

Getting students to proofread a 'model' essay

What did/do you do?

I got our Medical Microbiology stage 2 students to do a proofreading exercise at the beginning of module MIC2028. At the same time we had two seminars on writing skills for their written assessments. I also made them read a scientific paper to be critical on it at the same time. During one seminar we then went through the corrections they suggested.

Who is involved?

Phillip Aldridge, Institute for Cell and Molecular Biosciences, with Medical Microbiology Stage 2 students preparing for their written assessments.

How do you do it?

I wrote a model (good but not perfect) answer to a mock assessment question. Then with the help of a stage 3 student, I set about destroying this model essay: adding spelling and grammar mistakes, changing the order of sentences within a paragraph, inserting sentences that didn't make sense. I gave this destroyed essay to the Stage 2 students and told them to proofread it and bring it to our next session.

Why do you do it?

My argument was to get the students to become self critical to correct their own work. This came from my observation, and some of my colleagues, that when a student comes to question a mark, you sit down and read the first sentence and end up asking if you need to go any further. My philosophy was that students lose a percentage of the mark simply by not reading/correcting their own work and we as academics simply can't mark it, as it does not make sense.

Furthermore by not proofreading what they write they can also take things out of context, which in an essay or report turn into false statements. An example includes 3 facts per sentence bouncing from one aspect of the essay to another without any structure, where what you really need are three distinct clear sentences introducing the facts and an explanation. My argument was that my red pen comments would become more scientific and not simply 'bad English', 'what are you trying to say', as I have got them to read their own work before submission. Note part of our marking criteria is always structure and organisation of the essay or report.

Does it work?

I felt this has helped the students and will be doing this again. I have examples of their attempts. One experience was to note how different students approach this task. Those that write all over the document to those that will circle just the spelling mistakes. I know from discussion with them that I clearly made them sit up and think about what they were submitting. I also know the students looked at the essays and reports differently when returned partly to first see where the red pen hit their essay. I have introduced a similar policy in the lab. I now refuse to read anything a PhD or Post doc gives me for comments without prior evidence of self-critical proofreading.

Teaching and Learning Case Study

2011/12

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Coherent Curriculum themes:

- Assessment and feedback

Other keywords:

Marking, proofreading