Motivating students to write well

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Abstract

Original research by Alison Theaker, College of St Mark & St John, UK and Dr Suzanne Fitzgerald, Rowan University, USA, into team skills needed in public relations investigated differing perceptions of academics, students and practitioners. Questionnaires were sent out by post and email, analysed by SPSS. Several skills were found to be held in common by all groups, whether they resided in the US or UK. One significant difference was that academics and practitioners rated writing skills far more highly than students. Anecdotal evidence suggested that this was common to colleagues across all disciplines at the UK college. Theaker built on these findings to investigate this disparity in perceptions. Firstly, student teams were asked to fill in work logs for a team project, noting which skills were used. The next stage of the research used focus groups with students across a range of disciplines. Students were first asked to self assess their writing and communication skills, then take part in a discussion about how important they perceived writing skills to be, and what would motivate them to improve. The findings are to be used in the design of a college wide induction programme to tackle the problem of poor writing skills.

Key words: public relations education, writing skills

Introduction

In previous research with Dr Suzanne Fitzgerald in the US, the author found that whilst students and practitioners in the US and UK largely agreed on the qualities of effective teams, one significant disconnect was the rating of writing skills by practitioners as extremely important, whereas students in both countries undervalued this aspect of successful team skills. Building on this research, Alison Theaker and Suzanne Fitzgerald, investigated how academics were teaching team and writing skills. Practitioners were also asked to respond to this disconnect. Now working in the UK, the author took part in a cross-institution exercise to investigate common issues. Poor writing skills were found to be a persistent attribute of students in several subjects. A cross-college team
was formed to investigate what could motivate students to write better and a series of focus groups were carried out in different subjects – Management, Public Relations, Child Welfare & Society (CWS) and English Language and Linguistics (ELL).

Literature review

The literature was examined in four areas: the writing process; writing skills required by employers; the writing skills provided by education and the writing skills required by public relations education.

The writing process

The ability to write well has a very close relationship to academic and professional success (Weigle, 2002, p.4). Writing is regarded as an essential tool for learning, and a lack of writing expertise is often seen as a sign that the student does not possess thinking and reasoning skills. Peck and Coyle (2005) begin their text on writing skills by suggesting that the main difficulty most people have is how to write effective and coherent sentences. Crème and Lea (1997) add that in an academic context, the key to becoming a successful writer is understanding what is required in completing assignments. They see reading as an integral part of the writing process.

Hyland (2002) sets out three approaches to examining the process of writing. The first examines texts, and assumes that writers follow principles on the correct arrangement of the various grammatical elements, setting out their ideas in the correct forms. Teaching methods emphasise how to write prose and correct essay structures. Tests such as TOEFL focus on structure and error recognition. The traditional concept of good writing is that it is good regardless of the audience, purpose or context. The emphasis is on adherence to a style guide and correct grammar and punctuation. However, he also adds that syntactic complexity or grammatical accuracy are not the only measures of good writing. Good writing is contextually variable – students should not only know the correct grammar forms but also how to apply them for different purposes and contexts. The second approach regards writing as a process and the free expression of the writer’s ideas. However, this approach offers no clear principles to evaluate good writing. The final approach regards writing as social interaction and thus expertise is linked to how satisfied readers are. Crème and Lea (1997) details the development of research into academic literacies, investigating how writing in universities is affected by genres of disciplines. This has contrasted with the dominant focus on surface features such as spelling and punctuation, illuminating gaps between students’ and tutors’ expectations. Writing has often been seen as merely a tool for assessment. The Thinking Writing programme at Queen Mary, University of London, has explored how students need to write in their discipline, and how to fulfil the different requirements of modules, courses and tutors.
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Writing skills required by employers

The CIPR Training Framework makes few references to writing skills, including simply writing for the media, writing for interactive channels and writing for internal publications/intranets, at the first level of account executive. “Business writing’ is added at the account manager stage, writing speeches, presentations and proposals at account director level. Baron (2007, p. 15) regards writing as a “lifelong apprenticeship’ and that there is always room to grow. She offers advice about avoiding the passive voice, using second person and reducing jargon on an article aimed at senior internal communicators. Collins (www.pr.week.com, 2007) complains about the fact that graduates’ “writing skills are woefully poor,’ and this is reflected by Paton’s (2007, p.14) report that civil servants are having to take courses in punctuation and use of basic words such as hear/here, their/there/they’re, to/two/too.

Gregory (2006, p.24) refers to public relations agencies using written tests in their recruitment processes. Hill & Knowlton made potential recruits write an essay about a brand to identify those who can write. Brown and Fall’s (2005, p.303) survey of employers found that practitioners emphasised that “written and oral persuasive communication skills are essential to a successful career in the public relations field.’ Colen and Petelin (2004, p.136) suggested that beyond “the ability to write well, professionals require competency…in collaborative writing’. They found that most of the writing in a corporate context required working with other writers to produce documents. Collaborative writing offered several benefits, including the fact that co-writers could also operate as readers at draft stage and provide valuable feedback.

Writing skills provided by education

“Writing is central to children’s intellectual, social and emotional development,’ says Hyland (2002, p.96). He sets out the case study of the New South Wales K-6 syllabus as an example of an application of a functional model of writing motivated by the needs of students. This Systemic Functional model regards writing as using language to communicate, and that texts always relate to a social context. Thus different text types such as narrative, review or recount will have different grammatical patterns. Students are encouraged to develop the ability to talk about the language used, as well as draft, revise and edit to form “well-structured, accurate sentences in legible handwriting’ Hyland (2002, p.96). This approach has evolved over the past thirty years.

The National Curriculum in the UK is based on many of the same principals. Literacy is divided into speaking and listening, reading and writing. The latter has clear outcomes at different Key Stages in the areas of composition, planning and drafting, punctuation, spelling, morphology, handwriting and language structure. As in the NSW system, students are taught to choose form and content to suit different purposes. The lack of formal grammar teaching for
several years in the UK education system was blamed by many academics for the poor quality of students’ writing they experienced when marking assignments in higher education. Informal research with a primary school student ascertained that she was familiar with the different components of simple, complex and compound sentences, tenses and the different formats of reports, recount, biography and autobiography. However, the National Curriculum was only introduced in the UK in 1991.

Writing is of central importance in most degrees and in most workplaces (Moon, 2005). However, more students are entering higher education with little or no recent experience of sustained writing. They often do not understand the tasks they are set. Any help offered is based on a deficit approach, suggesting that those who seek help have ‘problems’. Students are therefore often unwilling to admit difficulties and seek help.

A study at the University of Hertfordshire found that undergraduates could not spell, their vocabulary was poor, they had little idea of syntax or punctuation, and no idea what constitutes sentence or paragraph. They were therefore unable to detect errors when proofreading, and did not realise the differences between oral and written language. (Newman, 2007) Tench (2001) also refersto questions of whether standards are being maintained and anecdotal evidence of the decline of writing skills of graduates.

Warwick’s (2006) account of a targeted programme for Chinese students offers some warnings in how to offer help in writing skills. An optional programme offered to all students resulted in only 14 out of 80 students completing the formative writing assessment, and only 22 students attending the extra sessions. Of those, half only came to one. Those who attended did only marginally better in their assignments than those who did not. Lessons learnt were that communications had to indicate the importance of writing skills, and that if attendance was optional students did not come. She recommended that such programmes should involve compulsory attendance.

Wray (1995, p.94) questioned to what extent it is part of a university teacher’s job to comment in detail on an essay which has verbless sentences, freestanding subordinate clauses, non-standard punctuation or spelling. Her own research showed that 72% of students made errors with apostrophes, 87.5% made spelling errors and were unaware of their inability to spell. Wray suggests that employers’ dissatisfaction is not new. In the Bullock report 1975, the poor standard of writing by young teachers was noted. The 1921 Newbolt Report also responded to dissatisfaction of employers with standards of written English.

Writing in public relations education

Public relations education has always emphasised links with the profession. Heath (2001, p.187) stated, “How we educate students to the practice will determine how they serve the profession’. The five core competencies that the
Commission on PR Education (1999, pp.21–22) determined include: principles, practices, theory, ethics; techniques: writing, message dissemination, media networks; research for planning and evaluation; public relations strategy and implementation; Supervised work study. Neff et al (1999, p.44) found that, “serious gaps exist between the outcomes we desire and those presently achieved in Public Relations education.” The emphasis on practical skills such as writing, design, visual awareness and presentation skills is frequently cited by practitioners’, says Tench (2001, p.96). Employers also refer to “intellectual and practical deficiencies’ of graduates. Writing skills are essential for public relations graduates as they will “enter a profession where it is a core skill’. Tench feels that “an ability to write for different audiences is essential for career entry and progression’ (2001, p.97). His own research amongst final year undergraduates revealed that they considered their writing skills developed most as a result of work experience, which they felt was twice as useful as lectures and seminars at university.

Public relations academics in the UK found that many of their students had poor writing skills. Some said 80% of their students had problems, whilst 35% of respondents said over 50% (Behind the Spin, 2007). Tench (2003, p.439) also felt that “the attitude of HE now is that students have problems with writing and grammar’, and that this view exacerbated the problem.

Methods

The original study replicated (with minor adjustments) the survey instrument conducted by Ahles and Fiske in 2002 and expanded its scope of the study geographically by using two sites; Philadelphia and Boston in the United States as well as adding the trans-Atlantic element by surveying students and practitioners in southwest England. Academicson undergraduate courses in the UK and US, approved by the CIPR or PRSA respectively were then surveyed to see if they agreed with the characteristics suggested by practitioners and students. In addition, a small sample of practitioners were invited to comment in depth on the previous results by email or telephone.

In addition, four focus groups were arranged to investigate the question of motivating students to write better. Focus groups were successfully completed with students from the Public Relations and CWS degree programmes. Management students did not attend the focus group, so they were given a detailed questionnaire. Students from English Language and Literature (ELL) also did not attend the group due to communication problems. A questionnaire was circulated but only one student returned it.
Sample

Eight of 10 public relations students attended the focus group, and 5 CWS students out of 12. Seventeen first year Management students of a cohort of 28 completed the questionnaire, but only 1 of 12 students from ELL. Whilst this is a small number of students in total (31), it was felt that this was representative of students in all of the areas but ELL.

Data collection

Students were selected from the subject groups of those academics involved in the cross-College pilot study. First year students were selected as it was felt that students should be introduced to the importance of writing skills at the beginning of their academic career. By investigating their assessment of their skills and motivation to improve them, a programme could be devised for the whole intake of students.

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed and common themes were drawn out using spreadsheets. Questionnaires were also analysed using themes and spreadsheets, due to the small number of respondents and the mainly qualitative nature of the questions. A total of 13 respondents participated in the focus groups and 18 students returned the questionnaire.

Instrument design

The focus group and questionnaire used the Personal Development Plan self assessments skills audit devised by the Southampton Institute as a starting point to get students to assess their own skills. The questionnaire comprised several sections. Students were asked to assess their reading and writing skills and state how confident they felt about them. They were asked to rate their skills on a scale of 1–4, meaning that each section could gain a maximum of 24 marks.

Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I feel confident about my reading, especially for study</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am able to use different reading strategies (skim, scan, read in depth)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am able to find information from a wide range of sources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am able to select information relevant to the topic from sources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am able to make useful notes whilst reading for an assignment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am able to summarise a section of text to convey the author’s main arguments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Writing

| I am confident that I can reproduce my ideas effectively in writing |
| I am confident in writing reports and essays as well as shorter pieces of work such as formal letters |
| I always plan my essays and other assignments before writing anything |
| I always check my work for spelling and grammatical errors before submitting it |
| I always check that my work is presented according to the course requirements |
| I am able to make useful and meaningful notes from a lecture, presentation or demonstration |

Scale:  Disagree strongly  = 1  
Tend to disagree  = 2  
Tend to agree  = 3  
Strongly agree  = 4

They were asked what kinds of writing they had done and what feedback they had received; the number of drafts of assignments; and what they found the most difficult thing about writing. Then they were asked to consider whether they would like to improve their writing skills, what they might gain from that and what problems would occur if their skills did not improve. Lastly they were asked what help with writing should be available and what would motivate them to improve their skills. The results are detailed in the following section.

Results

In the original survey (Theaker & Fitzgerald, 2005), writing was the most important professional skill for both professionals and students. However, when aggregated into rankings across the three areas, writing skills were valued much more highly by professionals than by students (see Table 1).
TABLE 1: Most important skills in effectively functioning campaign teams (2005) US and UK professionals and students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Professionals</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Completion of assignments on time</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Completion of assignments on time</td>
<td>3.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Putting thought and care into assignments</td>
<td>3.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Attendance at work</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4(tie)</td>
<td>Respect for others</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Writing skills</td>
<td>3.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4(tie)</td>
<td>Putting thought &amp; care into assignments</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>3.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6(tie)</td>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6(tie)</td>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Teamwork attitude</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Teamwork attitude</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Willingness to accept assignments</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9(tie)</td>
<td>Punctuality at work</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>9(tie)</td>
<td>Open communication</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9(tie)</td>
<td>Attendance at meetings</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>9(tie)</td>
<td>Punctuality at work</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Writing skills</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2006, US academics rated writing as one of their fourteen jointly ranked top skills, whilst UK academics rated writing skills joint 5th (Table 2). This compares with practitioners who ranked them as overall 4th, whilst students ranked them only at 14th.
Most practitioners agreed that writing is a key skill. They suggested the following ideas for teaching these skills.
• Put the students into the work place
• Proofreading
• Opportunity to practice writing skills
• Greater emphasis placed on written skills, particularly writing for the media.

To achieve this, students should be encouraged to read newspapers, books and business magazines and undertake exercises on a weekly basis – by improving their writing ability they will also find it easier to cope with their academic disciplines.

Practitioner comments included:

“Students do not seem to have grasped that written communication will be at the heart of everything they do.”

“Young people will only value writing skills when they realise how bad they are at writing.”

“Writing skills (of new recruits) are sometimes not as polished as we want and this can be problematic.”

Practitioners felt that a lack of emphasis in education had caused the problem. “Less emphasis is put on both the English language and the importance of good writing from an early age.” Others also felt that “increased input from the industry” was necessary in public relations education to encourage students to improve.

Academic comments included:

“Until real professionals tell them this is important they don’t always believe teachers.”

“They think PR is more about the social aspects…they want to go out to parties and are often surprised on placement how much work is in the office.”

One academic questioned the emphasis on writing skills. “Why do practitioners value writing skills so highly? Students need to first learn how to construct an argument and develop the confidence to critique ideas. Marking criteria assesses a variety of things, from understanding of subject matter and use of critical sources as well as structure and writing style.”
TABLE 3: Results of writing focus groups and questionnaires

Students generally felt confident in their reading and writing skills when using the self assessment tool.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student group</th>
<th>Reading score</th>
<th>Reading %</th>
<th>Writing score</th>
<th>Writing %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CWS</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR</td>
<td>18.25</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>17.63</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAN</td>
<td>17.18</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>17.35</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, when asked to explore this in the qualitative questions, students did not regard their skills so highly. CWS students were concerned about the use of jargon in their subject. There students revealed that they had been advised to seek support from the writing tutor in Student Services. They felt that the main problem was the style of academic writing they were required to use.

The ELL student expressed that they were not very confident in reading, and only “OK’ in writing. Public relations students felt that their reading skills were “fit for purpose’, but that they had difficulty putting their ideas on paper. They felt that problems lay in the need for referencing and paraphrasing of sources.

Management students were mostly confident or very confident about their reading and writing skills, although one expressed this as “can read and understand [sic] affectivly [sic]’. This group of students again mentioned the difficulties of planning their written assignments, writing in an academic style and also “getting the grammar in the right place’.

All groups felt that more support was needed to help them improve their writing. CWS students felt that sessions should be timetabled and that they should bemadetogoandthatmarksshouldbegivenforattendance.Inaddition, they thought that holding sessions at lunchtimes with biscuits and drink available would work. In addition, they suggested that there should be more staff in Student Services, as currently appointments were hard to come by. Public relations students felt that writing should be taught as part of the course in the first year. Most management students (70%) felt that writing skills should be addressed in extra sessions.
Students revealed that they might complete between three and “several’ drafts of an assignment, although many stated that they did not write a draft but merely submitted their first attempt.

All students recognized that improved writing skills would lead to better marks, a better degree and a better job. “Better marks’ seemed to be their main motivation for addressing their skills. Some referred to ‘personal satisfaction’. One suggested a payment, having heard that one university had offered students £100 rebate on fees for attending all lectures.

Discussion

Students seemed to be aware that good writing skills would assist them in their academic and career progression. However, they were not clear on what kind of support they would take advantage of. When public relations students were reminded that marks had been given for attendance in their first module, yet this had not improved student numbers, they remarked that “most people didn’t realise there were marks for attendance’. CWS students mentioned that optional sessions in study skills had been well attended until they had realised they were optional, at which point most students stopped going.

Given Warwick’s (2006) problems with an optional programme, it is doubtful whether students who self-assessed themselves so highly in terms of skills would attend. Several students felt that extra help should only be “for those who need it’. This shows the problem with the current deficit model. Students also found that academic writing style and subject specific jargon were the most difficult things to come to terms with. This also supports the literature suggestions that students do not understand the requirements of university writing. The fact that the majority did not edit their work before submission suggests that they do not see the link between revision and improved marks. Part of the problem seems to be that the need for good writing skills has not been adequately communicated to students. They expressed surprise that it is a College-wide regulation that 10% of marks should be dependent on writing and presentation of assignments. As one pointed out, with a pass mark of 40%, this still meant that students could pass modules without being a good writer. This is very much a “work in progress’. It is encouraging that students see the need for improved writing to gain a better degree and job.

However, optional study sessions have not worked at the institution in the past. Members of the cross-College working party are devising a trial package of materials, both classroom, text and web based, to be introduced in September 2007 in the subjects used in the research. The intention is to make the package deliverable by subject tutors, so that materials can be adapted to the requirements of each subject. If successful, this will be rolled out to all first year students in September 2008.
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