

Transforming the Teaching of Writing from a Skills-Based Approach to a Knowledge Construction Approach in a University in Singapore

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Introduction

The medium of instruction is English in all universities in Singapore. Typically, in engineering, science, and technology degree programmes, academic writing is taught through one or two distinct or 'stand-alone' modules delivered in the first year of students' undergraduate programmes to help them cope with the writing needs of assignments in their disciplines.

Often such modules are designed and delivered by teachers in language and communication centres like the Centre for Communication Skills [CCS] at the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), Centre for English Language Communication [CELC] at the National University of Singapore, and Language and Communication Centre [LCC] at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Some faculties in these universities may have their own small core of language teachers who specialize in teaching writing that is specific to the needs of students who take their degree programmes, but by and large, teachers at language centres such as the ones mentioned above teach academic writing to students across faculties and disciplines in these universities. This paper describes a process of transformation of the teaching of academic writing to SIT students from using a skills-based approach to one that focuses on knowledge construction (Lillis) and the development of disciplinary values (Latour and Woolgar; Lea and Street; Lea and Stierer; Yancey) at the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT).

The Centre for Communication Skills at the Singapore Institute of Technology (CCS-SIT)

SIT was established in May 2009 as the fifth autonomous university and the university of applied learning in Singapore which is reflective of the equal emphasis given to classroom teaching of theoretical concepts and the application of those concepts at the workplace, particularly when students serve their compulsory extended work attachment that lasts from six months to a year.

The extended work attachment, referred to as the Integrated Work Study Programme (IWSP), accounts for 20 modular credits and is organized by the Centre for Career Readiness (CCR) of the university. During their IWSP, students are supervised by an academic mentor as well as a work supervisor and are required to submit bi-weekly, written, progress reports, which include the application of their disciplinary content in the projects or tasks at work. At the

end of the IWSP, students are required to submit a critical reflection report of approximately 2000 words, detailing the content knowledge they brought to bear upon the work they carried out, challenges they encountered, how they overcame those challenges, what they could have done better, and how they plan to move forward and build on this learning in the future. This written reflection, along with the oral presentation of it, accounts for approximately 5 credits of the total of 20 credits and is, therefore, an important culminating writing task for all SIT students before they graduate.

SIT offers over 40 undergraduate programmes in engineering, health and social sciences, chemical engineering and food technology, infocomm technology, and design and specialized business. Approximately 95% of the students at SIT come from having completed a three-year diploma programme at one of the five polytechnics in Singapore (<https://smiletutor.sg/polytechnics-in-singapore-overview-courses-admissions/>); a small percentage come in after having completed either the G.C.E 'A' Level (home/examinations/gce-a-level) and/ or the International Baccalaureate (Iborganization).

In general, students who have completed their 'A' levels and IB and have written extended essays as part of their curricula, are able to cope better with the writing needs of their degree programmes. By comparison, generally, those who have taken the polytechnic route, which is the majority of SIT students, tend to be less competent in academic writing because they enroll in the polytechnics after their G.C.E 'O' Level examinations (home/examinations/gce-o-level/about-gce-o-level) and polytechnics usually focus less on academic writing and more on workplace writing (as well as a host of other workplace communication, such as interpersonal, leadership and teamwork, skills). As can be gleaned, students come into SIT with varying levels of communicative competence in academic writing and as such a significant number of them need focused instruction in it. It is precisely to address this need that the Centre for Communication Skills (CCS) was formed in 2015.

Where We Were

CCS began by offering instruction in both writing and oral presentation skills to students through distinct or 'stand-alone' modules and from 2016, assignment-specific, instruction in content modules, based on requests from content faculty, assignment-specific. Students could also seek individual consultation with CCS faculty through an online reservation system. Although both writing and oral presentation were offered in the 'stand-alone' modules, there was always more emphasis on writing as it was clear from their assignments and class work that students needed more help with their writing.

Despite the overall sense that many students needed writing instruction, not all degree programmes included a compulsory module in academic writing or any embedded writing instruction in their content modules, although

almost all programmes required their students to write reports, proposals, and reflections during the course of their three or four year programmes. Thus, it was common that at certain points of the year, when students were writing their capstone, final year projects, or IWSP reports, there would be a surge in the number of those seeking help from CCS faculty through the online reservation system.

As was expected, these ‘cries for help’ were merely for ‘quick-fix’ consultations that might help them to pass the particular assignment or project and not requests to actually learn how to construct an academic paper that conformed to an academic context (Bazerman; Berkenkotter and Huckin) or the requirements of disciplinary ways of knowing and telling specific content (Ivanic; Jones et al.; Lea and Street; Lea and Stierer). Also, it did not help the situation that assessment of the assignments was based largely on the inclusion of necessary content and very little or not at all, on how the content was written.

The Transition

In 2019 some changes were made to this situation based on feedback from professionals who served on SIT advisory boards, survey findings on the views of employers of SIT graduates as well as work supervisors who oversaw SIT students on the IWSP, that our students needed to be able to write better to engage different stakeholders when they went out to work. The feedback also informed us that the transfer of writing knowledge (Eady, Machura, Jaidev, Taczak, DePalma, Mina) to the workplace, along with that of content knowledge, was necessary if SIT graduates aspired to compete with graduates from the more established local universities as well as those applying from overseas universities and advance beyond entry-level positions to senior positions in their chosen professions. More importantly, it became clear that enabling SIT students to write better should not only be the responsibility of CCS and the language and communication tutors but that of all faculty so that students would realize the gravity and urgency of investing time, effort and agency (Shapiro et al.; Tardy) into learning to write better for academic and professional purposes.

Where We Are Now

As a result of support from the senior management of SIT, 2020 saw the design and delivery of a new 4-credit module focused on teaching a first year, critical thinking version of academic writing, wherever possible, in all university degree programmes. Additionally, senior management of SIT acknowledged that for students to be able to recontextualize, repurpose, and refocus (Robertson et al.) the writing knowledge gained in the 4-credit module taken in the first year at the start of their degree programmes and apply

it in new and previously unencountered contexts, purposes and audiences, writing instruction would have to be reiterated throughout students' degree programmes. Thus, what CCS had already begun doing by way of embedding assignment-specific writing instructions in content modules, but on an ad-hoc basis, was formalized as a requirement for all degree programmes across the university. It was decided that writing instruction would be embedded in at least one content module in every SIT degree programme from the second year onwards. In addition, students' writing in these content assignments would be assessed based on a set of rubrics that was agreed upon by both content and CCS faculty and weighted to contribute the equivalent of three modular credits in each academic year beginning from the second year of their programmes.

The design of the 4-credit module entitled, Critical Thinking and Communicating, was done using backward curriculum design or what Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe refer to as "understanding by design." Basically, what we did was to work closely with content faculty and design the writing curriculum based on what students would be expected to write in their content modules and in their professions. So, we started from the point of 'desired results' (Wiggins and McTighe), namely, what are students required to write, in what formats would they be required to write, for whom, and in what contexts. At the same time, the university decided that as the university of applied learning in Singapore, we should not only infuse critical thinking in our pedagogy, we should make this effort visible. With this goal in mind, we chose to premise the teaching of these "desired results" on the Paul-Elder critical thinking framework (Paul and Elder) for disciplines like engineering as it lent itself well to the types of writing in that field. We worked from there to develop the content, practice exercises, activities, and assessments. The incorporation of a critical thinking framework has been useful in scaffolding the process of asking the right questions when reading academic texts, evaluating information from multiple sources and incorporating 'voice' in writing. In short, using a critical thinking framework with a process and sequence of questions has helped students to articulate their mental narratives on problem identification, solution and evaluation in concrete words.

In conclusion, by making writing instruction a requirement for all SIT undergraduates through the teaching of a distinct 4-credit module that is customized based on the writing requirements of specific disciplines, embedding assignment-specific writing instruction in content modules in subsequent years of the degree programmes to reiterate the writing knowledge acquired from the 4-credit module and premising the teaching of all writing on a critical thinking framework, we aim to scaffold and facilitate writing transfer.

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