

Mitchell's Musings 6-25-12: The Write Stuff

Daniel J.B. Mitchell

A recent *Wall Street Journal* article lamented the poor grammar and general written English usage of new hires. You can find the story - "This Embarrasses You and I" - at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303410404577466662919275448.html>. The complaint of the article's author will be familiar to any undergraduate instructor even though it is drawn from the workplace rather than the classroom:

"...Managers are fighting an epidemic of grammar gaffes in the workplace. Many of them attribute slipping skills to the informality of email, texting and Twitter where slang and shortcuts are common. Such looseness with language can create bad impressions with clients, ruin marketing materials and cause communications errors, many managers say..."

"Most participants in the Society for Human Resource Management-AARP survey blame younger workers for the skills gap. Tamara Erickson, an author and consultant on generational issues, says the problem isn't a lack of skill among 20- and 30-somethings. Accustomed to texting and social networking, 'they've developed a new norm,' Ms. Erickson says..."

Actually, if I had to guess, the problem is not just social media norms vs. workplace/good writing requirements but is more significantly an issue of poor high school and – to be sure – college preparation. Reading a lot early is a necessary, but not a sufficient, form of training for effective professional writing. Writing a lot – combined with reading a lot - completes the picture. Neither is happening as much as it should at the K-12 level. And there is good reason to believe, as public budgets are being cut at the local and school district levels, that the trend in K-12 is currently tilted in the wrong direction.

My UCLA colleague William Ouchi – who has studied K-12 school management and performance – emphasizes a concept he calls "total student load" (TSL). Essentially, TSL is the number of students a teacher deals with in a given day. It is related to some extent to class size but also to the number of classes. With a lower TSL, more individualized contact time with the teacher is possible and so is more homework. If a teacher assigns an essay for students to research and write, the more students he/she has, the more assignments that must be read, graded, and returned. A high total student load means that few essays will be assigned.

"TSL stands for Total Student Load, which is the number of papers a teacher has to grade and the number of students - human beings - a teacher has to get to know. It is a measure of the degree of intimacy of contact that's possible between teacher and student. ...In Los Angeles, teachers have forty-five students per class; that's a Total Student Load of 225. In Boston, it's 140; New York City, it's 170.

Should your child be lucky enough to attend an elite private school, TSL can range from 60 to 65 students per teacher.”¹

Of course, some students will be self starters and compensate for any lack of formal school assignments. But even in Lake Wobegon – where all children are above average – the number of such self starters will be limited. And most students, whether residents of Lake Wobegon or not, won't have attended “an elite private school.”

If students don't have much chance for learning writing skills, they are even less likely to develop oral presentation skills – although such skills are important in business careers and in fact in almost any setting. So what to do? A common approach in higher education - when students arrive on campus without the necessary skills - is to provide some kind of remedial course (“bonehead English”). In reality, these courses tend to suffer from the same flaw as the K-12 education they are supposed to remediate. That is, they are of limited duration (so there will not be much reading and writing) and their TSL levels are typically high.

In addition, some students who can't write at a satisfactory level – and are made aware of their deficiencies - learn what they think of as coping skills, essentially cutting and pasting text from the web. Coping in that manner – if subsequent instructors use anti-plagiarism online services such as Turnitin.com - can lead to very unhappy results. Unless the remedial courses deal with that issue overtly and don't accept cut-and-paste papers as legit, students may develop what is essentially a dangerous habit; they may not even think that what they are doing is a problem until, suddenly, when they are caught, it becomes a big one.

Readers of this musing may have guessed by this point that the observations above come from personal experience. I co-teach a course every winter at UCLA with Michael Dukakis – who visits each winter from Northeastern University - on the topic of *California Policy Issues* (Public Policy 10b). The course enrolls about 60 undergraduates and a few graduate students. Each year upwards of a quarter of the undergraduate students in the class have notable writing deficiencies. Some of these deficiencies are in research and organizational skills, i.e., where do you find source material and, once you have it, how do you put it together in a persuasive essay. Similar problems arise with the oral presentations students are assigned to make in the course.

Unfortunately, some of the deficiencies go much deeper than just research and organization and involve basic spelling, grammar, and sentence construction. Almost every year, despite increasingly dire warnings by the instructors, one or two students are sent to the Dean of Students office due to plagiarism issues. In some cases, suspensions from the university have resulted.

¹ An interview with Ouchi can be found at <http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/x30960.xml>. The interview took place in 2009 so the TSL levels may well have risen since then in the cities cited.

Because of the ongoing problems with writing, we have developed our own coping skills in *California Policy Issues* and these may be of use to instructors elsewhere. Student essays are submitted in three versions at two-week intervals: as an outline, as a draft, and as a final product. Only the last is graded. The outlines and drafts receive detailed comments, mainly by email, within a few days after submission. Students who early on exhibit writing problems that are detected from weekly assignments or other materials are directed to the course TA who then acts as a writing coach. All grading is done by the instructors, however, not the TA. In the second week of the course, there is a roughly one-hour presentation on writing and on making oral presentations. You can find the PowerPoint slides in pdf format for that presentation at <http://issuu.com/danieljbmitchell/docs/10breportguide2013?mode=window&backgroundColor=%23222222>. (The pdf version obviously omits embedded videos and the oral discussion that goes with the slides.)

Although the Wall Street Journal article did not go into oral communication, we find that some students are afflicted with “uptalk,” a malady not well suited to job interviews or the workplace that seemed to arise in the 1980s. It is more unkindly known as the moronic interrogative:

*Moronic interrogative: Raising your voice at the end of a statement to turn it into a question as typified by valley girls but has spread far beyond to both sexes and even beyond the U.S.*²

That definition is reasonably accurate but true practitioners of uptalk actually insert the questioning tone in the *middle* of their statements as well as the end. A good start in alerting students to avoid uptalk is to play the YouTube video I have embedded on the subject on the EPRN website. Click on <http://www.employmentpolicy.org/topic/403/blog/avoiding-uptalk>.³ None of the remedial efforts described above are cure-alls. But they help and may be of use to other college and university instructors. They might even help, like, your students? find, you know, a job? in today’s difficult labor market?

² <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=moronic%20interrogative>.

³ If you enjoy that video, you might also enjoy <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=if5XbL2I1Ic>.