

Creating a Cross-Disciplinary Foundation Unit in Communications

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Abstract

This paper narrates the ‘warts and all’ ongoing case study of how a Creative Industries communications unit has been transformed into a successful cross-disciplinary foundation unit at ECU South West.

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Introduction

During the 1990s and at the turn of this new century, it became apparent to academics across many disciplines, across many universities, and across many continents, that newly enrolled tertiary students lacked some basic, fundamental writing and communication skills. This culminated in what could be called a ‘literacy panic’ which, like many moral panics, has been stirred up and churned out via the media. This panic has been attributed to a “skills deficit model” (Vardi, 2008) that has now escalated into a “literacy war” (Snyder, 2008).

As a result, researchers began to focus on the reasons for this ‘literacy panic’ but many of their findings only confirmed what was already obvious: students lacked skills in grammar, punctuation, spelling and sentence structure; did not know how to structure an argument; and did not understand plagiarism.

This was followed by a wellspring of opinions into how to ‘remedy’ the ‘problem’. The attitude behind the ‘skills deficit’ assumption is interesting because it blames the past (for example, the pre-tertiary education system) for the present. The proliferation of texts, web-sites and university remedial courses is testimony to this and grammar has, to some extent, become quite ‘sexy’ via sites like grammargirl.com with its ‘quick fix’ solutions.

As tertiary educators, I believe we have to get beyond the textuality of communication skills by focussing on context. For example, now that higher education has become democratised and we have such a varied student demographic, we need to acknowledge that the tertiary context is, for many students, like another planet, and that tertiary language may sound like gibberish. In other words, *we* need to communicate more effectively with students so that *they* don’t feel like aliens.

This is where a foundation unit like RPS1100 comes to the party (I was tempted to say ‘to the rescue’, but I didn’t). It welcomes students from all walks of life, and all programs, to tertiary education. It then proceeds to teach fundamental written and oral communication skills so that all students who complete the unit are on the same page – playing field.

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I don't buy into the literacy panic *or* the literacy war any more. And I don't waste time worrying about the "skills deficit". Instead my focus, in developing the foundation unit, is on skilling up the hundreds of students who enrol at RPS.

Background

I began lecturing as a sessional at ECU in 1994. A year later I was tenured (0.5) and my main responsibility was to teach and coordinate the Creative Writing units. My credibility was partly due to knowing, and having been taught by, the coordinator, but I'd also had several short stories published and had embarked on a PhD.

A few years after that, I began to write new writing units for a brand new faculty-specific programme for our campus and I was inspired, driven and excited. I felt more confident as a lecturer in writing, and as a writer of lectures, because I'd had a book published and had established myself as a columnist. The writing units were popular and several students excelled and got stories or articles published.

So, for several years, my primary role was to write, teach and tutor in the writing units. This was something I loved doing but at around the turn of the century I began to notice a significant drop in the fundamental English literacy skills of students. For example, whereas in the past I might have groups of students (majority mature aged) who, though not particularly creative, had good literacy skills and could write articulately but not imaginatively, now I had groups (majority young) who were very creative but could not write a complete sentence, did not know how to punctuate, did not know what an adjective was, and who did not/would not read.

There were external factors, yes. For example, my own 'literacy panic' was partly due to the fact that at about this time the TERs at all WA universities fell, meaning that people with lower initial qualifications could gain admittance to ECU. It's also worth noting that at the Bunbury campus the demographics generally began to flip as the bottom fell out of the mature aged market.

Needless to say, my colleagues and I became concerned, and one of them – Lorna Kaino – developed a writing skills unit to help address the literacy problems we were all encountering. We began to teach this inside our own degree program (Creative Industries) and recommended it to other programs as an elective. Gradually, the unit was embraced as an elective, but my colleagues and I proposed it should be offered as a core unit for all 1st year students.

Our new dean supported this and, in semester 2, 2006, with Lorna's blessing, I took over the coordination of our faculty's first ever foundation unit. Little did I realise the challenges ahead.

Challenges

Despite many staff supporting the foundation unit due to their students' poor writing skills, there was also some understandable resistance. Many felt it was a dumbing down approach. Some lecturers expressed, very honestly, that they, themselves, did not feel confident when it came to things like grammar and punctuation, for example. Then there was the reluctance of programs having to sacrifice their own communication units for the foundation unit. Staff chosen from programs other than Creative Industries, to tutor in the first rendition of the foundation unit, were not very keen.

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Also, it should be noted here that the foundation unit was never intended for business as the business program would not make room in their degree for it to be taught. FBL might have taken RPS1100 in substitution for MKT1101, but FBL changed their degree at around the same time, so Business students were prevented from doing RPS1100, despite RPS Business staff expressing a willingness to come ‘on board.’

What some saw as dumbing down, I saw as smartening up. When tutors were uneasy about teaching what was, at that time, a basic writing skills unit, I applied for (and received) a small T&L grant to write a handbook for tutors that would include lecture notes, tutorial activities, quizzes and answers. I also recommended that they participate in ECU’s Effective Writing PD, which some did. The painful situation of having to sacrifice their own program’s communication units was a bit trickier, but I made sure I studied those units so that I could incorporate material into the foundation unit. These units included:

SWK1104 Professional Communication (Bunbury based Social Work unit);

NSP1103 Communication in Nursing (Perth based Nursing unit);

LAN1100 Language Education 1 (Perth based Education unit);

ERG1101 Literacies and Learners (Bunbury based Education unit);

WRT1101 Language and Writing (Perth based English/Writing unit);

CTC1115 Essential IT Communications (Bunbury based Computing unit);

MKT1101 Professional Communication 1 (Perth based unit).

ENG1110 The Power of Practical Writing (Perth based unit that already has equivalent status).

I wanted to do this latter job fast but it has turned out to be incremental which, in hindsight, I realise was much better than rushing the changes. The reason I say this is that it was (initially) difficult for my Creative Industries colleagues and me to be willing to change a unit we already thought perfectly fitted the bill in terms of students’ needs.

There was also, to begin with, significant resistance from some students who did not understand why they had to do a unit that did not belong to their program degree and who did not want to mix with students from other programs. I didn’t know this, of course, until I received some Week 4 evaluation feedback and, eventually, the UTEI results of that first rendition of the foundation. That was a shock.

Second Semester, 2006

This was the semester when the foundation unit, then called CCC1140 Effective Writing and Speaking, was first delivered across disciplines. I had taught it already for a couple of semesters to, predominately, Creative Industries students with a sprinkling of students from other programmes and I think my biggest group came to around 30.

But now I knew I’d be teaching it to Creative Industries, Surf Science, Computing, Education and Social Work students. I was excited as I’d figured out lots of ways to make grammar interesting, to inspire students to pose arguments in essays, to role-play oral presentations where they pretended to be asking community organisations for funding. In this, and in my writing units, my UTEIs were consistently high. I had the reputation of being a popular, approachable, entertaining lecturer, a bit distract sometimes, but generally solid. Bunbury’s biggest lecture theatre has a 180 seat capacity. We had 189 enrolments. This eventually went down to 168. Nevertheless, I had never taught a group larger than 55. I was terrified. And – for good reason.

The UTEI OS score was 26. I was devastated. I was used to OSs in the 80/90 range. Anyway, once I’d recovered from the shock, I started looking at what to do to improve

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things. The first thing I looked at was the unit plan/schedule and here is what the second semester 2006 students were given:

Week beginning:	Lecture Topics	Tutorial Activities
1. 31 July	Effective writing	Writing exercises
2. 7 Aug	Giving a verbal presentation	Verbal presentation practice session WRITING EXERCISE 1 (10%)
3. 14 Aug	Essay writing 1	TUTORIAL PRESENTATION DUE (10%)
4. 21 Aug	Essay writing 2	WRITING EXERCISE 2 (20%)
5. 28 Aug	Essay writing 3	Essay workshop
6. 4 Sept	Referencing 1	Referencing workshop
7. 11 Sept	Referencing 2	Referencing workshop
8. 18 Sept	Submission/report writing 1	Submission/report workshop ESSAY DUE (30%)
25 Sept	MID-SEMESTER BREAK	
9. 2 Oct	Submission/report writing 2	Essay debrief
10. 9 Oct	Submission/report writing 3	VERBAL REPORT (10%) DUE
11. 16 Oct	E-mail communication	Submission/report workshop
12. 23 Oct	Student consultations (no class)	WRITTEN SUBMISSION (20%) DUE
13. 30 Oct	Review	

The UTEI comments were many and various and I'd never received so many! The positive comments were encouraging with many students grateful for a unit that went back to the basics. But the negative comments were gutting. Here are just some paraphrased examples:

- Too easy.
- Too hard – I don't get it why we haf to do grandma [grammar?]
- Demeaning – are we in primary school?
- Boring, boring, boring.
- Who cares?
- Why do I have to be in tutes with students from other degrees?
- Julie's notes are good but she's disorganised in her lectures.
- Why come when it's all on Blackboard anyway?
- This unit sucks big time.
- Julie tries hard but she has to teach boring stuff.
- What's any of this gotta do with Social Work/Education (etc.)?
- Too much like UPC.
- I don't get the point of it!

Back to the Drawing Board

I struggled to figure out what had gone wrong and how to fix it. I already knew that some of what had gone wrong had to do with a 4-week practicum that Education students had to do in the middle of getting used to the foundation unit. I'd been concerned for those students and that's when I started to invite students to email me at any time and I would reply asap – a practice I've continued to do now for five semesters. This has certainly helped in terms of students knowing someone will reply fast. It has, however, also created a bit of an email hurricane, but that is not the subject of this paper.

It wasn't until the Nursing program came on board in semester 1, 2007 (with a caveat that their students were a separate tutorial group), that I began to re-see how this foundation unit might work better across disciplines. It took me awhile, but I soon realised that communication was more than the written word and that, if we were going to offer a cross-disciplinary unit in communication skills, I had to go beyond grammar and punctuation.

This happened when a relatively new lecturer, Rita, was given the task of working with me. Not only was she young and beautiful; she was confident, assertive and a bit stern. Her 'brief' was to ensure that the foundation unit did everything the sacrificed nursing unit had. I liked her immediately. She also scared the hell out of me.

Change – Getting it 'Right' for All

Rita appreciated the writing skills components of the foundation unit, but she said it also needed more verbal communication skills for nurses. She emphasised topics like conflict resolution; sympathy versus empathy; how to interview a patient via a health assessment; and how to simulate an interview.

Initially, I felt uneasy about incorporating lectures into the foundation unit that seemed to teach common sense but, by second semester, 2007, I'd begun to understand (via Rita) that verbal communication skills, like the above, were just as important as written communication skills. I found this both disturbing and enlightening because, by this time, I'd done some research into the various Generation X & Y communication dilemmas and was beginning to realise that the lack of a comma was not quite as bad as the lack of a 'please' or a 'thank you'.

So I began to seriously think about how a unit that teaches communication skills should focus on communication in the workplace – every kind of communication from emails to confrontations etc. This became even more important when, this semester, the unit was renamed RPS1100 Communication for the Professions.

Current unit plan (2008/02) looks like this:

Week	LECTURE TOPICS	Required reading + tutorial activities
1. July 31	Unit overview Grammar and punctuation	CHAPTER 12 OF TEXT <i>Grammar & punctuation activities</i>
2. Aug 7	Unity and coherence - paragraphing	CHAPTERS 6 & 10 – 12 OF TEXT <i>Paragraphing activities</i>
3. Aug 14	Research and referencing skills	CHAPTERS 3 – 5 OF TEXT <i>Research and referencing activities</i>
4. Aug 21	Essay writing 1: the thesis statement	CHAPTER 9 OF TEXT <i>Thesis statement workshop</i>
5. Aug 28	Essay writing 2: structure Oral presentations	CHAPTERS 9 & 16 OF TEXT <i>Essay planning & oral presentation workshop</i>

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6. Sept 4	Report writing 1: structure	CHAPTER 8 OF TEXT <i>Report structure activities</i>
7. Sept 11	Report writing 2: documentation ASSIGNMENT 1 DUE	CHAPTER 8 OF TEXT <i>Students' oral presentations</i> <i>Interviewing activities</i>
8. Sept 18	Interviewing 1	HANDOUT PROVIDED <i>Interviewing activities</i>
9. Sept 25	Interviewing 2	<i>Interviewing activities</i>
Oct 2	Mid semester break	
10. Oct 9	Interpersonal skills 1	CHAPTERS 13 – 14 OF TEXT <i>Communication activities</i>
11. Oct 16	Interpersonal skills 2 ASSIGNMENT 2 DUE	CHAPTER 15 OF TEXT <i>Teamwork activities</i>
12. Oct 23	Critical thinking	CHAPTER 7 OF TEXT <i>Critical thinking activities</i>
13. Oct 30	Unit review & exam preparation	<i>Mock examination</i>

If you compare the above to the outline of two years ago, you'll notice that we now focus much more on interpersonal communication skills. Good writing skills are still a primary emphasis but the unit has become much more interesting and relevant to *all* degrees.

Learning Curve

Until I took on the coordination of this new foundation unit, I'd worked independently and autonomously on my writing units for Creative Industries (previously BA) for over a decade. In all that time, I had never experienced a significant conflict with a student or lecturer, never been criticised, my UTEIs were always shiny and I felt I was delivering quality material.

Since taking the reins in this foundation unit, I have experienced an (ongoing) inversion of *all* of the above. None of this felt good at the time but it has forced me to re-analyse the whole idea of communication in this era. In my dealings with multiple tutors, I have learned so much about communication; mostly, I have learned via my mistakes. I've embarrassed myself via unclear emails that I've sent to tutors; I've misunderstood colleagues' advice; I've been hurt by conflicts of interest; I've suffered student criticism; and the list goes on.

But, guess what? I love this list of faults because I can fix; that's the challenge in this unit. I don't get upset anymore because this is a communication skills unit and I want to get it working smoothly.

Evolution

There is so much more to say about RPS1100. UTEI OS scores have risen; UTEI comments have become more positive and this unit is in good shape. It is now offered as an off campus option and I've learned how to create Camtasia videos, use Flexilecture facilities and am in the process of putting together guidelines for tutors who facilitate off campus groups.

RPS1100 Communication for the Professions is already good, and I have loved evolving this unit so that it's one-size-fits-all. The challenge for me now is to further evolve this unit, to keep on keeping up with the needs of students from *all* programs and to keep on conversing with other unit coordinators.

Conclusion

Recent research shows that foundation units are being implemented in most universities (internationally) due to the low literacy/communication skills of many 1st year students. In the USA most universities require students to complete 1-2 years of interdisciplinary study.

In Australia, many of these foundation units (including the accompanying research) are extremely detailed, complicated and longwinded.

RPS1100 Communication for the Professions is concise, simple to follow and teaches basic communication skills in practical, realistic ways, so that students are not overwhelmed.

Bottom lines: a faultless sentence, a perfect paragraph, an inspiring oral presentation, an essay with a hearty argument, a well organised report, a student who can (verbally) communicate effectively in a professional context.

Feedback appreciated as this is a work in progress.

References

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