Teaching University Students to Read and Write

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Abstract

In 2013 the Australian Government introduced new literacy and numeracy standards for initial teacher education degrees. Minimum standards were set for entry to teaching degrees, and students would be tested against these standards on graduation by the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education Students (LANTITE). We, the authors of this paper – both members of the English discipline at a regional Australian University – were invited by our Faculty of Education to create a foundation literacy program for students enrolled in teacher education degrees. Our program consisted of two subjects run across the students' first year of study: the first focused on reading, the second on writing. In attempting to describe our first five years' experience (2014-2018) we find it necessary to make explicit a number of implicit literacy hypotheses from different disciplines and to test them against our direct experience of student accomplishment. Whilst all the hypotheses tested have some sort of value, we have come to the conclusion that there is nothing like reading for improving reading, and nothing like writing for improving writing. This accords with what we call the *immersion hypothesis*.

Keywords

Literacy, university pedagogy, tertiary standards, LANTITE, language immersion.

1. Introduction

In 2013 the Australian Government introduced new literacy and numeracy standards for initial teacher education degrees. Minimum standards were set for entry to teaching degrees, and students would be tested against these standards on graduation by the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education Students (LANTITE):

> Entrants to initial teacher education will possess levels of personal literacy and numeracy broadly equivalent to the top 30% of the population. Providers who select students who do not meet this requirement must establish satisfactory arrangements to ensure that these students are supported to achieve the required standard before graduation. The National Literacy and Numeracy Test is the means for demonstrating that all students have met the standard. (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] 2015:12)

The authors of this paper – both members of the English discipline at a regional Australian University – were invited by our Faculty of Education to create a foundation literacy program for students taking teacher education degrees. Our mission, set by the group collegially, was not to 'teach the test'. This was partly because we instinctively felt that it would be a pedagogically impoverished approach, but also because we didn't yet have any idea of what would be in the LANTITE. Our ambition was a general uplift in 'literacy', our working definition of which meant the ability to read and interpret complex texts, and to write grammatically and fluently. Our program consisted of two subjects run across the students' first year of study: the first focused on reading and the second on writing.

From the outset, we had certain ideas about how we should proceed. We both held beliefs relating both to 'literacy' and to 'student learning' that carried through to our original subject designs. The more we taught our subjects, however, the more we found ourselves refining our ideas, questioning different approaches, trying things out and testing hypotheses on each other and in the classroom. We present our findings here in a certain order, working as warily as Descartes at the outset of his *Discourse on Method*: an approach which tells 'a tale' (1960:38) blending experience, evidence of different kinds and learning contexts. Like him, we are cautious enough to understand that those who 'take it upon themselves to issue precepts' are susceptible to the charge that they 'must think themselves cleverer than those to whom they issue them' (1960:38). Our approach is careful, and we seek not to claim more than we have found. In that light, we contend that we have learned some things, and we claim too that we offer a usefully *orderly* presentation of hypotheses about literacy and about literacy development.

2. Making hypotheses overt

A year or so ago, one of the authors was asked by a friend to assess the literary worth of some personal letters written by a poet and academic about fifty years ago. The letters were not going to be kept, but it only took a few lines to notice just how literate their author was. Written rapidly, yet in a neatly compressed cursive hand, their glancing sarcasm, wit and erudition were matched by a carelessly correct complex syntax and a casually rich vocabulary. As readers, many of us can sometimes take a selfish pleasure in the joy of language well used, in its vanities, its powers and its wealth. This person, clearly, was highly literate, was perhaps of the order of literacy by which other high order claims to literacy might be measured and found wanting.

For literature readers and lecturers like us, such things can be judged very quickly, and indeed it is frequently our job to do so. But *how* do we know what we know? And what *is* literacy?

2.1 DEFINING LITERACY

The field of literacy is so fraught that we need to be clear about what we mean by the term itself. In the first place, we are not discussing 'literacies' in the broadest sense, to include digital literacy, media literacy or visual literacy. Our task, and our expertise, such that it is, relates to the skills of reading and writing. We also do not mean 'basic literacy': students who matriculate into university are *already* literate in the sense of being able to read and to write sentences. However, their level of literacy at the commencement of their studies – what we might call 'matriculating literacy' – is sometimes not adequate to the demands of their higher education courses.

William Gray's landmark work, *The Teaching of Reading and Writing*, originally published by UNESCO in 1956, was directed at adult education. It emphasised a practical definition of what he calls 'functional literacy':

> A person is functionally literate when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed within his culture or group. (1969:24)

Our experience is that the level of literacy of many of our first-year students is not functional, in the sense that it may not be adequate to the purpose of reading and writing academic texts. Indeed, a recent OECD survey found that 44% of Australians did not meet the third level of a five-level proficiency scale defined in the following way:

> Adults performing at this level can understand and respond appropriately to dense or lengthy texts, and can identify, interpret, or evaluate one or more pieces of information and make appropriate inferences using knowledge text structures and rhetorical devices. (OECD 2013:2)

However, this definition leaves itself very open to interpretation: how do we define 'dense' or 'lengthy' for example, and what constitutes a 'rhetorical device?'

Definitions of literacy have contexts. In our context, we know basic, matriculating and academically-functional literacy when we see it. But even in the narrower contexts of tertiary education, things are not settled. For instance, most definitions of literacy rely, at some point, on making a tangible reference to an intangible object. James Paul Gee's definitions of literacy, for example, rely on the distinction between the 'acquisition,' 'control' and 'full and effortless control' over dominant discourses (1991:5-6). But once again, these distinctions rely on implicit standards of vocabulary, grammar and erudition that are difficult to make explicit. How does one explain or qualify the difference between 'acquisition' and 'control'?

Our context is also defined by the Education courses our students are enrolled in – and the external yardstick of government assessment agencies. In theory, the Australian government's standard sidesteps the problem of definition by setting the minimum standard of literacy *relatively*. The stated requirement is that graduating student teachers must be in the top 30% of the Australian population. However, as might be guessed, no such national survey exists to determine the nature of this cut-off standard. So, the administrators of the literacy test, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), are forced to make a number of judgements about this standard:

In efforts to interpret the meaning of the 'top 30 per cent of the population' referred to in Standard 3.1, a number of approaches have been implemented. (ACER 2017:25)

These approaches include the results of literacy surveys, such as the OECD survey mentioned above, and by establishing a 'two-day workshop with expert groups' (2017:25) to determine the final indicators of appropriate literacy for teacher graduates. The result of these deliberations is that the top 30% of Australian society is said to correspond to an Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) range defined by the upper end of ACSF Level 4 and lower end of Level 5.

At first glance, this seems to be another sideways step: a set of standards which refers to another set of standards. However, the ACSF does, at least, go into rigorous detail about what it means by its own standards. For example, the Level 5 Reading standard includes specific attributes like:

> Draws on broad general knowledge to aid understanding of texts on a wide range of subjects and within specialised disciplines;
>
> Identifies how social relations, register and audience influence an author's choice of text type, structure and language and how they may be used to express or hide attitudes and bias;
>
> Recognises the distinguishing structures, layout, features and conventions of a broad range of complex text types and understands how to use these as an aid to locating information, developing understanding and focusing reading effort;
>
> Understands the stylistic conventions of complex fiction and non-fiction texts. (ACSF 2012:66-67)

And the Level 5 Writing standard includes statements like:

> Uses writing as a tool to develop hypotheses, explore complex issues, plan and problem solve;
>
> Uses and experiments with a broad range of structures and features;
>
> Understands and uses broad vocabulary, including idioms, colloquialisms and cultural references as appropriate;
>
> Understands and uses linking devices effectively to demonstrate complex conceptual connections and/or causal relationships. (ACSF 2012:92-93)

These are the qualities and standards that we, as English specialists, immediately recognised as the implicit targets of our teaching program. Our reading subject already had a lecture on the stylistic conventions of fiction and non-fiction, and another dedicated to reading the worldview (or bias) of the author. Our writing subject already used composition experiments to foreground text forms and features. Over time, the above-described ACSF Level 4/5 in Reading and Writing has become our practical guide to the *qualities* of literacy we need to work towards with our students.[1]

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1   Whether or not the LANTITE effectively tests these qualities and standards is a topic for another paper. All we would say at this point is that we do not immediately warm to a literacy test that does not ask the students to write.

2.2 HYPOTHESES ABOUT IMPROVING STUDENT LITERACY

It is one thing to devise scales of literacy. It is quite another to support its improvement. What follows is only an attempt to describe our own teaching practice in terms of an orderly series of hypotheses, chief among which are rendering reading and writing practices overt and reflective. But before we consider what we do, let us set out the hypotheses we have used in the company of other hypotheses, and let us do this without discarding views we do not share.

We begin in our own field, English, and our colleagues' tacit hypotheses about 'how to do things' in subjects like ours. Let us call these the English disciplinary hypothesis set. The most ubiquitous of them is the *hypothesis of immersion*, of making students read. This idea informs the entire foundation of English literature – of teaching in school and at university. In the latter case, it is a difficult one to substantiate because those students who elect to do English literature have a predilection for its approach and an interest in the texts. It is also difficult for 'us' to make our case beyond our own field, except to note that our hypothesis is obviously shared by those who frame school curricula and require reading both in primary and in secondary schooling. Another English disciplinary kind of hypothesis involves choosing 'good' literature, the hypothesis being that rich vocabulary and complex syntax enhance literacy more strongly than simpler forms of writing.

Many outside our field object to these kinds of approaches. Colleagues in commerce and in applied communications, for instance, see little point in using literature this way. They point to the issue of some students being averse to literature. There is also evidence of gendered dimensions to this interest: that women prefer fiction while men prefer non-fiction (see for example, National Endowment for the Arts 2015:71). This leads to a different kind of hypothesis, namely that students need to be interested for there to be any benefit in *any* reading-based approach. This kind of claim involves the scene of teaching, the teacher and the text. Let us frame the *engagement hypothesis* this way: the student will learn if and (mainly/only) if he or she finds the teaching and the text absorbing.

Then, another hypothesis comes quickly into play: the idea that the text being read is connected to something the student values. In a tertiary context, this might best be called the *application hypothesis*. The student asks: do I need to know this? Is this useful to me? What will I do with it? Churchill's attack on his Latin classes in his schooldays is apposite. He derided them as inherently useless knowledge, asking famously, when would one ever have occasion to use the vocative case in the declension of the Latin noun for table, *mensa*? (Churchill 1930:25). Churchill is hardly alone in his objections, and we hear the refrain today as well.

We work with colleagues in education. They too have literacy hypotheses. Many of them have an interest in how curricula are laid out. They emphasise clarity in subject outline structures and assignment rubrics. This is true not just in school, but also at university. The hypothesis is that by the university being clear about where subjects fit into courses, where assignments fit into subjects and where weeks of work support assignments, there will be clarity of purpose for student and teacher alike. This is the *constructive alignment* group of hypotheses.

In all fields of endeavour in education, including our own discipline, we find many who propose a variety of the *technological hypothesis*. A contradiction emerges. Sometimes, it involves using more technology (like the BKSB-branded literacy and numeracy modules our university uses), and by making more of our teaching material available online. At other times, however,

we find the apparent opposite: that mobile phones, laptops and the like should be restricted at school and university.

There are risks in making such hypotheses overt. Profound and hard-won insights can seem obvious or trivial. Highly wrought models of teaching can be rendered simplistic. There is an inevitable flattening of their value as soon as hypotheses are simply listed. They are not all of the same kind, or merit. It could be that one eclipses others so much that they are a side-issue. It could also be the case that accepting one hypothesis-set means rejecting one or more of the others. In our view, however, the value of making things overt is consistent with our own practice in teaching. We will ultimately conclude this essay by expressing some of them in an orderly way, in the hope that this helps others who share our journey. Now, though, we turn to the reading and writing practices of our students and how we seek to support them.

3. Teaching University Students to Read

3.1 OUR READING SUBJECT

The original framework for our reading subject was borrowed from the Office of Learning and Teaching project 'The Reading Resilience Toolkit,' led by Rosanne Kennedy at the Australian National University (Kennedy et al 2013). The model uses reading guides (background to the text and its author, its context and themes) to scaffold the reading of a text, followed by intensive class discussion. In our hands, the ambition of this approach is to create a 'community of practice,' or what we call our 'book club.' With so many students in the same position, we find they can help and encourage each other, particularly in class.

We structured the subject as follows. Our students watch an online lecture (we teach to five campuses simultaneously) which provides some context and background information about the texts. Then, students read one or two extracts each week, of 10-30 pages in length. We ask the students to read the texts on their own terms, so that they can explain what they understand it meant and how they felt about it. Following our discussions in class, we ask them to write a 500-word report on each text, explaining what they thought it was about and whether they liked it, and why. With the support of the lectures, we also ask students to comment on any 'technical aspects' of the literature that struck them: genre, point of view, and cultural codes and contexts emerge here. No secondary reading is required: our process is to take the student's honest reaction to the text and to turn that into a critical response. Our abiding focus is to 'force' students to read short texts closely, by supporting and then testing them on the closeness of their reading.

Finally, our reading subject has a content, a focus of its own for its own sake. We study 'the idea of Australia', as represented in literature, essays and film since the bush ballads of the 1890s. This focus was, again, decided collegially with the Faculty of Education. We felt that a thorough reading program in Australian texts was appropriate for future Australian teachers, and also that the 'the idea of Australia' provided an engaging topic to drive students through the literacy tasks and outcomes.

3.2 HOW OUR STUDENTS READ

So how do our students read? To give a sense of the challenge many students face, we begin with some common responses to the first written assignment of the year. The assignment, called the 'Reading Reflection,' asks students to describe their reading habits, their likes and

dislikes, and their attitudes towards reading as a pastime. We have collected these responses over the past five years and observed certain patterns emerge. Consider the following responses, which have been chosen to illustrate each point, but which represent the major typologies of responses:

> Reading for me is not a natural thing and I have to be told to sit down and read this because it would be beneficial for me, but if I wasn't forced I wouldn't read at all. I can really relate to recipes books and different chefs, I love to cook and it is interesting to get an insight into the life of world famous chefs, for example Jamie Oliver.

> As a child I used to love reading by Dr Sues and the Gumnut Classics by may gibbs, but more than any thing I used to love listening to people read them to me. I believe that due to my parents reading to me I find more joy in listening to a book and actually reading it. I started reading again in year nine at night-time to make my self-tired. […] I cannot say I am an active reader as I would much rather listen to a tutorial or watch a movie although do to get some enjoyment out of reading. And like every one these days facebook seems to be the most common thing open and I am actively reading these days.

> When I was younger, I used to read every night before bed, wether it was a prescribed piece from school or a personal choice in the form of magazines, fiction and non-fiction novels or short stories. As I got older I lost this habit and found myself playing on my mobile phone and more recently my I pad. My reading habits are starting to increase since I made it a new years resolution to read more novels and read before bed rather then playing on an electronic device and I find before bed is the time when my reading happens most. I find I don't have time during the day to sit down and read.

We note the wide range in the interests and abilities in our student cohort. But there are patterns too. It's clear that many students in the teacher education degrees do not enjoy reading fiction or long-form non-fiction (biographies, histories, and so on). Many of these students intend to be primary school teachers. They will have the task of 'teaching literacy' to young children. If they themselves struggle to find any pleasure in reading such works, they may struggle to instil any sense of the pleasure of the text in their own students.

But why is this so? Why is reading not a habit or hobby among the majority of our cohort? The responses we have received to this Reading Reflection task over the past five years suggest speculation along the following lines.

3.2.1 The communications revolution

Social media patterns have affected literacy of the traditional kind. Many students who claimed not to 'read' also described the amount of time they spent on social media:

> Reading is not a hobby of mine. I am not the kind of person who will sit down and read a novel a week or even a month. I would be lucky to just start reading a novel a year. The majority of the reading I do is based around my studies at University or on the internet such as a news update on facebook.

> I tend to use the internet as a major source for my reading. I find it to be easily accessible and a great outlet of information. Living in a predominantly digital society, I find it the easiest way to stay up to date with world happenings and access material that interests

me for free. Being that the internet is available on so many different devices I am constantly accessing the internet throughout my day.

While – to invoke Ong (1982) and McLuhan (1987) – the media of communication have an impact on culture, the impact is challenging when it not only supplements long-form reading, but actually displaces it. Educationally, the speed and brevity of information available through mobile devices can work to the detriment of long-form reading in both paper and digital modes. Even among the engineers and entrepreneurs leading the communications revolution, a 'dark consensus' is forming that screens are changing young people's brains in ways that we don't yet understand (Bowles 2018).

3.2.2 The unclear effect of cultural capital

We have also been puzzling over the effects of what many people loosely call 'cultural capital.' We wonder whether growing up in a household of book readers makes a great difference to student outcomes. On the one hand, our personal experience suggests that a household full of books must generate a certain tendency towards reading. On the other hand, each time we measured student performance (as both pass/fail rates and Grade Point Average in the Bachelor of Arts and the Bachelor of Education degrees) we found that the students' socio-economic status (SES) made no measurable difference to academic performance (Daylight 2014). It could be, of course, that cultural capital is less dependent upon SES than is usually presumed. But in tandem with this, we have noticed repeatedly that the responses to our Reading Reflection indicate that our students *were* keen readers up to the age of puberty, when technology and relationships and high school study itself pushed reading for pleasure aside. This suggests to us that, regardless of socio-economic class or cultural capital, our task in higher education is to *re-engage students with the pleasure of reading* that they once felt.

3.2.3 Narrowness of reading

When students do read for pleasure, they often read narrowly. Many of our students have read some young-adult and fantasy fiction, such as the *Harry Potter* series. We have also noticed that the nature of our students' reading is gendered: young men tend to favour factual texts, most often popular histories or sports biographies; young women tend to favour inspirational narratives, or melodrama (either fictional or biographical), often of surviving illness or abuse. These kinds of books are not 'bad,' but they are limited in their structure and narration. We repeatedly encounter a kind of bewilderment with the texts we offer them to read: 'I couldn't work out who was talking' is a frequent complaint. This is also true in their own accounts of books they read before they come to study with us. While many of them loved *Game of Thrones* on television, they did not always enjoy reading the novels:

> The last text I did not finish was 'A Game of Thrones' George R.R. Martin (2006). I started reading this book because I heard great reviews about the series and wanted to give it a chance. I didn't finish the text because I found that the character storylines were very disjointed and this confused me.

3.2.4 Trouble reading outside of the present context

We have also noticed that this tendency towards genre fiction does not lead to a capacity to read realist accounts of life outside of their own time and place. For example, while fantasy genres require a leap of the imagination, historical realism requires readers to place themselves in a milieu of assumed (rather than imagined) knowledge. Novels written or

set prior to, say, 1990, present two hurdles: (1) a set of cultural beliefs and (2) an English syntax that are foreign to the students. One text in particular made this clear. *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* by Randolph Stow (1965) is an Australian classic novel in the realist mode. It was taught to both authors in high school. However, its cascading syntax and assumed knowledge of twentieth century Australia left our students with nothing sufficiently familiar to hold onto. The response was so desperately negative that it had to be dropped from the reading program.

3.2.5 Not reading in bed (or in cafés, on trains, nor even on rainy days)

In our reading subject, we asked our students to reflect on *when* and *where* they read. To our surprise, this produced the most poignant difficulty of all. Even those who liked to read struggled to identify a time or place where reading is the main activity. In bed before sleeping, for instance, when many readers traditionally settle into a book, our students are online:

> I often like to read different online blogs and the news stories online but I rarely read the newspapers. I often read the blogs at night before I go to bed and I read magazines if I do not have the internet available. I like to read to relax myself, this is why I do it before bed. Reading a novel is usually a last resort, when there is no internet or something else that I feel more important at the time.

The golden periods for reading fiction, biography and other books – when all else is quiet, when a reader can sink into characters in an almost dream-like state – are lost to them. Images of readers in bed, on park benches, in cafés or on trains are now mainly seen as stock photos on the internet, not in everyday life - and our students are part of this large scale transformation.

To each of these situations, we have a number of quite specific responses. The impact of the communication revolution extends well beyond our scope to effect change. We do have a duty, however, to at least create the space for students to discuss their reading habits openly, with peers, with support, and start to think their own way towards a future in which longer and more complex reading becomes a part of their lives. We can – and do – point out that cultural capital can be developed, that they too can build on what they have, working with their interests, making links from text to text. We can also encourage complex responses to other complex media texts, too – to cinema, music, and image for instance. We do this in both subjects in order to show how connections are made, and in order to encourage them to do it themselves. Finally, as students who have to read texts, we begin by working over texts in class, reading over them together, making shared sense of them, and asking them to finish what we started when they get home. Taking all these things together, we now propose a synthesis of hypotheses, which we call 'The Reading Strategy.'

3.3 THE READING STRATEGY

Over the past five years, the authors have developed the following framework for improving our students' confidence, capability and resilience in reading complex texts:
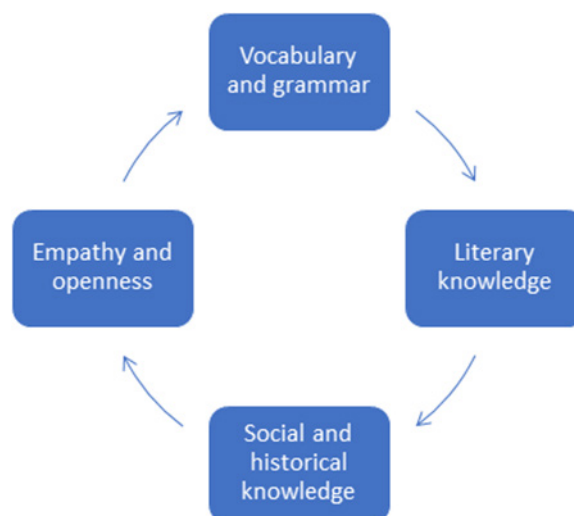
3.3.1 Vocabulary and grammar

When students face too many new words and sentence structures in a text, their reading becomes laboured and they may give up. We have learned to supply aids of one kind or another. For instance, in working over a text, we might stop reading aloud to discuss a word or turn of phrase, so as to discuss general difficulties of vocabulary and grammar in a staged way. We seek to instil a culture of being patient, of looking words up when useful, and allowing the contextual meaning to emerge. We start by teaching grammar as a reader, not as a writer. This generally means helping students to pay attention to, and interpret, an author's stylistic choices. Whether it is Randolph Stow or Francis Bacon, an author's lexical and syntactical choices bear meanings that can be observed and discussed.

3.3.2 Literary knowledge

An experienced reader approaches a text with some implicit questions: What kind of *thing* is this? What genre is it? What does it want from me? How does this text relate to other texts, to history, to my life experience? The experienced reader has enough literary knowledge to *situate the text* in literary history. In our reading subject, students are faced with literary forms that they are unfamiliar with (the personal essay, the poem) and they are given more complex forms of narration than they are comfortable with (unreliable narration, free indirect speech). We therefore have another kind of work to do. That is, as well as building vocabulary and grammar, we have the task of situating the text in time, against other texts and text types, and indeed, in relation to their own lives and ambitions. In short, we ask and help to answer the question: *What kind of thing is this?*

3.3.3 Social-historical knowledge and context

Most of our students, particularly those fresh from high school, come to our classes with limited knowledge of the twentieth century: the wars, the social movements and the changing political terrain. Some students therefore struggle to make sense of essays, novels and poems about a world outside their own experience. We cannot teach all these things. But we do provide a social-historical scaffolding for each text and use this to generate discussion in the classroom. For example, we used the history of Australian migration (from colonisation, through the gold rush, World War Two and afterwards) as a background to reading Christos Tsiolkas' novel *Loaded* (1995), which itself takes this history for granted.

3.3.4 Empathy and openness

In order to read well, a reader must be *open* to the text's intentions and interactions with past and present cultures. We never demand that our students *agree* with the text's point of view, but we do model the act of opening up to views different from our own. In the process, we discovered that many students are disturbed by texts in which the protagonist is flawed, or in which a narrative does not conclude in a 'feel-good' ending. This may reflect popular cultural narratives which align aesthetic pleasure with psychological affirmation. To some extent, however, accepting that life is complex and that people are flawed is an essential step in becoming an adult. This has led us, in our practice, to carefully balance the selection of texts between those which challenge our students' values and those which offer more straightforward pleasures.

These four focus areas act as a virtuous circle, as gains in one area help develop the other areas. Better vocabulary means easier reading, which means more reading, and the acquisition of more social-historical knowledge. Better social-historical knowledge helps students to empathise with the motives and desires of authors and characters outside of their own experience.

4. Teaching University Students to Write

4.1 OUR WRITING SUBJECT

As our first subject focuses on reading, we then offer a complementary subject which focuses on writing. The subject begins with a forthright account of grammar. We often hear from academic administrators that students find grammar boring. Maybe that was once so, but this is not our experience in tutorial rooms. As academics, we have stood in front of a wide variety of classes, ranging from sociology, philosophy, cultural studies, media and communications, to English literature. Students are capable of being bored by any of this. But whenever we work through a grammar lesson or break down a sentence into its components, all eyes are on the board and fingers clatter across their laptops. Since primary school, students have been starved of information about a subject which they secretly suspect is very important. When that information is thematised in terms of their own writing, and their own struggles, they pay even closer attention.

As the semester progresses, weekly classes introduce genres of writing, writing exercises, and class activities in which we experiment with language forms and features. In class, students write on unseen topics – just a few lines at first. We then share those lines, and comment on them as a group. Later in the session, we co-write pieces using the whiteboard or PowerPoint. We work towards clarity and power in these passages of writing by adding, subtracting and moving text around.

The class exercises support a series of writing assignments. The first involves identifying a grammatical point the student finds difficult, and then presenting a lesson on it. This is succeeded by an assignment on the lyric form – and on syntax at work. While students reach readily for previously learned 'literature skills' (imagery, metaphor, etc.) we direct their attention to the effects that simple grammatical features have on meaning and aesthetic effect. The subject's work converges in the final assignment: a composition. We ask them to create a new piece of work, but written in the 'style' of another writer. But what we mean by 'style' takes some time to develop. Through direct instruction and tutorial interaction we observe how a writer makes choices about vocabulary, syntax, rhythm and voice.

As with the reading subject, our writing subject has a content. Most recently, we framed our writing work with a question: 'How should we live today?' We use the students' intellectual and emotional engagement with this question as a way of generating the energy for completing grammar and composition exercises that might otherwise be very dry.

4.2 HOW OUR STUDENTS WRITE

Before we analyse the most common issues in the written expression of English speakers, we feel that it's important to put to aside English as a Second Language (ESL) student-writing. The example below carries errors in word order, tense, article, and subject-verb agreement that indicate the differing protocols of the source and translated language:

> The justice system is still factor of the obstacle of the reason of increase numbers of indigenous adolescent in detention centre. The justice system administer guideline that performances very well for common or prevailing Australians but it works horribly well for people who are diminish or detriment.

Teaching ESL students at tertiary level is a discipline unto itself. Our experience, however, is mostly with native speakers of English. And just as our analysis of our students' reading skills indicated that many struggle with basic vocabulary and grammar, the same is true of their writing. While some are tempted to make an unfavourable contrast between our students' work and the challenges of ESL students, the issues are quite distinct. Consider these instances from our students' assignments:

> Australia is often depicted as a baron, dry waste-land that is mostly complied of bush.

> I felt like I can relate to Helen Garners as her essay really tells a story about how peoples opinions on your life affect the choices you make for yourself.

> My first thoughts on the novel extract 'Singing my Sister Down' by Margo Lanagan, we're not positive. All though after class discussion's and re reading the extract I was able to come to a better understanding of the text.

The errors seem obvious when singled out this way: misused vocabulary, punctuation errors (particularly the apostrophe) and missing or awkward conjunctions.

Conjunctions also play a role in the grammatical error we most often encounter: the run-on sentence.

> Drugs are not only used to create victories but also sporting greats like Lance Armstrong 7 time winner of the tour de France (consecutive wins) the use of performance enhancing drugs put his leagues above his competitors and becoming an inspiration to some.

Whilst we are not alone in identifying the run-on sentence as a common error, we hope to shortly contribute something to the *explanation* of the frequency of this problem.

From literally thousands of compositions and essays, a picture gradually forms about the *general* qualities of student writing. Some systematisation of student writing is possible, and desirable, if we want to develop a program that addresses these issues. To systematise these errors in a grammatically orderly way, we observe the following categories:

4.2.1 Subjects and predicates

Grammatically, the 'subject' is what a sentence is about, and the 'predicate' is the claim that the writer wants to make about the subject. For example:

The ball	is blue.
(subject)	(predicate)

Many of our students, even very good ones, are deeply uncertain about subjects and predicates. This uncertainty leads to a variety of orders of wavering: sentences without a subject; dangling modifiers; duplicated verbs (leading to transitivity errors with missing verb particles); sentences phrased in a very awkward passive voice; ensembles of words which are fragmentary or incomplete quasi-sentences; and endless (and often eventually aimless), run-on sentences. Consider the following examples:

> She's one of Australia's most talented writers, with lyrical prose and fascinating characters.

> What I found interesting is, I understand this text to be an older and found it fascinating of the plot, as I wouldn't expect it back then, or as much as a common occurrence.

> Writing a grammatically correct sentence is something that I find difficult to do and know this is an area I need to work on. Grammar is not something I remember focusing on greatly during school and therefore sometimes have difficulties in understanding the rules of grammar and how to apply them in my work.

In each case, the subject needs to be recast, or slips; otherwise (for instance), it is 'grammar' that 'has difficulties understanding the rules of grammar.' Whilst it would be possible to break down these passages into their component errors, we see the problem here as a more general uncertainty in how to establish a direct and stable relationship between: (1) the subject of the sentence; and (2) what the student wants to say about it.

4.2.2 Lexical errors (nouns, verbs, modifiers, prepositions)

Clichés, modish colloquialisms ('relatable,' 'majorly,' and the like), and stock phrasing are inevitable shorthand for all of us. But every stock phrase and cliché has its context, its meaning and its sense. Witness the following lexical choices:

> Throughout high school I have always struggled with my literacy skills. The BKSB has been able to identify aspects of my literacy that I didn't know I needed work on whilst also giving me confidents in the areas that I understood. It was also able to reiterate the parts of my knowledge I already knew I was struggling with and provide me with activities to help improve those areas.

'Literacy skills' could just be 'literacy.' 'Confidents' should be 'confidence.' 'Reiterate' should probably be 'revise,' although the student's intention isn't clear. The errors here relate to nouns and verbs, but the problem of lexical choice is clearest in the adjectives and adverbs:

> To achieve principal happiness is to live simplistic in the nature of our existence.

> Although this song's lyrics and musical composition are juxtaposing through the melancholy lyrics and the upbeat and consistent melody effortlessly progress through the song.

> Whilst reading various pieces of Austen's writing including Pride and Prejudice I noticed reoccurring underlying themes of criticising society's expectations and exploring the role of women and men in contrast of each other. I chose the topic and wrote the narrative composition in reflection of Austen's underlying themes.

In each case, the inappropriate nature of the modifier blurs the meaning of the entire sentence. By themselves, they are small errors. Collectively, they indicate a cohort of students generally uncomfortable with verb tense and agreement.

Finally, there are text-fragments which themselves have become stock phrases even though they make little sense when written. Examples include:

a grasp *on* the subject [a grasp of the subject]

based *off*, focused *around* [based on, focused on]

this was due to [this was because]

in which [when 'which' alone is needed]

majorly because, majority which [mostly because, most of which]

4.2.3 Syntactical errors (conjunctions and punctuation)

Syntactical errors can refer to any kind of problem with word ordering and arrangement. Despite the variety, the most common type seems to occur *between* clauses – where a conjunction or punctuation mark is required:

> I finally get the courage to roll out of bed and tumble down the stairs to adhere to my heroic mother cooking me breakfast, as I complain about going to school even though it's the very first day back from a two week break, she continues to crisp the bacon and grind the coffee, 'but my dear, it is important that you receive an education to succeed later on in life, think about all those who do not receive an education at all' she mutters to me.

First of all, the incorrect word choice in 'adhere' is counter-balanced by precise and powerful word choices in 'crisp' and 'grind.' But the fact that this movement from bed to conversation is written as a single sentence betrays a profound lack of confidence in the staging of clauses within a longer sentence. The comma is being used as a kind of *median* punctuation mark: probably not right, but probably not completely wrong either. This issue sometimes appears in the work of an otherwise accurate passage:

> When completing the questions in the various formats I found this to be quite challenging at times, especially being on a computer screen, the topics in particular I found to be challenging was when to use an apostrophe and the spelling section. In the spelling section, I found it harder to identify the misspelt words on the computer screen. Compared to being written on a page in front of you.

This punctuation needs to be completely rewritten with a mix of conjunctions and full stops. Yet once corrected, the student has the potential to write clearly and precisely.

4.2.4 The problem of 'word processing'

Almost all our students speak in an orderly way. It is possible to ask them 'What did you think of this reading?' and they will respond in ways that reflect a sound (implicit) knowledge of how to connect a subject to its predicate, of subject-verb-object word order and agreement and of sound phrasing and general ordering of the material. However, this instinct for grammar

that generally operates in the verbal mode is often absent in the word-processed mode. In response to our question, a student might say in class something like: 'I didn't really like this book as it was too descriptive and too long.' The same student is likely to write something in their assessment task more like: 'The reading of this book was less satisfactory for me as a reader majorly in that it was excessive in its descriptions and also the length was too much.' In synthesising this kind of sentence, we don't mean to belittle our students. It is only an attempt to analyse why a tertiary student's written assignments can read so differently to their spoken English.

We refer to this phenomenon as 'word processing' because it does not also apply to handwriting, or the 'chirographic mode' (Ong 1982). This emerges most clearly in our reading subject which has an invigilated, handwritten exam at the end of semester. As with their spoken sentences, a generally sound subject-verb-object relation re-emerges in their handwritten sentences. To some extent, this observation mirrors those we have made in relation to the effect of the communications revolution on reading. Their word-processed sentences give the impression of lashing together the flotsam of the literary jargon from our lectures with ready-made colloquialisms and ungrammatical punctuation. Studies by Walter Ong (1982) and Michael Heim (1987) drew attention to the seriousness of this issue in its infancy, when word-processing was being brought into being, but very little pedagogical attention has been paid to the phenomenon.

4.3 THE WRITING STRATEGY

In decoding our students' writing, the general picture that emerges is this: *description is much more difficult than it appears*. The traditional hierarchy of tasks places description on the bottom rung of a ladder that exalts analysis and criticism. Yet every class, every assignment, every discussion involves descriptive skill. Universities take it for granted – but we as teachers have learned that we should not do this. In the field of writing, as in the field of reading, we believe educators tend to leap too quickly to what a particular field or discipline requires as its endpoint. Instead, we have been learning to work from more basic principles. Where reading involves understanding information, interpreting it and perhaps applying it to situations, writing involves an equivalent series of steps, the most fundamental of which is the *capacity to describe phenomena*. All disciplines – be they natural sciences, social sciences, or humanities – require one foundational capacity: the ability to *describe* phenomena. Yet nowhere is this skill taught, or even recognised as a skill worth teaching. Our writing strategy involves focusing afresh on writing as something *which says things about the world*. We have come to identify four main principles that guide our design: predication, the physicality of language, writing workshopping and making the talk about writing explicit.

4.3.1. Writing makes a claim about the world

Almost every sentence that we write makes a claim about the world. *That animal is a horse. The president has resigned. Calcium reacts with oxygen. This set of words is a sentence*. Rather than treat dozens of grammatical symptoms individually, we have noticed that a strong instinct *for* the subject, and then for what the writer wants to claim *about* that subject, improves our students' grammar immediately and significantly. When they follow this guidance, they instinctively start writing in the active voice. Their subjects and verbs agree more often. They tend towards shorter, clearer sentences. We risk them creating grammatically correct but repetitive writing. However, it is always worthwhile to pass through this phase rather than leap over it.

4.3.2 The physicality of language

One of the most important tasks in our two subjects involves drawing students into an awareness of what we call the *physicality* of language. When we read together, we stop to ask what words mean. Just as our reading subject offers texts with rich and precise vocabularies, our writing subject asks our students to write clearly and precisely. Our contention is that precision and clarity emerge from the habit of 'weighing our words,' that is, by feeling our words for their nuances, their connotations and their exact sense.

Clearly, lexical choice of nouns and verbs is something any class of this kind would teach. Not every verb complements its noun equally well. Not every adjective or adverb modifies its subject appropriately. So, we ask students to weigh their words, and to make their lexical choices more carefully. But the physicality of language extends to even the smallest kinds of words. These 'small words' (our own very special technical term!) are used everywhere, but they have exact meanings. Words like 'so', 'then', 'yet', 'since', 'therefore', all perform work in their sentences. They are the levers of sense. If verbs are the engines driving the relationships between subjects and objects, the small words are levers which switch the tracks, so to speak, and (to pursue the metaphor), shunt the component phrases and clauses into their precise lines, platforms, sidings. Small words perform big wonders, we say, even if our students do not yet quite believe us.

4.3.3 Writing practice in a grammatically orderly program

Our writing program involves writing practice. Our students practise writing in different genres, forms, moods, purposes, places and cultures. They work individually and collectively. The work on the small pieces of reading and writing is intensive. Then in the assignments, we ask for comparatively short answers - paragraphs or half pages, with three or four such questions per assignment. Rapid feedback is essential to any success - whether it is in the classroom context, or to assignments. In some subjects taught by the school, we have used a model of iterative writing, where a single piece is resubmitted. In our subjects, especially the reading subject, initial reading responses are worked up into a final assignment.

Just as important, we believe, is that the writing program works through these exercises in a grammatically coherent sequence. We dwell on the structural features of language as they emerge, and we call the issues by their names – their grammatical names. In this respect, the fact our students may have to teach grammar to *their* own students makes them attentive. We believe that the basic terms of grammar that were lost to the generations between 1970 and the present are valuable, provided they are not taught abstractly or in absurd detail.

Still, the main focus of our directed writing is not formally grammatical. For example, when we present example of writing stylists (Bacon, Austen, Woolf, Orwell) to the students, we ask our students to say things – *any* things – about what they noticed. The simplest comments are often the best starting points. Bacon uses lots of semicolons. Austen's sentence is complicated, Woolf's even more so. Bacon and Austen both launch their respective pieces of writing propositionally – a term that itself needs to be explained. Orwell writes clearly, doesn't he? Austen is making a claim and is like Bacon, but there is something distinct too. Bacon and Austen deploy a kind of balance in their sentences, a kind of 'syntactical balance.' Like many things in writing, we can feel things before we can fully explain them and 'playing' with writing samples is one of the best things we can do when we are in the room with them.

4.3.4 Multi-model writing

Which lecturer has not had this experience? A student comes to you with an assignment and asks for more feedback. At some point you ask: what did you mean to say *here*? Very frequently talking to our students unlocks some meaning buried inside an ungrammatical sentence in the document. We seek to help students to connect the vocal, written and word-processed responses before the fact. To do this, we set handwritten exercises in class, we set speaking and reading exercises and we work closely together to form sentences on the whiteboard and PowerPoint.

There is, perhaps, a Platonic irony in that this article was entirely word-processed from its origin (in between short bursts of handwritten notes and spoken conversation). But the authors – through their personal and educational histories – have found and practised ways to fully integrate the spoken, the handwritten and the word-processed modes. We don't yearn for a simpler time prior to the ubiquity of computers and mobile phones. But we do recognise a writing problem when we see it, and we feel that we must try to connect these modes more solidly in the students we teach.

5. Conclusions

We began this investigation by stating some elementary hypotheses about how literacy might be taught. At the conclusion of our reflections on our own methods, we find ourselves with *something to say* about each of these hypotheses. How does a university student become a better reader? A better writer? At the end of these many pages, we hope that you will see that while we have made certain observations and have developed certain convictions, we disbelieve those who claim to have a magic answer of some kind. There are as many kinds of readers and writers as there are readers and writers, and not everything will work as well – or at all – for everyone.

We begin with a story, one from the Australian novelist, poet, and essayist, David Malouf. He relates that when he first began as a high school teacher in the 1950s, he was sent to a school in Leeds. He turned up at the working-class boys' school with no idea of how to teach, but he was told to teach *Northanger Abbey* by Jane Austen. Not knowing what else to do, he read them the book aloud – in class after class. He was amazed at the power that the book had over the students – how much they connected with the Northern characters and how familiar they became with the words. Telling them about the book was not the point – reading the book itself drew the class into its world.

The point of that story is not just one about the power of the work of art, although it is that too. We do not have enough time in university classes to read an entire novel in class. But the process of reading is what teaches the ability to read. Reading and writing are, then, a bit like swimming. In order to become Olympic swimmers, our elite athletes swim for several hours every day. They are given direct feedback, and told to get back into the pool and carry it out. After five years of experiments with hypotheses and methods, we have come to the conclusion that there is nothing like reading for improving reading, and nothing like writing for improving writing. This much accords with the *immersion hypothesis*. It is useful – even essential – to aid the student in their reading and writing by providing reading guides and grammatical support. But if the student stops reading the text after a page or two because it is too long-winded or contextually confusing, there is no way to make up for this deficit by any amount of complementary teaching.

But this commitment to our own discipline's principal hypothesis has led us to lean heavily on the principal hypothesis of another discipline: *constructive alignment*. In our two subjects, we use assessments to drive students through the reading and writing tasks. We require students to explain, in close detail, what they thought about a book *only* so that they will read the book closely. We demand that students write in the style of another writer *only* so that they will write, and pay attention to their grammatical choices as they do so. This may seem obvious to many, but it does invert the mechanism of constructive alignment as it often appears in courses on literature. We don't ask students to read a book so that they can write a book review. We ask them to write a book review so that they will read the book.

Each of our subjects is organised around a theme: in our reading subject, we study the idea of Australia; in our writing subject, we ask how we should live today. In this sense, each subject has its own *content*. In this way, in in our choice of reading and writing tasks, we continually consider the *engagement* and *application* hypotheses. We set texts featuring young people, often in rural communities. We set writing tasks that relate to their chosen profession of teaching. However, we stop short of asking our students to read lesson plans or write curriculum documents. And our themes do not lead directly to their professions, except that we may want our future teachers to know something about Australia or to have considered the question of how to live well. More broadly, we could say that we took the opportunity to allow our students to develop their humanity and their citizenship, as much as their qualifications for particular employment.

Finally, and with some regret, we have formed a view within the *technological hypothesis*. As English specialists with some expertise in media and communications theory, we acknowledge that new media forms bring into being new forms of literacy. We recognise the value of these literacies in working and living in a digital world. However, we also highlight the risk that these newer kinds of literacy might displace older forms. We began our work with a basic definition of literacy: as the ability to read and interpret complex texts, and to write grammatically and fluently. We feel obligated to record that each year from 2014 to 2018, as our cohort became more and more 'digitally native,' we observed greater difficulties with *long form reading* and *consistently coherent writing*. We have learned to resist some of these trends, and to work towards integrating older forms of literacy within newer forms.

And this is principally why we have shared our thoughts in this article. Our main reason might just be the academic's reflex to share new knowledge. Over the past five years we have learned new things – things that were new to us, anyway – and we wanted to organise and to share this new knowledge. But we also felt that we have been witnesses to the rapid emergence of a new generation of students, in some ways radically different to previous generations. It is a generation that presents urgent challenges for tertiary educators, making many traditional methods and assumptions about tertiary education redundant. Whilst we are not entirely hostile to the pedagogical impositions of academic administrators – who, surely, must want us to teach well – we have found that the best new knowledge is most likely to be produced by the teachers who have met and wrestled with this new cohort over the last few years. It is to enter into a conversation that we make these observations public.

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