

EDITORIAL

Writing in the university curriculum

CHNG Huang Hoon,¹ WU Siew Mei,²

¹ Department of English Language & Literature

² Centre for English Language Communication
National University of Singapore

Address for Correspondence: Assoc Prof Chng Huang Hoon, Department of English Language & Literature, National University of Singapore, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Block AS5, 7 Arts Link, Singapore 117570.

Email: ellchh@nus.edu.sg

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Writing in the university curriculum

Like colleagues on any university campus around the world, colleagues at the National University of Singapore (NUS) are keenly aware of the need, and urgency, to educate undergraduate (and postgraduate) students on the finer points of effective written and oral communication, over and above the rigorous training they provide in the disciplines. NUS has over the past five years actively embarked on a journey to consciously include communication skills training in the curriculum. For example, at the university level, we are undertaking a critical review of the General Education curriculum, and in this review, we are actively shaping an aspect of the curriculum to include a “Thinking and Expression” strand that would effectively mean that all NUS undergraduates will receive exposure to at least one module on this important 21st century competency. At a more local level, other initiatives are also underway. One example comes from the NUS’ Pharmacy curriculum, where communication is a required module for all Pharmacy students. This type of graduation/degree requirement is increasingly becoming a norm in other NUS programmes too. The approach taken so far is one that can be best characterized as a differentiated model that attune to a range of learning goals and base competencies. This differentiated approach takes the following forms:

a) Different communication courses

Remedial or customized/executive courses are designed by the Centre for English Language Communications (CELC) in NUS to i) develop language proficiency to a level where students are well equipped linguistically to cope with academic demands or ii) equip students with advanced levels of integrated reading-thinking-writing-speaking competency that facilitates effective academic pursuits and beyond – into their professional careers.

b) Twinning approach

Communication courses are offered in parallel with an identified faculty content course. The alignment in the design of the two courses relates to teaching the kinds of communication skills that are necessary for effective content learning and for effective use of that content knowledge in individual or group settings to accomplish various projects. In essence, reading, writing, thinking and presentation skills are woven around the relevant content platform afforded by the content course.

c) Embedded approach

Embedding refers to the splicing of communication elements within a content module, especially where course requirements involve academic essay writing

or presentations. One third of curriculum is devoted to the learning of reading, writing, thinking and presentation skills that enable students to complete content assignments well. There is often a component of co-teaching to enhance the alignment of expectations and requirements relevant to the module assignments.

d) Customized communication courses

In such a setting, communications lecturers work very closely with faculty course coordinators to design a course that uses course materials that are highly relevant to the content course. General academic writing and speaking skills are developed using course materials that are highly pertinent to the content course.

e) Informal platforms

Facilities such as the Writing and Communication Hubs are set up for student's individual consultation on writing and speaking skills at appointed times. Student workshop series as well as annual events such as the Communication Skills Camp are organized. The student e-portal has just been launched (see <http://blog.nus.edu.sg/student/>). This is an interactive platform as well as a repository of resources for student use.

While (a) through (d) above are all offered by the CELC/NUS, and are credit-bearing modules or components formally woven into the curriculum, (e) is informal, voluntary, and thus non-credit bearing activities but are nevertheless critical in reaching out to different sectors, meeting different needs of the student population in a big public university like NUS, especially given the large and diverse (in terms of abilities and academic backgrounds) student body.

This special volume of AJSOTL is devoted to documenting and showcasing the varied efforts put in by Singapore colleagues in developing communication skills among our students in two big public universities, the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University. More importantly, each of the six papers in this series seeks to study and evaluate the approach taken by specific groups of colleagues from a particular disciplinary domain, and the outcomes that have been achieved. Measuring growth in communicative competence and its related notions is a challenge as these notions defy quantification. As such, the papers present indicators of growth that are triangulated with qualitative data collected that may clarify the extent and nature of development amongst learners. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the papers outline various approaches employed to identify indicators of growth and development targeted at in the respective courses. While five of them focused attention on writing and oral skills, the equally important component of critical thinking skills is the subject of study in the final paper (see next volume, Volume 4, No. 4).

In this volume, we focus on writing. The first paper by Ramona Tang, "Fostering student engagement in an academic writing class through an electronic writing

survey”, detailed an effort on Tang’s part to improve student engagement in a compulsory writing course by first eliciting students’ views about academic writing and then taking students’ challenges with academic writing as a starting point in her course delivery. In this way, she hopes to increase student involvement, motivation and interest in the writing course, as the challenges faced are real and of direct relevance to students. The second piece by Aryadoust focused on quite a different aspect of writing – the developmental progress in paragraph writing among a large group of 116 ESL undergraduates, studying the factors that contributed to growth. The use of psychometric models (Rasch analysis) adds a level of validity to the study as rater or prompt related factors that may confound the accuracy of measurement are ruled out before the latent trait model is used to identify indicators of development. The third and final paper by Deng, Yang and Varaprasad worked on a central activity among postgraduate students, thesis writing. This team investigates the academic and attitudinal outcomes generated by a 48-hour thesis writing course for PhD students, and found that such a targeted course contributed well to students’ understanding and confidence in the genre.

It is heartening to see this range of effort exerted by instructors in both universities in different domains on these important skills – writing, speaking and thinking. It is even more important that a step has been made in evaluating and sharing these (preliminary) results, as an important SoTL principle is the dissemination of the work one does in the classroom towards the improvement of student learning outcomes. In the second part to this special volume which will appear in the next quarter, we will continue the conversation by featuring three additional pieces of work on oral communication and critical thinking.

We hope to have the opportunity in the future to share more of such work and we hope that this modest start in AJSOTL on this subject will trigger more sharing of best practices in the years to come. We welcome continued exchanges among colleagues working in Singapore institutions. We also wish to extend an open invitation to colleagues further afield who may be working actively on this important issue. Please get in touch with us at any time if you have a proposal to enrich and extend this conversation.