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Minimal Marking: A Success Story

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Abstract

The minimal-marking project conducted in Ryerson's School of Journalism throughout 2012 and early 2013 resulted in significantly higher grammar scores in two first-year classes of minimally marked university students when compared to two traditionally marked classes. The "minimal-marking" concept (Haswell, 1983), which requires dramatically more student engagement, resulted in more successful learning outcomes for surface-level knowledge acquisition than the more traditional approach of "teacher-corrects-all." Results suggest it would be effective, not just for grammar, punctuation, and word usage, the objective here, but for any material that requires rote-memory learning, such as the Associated Press or Canadian Press style rules used by news publications across North America.

Le projet de corrections minimales mené à l'École de journalisme de Ryerson tout au long de 2012 et au début de 2013 a eu pour résultat des notes de grammaire considérablement supérieures dans deux classes de première année d'étudiants universitaires corrigés de façon minimale par rapport à deux classes où les étudiants étaient corrigés de façon traditionnelle. Le concept de « corrections minimales » (Haswell, 1983), qui exige un engagement considérablement plus important de la part des étudiants, aboutit à des résultats d'apprentissage supérieurs en ce qui concerne l'acquisition de connaissances au niveau superficiel par rapport à l'approche traditionnelle du « professeur qui corrige tout ». Les résultats suggèrent que cette approche serait efficace, non seulement pour la grammaire, la ponctuation et le bon usage des mots, qui étaient l'objectif visé dans ce cas, mais également pour n'importe quelle matière qui exige un apprentissage par mémorisation, tel que les règles de style de la Associated Press ou de la Presse canadienne utilisées par les publications de presse d'un bout à l'autre du Canada.

Cover Page Footnote

Minimal Marking: A Success Story Anne McNeilly Ryerson University Author Note Anne McNeilly, School of Journalism, Faculty of Communication and Design, Ryerson University This research was supported by a grant from Ryerson's Office of Teaching and Learning. The author would like to thank colleagues Lisa Taylor, Dan Westell and Cathy Dunphy for their participation and support in this project. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anne McNeilly, School of Journalism, Ryerson University 350 Victoria Street, Toronto, Canada, M5B 2K3. E-mail: anne.mcneilly@ryerson.ca

Woman, without her man, is nothing.
Woman! Without her, man is nothing.[1]

The student sitting in my office was in shock. He had failed the basic grammar test that all first-year students in the School of Journalism are required to pass before they can move on to the second year of the program at Ryerson University. "I was the top English student in my [high school] graduating class," he told me, incredulously.

He was not the only student who had not passed the test, which examined grammar, punctuation, word usage, and spelling. The number of bright students who are failing the university's mandatory test has been increasing during the past few years, going from 51% in 2008 to 69% in 2011 and 60% in 2012. Ryerson, however, is not the only university/journalism school in this position. A 2010 survey of journalism educators in the United States (Lingwall, 2010) found that they believed deficiencies in student writing were creating serious problems for universities. They described the problem as "epidemic" (Lingwall, 2010, p. 297) and attributed it to such factors as lack of instruction at the Kindergarten to Grade 12 levels, university enrolment pressures, and digital technology, which allows students to text and tweet in shorthand using a variety of truncated words. "Substantial research demonstrates that high school graduates are not prepared to write at the college level, and that a lack of early rigor often leads to the need for later remediation" (Lingwall, 2010, p. 285).

The problem, however, is not confined to journalism programs. The failure rate of students at the University of Waterloo, who must pass an exam testing their language skills to graduate, increased from 25 to 30 per cent between 2005 and 2010. According to Ann Barrett, former managing director of the English language proficiency exam at this institution, even Grade 12 students with good marks "still can't pass our simple test. Poor grammar is the major reason students fail" (Kelley, 2010). Simon Fraser University, now ranked No. 26 in an international survey of the top 100 universities under 50 years of age[2], reviewed entrance requirements for admission because 10% of its students were not meeting the mandatory writing requirements to graduate. Paul Budra, chair and professor of English at Simon Fraser, said that "punctuation and apostrophe errors" are a "huge" problem. "Students seem to have absolutely no idea what an apostrophe is for. None. Absolutely none" (Kelley, 2010).

Bauerlein (2010) has outlined how student scores on three national assessments of reading and writing in the United States have deteriorated since the 1990s, while Quible and Griffin (2007) found that poorly written work due to deficient writing skills resulted in "image degradation" (p. 32) for U.S. employers and employees, as well as a serious loss of productivity. The National Commission on Writing (NCW) in the United States estimated that American firms spend as much as $3.1 billion annually on programs to improve employees' writing skills. The NCW based this figure on data collected from 64 of 120 large American corporations that employed 8 million people[3]. (The importance of punctuation and grammar

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[1] Truss (2003, p. 9)

[2] According to the Times Higher Education Ranking system, Simon Fraser University in British Columbia ranked No. 26 among 100 universities under age 50 in 2013. The university opened in 1965. It was ranked No. 30 in 2012.

[3] The study for the National Commission on Writing in the United States study was done in 2004. In 2005, an NCW report summarizing feedback from 49 of 50 states found that public sector employers reported similar writing deficiencies. "Writing is considered an even more important job requirement for the states' nearly 2.7 million employees than it is for the private-sector employees studied in the Commission's previous survey of leading U.S businesses. Still, despite the high value that state employers put on writing skills, a significant number of their employees do not meet states'

can't be underestimated. In Canada, a misplaced comma in a business agreement between Rogers Communications Inc. and Aliant Inc. threatened to cost Rogers $2.13 million[4].)

Misplaced commas, along with sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and lack of subject-verb agreement are some of the errors educators in North America and at Ryerson University are seeing in first-year student writing, and these are consistent with those listed in the top 20 of the most common sentence errors outlined in a study by Connors and Lunsford (1988). I would add a punctuation error that is turning up increasingly in student work, which involves putting a period, rather than a comma, at the end of a quote. For example, *"I don't write editorials." He said.* That small, but major, problem suggests a decline in the reading habits of digital natives. The decline is outlined at some length and somewhat controversially by Bauerlein (2010), who compares the teacher's task to climbing Mount Everest, when it comes to teaching language mechanics. "By the time they reach their senior year of high school, students have internalized a sense of expression that teachers must labor mightily to dislodge" (Bauerlein, 2010, p. 40).

While this study does not attempt to scale Everest, it does build upon Haswell's (1983) strategy to improve students' written language through "minimal marking" (MM). The MM project at Ryerson's journalism school throughout 2012 and early 2013 found that students who were required to identify and correct sentence-level errors in their own work scored significantly higher on a language-skills test than those who were not required to do so. MM is a method that can be employed across disciplines by instructors aiming to improve students' written language facility. The difference in final test scores between students who were marked minimally compared to those who were not is so significant that it is surprising more research into this approach has not been done before now.

Digital Technology

One factor that has been cited as contributing to the decline in grammar, punctuation, and word usage (which I will refer to simply as grammar from now on) is the increasing propensity of teenagers and young adults to communicate through instant messaging. Sociolinguistics scholar Naomi Baron (2005) found that when students communicate by cell phone texts or Internet instant messaging programs their writing "is sloppier than traditional equivalents" (p. 22) and she speculated that such "sloppiness" might seep into their more formal writing. Turner (2009) confirmed that speculation in a study of secondary and university students. He found a positive co-relation between the amount of time the student spent texting and the number of grammar errors in formal written work, while Wardyga (2012) also found a significant negative co-relation between the volume of texts sent by female college students and their SAT writing scores.

In a 2008 Pew Research study, 50% of teens said they sometimes used informal writing styles instead of proper capitalization and punctuation in their school assignments; 64% of participants said they incorporated some informal styles from their text-based communications into their writing at school, and 38% said they used text shortcuts in school

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expectations." (College Board, the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, 2005, p. 3).

[4] Denis Chamberland outlines *The Million Dollar Comma Case* in the November 2008 issue of *Municipal World*. In the New York Times, Oct. 25, 2006, Ian Austen began his story: "If there is a moral to the story about a contract dispute between Canadian companies, this is it: Pay attention in grammar class." The Globe and Mail reported the story on Aug. 7, 2006: "The controversial comma sent lawyers and telecommunications regulators scrambling for their English textbooks in a bitter 18-month dispute that serves as an expensive reminder of the importance of punctuation."

work such as LOL, which stands for "laugh out loud" (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008). At Simon Fraser, Rummana Khan Hemani, director of academic advising and student success, said that emoticons were even showing up "in letters of academic appeal" (Kelley, 2010).

Whatever role texting and social media may play in academic writing, grammatical errors in student writing at the university level are a problem. Studies, for example those by Appelman and Bolls (2011) and Maier (2005), have shown that the presence of grammatical errors makes it more difficult to absorb and retain information, and also decreases the credibility of a news publication. Appelman and Bolls (2011) wrote that, "grammar significantly affects the cognitive processing and subsequent evaluation of news articles. Grammatical errors are associated with high mental effort, low retention and low perceived credibility" (p. 60).

Along with the serious problems that sentence errors can cause in communication, there are also important aesthetic and practical issues. Neglecting to pay attention to punctuation is akin to going out with spaghetti stains down the front of your shirt. It is not only sloppy, but, on a practical level, it is an easy way to be eliminated from career opportunities. CEO Kyle Wiens (2012) generated close to 4,000 responses when he outlined in a Harvard Business Review blog post why he would not hire employees for his companies, iFixit and Dozuki, unless they could pass a basic language-skills test. He wrote:

> Grammar signifies more than just a person's ability to remember high school English. I've found that people who make fewer mistakes on a grammar test also make fewer mistakes when they are doing something completely unrelated to writing — like stocking shelves or labeling parts. (Wiens, 2012, para. 10).

While new technology, such as the Internet, Twitter, and Instagram, may increasingly be dominating news gathering and dissemination, the necessity for strong grammar skills has not diminished. Effective written communication is one of the key skills students should have before graduation (Quible & Griffin, 2007; Wagner, 2008) regardless of discipline. Wagner (2008) found that "effective written and oral communication" were among the top seven skills employers value (p. 22). Students in the 2008 Pew Research study also recognized the importance of strong writing skills; 98% of participants agreed that writing is at least somewhat important for their future success; more than half (56%) thought that writing is "essential"; 30% said it is "important, but not essential"; and 12% saw it as "somewhat important." Just 2% said writing is "not at all important" to their future success in life (Lenhart et al., 2008, p. 42).

Many journalism educators are now incorporating new technology when teaching the digital generation (McNeilly & Rauhala, 2012), but the imperative to write clearly is still paramount. "In online and offline writing, students still need to edit and revise their work," Sweeny (2010, p. 126) writes in a paper that explores how "new technologies" can be incorporated into the classroom. The discussion of such technologies includes references to websites for practising and improving basic grammar skills and even includes a recommendation (p. 127) to the classic guide to writing, Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*. This well-known guide, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2009, continues to be influential for its promotion of a plain, clear writing style, despite criticism from one academic (Pullum, 2009) that itself generated a flurry of lively criticism[5].

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[5] The Chronicle of Higher Education ran a number of letters to the editor, *Who's Afraid of Strunk and White,* in response to Geoffrey Pullum's article, *50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice.* Pullum describes authors William Strunk and E.B. White as "grammatical incompetents." (2009)

Remediation

At Ryerson University, proposals for addressing weakness in written language skills have ranged from implementing a mandatory first-year grammar course to allowing students to fend for themselves (since such deficits at the university level should not warrant faculty intervention) to requiring students to complete an online grammar course. Weakness in written language mechanics is an issue faced by journalism schools across North America where this kind of "rigor or remediation" debate is typical (Lingwall, 2010, p. 287).

Ryerson currently gives students three opportunities to achieve at least 75% on a basic grammar test in first year before requiring them to take a continuing-education grammar course. Tutorials are offered for students who fail their first and second attempts. The standards for North American journalism schools on grammar requirements vary, but of those who administer such a test, the benchmark for passing seems to be between 70% and 80%[6].

When it comes to teacher feedback, research has shown that when a grade is included on writing assignments, students tend to focus on the grade and ignore specific comments, as well as compare grades relative to classmates (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Underwood & Tregidgo, 2005). Other research has found that teachers and instructors continue to correct surface-level errors, although most believe students should do it themselves (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004; Lee, 2009). Black and Wiliam (1998) found that grades, in conjunction with feedback, can actually have a negative motivational effect in helping some students develop writing capability. Straub (1996) found that "the research is unclear about the comments students find most useful and why" (p. 91), while Johnson-Shull and Rysdam (2012) were surprised to find so little research in this area has been done since feedback on student work is generally one of a teacher's primary tasks. They said, "The lack of response tenets in a field that relies heavily on feedback as a means of instruction is a perplexing phenomenon" (p. 26). Johnson-Shull and Rysdam (2012) divided unhelpful instructor feedback into three categories: excessive error correction, non sequitur commentary, and lack of constructive guidance and found that "the majority of teacher comments made on student papers . . .from across the disciplines were corrections" (p. 34). Murdick (1996) also took teachers to task for excessive sentence-level error correction, and said, "To merely red-mark every mishap in a paper, covering the text with monotonous corrections and scoldings, as though one mistake were the same as another, represents the kind of careless, indifferent teacher response that causes students to give up" (p. 43).

Teachers' preoccupation with "red-marking" such surface-level errors, however, may not be surprising given the study cited earlier by Appelman and Bolls (2011) who found that these sorts of errors were so distracting that it affected readers' ability to absorb and retain information. Their study suggests that a teacher marking multiple papers riddled with sentence-level errors might be so distracted by them, that it would be difficult to focus on, and retain, content.

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[6] Many journalism schools require students to achieve a mark of at least 75% to be admitted to or to continue in the program. King's College in Nova Scotia, for example, requires 75% to move forward. At Concordia's journalism program in Quebec, grammar facility is part of its application process; students are not tested once accepted into the program. Similarly, Columbia Journalism School in New York incorporates rigorous grammar testing into its application process. It is assessed in the context of the submission as a whole. At the University of Florida, applicants can only take a required test once and must receive 75% before being admitted to the program. At Texas State, 70% is required to continue in the program while at San Diego, the minimum is 80%.

The Minimal-Marking Approach

In 2012, as a result of what seemed to be a tsunami of misplaced commas and apostrophes throughout the previous semester, we decided to investigate whether Haswell's (1983) "minimal marking" (MM) approach would be a more effective and time-efficient method than the traditional teacher "red-markings" to help students improve sentence-level errors. Rather than correct errors in sentences, Haswell, who taught English, would indicate a problem in a sentence by putting a check at the end of the line. If there were two errors, two checks. He found that he not only saved time marking, but that students were able to find and correct 61% of their own errors. He said he did not, however, have "the heart to set up a control group to isolate the marking technique; it has been valuable enough for me that I prefer to sell it than to deprive any students of it deliberately" (p. 603).

Given that Ryerson's journalism school has multiple first-year sections following the same syllabus and marking scheme, it seemed a good opportunity to determine the extent that Haswell's method might help students to eliminate grammar errors. We aimed to discover whether MM could reduce the number of grammatical and other errors in students' writing. If effective, this approach could be a valuable tool, not just for language mechanics, but in other areas that require rote-memory learning in a particular discipline. For example, North American journalism students must learn the extensive rules in *The Canadian Press Stylebook,* or *The Associated Press Stylebook (American).*

Method

Four classes, each with 30 first-year journalism students, were involved in the study, which was conducted over three semesters, Winter and Fall 2012, and Winter 2013. The project received approval from the university's research ethics board at the outset. Each student was enrolled in a mandatory foundation course with the same syllabus and marking scheme. In addition to weekly exercises, each student was required to submit five assignments in each semester. Students ranged in age from 17 to 19 years. All instructors involved in the study were experienced journalists, as well as experienced university instructors. The controls consisted of two classes, each taught by a different instructor, who marked student assignments as they always had. The other two classes were minimally marked by the same instructor. The MM students were required to submit two copies of every assignment: one copy was minimally marked for sentence-level errors only, while the second copy was marked for content and structure.

The MM students were required to identify and correct their sentence-level errors, and return the corrected copy to the instructor, before receiving a mark for the assignment. Students could consult classmates for help if they had trouble identifying the problem. Failure to return the corrected copy meant the student would lose the credit for the assignment, which would affect the final grade. In this way, the MM students were required to be actively engaged in the correction of their own work, which had a secondary benefit of giving them experience with copyediting, since it required them to read the paper carefully for grammar errors once it was completed.

At the end of each of three semesters, the same basic grammar test was given anonymously to students in all four classes. Test participation was voluntary and students who wrote it signed consent forms. The total number of students who participated in writing the test was 231, with 126 in the control classes and 105 in the MM group.

The test consisted of 35 questions in four parts: Part 1 required students to select the correct word or phrase from a choice of two; Part 2 required students to punctuate sentences

correctly; Part 3 was multiple choice; and Part 4 required the volunteers to select a word used incorrectly in a sentence and replace it with the correct one. Subject-verb agreement, comma and apostrophe use, quotation marks, and noun-pronoun agreement were some of the concepts that were covered.

Results

At the end of each of three semesters, course instructors found that the scores on the uniform grammar test were consistently and significantly higher in the classes that had been minimally marked compared to students in the control group. Overall, 9% of all MM students failed the test compared to 26% in the control classes, a decrease of 67.3%. In addition, just 13% of the students in the control classes scored an A or B on the grammar test, while 33% of the MM students scored an A or B on the same test. The number of students who scored a D decreased by 32% while the number of Cs increased by 26% (see Table 1). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the significant difference in scores between the MM students and those in the control classes.

Table 1
Basic grammar test results for students in control and MM classes

Class		Failures (<50%)	D (50-59%)	C (60-69%)	B (70-79%)	A (80+)
Control (N=126)	n	33	39	38	14	2
	%	26.2%	31.0%	30.2%	11.1%	1.6%
MM (N=105)	n	9	22	40	27	7
	%	8.6%	21.0%	38.1%	25.7%	6.7%
	% Change	-67.3%	-32.3%	26.3%	131.4%	320%

The most challenging aspect of the test was Part 2, which required students to engage actively with a sentence rather than select an answer from a choice of two or more. For example, students were asked to punctuate a sentence such as this one: "Morticia, along with another couple, Fred and Ginger, decided to stay at Vacation Inn, a resort that was close to the lake and other attractions." This section required more engagement from students than the other three sections, which required circling one of two options or selecting a, b, or c. As a result, the chances of a correct answer through guessing were lower in Part 2 than in the other sections.

In the test question cited above, 65% of MM students punctuated the sentence correctly, compared to 34% of the control students. The MM students scored higher than regularly marked students on virtually every question on the test.

Although course instructors expected to save marking time when we embarked on the MM approach, this was not the case, initially, because students were unable to identify all their errors, even after asking classmates for assistance. When this occurred, the student made an appointment with the instructor to identify the problem, although it became increasingly unnecessary for this step in the process as each semester progressed. Many students, for example, did not, at first, understand what was meant by subject-verb agreement or were unable to identify a subject or verb. And like the student cited at the opening of this paper, many students said they felt "humiliated" and "upset" at not knowing parts of speech, which they all recognized as a surface-level learning deficit.

At the end of the project, an anonymous and voluntary survey of 38 first-year Ryerson students who participated in the MM section of the project found that 35% of these students said they had "never received" or had received "very little" grammar instruction in secondary school. Another 52% said they had "sometimes" or "occasionally" received instruction in grammar in secondary school. Only five of the 38 students who responded said they felt confident about their use of grammar. Sixty-five percent said their grammar needed improvement.
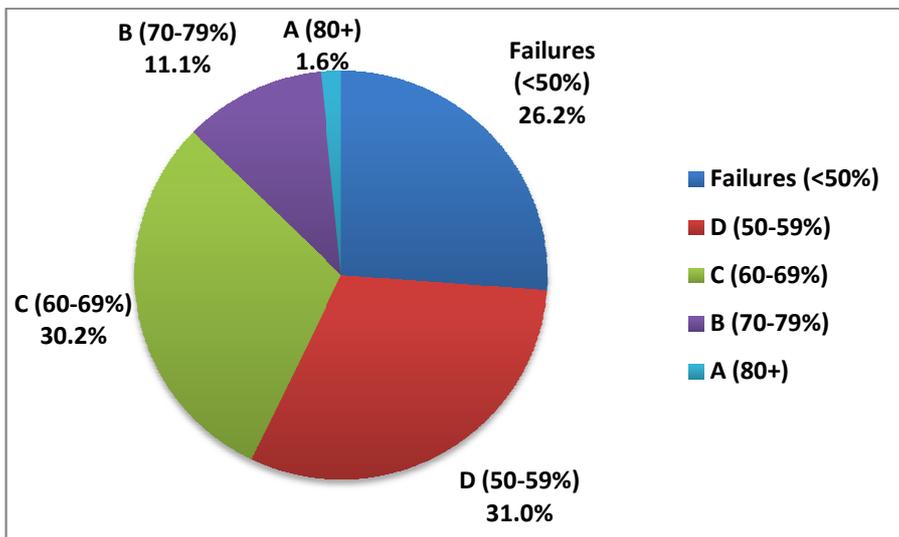
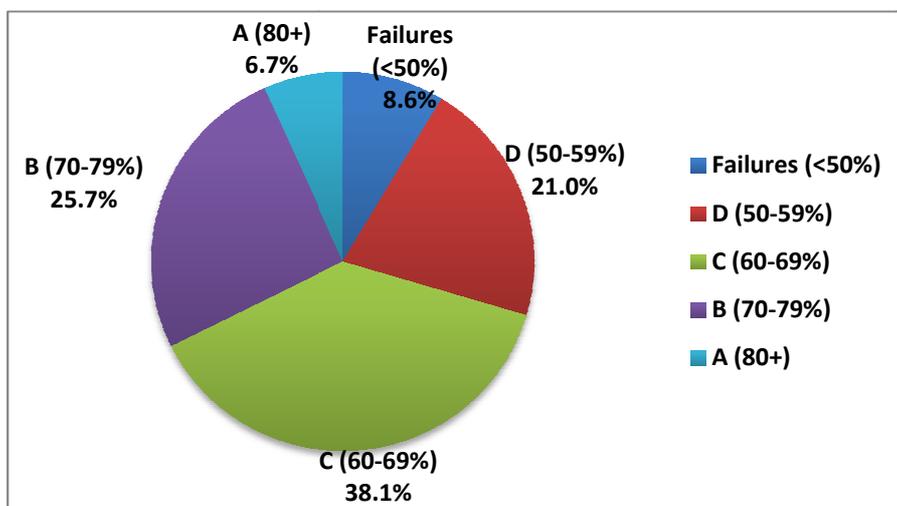*Figure 1.* Overall basic grammar test results of students in control classes.

Figure 2. Overall basic grammar test results of students in MM classes.

Discussion

While some students at the post-secondary level may not find the mechanics of the English language particularly interesting to practise and memorize, they are crucial to writing well. While knowing grammar and punctuation rules for standard English writing may not make for better writers, writing well requires good language facility. Similarly, learning and practising scales on a piano, while not glamorous, is a necessary step to learning to play music.

One of the debates, and it is a vigorous one, has revolved around whether teaching language mechanics and grammar can actually improve students' writing. There are scholars who say no (e.g., Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Schoer, 1963; Elley, Barham, Lamb, & Wyllie, 1976; Hartwell, 1985), and scholars who say it is essential (e.g., Bassett, 1980; Kolln & Hancock, 2005). Certainly, the significant improvements that resulted from this MM project suggest that instruction and feedback are effective and do have a role to play in teaching grammar to students. Explicit error feedback was also found to be effective in teaching English as a Second Language classes (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). One MM student failed the grammar test, but said she felt the method had, nevertheless, "really helped" her writing.

Another key to learning grammar basics could be the individual student's motivation. If the culture (such as one found in a journalism school) values and demands strong language mechanics, students might be more willing to make an effort to learn and memorize standard rules rather than dismiss them as tiresome or unimportant details.

Conclusion

Recent research (Price, Mazzocco, & Ansari, 2013) may support the notion that a solid grasp of basic written language rules is essential for writing proficiency and even higher-order thinking. The research team found, through brain imaging, a direct co-relation between high PSAT scores in secondary school students and the ability to do single-digit addition and subtraction questions such as $4 + 3 = 7$. The researchers also found a direct co-relation between low math PSAT scores and an inability to do basic mental arithmetic: "Arithmetic fluency, the speed and efficiency with which correct solutions to numerical computations are generated, is thought to represent a scaffold upon which higher-level mathematical skills are built" (Price, Mazzocco, & Ansari, 2013, p. 4).

Similarly, perhaps those "drill-and-kill" language exercises at elementary and secondary school levels may serve a useful purpose. Discarding these exercises at lower educational levels may be doing a disservice to students and their ability to express themselves coherently as they move through the educational system. This is an area worthy of more investigation.

It would also be useful to investigate whether secondary schools offer remedial writing support and, if not, why not. Grammar facility at the secondary level could be assessed to determine whether MM at that level might be as beneficial to secondary students as this project indicates it is at the university level. Because of the small sample size in this project, it would also be beneficial to continue the project to determine whether the positive outcome continues to be so significant.

The encouraging results from three semesters have prompted us to adopt this method in future. Certainly, the written student responses on an anonymous survey have been overwhelmingly positive: "My grammar is really improving from the minimal marking - Thanks!"; "I think that grammar is something that should be marked meticulously throughout your education"; "Minimal marking is very helpful because you get to scope out your grammar mistakes and figure out precisely what kind of error you've made." But perhaps the

following comment from a minimally marked student sums it up best: "It's not fun, but I know that I need to study it."

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