

# What kinds of help do tertiary and post-tertiary students need in reasoning and English expression?

*This is a revised version of a lecture given by Dr John Howes, President of the international educational and social movement Learningguild, at Charles Darwin University, in Darwin, on the 14th of June 2017.*

In this lecture I present a five-stage argument, and then give a warm invitation.

## 1. WHAT IS INVOLVED IN GENUINELY TERTIARY AND POST-TERTIARY STUDY?

The terms ‘tertiary and ‘post-tertiary’ are valuable partly because they have a wider range than ‘undergraduate’ and ‘graduate’ (as in ‘graduate student’). It is of course possible to **study** at tertiary and post-tertiary levels without being enrolled for any university degree (and universities should encourage and foster such study, in and beyond what are called the professions). But there is another difference between the pairs of terms. As the late Professor R.M.Hare of Oxford would put it, the latter terms are merely descriptive: for so long as one is enrolled, one **is** an undergraduate or a graduate student. Each of the former, by contrast, can also be used with what Hare calls evaluative meaning, as in the question that heads this section, or in the question “Does this course **deserve** to be called tertiary?”

That second question arises about beginners’ language courses. In February 1953, I had to begin my study of classical Greek at the University of Melbourne with an intensive four-week course before I began Arts I: only then could I enter Greek I, which was not a beginners’ course.

I give this answer to this section’s question. ‘Tertiary’ and ‘post-tertiary’ are properly applied, in their evaluative use, to **enquiry that is normally analytical, critical and synthesist (ACS enquiry)**. I have explained what I mean by each of those adjectives on p.1 of my editorial letter (in which I draw upon four books about university education) in issue 2.2014 of our magazine *Learningguild Letter (LgL)*, available on the website [learningguild.org.au](http://learningguild.org.au).

It was a characteristic of Australian “sixth form” or Year 12 syllabuses until about 1990 that they were intended to take you to the **borderland** of ACS enquiry, and so to fit you for it. Hence the use of the term ‘Matriculation’ even for that year itself. Year 12 syllabuses seldom do so now, and so most students, native speakers and non-native, are inadequately prepared for it. A similar complaint was made as early as 1991 by members of Australian Business Higher Education Round Table (reported in the first issue of *Campus*, April 15 in that year).

Let us consider two familiar nouns I have used which are often employed unthinkingly: ‘enquiry’ and ‘study’. No course deserves to be called tertiary, let alone post-tertiary, if it allows the student to “get it down, get it up, give it back”, rather than to enquire, i.e., to formulate and ask questions and strive for answers of his or her own. The etymology of ‘study’, as of ‘student’, is rooted in the Latin ‘*studium*’ and ‘*studēre*’: ‘zeal’ and ‘to be zealous’.

Professor R.D.Wright, the Melbourne physiologist, used to say that he wanted researchers with fire in the belly. Tertiary and post-tertiary progress hardly deserve those adjectives if eagerness and delight in enquiry, discovery and cooperative discussion are lacking. It is a major and wonderful role of a teacher at any level to foster such eagerness and delight.

We can properly differentiate tertiary study and two levels of post-tertiary study, for example Master's and doctoral, by distinguishing three ways in which ACS enquiry can proceed: (i) largely guided, (ii,a) often independent, and (ii,b) substantially independent. (Are coursework Master's students sufficiently required to do independent work?)

## 2. WHAT ABILITIES, AND WHAT ORIENTATION, DO ALL STUDENTS NEED TO HAVE IF THEY ARE REALLY TO BE ACS ENQUIRERS?

I use the words 'abilities' and 'orientation' because 'skills', so commonly used, seems to me to suggest something too cut-and-dried, even impersonal, and either possessed or not, although, when the noun 'skill' is used for something uncountable, as in 'skill in...', we can speak of some skill and of great skill. I invite you to note and carefully consider the three successive, separated and bold-type phrases in my answer to this section's question. ACS enquirers need the abilities that come from and depend on understanding and applying **questions and principles** that underlie **thinking, speaking and writing** that is **clear and precise, concise, and fair** (CPCF), and the orientation that consists of the desire and resolve to go on learning how to get closer to that ideal in their thinking and the two forms of communication.

"Well", someone might say, especially someone working with students as yet weak in written and/or spoken English, "there's a counsel of perfection if ever there was." I offer a three-part reply. First, I am here continuing in a long educational tradition stemming from the medieval *trivium*, the set of three *viae* or paths, grammar, logic and rhetoric, a set rightly regarded as the prerequisite of tertiary education. However, I use the phrase 'updated *trivium*', and, to give these paths greater width, the more attractive names 'sentence-construction', 'reasoning' and 'choice of words'. Secondly, we read in Plato's *Republic* (504c) that nothing imperfect is an adequate measure of anything. Ideals, close and sympathetic observation of students, and realistic aims are all essential in education at all levels. Thirdly, I am asking for increasing appreciation of the ideal: even a student still quite weak in reasoning and/or English expression can be encouraged to **learn how to progress** towards CPCF thinking, speaking and writing.

Teachers at any level can lack one or more of these four virtues, and their teaching is vitiated thereby. How much they can help and even inspire their students both to learn and to be zealous if they have themselves learned, without any complacency, to get nearer and nearer to the ideal.

Few students now in universities, even when their work is or is supposed to be post-tertiary, and few younger professionals, have much familiarity with the questions and principles I have in mind. So, for example, unused to asking questions about the presentation of a question, a health professional writes "We ask them ... to think about what sort of person

do they want to be?”, never having clearly grasped the difference between a direct question and an embedded one, often called indirect or reported.

You may have thought that ‘fair’ was a surprising adjective to add to the other three, or that it’s odd to describe thinking as concise. A truth-seeking person needs to embrace fairness in three aspects: accurately representing another’s position, looking for both strengths and weaknesses in it, and ensuring that any criticisms of it are themselves soundly based. How educative, how humane, it is to learn, often with a good teacher’s example and help, to be fair in all those ways. In contrast, a radical defect in Donald Trump is his lack of commitment to fairness. As for concise thinking, when a company’s interviewer says, after the interview, “She’s quick on the uptake”, that ability is being recognized as the great merit it is in business as everywhere else. (The quick thinker in academic work, however, as often elsewhere, must sometimes engage in thinking that is also arduous and protracted.) Good examinations, often taking three hours, and usually indispensable as determining what a secondary or tertiary student can do unaided, are a valuable training-ground in alacrity as well as conciseness.

### 3. WHAT GUIDANCE AND MATERIALS EFFECTIVELY HELP TERTIARY AND POST-TERTIARY STUDENTS TO DEVELOP POWERS OF CPCF THINKING, SPEAKING AND WRITING?

I begin with the student at any of our three levels who is a non-native speaker and still very weak in English and perhaps in reasoning as well, and so unable to present a case effectively. Think of a Cambodian student in that situation in speaking of whom a professor said, of course rightly, “We can’t give a man a Melbourne Ph.D. simply for telling us what his research was.” So far as I know, the man was not offered any direct personal help in reasoning and expression until his **seventh** semester when he was supposed to be “writing up” his work and I was asked, in 2014, to help him, because his weakness had become evident. (Writing should be part of the student’s work **throughout** his or her undergraduate or graduate course.) My help at that late stage had be largely *ad hoc*, though I progressively listed things that he needed to remember and apply in future similar cases.

Every tertiary or post-tertiary entrant should be given a **diagnosis** early in his or her first semester, after the writing of an argumentative essay of at least 500 words, under examination conditions, on any one of, say, ten topics, and then a one-with-one talk for at least a quarter of an hour with a person sensitive to difficulties in spoken English. The diagnosis and related recommendations should be written, with a copy in a file for that particular student, and handed to the student in the course of a second and similar talk. Whether or not there can be a recommendation to attend a class, specific and recorded guidance should be given, such as “Work right through Murphy’s *Essential Grammar in Use*, doing all the exercises, in the next six months, and show me that you have done so”, and an indication of a weekly time or times when the speaker would be available, at least to anyone who called. To be blunt, if you don’t want students to be cynical and think of themselves as “cash cows”, but also and primarily so that they don’t descend into paralysing anxiety and isolation, let them know in this and other ways that you really care about their making steady progress.

Learners of English as a further language need above all to understand and use the sentence-structures, as well as most of the words, in a book-dictionary of limited compass (**not** their electronic one) that provides illustrative sentences for many of those words. The best I know is the *Oxford Essential Dictionary*, which has the further merit that in many of those sentences words often used together (one of them often a preposition) are put in bold type. So, at ‘interest<sup>1</sup>’, the first entry is “(no plural) wanting to know or learn about somebody or something: *He read the newspaper **with interest**. He **takes no interest in** politics.*” (Better ‘desire’ to fit those sentences than ‘wanting’.) I ask students at the elementary or early intermediate stages to read many such sentences, often aloud, and imagine how a conversation beginning with them might proceed, but also to do a particular kind of written work set out in my booklet *SSC (Sentences to Study and Change)*, whose text is accessible from the Home page on our website. They should seek annotation of their work from a competent person, but should often be able to say to themselves “Since this example given by *OEssD* is good English, the sentence I’ve written for the same word and with the same structure is probably right too.” This method has the advantage that students can look for words that suit their own interests.

Many of my students at these levels have needed also a grammar book such as one or other of Raymond Murphy’s. There too I use the SSC principle, asking students not only to do all the exercises but also to write two sentences of their own at the foot of each unit, drawing upon something they have learnt from it and preferably preserving sentence-structure. Murphy says his books are not to be worked through, because not arranged in order of difficulty. In fact, if the preposition units are taken quite early, the student benefits from both systematic treatment (e.g. of tenses) and, roughly, an order of difficulty. On all of this, I invite you to read my editorial letter in *LgL* 1.2012, which includes much of the advice I offered to Chinese learners of English when I gave a lecture in two universities in China in 2012.

Increasing clarity in the speaking of English is very important for communication and confidence. I ask students to purchase my booklet-and-CD *Sounds, Words, Sentences (SWS)*, which presents all forty-six sounds used in English and recognized in the International Phonetic Alphabet, repeats (with permission) Oxford University Press’s illustrative word in each case, and adds three others, and sentences (later to be read aloud) about the making of the sound. I emphasize the need to pronounce consonants clearly (“nekst wi:k”) and to practise vowels, e.g. the “kissing” vowel in *go* and *most*.

What of the native speaker of English who, like most such students in our universities, has not been required at school to learn much English grammar, and the non-native speaker at an intermediate level? Here my main medium is now my booklet *QPS, Questions and Principles for Sentence-construction* (text in *LgL* 2.2015). The reader learns to be sensitive to points at which he or she should ask such questions as “Should I use a pronoun here?” and to master and apply relevant principles. I provide errors for correction at the end of each of the thirteen sections, all of them from one book – by health professionals.

That booklet serves as an introduction to Rebecca Gowers’s *Plain Words* (Penguin 2015): she has revised her great-grandfather Sir Ernest Gowers’s famous *The Complete Plain Words*. To get to know such a book well, over several years, is an education in itself.

Most students have learnt very little about forms of cogent reasoning and ways in which arguments can be unsound. For that I offer my booklet *Reasoning*, available by post from Learningguild. I also now recommend to those ready for it my editorial letter on truth-seeking and hypothetico-deductive reasoning in various fields, in the most recent *LgL*, 2.2016.

#### 4. SHOULD THERE NOT BE A REPEATABLE EXAMINATION IN REASONING AND ENGLISH EXPRESSION, WIDELY KNOWN, RECOMMENDED AND TAKEN, AND NOT TIED TO ANY COURSE?

First, that question raises a matter of **equity**. Given that a degree is not now normally itself a guarantee of proficiency in English, a non-native speaker of English needs to be able to point to success (e.g. an upper B) in such an examination as proof that he or she **does** have that proficiency. Something wider, deeper, and culturally richer is here preferable to IELTS, TOEFL or the Cambridge test, provided that adequate guidance is given on a website for preparation. The exam's requirements should include critical discussion of some passage in which at least some of the arguments are certainly defective, and an essay of at least 500 words entirely relevant to one topic chosen out of many. Such proof of proficiency would impress and reassure an employer who rightly insists on avoiding the prospect of getting or hearing about reports or letters in English that is unclear and/or full of errors.

Secondly, the repeatability of such an examination would provide a pathway for native and non-native speakers alike towards excellence in reasoning and expression, especially if there are constructive reports on past exams.

Thirdly, there is an important point of strategy and public relations for senior university administrators to consider. It is for them to decide whether or not to insist that assessments for which they are ultimately responsible should require a higher level of English than at other universities, with the risk of losing students to those others thereby. Whatever decision they make there, they could sincerely and gladly say, to both students and employers, that in recommending, and perhaps supporting or even sponsoring, a repeatable exam for whose standards and results they themselves take no responsibility, they are encouraging real and continuing progress towards the competence and excellence in reasoning and expression that many employers rightly look for in anyone they'd take on who would write reports or letters.

#### 5. DOES THE TWICE-YEARLY EXAMINATION FOR THE LEARNINGGUILD CERTIFICATE IN REASONING AND EXPRESSION DESERVE YOUR APPROVAL AND SUPPORT?

I should gladly welcome any questions. I invite you to look for yourselves at some pairs of a past paper and report on our website, perhaps especially that for the exam named May 2014, in which the candidates ranged from a Rhodes Scholar about to go to Oxford to boys in Year 11 at Melbourne High, the school which he and I had attended. There are testimonies on the website to the value of our exam from Sir Keith Thomas of Oxford, Professor Peter Singer of Melbourne and Princeton, and the late Dr John Silber, President Emeritus of Boston. Professor

Ross Garnaut, recently awarded the AO, has sent Professor McManus and me a copy of a letter he has written to your Vice-Chancellor, in which he says “The Learningguild project and its examination can play an important role in helping Australians ... to overcome important gaps in their education”, and “It would be good if CDU recognised an opportunity to take a lead in an area in which Australian education has large weaknesses.”

There are three grades A, B and C, for overall results in this exam, with upper, middle and lower levels in the B and C grades. A person should not be a journalist or a secondary or tertiary teacher without being able to get an A. When Penny Hutchinson (later CEO of Arts Victoria) arranged with me in the early 1990s for 31 young managers at the Melbourne accounting company BDO to take the exam (she was then the partner in charge of training), we agreed that an acceptable level to be expected of them, in some cases through several attempts, was an upper B. One, Chris Wookey, was very glad to get an A at his third attempt. (See his testimony on our exam leaflet.) It is a serious handicap to **any** tertiary or post-tertiary student not to be able to get even a lower C, and of great benefit, in itself and in its consequences for university assessments and employment, to move up in that grade and into the Bs, normally assisted by some of our concise reports and publications. (I know that many students now are time-poor.)

The invitation I now warmly extend to you can, after the previous paragraph, be put as follows. Is there someone, or some pair or group of persons, at CDU who will be a Penny Hutchinson for the Learningguild exam? Not in requiring, but in **recommending**, that some individual or group take it, and in organizing, in consultation with me, a time and place or places within CDU. “The probable base date for the second exam” for this year has been stated on our leaflet, whose text is on the website, as Saturday September 16th. Other arrangements can be made provided that the integrity of the exam is maintained.

With help from others, now including my niece Hilary Howes, a post-doctoral fellow at ANU (who was in 1998 the Australian girl referred to in our leaflet), I can go on setting exam papers, leading a team of markers, and inviting others to join us – and looking for and assisting someone who could be my successor.

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