

Mitchell's Musings 2-2-2015: Why We Write

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As readers of this blog may know, each winter quarter I co-teach an undergraduate course with Michael Dukakis on California Policy Issues. As part of that course, students must select a California-oriented topic from a menu of choices and produce a written report. Given the time frame provided in the course, they have essentially six weeks to complete the assignment. In the second week of the course, students must select their topic. In the fourth week, they must submit an outline of the report. They then receive emailed comments from the instructors on the outline. In the sixth week, they must submit a draft of the report – and again receive emailed comments. In the eighth week, the final report is due. There are detailed requirements concerning the structure of the report which must be followed. Apart from the individual report assignment, students are organized into teams that produce both a written report and an oral presentation, again in a highly structured format.

Although the course is primarily devoted to the subject matter of its title – California Policy Issues – about an hour in the second week is devoted to how to write a professional report and how to make an oral presentation of such a report. The latest version of that lecture can be found online as a streamed video or a download at <https://archive.org/details/10bwriting20151>.

Academics often complain about undergraduate writing. But in California, it seems to be a special problem. I rather doubt that the problem is captured by standardized testing in the K-12 system, particularly if the test is of the usual multiple-choice variety. Indeed, emphasis on such check-the-box tests – to the detriment of writing – may be part of the problem. The chief concern is that there isn't enough writing going on in K-12, at least in California schools.

In principle, someone is supposed to make up for the problem early on in college – but it doesn't seem to happen. My co-instructor tells me that at Northeastern University, where he teaches in the fall and spring, undergraduate writing is notably better although Northeastern's student body has many undergraduates who are the first in their families to go to college. So the problem seems especially acute in California. But I suspect it exists in varying degrees elsewhere.

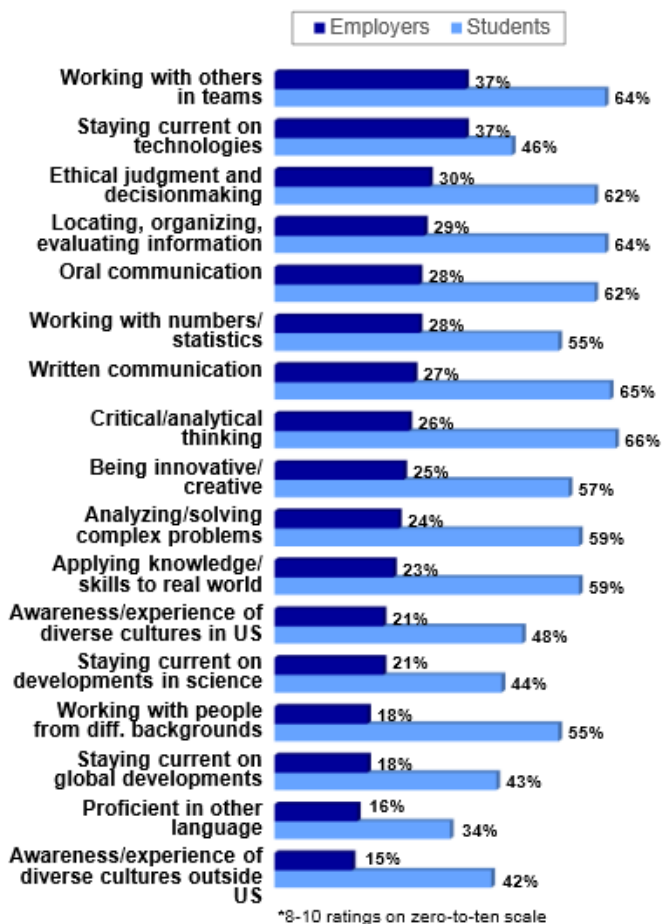
Writing and presenting are generic job skills, regardless of field or occupation. Despite all the rhetoric about how the workforce of the future will need more higher education, emphasis on these basic communications skills seems to be a low priority. When writing is taught at the college level, there

appears to be an emphasis on details such as how to make a footnote that follows some style manual rather than how to write to put your message across. Stand-up presenting is even less emphasized. And the current solution *de jour* to all problems of higher ed – online education – is unlikely to help. Online ed is more likely to hurt, in fact, since it’s hard to do writing or presenting in that format.

There have been surveys from time to time that indicate that employers value writing, communications, and team participation as important job skills. A recent such study sponsored by Association of American Colleges and Universities finds such skills to be important *and* also finds that students are more likely to think they have those skills than employers do, as the chart below suggests.¹

Employers give college graduates low scores for preparedness across learning outcomes; students think they are better prepared.

Proportions saying they/recent college graduates are well prepared in each area*



¹<http://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2015employerstudentsurvey.pdf>.

Presumably, addressing the employer-student discrepancy should be a major priority of college administrators. But there is little sign of that happening. Perhaps the problem is an embarrassment. All the more reason to address it.

If the news media put more emphasis on the issue, that publicity might in turn lead to greater attention by those administrators. Sadly, however, to the extent that such matters arise in the news media, they fall victim to an irrelevant debate. Recently, for example, there has been a tempest in the media about something called “vocal fry” that, supposedly, young women exhibit in speaking. I have to confess to not hearing this phenomenon, but you can see if you can hear it at this link:

<http://www.today.com/video/today/45681253#45681253>

Let’s assume for a moment that the phenomenon exists and that it sounds odd to *some* people. If so, it would be a phenomenon similar to “uptalk” which we do urge students to drop in the one-hour class presentation. The debate in the news media on vocal fry – whatever it is – has quickly degenerated into a discussion of whether this concern over a speaking pattern is just a form of intergenerational conflict:

http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2013/01/07/vocal_fry_and_valley_girls_why_old_men_find_young_women_s_voices_so_annoying.html

Obviously, all languages are arbitrary and are the products of historical accident. Obviously, all languages change over time so different generations will have different styles. But the immediate problem for students is to be aware that how they write or present becomes a problem if it distracts from the message they are trying to deliver. If the folks it distracts belong to an older generation, so what? Do you want to deliver your message effectively or do you want some fraction of the audience to be diverted from your point by your writing or speaking? Note that in a one-on-one job interview or an application, the fraction diverted might be 100%. Put that way, there really is nothing to debate.

In short, colleges and universities need to spend more effort upgrading and coaching the speaking and writing of their graduates than they do. You and me can, like, totally agree on that, you know?

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