

Engaging IT students in enhancing writing skills

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Although employer studies suggest communications is the most important of the non-technical skills sought in IT graduates, students do not consider this a focus of their studies. Both the research and anecdotal evidence suggests graduates even have trouble writing a CV and covering letter for a job application (DEST, 2002; Lee, Trauth, & Farwell, 1995; Scott & Wilson, 2002).

This presentation describes the *CILcomms* project to assist students studying within the School of IT. The project addresses the feasibility of acquiring and embedding an automated tool for evaluating writing skills within assessment items.

The Design Research methodology was applied as it allowed for insight into the local dynamics of the intervention as well as demonstrating the relevance of the findings to other contexts. The need to address issues of *usability*, *scalability* and *sustainability* are characteristics of Design Research.

A search of the literature and evaluation of the top rated Writing Enhancement Software (WES) packages led to the selection of *Writer's Workbench* (www.emo.com) to trial within the School. WES packages focus on offering relevant feedback with explanations that consider the entire meaning of a sentence or selection and more than one choice of possible corrections. Good reference materials (eg a grammar guide) are often included, with the best software usually compatible with popular word processing applications.

Units that would capture a broad spectrum of students across IT programs were solicited for the pilot: 1st year unit in IT fundamentals; 2nd year programming unit; 3rd year unit in project management and a masters unit in professional practice. In all over 150 students were involved. Data was collected from several sources: WWB reports submitted with assessment items; a questionnaire exploring the (masters) students' perceptions of their writing skills; a focus group from 3rd year participants.

The results indicate students:

- rate their technical writing skills higher than other styles of formal writing
- use embedded tools ubiquitously but are much less likely to use stand-alone tools
- are strategic in their use of any tool – less than 5% submitted the same work more than once, while a (subjective) acceptable is 'good enough'. In contrast, the literature suggests up to five revisions show consistent improvements (Attali, 2004)
- are influenced in use by: time-pressure (needing to complete the work to allow time to fix and resubmit the work to WWB); overwork (other assessment, outside work); need to go to a lab on campus.

In addition, 1st year students, appear to require extra support (eg a hands-on session) in learning the tools. For all other students, in-built tutorials and peer support appear adequate.

This pilot suggests use of such a tool would be of greatest benefit if embedded in the assessment structure and accessible more flexibly than the pilot allowed. An interface to support offered within the University is also desirable. Discussions are underway to implement a University-wide web-based system.

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