

'Words' goes into action

The February column about *the generation grammar forgot* certainly stirred some comment, mainly from older Pesapersons recognising their children's grammatical failings, and all convinced of the disservice done to our young people by the schooling system. That failure had been well stated in an article in *The Australian* by Peter van Onselen, a professor at the University of Western Australia, at the time I was writing about Gemma Sapwell's language experience.

In *Writing Wrongs of Education Policy* (5/01/13), Van Onselen lamented that his teaching experience at University had shown him that 'even at the Tertiary level, most students have not been taught (or at least have not absorbed) the basics of good written expression'.

'First year students fresh out of the schooling system generally struggle with essay writing. And these are the students who have been deemed capable of entering university. What of the rest?'

'By the time students leave university, their essay writing may have improved somewhat, but it is not of a standard previous generations would expect.'

The problem began with changes to the curriculum years ago, effectively stopping the teaching of basic grammar and written expression at the end of primary school, instead of maintaining them as standard and compulsory subjects right through high school.

A generation later, this has evolved into a deeper-rooted systemic problem: many of today's teachers came through that English curriculum and are simply not competent to teach grammar.

Van Onselen describes his previous experiences at a teacher-training University, being appalled that essays 'submitted by final-year teaching students – some of whom were already doing their in-class practicums – (were not) of a standard the community should expect from a Year 12 student, much less someone about to take up a teaching position'.

All this is before we superimpose the SMS and twitter world on the I-Generation's literacy; not to mention the political correctness that seems so prevalent in Australia. Witness the recent move in WA to teach part-Aboriginal

children in their own dialect of English, because to force them to use correct English in the classroom would be demoralising. Not nearly as demoralising as being unemployable because you cannot speak or write English!

(This initiative drew cause from a student being disciplined for calling another a 'horse'. His defense was that, in the English dialect he spoke at home, 'horse' meant 'the best'. Allowing the slim chance this was the truth, one might argue that the purpose of English lessons is to teach the child that 'horse' doesn't mean 'the best', not to encourage his use of that family slang in the classroom.)

The problem cannot now be solved simply by a change of syllabus. The teachers who would be called on to teach the higher-standard English expression would first have to learn it, making teacher re-education an essential part of any useful program. The much-touted Gonski reforms barely touch on such issues.

This is far less an issue with private schools, of course. As van Onselen says, 'the private schools cherry-pick the limited number of new teachers who can properly string sentences together on a page'. Once again, manipulation of the curricula to remove elitism, racism, sexism etc, (Shakespeare isn't better'n street rap, bro) and create a more egalitarian society, ends up deepening the divide between public and private education.

As an industry and geoscientists, we can't solve the education issue, but we need to address what we can do for our younger colleagues. We can pontificate all day in columns such as this or in emails to each other, but the time has come for a more focused effort.

Not that long ago, young geoscientists in a new company had to write reports and submit them for review to their manager or the department head. Those reports were rigidly edited, not just for their scientific content, but also for structure, composition and grammar. That doesn't seem to happen very much anymore, except within some government organisations such as the Geological Survey of Western Australia.

Many seismic interpretation reports submitted to Government are token efforts. Well Completion Reports are often written by a contractor hired for that purpose. Most communication is by PowerPoint or equivalent.

In writing about Sapwell last month, I applauded her purchasing *Elements of Style* to educate herself about grammar and improve her writing style. In that *Writing Wrongs...* article quoted above, van Onselen admits to a similar wake-up bump on the Damascus Road.

His supervisor told him that his thesis was technically good but he needed to go out and buy 'a book on basic writing to fix poor expression points'. The Professor told him 'in no uncertain terms' that he'd be damned before he'd pass a thesis that wasn't well written.

'Being forced to read through a book on grammar, even at the 11th hour, did wonders for my writing', said van Onselen.

That both Sapwell and van Onselen credit much of their success as writers to their purchase of a long-ago published book on grammar and expression, suggests one course of action. Young Pesapersons should be encouraged to purchase (and read) some of the better books about writing. Companies could purchase the books and make them available in the library or digitally on the in-house network.

In coming issues of *PESA News Resources*, I will recommend and review some of these books. Last month, I mentioned *Elements of Style*; next month I will look at William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*.

I like Zinsser's book, especially for his conviction, which I share, about continuity in writing. A report or a paper should flow from opening sentence to the end. Sentences within paragraphs should flow logically along, paragraphs should link, and sections should be bridged, one to the other, as much as possible.

Zinsser puts it in his usual succinct way: 'writing is linear and sequential, sentence B must follow sentence A'.

He also said that 'writing is learnt by imitation; we all need models'. So we will look at well-written papers and local authors to learn from – or local authors from whom we can learn, if you prefer.

'Words' has been primarily a column of entertainment in recent years. Time we went to work.

Peter Purcell ■