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## **Using WebCT to teach grammar selectively**

### **Abstract**

Teachers of business and technical communication are supposed to teach grammar, but only to a limited extent, according to the literature. Technology program faculty at the British Columbia Institute of Technology and employers of graduates want grammar to be taught, along with an ever-expanding list of other employment-related communication skills. In response to these demands, a series of eight mini grammar lessons was developed for students in four technology programs. The software WebCT was used to facilitate the development and delivery of the lessons, which formed a component of the students' business and technical communication course. Exercises, self-tests, and quizzes used sentences from workplace documents from the students' technologies in order to hold the students' attention and to validate the study of language. For students, this online component proved to be an attractive feature of their course.

### **1. Introduction**

This article discusses the requirement that grammar instruction be included in modern curricula, provides an explanation for the development of eight mini grammar lessons in terms of choice of topics and the use of the software WebCT<sup>1</sup>, describes in detail the features of WebCT and the usefulness of these features for facilitating the development and delivery of the lessons, and evaluates the effectiveness of the lessons, largely in terms of student satisfaction.

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The purpose of the eight mini lessons was to integrate limited grammar instruction into four different communication courses, each of which was specially designed to teach the communication documents, in terms of format and content, that students would most likely encounter after graduation, when employed in their technology. Because of the shortness of the courses (each course is 45 hours in length), a major consideration in the development of the grammar lessons was that they also contribute to the main course goal of increasing students' familiarity with and expertise in producing documents specific to their technology. The titles of the four series of lessons reflect this emphasis on the students' fields: Analyze this: The Grammar Sample, for students in Chemical Sciences; Cut it: The Grammar Mill, for students in Wood Products Manufacturing; Dig it: The Grammar Mine, for students in Mining; and Drill it: The Grammar Well, for students in Petroleum and Natural Gas. The lessons were generally well-received by students and technology faculty and assessed to be so effective that an additional series of lessons was developed specifically for students in forestry: The Grammar Log: Load it.

## **2. The Requirements for grammar in modern curricula**

Teachers are supposed to teach grammar, but only to a limited extent, according to the literature of teaching business and technical communication. Gilsdorf & Leonard (2001: 465) recommend faculty "continue to teach grammar selectively" and use easy-to-understand explanations and only a few grammatical terms. Beason (2001: 60) asserts that error avoidance belongs in the curriculum but "without overpowering it." Martin & Ranson (1990) advise developing strategies to advance students' spelling abilities and decrease their deficiencies. Murranka & Lynch (1999: 14) include "avoidance of selected grammatical errors" in a list of three competencies for their business fundamentals module. Wardrope & Bayless (1999: 38) report that Association for Business Communication (ABC) members rated "use correct grammar and sentence structure" highest out of 30 business communication concepts. In a survey of 199 students in college business and interpersonal communication courses, McPherson (1999: 49) found that 50.8 percent rated "improving the English, mechanical, and technical aspects of writing" as valuable.

Technology program faculty at the British Columbia Institute of Technology and employers of graduates want grammar to be taught, along with an ever-expanding list of other employment-related communication skills. This expanded curriculum, taught to increasingly diverse groups of students, includes oral, interpersonal, teamwork, meeting, intercultural, and communication technology skills, as well as business and technical writing. In the Chemical Sciences Program's most recent major curriculum review, employers of graduates rated all 13 goals of the students' 3-hour-a-week, 15-week technical communication course high or medium, with the high rating predominating. One survey respondent commented, "I think all the course goals are extremely important to a technologist, who is expected to write technical reports, interact with clients, initiate projects as well as [assume the tasks of] project management, and to justify actions such as equipment purchases within the company." In response to this, technology program faculty have requested special meetings with Communication Department faculty to discuss the urgent need for the communication course to improve the students' spelling and grammar.

Many academics and instructors in the field of business communication (see e.g. Bowman 2001) report that students still enter their business communication course with problems in English usage, despite their having completed a basic writing skills course. Wardrope & Bayless (1999: 39) point out that faculty, with limited class time and expanding demands, such as teaching the ability to communicate via electronic media, "face difficult curricula decisions."

Beason (2001: 59) warns teachers against deluding themselves into thinking there is an easy solution, an "easy out," to problems of grammar and usage, and Gilsdorf & Leonard (2001: 467) describe teaching grammar as an "uphill struggle" for both students and teachers. This difficulty may be attributed partly to the persistence of student errors, which are the result of language habits that are resistant to change (Gilsdorf & Leonard 2001). An additional difficulty is reflected in a body of research that concludes that grammar teaching is ineffective in improving student writing (see Gilsdorf & Leonard 2001: 467, Millard 2000: 48). Furthermore, language itself is evolving and thus both the nature and the seriousness of errors change over time (Gilsdorf & Leonard 2001). Language is also a "complex behaviour linked to one's origin and the

groups with which one is affiliated” (Gilsdorf & Leonard 2001: 443). Both the evolving nature of language and its link to the user’s origin and social status suggest that curriculum developers have an ethical obligation to develop materials that do not perpetuate stereotypes about people who make grammatical errors (see Beason 2001: 60). The first implication drawn from the research of teaching business and technical communication is that grammar should be included in modern curricula, but not at the expense of other business communication topics or in isolation from them. A second, significant implication is that grammar as a curriculum topic is ethically sensitive, difficult to teach, and difficult to assess in terms of teaching effectiveness.

### **3. Development of the WebCT mini grammar lessons**

The lessons were developed through a three-step process: 1) the topics for the lessons were selected; 2) a prototype of the lessons was developed on paper and used with the students; and 3) the lessons were adapted to be used on WebCT. In Stage 1, to ensure that the topics of the lessons would represent the types of errors commonly made by students, the errors of former students (1998) in 86 final exam answers to a question that required them to write a memo from a case study were counted and categorized. Two hundred sixty-nine errors were counted in this material. Eleven memos had no errors. Seventy-six percent of students made 1 to 4 errors, 21% made 5 to 9 errors, 2% made 10 to 14 errors, and 1% made 15 to 19 errors. The highest number of errors was 16 (one memo), and the second highest was 11 (two memos). The average number of errors was three. The top error categories were spelling (110 errors), articles (18 errors), and the apostrophe (17 errors). Based on the most frequently occurring errors, on teachability in a mini lesson, and on the length of the term, the decision was made to develop eight short lessons on the following topics: 1) How to spell it right; 2) How to tell a fragment from a sentence; 3) How to recognize comma splices when you see them; 4) When to use definite and indefinite articles; 5) How to choose the right word, 1; 6) How to choose the right word, 2; 7) How to be sure you haven’t dropped an “s” or a “d”; and 8) Where to put the apostrophe.

A prototype of the lessons was first developed in 2000. These lessons were developed as traditional paper-based classroom materials and thus entailed a significant teacher workload since all materials needed to be

organized and photocopied and each lesson involved at least one quiz to be read and marked by the teacher. An additional problem with the paper-based lessons was that students had limited class time to complete the lessons, and some students complained of being rushed to begin the next exercise before they had understood the preceding one fully. Whereas advising students to take advantage of computer grammar and spelling software to correct their errors themselves did not work (Seshadri & Theye 2000), the assumption was that computers could be used to facilitate the administration of the classroom materials (Clark et al.: 2001). Another assumption was that the technology could significantly improve student satisfaction and student competence. Online communication channels such as e-mail, chat, and conferencing had been demonstrated to be adaptable as useful tools in the communication classroom (Vance et al.: 1997), and the supposition was that other features, such as the quiz and record-keeping features, offered by software such as WebCT, would prove to be effective in improving student satisfaction and competence.

WebCT, an abbreviation for Web Course Tools, is an integrated set of tools for developing, delivering, and managing courses or course components over the Web. The software resides on a server, and teacher and students access the WebCT course components through a browser, by clicking a mouse. Because the software resides on a server, an administrator is required to maintain the server, allow access to the software, and create course accounts. As course designers, teachers can use WebCT to develop and edit course materials and deliver those materials online. Tools available for designing courses on WebCT include communication tools such as e-mail, chat, whiteboard (similar to chat except that it allows participants to communicate using drawing tools and graphics as well as words), and a discussion area, and evaluation tools such as assignments, self-tests, quizzes, and surveys. An additional feature of WebCT is that as course designers, teachers can make changes to the components from any Web-accessible location, and those changes become immediately available to the students. Teachers can also use WebCT to review and mark student work. Students have access to all course materials but cannot edit the materials. Students can assess their progress by reviewing the quizzes they have completed, viewing their quiz scores, and comparing their results with statistics for the class. Thus, WebCT offered a variety

of features for transforming the prototype paper grammar lessons into interactive, Web-based lessons.

#### **4. Features of WebCT used in the mini grammar lessons**

The natural compatibility between Web design features and the need for simplified, easy-to-use learning materials and the relative ease with which WebCT handles evaluation and feedback are two major features of WebCT that are used to advantage in the mini lessons. Each lesson begins with a brief introduction to spark interest, to explain why the lesson is important, and to give the goals of the lesson (see Appendix A). Tables are frequently incorporated into the lessons to provide summaries of explanations, rules and examples (see Appendix B). The brief screen-sized introductions for the lessons and the frequent use of tables are Web design elements that facilitate the kind of simplified explanations of grammatical rules recommended by Gilsdorf & Leonard (2001). The lesson introduction is followed by an exercise or a discussion posting, and a self-test, which the student can take more than once. Thus, WebCT allows students to control the pacing of the material to match the varying amounts of time they require to attain proficiency. Each lesson ends with a quiz whose marks constitute part of the student's course grade. Students receive feedback on all self-tests and quizzes. Feedback includes a brief explanation of the correct answer. Students receive this feedback on exercises by clicking the mouse on "Check your answers" to call up the correct answer. Administration of evaluation instruments, marking and feedback, and record maintenance are all performed by WebCT, with the teacher required only to review the results. In addition to the advantages discussed above, the software also greatly facilitated the integration of technology content and the introduction of interactivity into the learning materials.

##### **4.1. Facilitation of integration of technology content through WebCT**

Because WebCT is an authoring software that can be used easily by teachers to design their own learning materials, it was possible to customize the materials for the four series of grammar lessons by adding content derived from each of the four different technology programs the students were studying. The effect of such customized content was to

validate the study of language for the students while engaging their interests and enhancing their status as language learners. WebCT allowed the incorporation into the exercises, self-tests and quizzes of related sentences from workplace documents from the students' technologies. Sample topics include heli-rigging and heli-logging, power boilers, HPDs (hearing protection devices), plywood manufacturing, mountain pine beetles, gravel mines, haul trucks, and rotary hogs. Because the students are preparing for careers in engineering technology, their immediate interest lies with the practical details of these topics. The lessons meet these immediate interests. Thus, sample "sentences" to be identified by students as fragments, comma splices, or correct sentences include "Because the scanning transducer must have flat surfaces to roll on, the logs must first be cut into square cants" and "A hog sells for \$200,000 new, it sells for \$150,000 used." A sample sentence from a lesson on commonly confused words is as follows: "Pieces of lumber that are lower than economy grade, called chip (stalk, stock), are passed under the sorting gate to the chipper." Two of the self-tests are composed of sentences taken from workplace incident reports. One self-test describes how a tire exploded on a haul truck after its raised bed had severed a 33,000 V overhead power line and the electric current had caused inflammable gases to build up in the tire. The other self-test describes how a worker was injured when a battery exploded because he had been trying to cut off the battery terminal with a hacksaw. The hacksaw had connected both terminals and caused a spark, which ignited the hydrogen gas normally present in a lead-acid battery. These kinds of sentences hold the attention of engineering students and validate a study of the language. For instance, students will engage enthusiastically in applying parallelism when rewriting the following list of mining field technician duties to begin each item with a verb: geo-chemical soil sampling, bulk sampling on R. C. rigs, bathymetry and geophysical surveys, core logging of kimberlite, prospecting and camp setup and tear down. The students will insist that while a person can "carry out" or "perform" geo-chemical soil sampling and bulk sampling, "you don't perform core logging; you log kimberlite cores." Likewise, they will insist "bathymetry" be "bathymetric" because they sense that this use of language reflects their newly acquired technical competence. With a similar attention to language, students have drawn attention to an error in a table in a mini lesson on the definite and indefinite article in which the phrase "put on the earplugs"

was used. “You *insert* earplugs,” the students insisted. Concerned that they be perceived as competent and that what they have learned in their technology programs be respected, these students grasp “how readers use errors to construct a negative image of a writer or organization” (Beason 2001: 58). In addition, the students are acquiring this understanding of the depth and significance of errors in grammar and usage while experiencing an enhancement of their own status, rather than the diminution of status that often occurs with language correction. Gilsdorf & Leonard (2001: 443) emphasize proficiency in grammar and usage as a “ticket” or “a bar” to acceptance in a discourse community, such as a particular workplace. Use of content specific to their technology allows the students to assert their own agency or power to become arbiters of correctness in their own discourse community, so that they can apply the rules as they have experienced them to their own benefit. Furthermore, the software allows the words on the screen to be altered by the teacher so quickly in response to student response that the students experience themselves as co-designers of the curriculum, a role that they will need to continually perform as they continue to acquire the language habits of the discourse communities of their various future workplaces (for a discussion of how students must learn how to learn, so they can continue to learn to communicate once they are in the workplace, see Freedman & Adam 1996).

As well as facilitating the easy integration of technology content into the learning materials, WebCT also allows for the “publication,” even if it is only to those with access to the WebCT server, of those materials on the Web and thus lends the students’ communication course materials a relatively high status by association with all other Web sites which students voluntarily access daily. Photographs form an important and pervasive component of sites on the Web, and WebCT facilitated the easy integration of photographs into the grammar lessons. Photographs were used to add interest, illustrate grammatical points, and show the relevance of grammar to “real life.” Photographs depict everyday activities of the students’ future workplaces, such as helicopters carrying loads of logs, copper floating to the surface of flotation tanks so it can be skimmed off as a bubbly froth, hog fuel falling through the log chute of a sawmill, and a person inspecting the giant tire of a haul truck that costs \$951,000 and that can carry a payload of 235 tons. The lesson on the

apostrophe features photos of signs, such as “[name of mine] OPERATIONS VEHICLE’S ONLY.” The lesson on using the right word begins with a joke – “What did the fish say when it bumped into concrete? Dam!” – which is illustrated by combining PowerPoint clipart of a fish and a dam.

#### **4.2. Introduction of interactivity to the learning materials through WebCT**

Another important feature of Web sites and Web-based software is interactivity. At a basic level, interactivity means that the visitor to a Web site or user of the software can make things happen, usually by pointing and clicking with a mouse. At a higher level, interactivity involves a collaboration of users to create something new. For example, in an online course, students collaborate through discussion postings to create new knowledge (Mabrito 2001). In the mini grammar lessons, the discussion posting feature of WebCT is used to encourage the students to teach each other. For example, in the lesson on spelling, students post their own spelling strategies. In the lesson on the apostrophe, they post their own examples of correct use of the apostrophe. One student posted the following two sentences: “Dave’s truck cost him eight months’ pay. It’s not wise to smoke in Dave’s truck.” Sentences like these are more likely to be remembered by the students who write them and by those who read them. Nonetheless, other sentences posted by students were of the standard textbook variety; for example, “Jane planned to go to the mall to shop for her graduation dress, and later on, she would join her friends for dinner.” Sadly, it seems that years of schooling have ingrained in students that there is a special kind of sentence that is used only when doing English grammar and which appears nowhere else and would be spoken by no one in “real life.”

While additional interactivity could have been gained by having the students write collaboratively and share pieces of writing that would be longer and more complex than their relatively short discussion postings (Mabrito 2001), all paragraph writing must be graded manually on WebCT. Thus, an increase in interactivity would have entailed the loss of the major advantages of using the software in terms of providing immediate feedback to students on their progress so that they can control the pace of their work.

### **5. The effectiveness of the WebCT mini grammar lessons**

The mini grammar lessons were well-received by technology program heads. As one program head remarked, “This is the kind of idea we ... were looking for for the first-year communications courses. I agree that it will not solve the problems of students who lack basic English, but it should help to improve the overall writing skills of our students. Let me know if I can provide you with any assistance.”

Student perceptions of the lessons were measured by survey. A survey was administered to students before they began the series of lessons and after they completed the lessons. A survey instrument was used to capture data in this particular situation because of the requirement discussed earlier in this article that *all* course activities, including any data collection, be valuable for the students in helping them in attaining the main goal of their communication course. Data collecting instruments can be a useful tool for the people being surveyed if the instruments give them an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, reassure them that their experiences are normal, and allow them to verbalize their feelings and concerns (Oakley 1981). Participating in the surveys, for the students, was a metacognitive activity that helped them to become aware of themselves as learners (Cross & Angelo 1988) and to become more self-regulating (Cross & Angelo 1988, Brooks 1997), i.e., more able to employ strategies to actively facilitate their own learning. Becoming more self-regulating helps students become the kind of life-long learners they need to be in order to learn how to communicate effectively in their various workplaces (Freedman & Adam 1996). A second reason for using surveys is their importance as a document in business communication. For example, in their workplaces graduates of technology programs may expect to have to survey equipment suppliers to compile a recommendation report for management. To familiarize students with a variety of survey question types and to stimulate their thinking about their learning in different ways, a variety of questions were featured in the surveys. For example, in the pre-lessons survey, students were asked to rank communication course topics in order of importance according to their own views and from the viewpoint of employers. Cross and Angelo (1988: 89) recommend having students assess skills “from their own viewpoint and from the imagined viewpoint of a relevant ‘assessor’” in order to help students develop their metacognitive skills. In the pre-lessons survey students

assessed their own knowledge of grammar and spelling and predicted how valuable the mini lessons would be, and in the post-lessons survey the students assessed how much they felt they had learned and how valuable the mini lessons were. A scale of five faces (for a discussion of this type of scale, see Fowler 1995: 160-161) was used to measure how the students felt about the lessons. The five-face scale consisted of drawings of a neutral expression that was at midpoint and four other expressions that can be described as a deep frown, a mild frown, a smile, and a wide smile.

In the post-lessons survey, when asked to match a facial expression with their feelings when they thought of the lessons, 61 per cent chose smiles, while only 9 per cent chose a mild frown. None chose a severe frown. For the prototype paper-based mini grammar lessons, there were only 40 per cent smiles, and there were 16 per cent frowns. When the students were asked how much they thought the lessons helped them improve their grammar, 38 per cent said “a lot” or “quite a bit,” and only 2 per cent said “not at all.” In regard to improving their spelling, 36 per cent said “a lot” or “quite a bit,” and only 4 per cent said “not at all.” Only 11 per cent said “a lot” and “quite a bit” for the prototype paper-based lessons.

The fact that the students rated the prototype paper-based lessons lower than the WebCT lessons may be partly attributed to technology’s ability to make students come “alive” (McEwen 2001: 99). WebCT has been found to increase student satisfaction (Hutchins 2001). The difference may also be attributed to the advantages offered by WebCT in enabling a presentation of materials that is more appealing to Web-savvy students and in allowing the type of interactivity to which students have become accustomed as Web-users. However, as the prototype paper-based lessons and the WebCT lessons were administered to two different groups of students, differences between the two populations could also account for the difference in ratings.

When asked to rank the eight mini lessons in terms of how valuable they found them in improving their writing skills, the students ranked “How to recognize comma splices when you see them” Number 1. A possible explanation for this preference is that students are more likely to view sentences as purveyors of meaning and thus to view writing a complete sentence as more valuable in improving their writing than, for

example, correctly placing an apostrophe, which they may view as considerably less significant for meaning. Gilsdorf & Leonard (2001), in their survey of the reactions of business executives and academics, found that comma splices in general bothered both audiences, who ranked a comma splice among the ten most distracting errors out of 50. Benson (2001: 52) found that the business people he surveyed were likely to associate comma splices with “faulty thinking abilities.” Gilsdorf & Leonard (2001) surmise that many students’ grammatical errors can be attributed to the fact that students use spoken language much more often than written language and thus are prone to make errors such as comma splices because these errors can only occur in writing.

As well as being asked to rank the eight mini grammar lessons, the students were also asked to rank their communication course topics, which were only coincidentally eight in number. The mini grammar lessons formed the learning activities for only one of the eight communication course topics: “write correctly and accurately.” Students ranked the eight communication course topics in terms of how much they had learned. They ranked “write short documents (memos, reports, and letters)” Number 1. “Write correctly (grammar and spelling)” received a ranking slightly past the midpoint (see Table 1). This ranking indicates that while the WebCT mini grammar lessons were viewed by the students as an important course component in terms of their learning, the lessons did not supersede in importance the two major course topics, “write short documents (memos, short reports, letters)” and “use headings, lists, and layout techniques to provide access to readers.”

Table 1. Average Ranking by Students of Communication Course Topics  
According to How Much They Learned

Communication Course Topic	Ranking 1 (most learned) to 8 (least learned)
1. write short documents (memos, short reports, letters)	3.53
2. use headings, lists, and layout techniques to provide access to readers	3.82
3. write concisely	4.51
4. create appropriate tone in writing (choose words that get the desired emotional response from readers)	4.62
5. write clearly and accurately	4.64
6. write correctly (grammar and spelling)	4.66
7. select and organize information according to purpose and audience needs	4.95
8. use business writing conventions correctly (e.g. memo and letter format)	5.22

On the post-lessons survey, one student commented that he found the lessons helped him improve by telling him about “mistakes [he] had neglected in the past.” This comment is consistent with the judgment of business communication teachers that students do not arrive in their classrooms with a “mastery of traditional grammar and an internalized ability to perceive writing choices in its light” (Gilsdorf & Leonard 2001: 463, see also Bowman 2001). While commenting that “most of the material covered on the mini lessons is pretty basic stuff,” one student said, “I found the apostrophe lesson useful as I always mess that up.” This student’s comment that grammar is “pretty basic stuff” expresses the notion that grammar, which has been traditionally taught in the early school years, belongs to the category of common knowledge that educated adults can reasonably be expected to have already acquired. One of the business people Beason (2001: 55) interviewed described grammatical errors in a sample document as “junior high.” Another student wrote, “I think mini lessons were a good idea. Most students need work on grammar and this helps.” This student’s comment implies agreement with the notion that although grammar has traditionally been taught since the early years

of schooling, proficiency remains an elusive goal for many students. A student remarked in regard to the entire course, "I like the computer and teacher combo." This final comment suggests students preferred online instruction as a component of their communication course rather than as constituting the full course.

However, some students objected to the lessons. One student stated that while she liked the way the course was taught in general, with many visual aids, she found the mini lessons "felt like a total waste of time." Another commented that more could be learnt "if the mini lessons were just an activity and the teacher gave a short lesson on grammar." One commented, "I already knew a lot of the mini lessons, so they didn't help me that much. Lab time could be spent on other stuff like doing an application letter." Another said, "I would rather do work on paper and with a team ... discussing solutions.... In the discussion type of learning, I remembered a lot more, it was also more interesting (than a computer screen). Teamwork and discussion in class are also great because other people (students) can contribute quite a bit to the teaching / learning that occurs (they do through their questions and comments.) Thanks for asking our input." These comments suggest that some students were dissatisfied with the emphasis on grammar and with the way computers were used to teach grammar. Elementary and secondary schools today are more likely to emphasize the writing process and have the students keep journals, than to focus on grammar (Gilsdorf & Leonard 2001). While an older generation may blame the prevalence of grammatical errors on this modern emphasis (Beason 2001), the younger generation has grown up accepting methods of teaching writing that do not focus on grammar. Gilsdorf & Leonard (2001) found that the younger the people they surveyed, the less likely they were to be annoyed by grammatical errors. Beason (2001: 59) warns teachers and students not to "obsess" over grammar and notes that almost all the business people he surveyed commented on the importance of "logic, organization, and conciseness." Similarly, the student who wanted only a "short lesson on grammar" and the student who wanted more time spent in class on application letters appreciated the fact that business communication is much more than grammar. The student's comments regarding her preference for the "discussion type of learning" reflect the different teaching methods such as cooperative learning and group work to which today's generation of

students have become accustomed. The student wanted more interaction with the other students, and she wanted that interaction at a greater depth than was available in the WebCT mini lessons.

In terms of student performance, on the eight WebCT quizzes for marks, the students averaged 83 percent. On the short-answer editing questions on the final exam, which were the same type of questions as were on the WebCT quizzes, the students averaged 66 percent. For the case-study question on their final exam, the students averaged 4.7 errors per memo, with 58.5 percent of the memos having 0 to 4 errors, 25 percent having 5 to 9 errors, 12.5 having 10 to 14 errors, and 2 percent each making 15 to 19 and 20 to 22 errors. The students made more errors on their memo than the students had in 1998 in the final exams that were examined to determine the content of the mini lessons; however, this difference could be attributed to differences between the two groups of students rather than to the fact that the second group received the mini grammar lessons. To a certain extent this difficulty arose because when teaching materials and methods are studied, a "sense of ethics and fair play" often requires students to have equal access to an instructional opportunity (Brooks: 24), with the result that all the students are in the "treatment group." The students in the "control group," i.e., the students who did not take the mini grammar lessons, were from a former year and variables could not be well controlled. Nonetheless, the data indicate that the students who took the WebCT lessons were most successful, in terms of avoiding grammatical errors, at the WebCT quizzes, less successful at the short-answer editing questions that resembled the WebCT quiz questions, and least successful at answering the case-study question. This difference in student success at avoiding grammatical errors is not unexpected given a large body of research that concludes that teaching a form does not lead to a transfer of that knowledge to a more communicative setting (Millard 2000). In a communicative setting, choosing the appropriate grammatical form is but one of a large number of decisions that students have to make in shaping a text for a specific audience and purpose.

In conclusion, regarding satisfaction with the WebCT mini grammar lessons, the response from students and technology program faculty was positive. The WebCT mini lessons proved themselves effective in terms of student interest and enthusiasm. In addition, while an increase in student

learning could not be demonstrated through an examination of the students' final exam answers, survey results indicated that the students felt they had improved their grammar. Cross & Angelo (1988: 125) argue that student perceptions of learning are valuable since students constitute "the audience for whom the teaching is intended and they are in a good position to evaluate the impact of the teaching on themselves as learners." According to Cross & Angelo (1988: 125), student surveys are of value in helping determine the "usefulness and effectiveness" of course materials and assignments.

A further strength of the WebCT mini lessons is their ability to provide "good washback," a term used in testing research to refer to learning of value that occurs "incidentally" to the test. While taking the WebCT mini lessons, students are reading documents from business and engineering and thus "incidentally" learning about their future workplaces. Students are also learning more about using communication technology. Finally, the students are learning to become more self-regulating and more independent learners since WebCT places much of the control of their learning in their hands. The students decide when and for how long to do the WebCT lessons. The students can access their marks and track their progress. They can choose to repeat a self-test to improve their results. They can review the lesson material whenever they wish, in the classroom or at home at any time. They can post their own feedback and suggest changes to the material, and the teacher can change that material immediately in response to the students' requests.

The major disadvantage to the WebCT mini grammar lessons is that they still have too much in common with a standard grammar-centred approach, which uses sentence-based exercises. Concerned that many present-day grammar textbooks still reflect such a traditional approach, Millard (2000) developed a checklist to ascertain the extent to which a grammar textbook conforms to contemporary research in communicative language teaching. When the relevant parts of this checklist (the sections that relate to the ease with which other teachers could use the material are not considered relevant) are applied to the WebCT mini grammar lessons, the lessons score well under contextualization for having sentences linked by a thematic concept and having sentences flow from each other. The lessons also score high according to Millard's (2000: 50) checklist for "providing explicit grammatical explanations that are level-

appropriate, while stressing not only form, but also function and pragmatic use.” However, the lessons do not attain the highest level of contextualization, which is defined by Millard (2000: 49) as requiring “students to make choices between alternatives” and having “longer activities that are open-ended and demand choices.” Thus, the WebCT mini grammar lessons are more contextualized and provide simpler, more user-friendly grammatical explanations than traditional grammar instruction. However, similar to traditional instruction, the WebCT lessons lack the highest level of contextualization and thus do not resolve the problem of knowledge transfer. Students are not able to transfer what they have learned about grammar to more complex writing tasks such as writing a case-study memo. This problem of knowledge transfer appears to be more effectively resolved by having the students work in pairs and small groups using such techniques as talking to each other before they write and using tables and checklists to do peer editing of their rough drafts (Vance & Fitzpatrick, 1994). Gilsdorf & Leonard (2001) have experienced success in having students edit and discuss their papers in small groups. However, some students, faculty, administrators, and employers do not perceive these types of pre-writing and editing and revising activities as teaching grammar. Gilbert (1993) reports a similar experience in teaching spoken English to non-native speakers. She (1993: vi) writes that “students believe they will improve their pronunciation if they work hard on individual sounds. However, improving rhythm will do more for clarifying sounds than any amount of practice on the sounds themselves”. This parallel between believing that individual sounds must be taught and believing that grammar must be taught as a separate topic suggests again that while research leads many teachers to present course material at a higher level of contextualization and this teaching in turn leads to many students becoming accustomed to this new way of learning, many other students, teachers, and administrators are accustomed to recognizing a topic as being taught only when it is more de-contextualized and thus, for them, more recognizable. These habits and preferences need to be considered when evaluating the effectiveness of grammar lessons and when making those difficult curricula decisions of what to include in a workplace communication course. Teachers, in a desire to accommodate all learners and retain program and administrative support, may have to

design different parts of their curriculum at different levels of contextualization.

Student and technology faculty enthusiasm affirms the value of the WebCT mini lessons. A further exploration of ways in which WebCT could be used in a business and technical communication course would be worthwhile. WebCT could be used to develop lessons on topics such as conciseness, preciseness, register, organization, and logic. Similar to the way it is used in the mini grammar lessons, WebCT could be used to teach these topics through providing simple guidelines and explanations, and a number of easy-to-administer exercises on practical applications of the guidelines. In addition, since the mini grammar lessons were developed, WebCT software has already changed as the technology has developed and as teachers have demanded more tools. Thus, it would also be worthwhile to pursue ways to use WebCT to facilitate students working together to produce and revise more complex pieces of writing.

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**Appendix A**

Introduction:

Some writers want so much to be concise that they cut their sentences into short fragments.

However, short fragments can give your readers headaches because they need the essential details that sentences provide, such as “who did what.”

Banff National Park’s first ranger, “Skookum Jim,” wrote an incident report in *ca.* 1900:

First Jan. 1901

Shot three bandits.

The Ministry demanded more detail, so he wrote back:

First Jan. 1901

Shot three bandits.  
Snowed like hell.

You have three goals:

1. To learn when to write fragments and when to write sentences.
2. To review the three different kinds of sentences.
3. To learn how to recognize a fragment in your own writing and change it into a sentence when it is appropriate.

## Appendix B

Rules for Using the Apostrophe	
Rule	Example
1. Use the apostrophe to show <b>possession</b> . 2. Put the apostrophe <u>before</u> the s <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• when the noun is singular</li> <li>• when the noun is plural, but does NOT take an s in the plural.</li> </ul> 3. Put the apostrophe <u>after</u> the s when the noun takes an s in the plural. 4. For place names in the possessive – rivers, mountains, restaurants, hotels – check a source such as the Internet to find out whether the name takes an apostrophe.	Chris's pay for a week's work Kathy believes in women's rights.  His pay for seven weeks' work  I worked at three restaurants: McDonald's, earls, and the Lions Gate Hospital cafeteria.  Look at your Class 5 Driver's Licence.
5. Use the apostrophe to replace the missing letters in a <b>contraction</b> .	Three o'clock Didn't He'll (not hell) They're (not there) Who's ("who is", not whose) It's ("it is", not its)
6. Do NOT use the apostrophe after plural nouns that do not show possession.	One Ford 150 pickup truck is worth 10 Porsches.
7. Do NOT use the apostrophe after pronouns that show possession.	Kathy's racing car is parked in his garage, but the car is still hers.
8. Use the apostrophe and s to form the plural of lower case letters and of abbreviations followed by periods. You <i>may</i> also use the apostrophe and s to prevent confusion with the plural of capital letters, abbreviations without periods, words referred to as words, and with numbers.	The office has two VCR's that it purchased in the 1990's.

