

EDITORIAL

Understanding growth and development in undergraduate students' thinking, writing and speaking skills

WU Siew Mei,¹ CHNG Huang Hoon,²

¹ Centre for English Language Communication

² Department of English Language & Literature
National University of Singapore

Address for Correspondence: Assoc Prof Wu Siew Mei, Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore, 10 Architecture Drive, Singapore 117511
Email: elcwusm@nus.edu.sg

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The previous volume of AJSOTL introduced the work of various colleagues on developing writing skills. This volume extends the conversation with an additional slate of three articles, each addressing a different aspect of communication and critical thinking skills. As observed in these papers, the task of measuring communication skills growth is a challenge, though it is important to investigate and gather evidence of the effectiveness of curricular initiatives on these skills. In the spirit of SoTL, these papers demonstrate systematic investigations for the gathering of evidence through qualitative inquiry of students' perception of skills growth or through the adaptation of existing framework to measure critical thinking skills. Meeting the challenge of measuring communication skills development is more successful in some cases than in others. However, it is still important to emphasise the need for investigating the teaching and learning of communication skills in a scholarly manner and disseminating the outcomes for peer review. Trigwell (2013) has assessed if such SoTL efforts achieved its purpose of improving students' experience of learning and concludes that the chance of improving students' learning experience is higher when teaching is scholarly in approach and inquiry into the relevant processes is peer reviewed and disseminated.

The first paper follows from others in the previous volume on the university's writing curriculum and its impact. Authored by Ng and his colleagues, this first piece is an investigative work done within the Faculty of Science, in collaboration with the Centre of English Language Communication, on a newly designed communication course for all Science undergraduates. This study is designed and conducted by a mixed team of faculty members from different subject domains and thus, presents a perspective that has an added level of interest as the researchers were tracking learning outcomes that may have pertinent bearings for their own domain relevance. This paper reports on the study made in evaluating the learning outcomes of the course, including also the confidence level of Science undergraduates after undergoing the module. In this study and in fact all the following studies, a common denominator that can be gleaned is this: intense and creative engagement of students on the instructor's part is critical to promoting good writing skills and confidence in operating through the written medium.

The second paper in this volume contributed by Peter Teo, focused attention on speaking skills in the pre-university classroom. More specifically, Teo

explored “how teachers can increase student participation and encourage more substantive student talk”. Student talk is a critical building block for effective oral communication, this latter being an extremely important 21st century competency that Teo noted is often marginalized as concerns about writing predominates in most classrooms. This emphasis on student talk is what Littleton and Mercer’s recent (2013) book *Interthinking: Putting talk to work* flags as very important in the classroom and they suggest strategies to enhance student talk. Littleton and Mercer (2013) also highlight the crucial role that student talk plays in the development of critical thinking skills.

In an effort to investigate the effectiveness of a new writing initiative in a residential college setting, where the *Ideas and Exposition* (or *I&E*) module is content driven but rhetorically intensive, Patrick Wade and Michelle See focused on an important concern – measuring critical thinking to understand the extent to which student learning outcomes have been achieved. Measuring critical thinking growth is a necessary but challenging task in the educational setting. Greenhoot and Bernstein (2011) for instance, have discussed some of these challenges as they use the VALUE rubric to understand the impact of collaborative course design on critical thinking and writing in the Kansas University setting.

The pilot study conducted by Wade and See on the *I&E* module yielded mixed results, with improvement found in only one area – argument analysis. The authors shared their views on what can be done to improve these results. Their paper underscores the multi-faceted nature of the notion of ‘critical thinking’ and the need to customize measures of critical thinking growth that align well with the module design.

We hope that in these two volumes on communication and critical thinking skills, the combined slate of six articles have provided some food for thought and have started a useful conversation about developing these important life skills. As with previous issues featured on this platform, we welcome readers’ engagement and contribution to the discussion, either through the online space or through an original article or commentary in a future issue of *AJSOTL*.

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