In support of the university’s efforts to nurture able communicators amongst our students, this bumper issue features articles on Developing Our Students’ Communication Skills. It includes introductions to upcoming initiatives by CDTL and the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC) to enhance our students’ ability to communicate effectively, and also features contributions from colleagues throughout NUS as well as from the industry, in which they will share communication skills courses or collaborations they are currently running in their respective domains and the challenges they face in helping their students develop these core skills.

Communication Skills for the Global Marketplace

Associate Professor Chng Huang Hoon
Director, CDTL

“It’s exciting to believe that we live in times that are so revolutionary that they demand new and different abilities. But in fact, the skills students need in the 21st century are not new.”

(Rotherham & Willingham, 2009)

I choose to begin this article with the above statement by Andrew Rotherham (co-founder of the independent education policy think tank Education Sector) and Daniel Willingham (Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia), because I wish to emphasise from the outset that the effective communication skills that are the subject of discussion in this special issue of CDTL Brief are not ‘revolutionary’ in type but are perhaps receiving renewed emphasis in today’s world because we are only waking up (again) to exactly how important such life skills, traditionally called the ‘3 R’s’ (i.e. reading, writing and arithmetic), are in the global marketplace.

A report on general education requirements conducted by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) in 2009 noted that “only 31 percent of college graduates can read and understand a complex book” (pp.1-2), and that “[e]mployers are increasingly complaining that graduates of four-year colleges lack the writing and analytical skills necessary to succeed in the workplace” (p.2). This situation, I am fairly sure, is not unique to the American context—I believe that Singapore graduates draw the same flak too.

In the context of a knowledge economy and an uncertain global future, it is increasingly important that universities produce graduates who are not so much just skilled in specific knowledge domains (with perhaps the possible exception of professional schools like law and medicine) but nurture students with what have been called ‘21st century skills’, including good communication, thinking and analytical skills—skills that will be applicable and transferable across time and space. The shift in emphasis is therefore one from imparting easily-outdated subject content to dynamically transferable life skills that will stand our students in good stead when they move on into the world of work.

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Employers have identified writing and reading comprehension as “very important or important basic skills and knowledge” essential for the global marketplace (ACTA 2009, p.5). But the reality is, within many university curriculum structures, there is seldom (enough) space to accommodate the learning of these crucial life skills. In addition, many professors are simply not equipped, or feel themselves not trained to teach communication skills for instance, over and above their own subject expertise. And for the few professors who are able to coach their students on good oral, written, critical reading and thinking skills, there is simply no time in their crowded syllabus to devote the kind of consistent attention that is needed to make significant inroads. This is the main reason why the teaching of communication skills in many universities is taken out of department and faculty domains and relegated to a communication skills department, such as the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC) at NUS. This results especially in a big public university setting, in such communication units not being able to cope with the thousands of students who walk through university corridors on a yearly basis.

The following is probably trite but I think is a point worth reminding ourselves:

“In considering what should be included in a well-rounded college education, most people will agree that the primary goal is for students to learn critical habits of mind. These skills are not taught in any one class, but are built and refined over time as students wrestle with great thinkers in many fields of knowledge. A necessary prerequisite for studying the human world is an ability to communicate in it. Therefore it is essential that students become proficient in their reading, writing, and speaking” (ACTA 2009, p.7).

I would like to draw attention to the bit that says “These skills are not taught in any one class, but are built and refined over time …”. Former President of Harvard, Professor Derek Bok makes the same point: “good writing—like critical thinking—will never be a skill that students can achieve or retain through a single course” (Bok, 2006, p.98). Furthermore, Bok has argued,

“The entire college is responsible for the writing of its graduates, and every department has a stake in the results. Discussing the subject in a faculty-wide forum should curb the tendency of some instructors to adopt purposes of their own that almost certainly do not reflect the wishes of the faculty as a whole. It may also help professors and administrators to appreciate the difficulties involved in teaching undergraduates to write and thereby muster support for doing more to strengthen the quality of the composition program” (Bok, 2006, p. 97).

This emphasis that I see Bok putting on the collective effort of all professors and all departments or faculties, and not just a centre for communication, in cultivating good communication skills in our students is an absolutely crucial point if our students are to successfully acquire the range of valuable skills that will prepare them well for a career outside university walls.

We take such positions seriously, and at NUS, an ‘able communicator’ initiative led by the CELC has been the subject of several rounds of discussions among relevant stakeholders such as the Provost’s Office, Faculty Vice Deans, groups of colleagues from different faculties and schools, CELC and CDTL, among other stakeholders. This special issue of CDTL Brief contains various perspectives and practices on this matter. What follows is CDTL’s role and plan in contributing to this initiative.

Part of CDTL’s mission is to enhance the student learning experience at NUS. To this end, we run student workshops to give students a platform outside the classroom to learn skills and discuss academic/learning issues that they often do not have time for within the tight constraints of classroom curricular demands. In relation to the able communicator initiative, CDTL sees its role as helping to enhance the NUS student
population’s communication skills outside the regular CELC programmes, given the importance of communication skills in the global marketplace, which encompass not just speaking and writing, but also reading and thinking skills.

Since August 2009, CDTL has introduced a few workshops on communication skills; namely effective oral presentations, a critical reading workshop; and as part of good academic writing practice, an academic integrity workshop and a workshop facilitated by an alumnus on the expectations of employers on the following subjects:

- Preparing a Successful Presentation
- Keeping Your Audience with You
- Delivering Confidently
- Critical Reading
- The Second Best Reason not to Plagiarize
- The Art of Good Communication—Tips and Secrets

While this range of workshops for students may be a start, they are nevertheless ad hoc offerings that are not guided by an overall systematic plan of action. CDTL has therefore recently proposed, together with CELC, a more carefully thought through series of communication skills programmes to address the communication skills issue within NUS (see Wu in this volume for the CELC proposal).

CDTL has successfully obtained a modest budget to hire an in-house trainer well versed in designing and delivering communication skills workshops for different groups of students at different levels of study and different disciplinary domains of practice. The plan is to offer up to 75 workshops in a calendar year, with about 40 students per session, so as to reach out to 3,000 students a year at steady state. Apart from designing and delivering these skills workshops, CDTL also hopes to offer some ‘clinics’—either one-to-one or in small groups for students who feel they need more customised help with speaking, writing or both. The workshop series will be monitored for demand levels, deliverable and effective outcomes as well as for longer term sustainability. If successful, we hope to expand this platform so that more students can benefit from these workshops.

It is important to note that though we may choose to pay attention to specific skills, whether oral, or written or thinking skills, these skills should not be treated as independent of one another. In fact, with respect to writing and thinking for example, “[w]riting professionals no longer view composition as a mechanical process of turning previously formed ideas into suitable prose, but as something inseparable from thinking itself” (Bok, 2006, p.92).

The holistic approach needed in viewing this enterprise will guide us in cultivating students who will gain confidence in speaking, that we hope will also translate into confidence in writing, which in turn will be reflected in an eventual clarity of thought. While this goal is not easily achievable, especially not in the short term, it is nevertheless a goal that is worth working towards. The hope is that if all of us take up this commitment to improve our students’ communication and analytical skills, and if several of us come together to deliver some component of these skill sets that will contribute to the jigsaw, with time and concentrated effort, there is no reason why our students, who are already capable, should not one day emerge to be able communicators. That investment in this goal begins now, and in this special Brief volume, we are happy to share the practices already evident in various departments and faculties that colleagues have embarked on, and hope that more colleagues and departments will come on board sooner, rather than later.

Endnote

1. I am grateful to my colleagues Associate Professor Sunita Anne Abraham from the Dept of English Language of Literature and Associate Professor Wu Siew Mei, Director of the Centre for English Language Communication, for their most insightful comments and discussions on an earlier draft.

References:


The clear exchange of ideas in any interactive context has a fundamental role to play to facilitate successful transactions. The role of competent language and communication abilities in enabling success in various arenas has been reiterated on different occasions by various people, including Singapore’s Minister Mentor as well as the presidents of NUS and NTU. In both his Tsinghua Global Vision Lecture on the 1st of June 2009 and the NUS commencement speech on the 17th of July 2009, NUS President Professor Tan Chorh Chuan highlighted the point that besides producing critical thinkers and responsible global citizens, the NUS environment must strive to educate students to become able communicators (Tan, 2009). Many articles in this publication itself would also have championed the need for good communication skills from various perspectives, whether it be to fulfill NUS’ mission or to prepare our graduates for the challenges of the 21st century.

It may seem strange to some that the best of the student cohort, who actually have managed to compete successfully for a place in NUS, would be in need of communication training. Perhaps, it has been taken for granted that the best of the cohort will not need communication and language development. In response, I would like to quote Education Minister Ng Eng Hen as he best sums up the situation about standards in English language in his address at the Ministry of Education’s (MOE) work plan seminar; “Teachers tell me that the standard of English can be improved, and attention must be paid not only to reading and writing the language, but also to speaking it well” (Ng, 2009, para. 19). He further issues the challenge to “[r]aise the standard of English. Just as we are renowned for high standards in mathematics and science, we should be known for producing students who express themselves well in English” (Ng, 2009, para. 27).

Does the tertiary level present appropriate platforms to hone English language communication skills? Would it not be more appropriate to develop such skills at earlier stages in education, where the competition for students’ time and attention for subject specialisation and knowledge acquisition is a little less intense? Though it is not known how pervasive communication and language problems are in NUS, it is not uncommon to hear comments about the disorganised written pieces and grammatically weak essays that faculty staff have to contend with in their marking of essay-based modules. There are also instances where supervisors have highlighted their plight when they can barely understand what some of their graduate students want to say in each sentence, much less the whole thesis. It is a common experience that tutors and lecturers find it hard to engage the average student’s views in interactive ways in class. In many cases, students may not be sufficiently confident to put forward a case in response to issues raised, much less make a coherent presentation.

Given the diversity of proficiencies represented in the student population, their varied areas of interest and purposes for further developing such skills, and the competing demands to develop many other knowledge bases and professional competencies within a limited time frame, it is not easy to reach a consensus on the best ways to facilitate the further development of students’ communicative competence. As a Centre that is tasked to support the English language and communication skills at NUS, we believe that contextual factors and resources can be harnessed to facilitate students’ acute
awareness of the many facets of effective communication. However, the effort to improve our students’ communicative abilities cannot and must not be confined to the English language class. In fact, to ensure the maximal development of these communication skills, the need for good communication skills has to be insisted on by different gatekeepers (e.g. tutors, lecturers, supervisors) in their various interactional contexts. This is to ensure that the awareness translates into practice in contexts of high-stake use; where the failure to effect these skills would reinforce a perceived impact in such a way that the clear communication of good ideas becomes recognised as equally important as the quality of the ideas themselves.

CELC works towards students’ effective communication (both written and spoken) as described in these terms: messages that are clear, concise, coherently argued, structurally well organised, appropriate in tone and very importantly, free from basic grammatical errors. Though there are variations in texts written for different purposes and audiences, these are fundamentals that transcend topical differences and which are requisite of any effective texts. Our students may already have acquired varying degrees of proficiency in the production of such texts at the point of entry into the university.

CELC has been providing a range of writing and communication courses that support students’ English language needs. The range of courses provide instruction on very basic sentence level concerns on the one end to rather complex communicative needs that concern intertextual discourse skills. Examples of courses at both ends of the range are ES1000 “Basic English Course” and the University Town Writing Programme (UTWP) respectively. These courses are mostly inclined towards the enhancement of skills necessary for two broad spheres of language use: the academic and the workplace/professional settings. More recently, CELC proposed various new initiatives to enlarge its scope of support to language needs that may not entail sustained instruction over the semester. For instance, a Writing and Communication Hub will be set up to allow the discussion of essay writing and/or presentation skills on an appointment basis. CELC is also collaborating with CDTL on their student workshop series to target specific aspects of communication skills that can be addressed on a short term basis. CELC’s e-portal (http://www.nus.edu.sg/celc/) is also being reconstructed to provide a charted path of independent and interactive learning.

How effective then are these programmes and initiatives? In our experience, the isolated language classroom provides a simulated and ‘managed situation’ for the practice of communication skills. It presents a managed environment where many factors in authentic communication situations may or may not be replicated in the classroom environment to facilitate learning. To ensure relevance and usefulness of instruction, the guiding principle in many of CELC’s courses is to ensure authenticity in the materials used (text authenticity) and tasks assigned (task authenticity) so that students see the potential for the transference of these skills into contexts which are perceived as high stakes to their academic achievement i.e. in their respective content areas.

However, besides text and task-based authenticity, there is what Wee (2008, p. 261) terms ‘self-based authenticity’ which needs to be developed for communicative efficacy. Self-based authenticity is described by Kramsch (2007, p. 60) as “speakers coming across as authentic and trustworthy”. Kramsch (2007), cited in Wee, explains self-based authenticity as “the authenticity of the self” which is especially crucial in the communication of corporate culture that Wee refers to as enterprise culture. However, it is also the case that the construction and conveyance of a writer’s ‘self-based authenticity’ or speaker’s credibility, reliability and genuine intentions is central to facilitating an effective message in any interaction.

It is not difficult to recall texts or speeches constructed with all the apt buzz words but which construe a trite and faceless entity lacking persuasive force and a measure of sincerity. Thus, essentially, beyond the ability to choose the right words and phrases, the best format, content and concepts, it is pertinent for the effective communicator to construct his/her

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values of self that is in congruence with those values that the audience is seeking, may it be initiative, reliability, excellence, leadership or aptitude.

It is the case that self-based authenticity is best developed in a continual learning process, beyond the language classroom. Authenticity, whether in texts, tasks or self is important because it helps to align the learner’s classroom experience with what happens in the real world. Moreover, Wee (2007, p. 266) points out that in the real world, “…authenticity is an ongoing process of learning and performance”. Thus, Wee recommends a perspective “…that foregrounds authenticity as something that is continually practiced and performed both inside and outside the classroom”.

The honing of the authentic self, though seemingly a contradiction in terms, is an aspect of communication that is best achieved through consistent observations of how the self is crafted in actual situations of language use. Awareness of what construes the authentic self can be raised and discussed in the communication classroom. However, its essence emerges most strongly when learners are alert to or are reflective on the key contributory factors in successful effective communication in use. Thus, every interactive situation presents an opportunity for the learner to enter into a reflexive journey of how his/her authentic self can be more or less successfully constructed. Notions of effective constructions of self can be reinforced if they are surfaced and displayed within each of those contexts that are pertinent and important to the learners—during their chemistry, mathematics or psychology lectures, their organisational behaviour or Java language tutorial sessions. In these situations of practice, self-based authenticity is modeled within the context of discourse and tasks that are authentic to the discipline and thus, all three types of necessary authenticity of task, discourse and self are present to facilitate the development of the effective communicator. These situations of practice, when multiplied many times over the sessions that students spend learning content knowledge beyond the language class, will provide many more opportunities for the honing of effective communication skills.

Each NUS student graduates with the stamp of approval from the university regarding his/her competence in their respective subject areas and the related skill sets that mark them as educated. It is thus an important task to ensure that these students carry with them the necessary traits that project confidence in their competence. It is also a shared responsibility for each of us, both the domain and language expert, to create opportunities for the learning of content knowledge and the development of relevant skill sets, including communication skills that ensure the optimal performance of our students in their professional lives.

References


Teaching Communication Matters: Importance, Methods and Challenges of Teaching Communication Skills

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It is hard to overstate the importance of teaching good communication skills at a world-class university whose basic mission is to prepare students to effectively participate in their societies. Democratic societies require an informed citizenry with basic communication skills, because communication makes critical thought and ideas available for reflection and action. Critical thought is interwoven with all forms of expression, whether written, oral or visual communication. Written communication is an especially important mode of expression, because the complex process of writing facilitates learning, requiring us to focus, organise and extend our thoughts.

Teaching our students communication skills can help them become lifelong contributors to the societies in which they live. Whether ascribing to a philosophy of collectivism or individualism, educated individuals can contribute to societal debates on issues of public concern, or they can assume roles in which they help organisations—whether government agencies, non-profit charities or corporate entities—communicate more ethically, responsibly and effectively. Graduates with excellent communication skills can assume leadership roles in which they can influence organisations to conduct business ethically and in a socially responsible manner.

To be prepared for the workforce or for their lives as world citizens, students must learn communication theories and skills and then put what they have learned into practice. The more practice we can give students in these critical skills, the better prepared they will be for their careers as well as for democracy.

The NUS Communications and New Media (CNM) Programme focuses on communication. The foundational module in CNM’s Communication Management unit, NM2219 “Principles of Communication Management”, introduces students to the basic fundamentals of strategic communication. These fundamentals are also included in our introductory and professional writing modules, where students review grammar, hone their writing skills and learn how to write for a variety of media to achieve specific communication objectives. Even our publication design and campaign modules stress writing, incorporating written messages, based on research, into print and electronic publications.

Our writing modules also stress the importance of accuracy in the search for truth, whether by a journalist, a public relations practitioner or a researcher. Our aim is for students to incorporate the mindset of “getting it right” into their daily pursuit of knowledge and to clearly communicate what they have learned.

Our writing modules are theory based. Teaching students theory helps them see how communication principles operate in their daily lives as well as in the daily communication of organisations and societies. Students are given as much practice as feasible in applying communication theories to problems and opportunities facing organisations. This practical application of research, theory and skills in our writing courses means that our students will write—a lot.

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Within each writing module we continually evaluate students’ progress so they can learn and improve. Our assessment of their writing involves much more than just putting grades on papers. Their work is critiqued in detail, with copious amounts of written and oral commentary. In fact, detailed feedback is employed as the most crucial element of our teaching. Timely feedback reinforces students’ efforts when they are on the right track and gives them essential error messages when they need to adjust.

Learning to communicate well requires more than just practice: It requires righting mistakes. Indeed, professional writers have found that the secret to writing well is rewriting—and rewriting some more—until the communication is as effective as we can make it.

Students can read instructors’ comments and not really understand why they have fallen short of module standards. I have found that students learn best if they are allowed to apply our feedback. For many writing assignments, students have one week to rewrite each paper, applying the feedback given in the initial assessment, to recover up to half the points they missed in the first submission. For example, if a student scores 60 on the first submission, he or she can earn back up to 20 points on the rewrite, for a potential final score of 80 for the assignment. By allowing students to recover up to half of the missed points, we encourage them to not only do their best work on the initial assignment but to learn from their mistakes as they revise and resubmit. I believe that offering this rewrite option is a highly effective tool for teaching writing. Students tell me that they appreciate this opportunity and that it does help them learn. Indeed, I have noticed a marked improvement in their writing along the lines of the feedback provided. Moreover, making the rewrite opportunity an option empowers students to take responsibility for their own improvement. While there is not always time for re-working all assignments, rewriting is a key component of the learning process in our writing modules.

Grading is the most challenging part of teaching writing because of the extensive written feedback required for each paper, and with the number of assignments needed to teach the basics of writing, the grading load for our writing instructors is significant. Other universities that emphasise writing have found that the ideal student-teacher ratio in writing classes is 12 to 15 students per instructor. When resources are scarce, this gets stretched to 18, but this is in universities with a semester length of 15 to 16 weeks. NUS can help improve students’ communication skills by adjusting teacher-student ratios to accommodate writing modules.

Another significant challenge to teaching communication skills at NUS is the fact that English is a second language for many—if not most—of our students, even though English is the official language of Singapore. Moreover, as the Straits Times recently reported, many primary and secondary English-language teachers in the past two decades have had no formal training in grammar (Cai, 2009). As many of our students come from these schools, this lack of training has made remedial English a necessary component of our professional writing modules.

The Ministry of Education and NUS have begun to focus on developing students’ communication skills. This is a crucial undertaking that will require a significant commitment of resources. But this commitment is essential if we are to meet our basic mission of preparing students to be critical-thinking citizens and lifelong contributors to the societies in which they live.

References


Pharmacists are healthcare professionals who possess domain knowledge in drug substances, medicinal products and patient-centred medication management that allow them a variety of career paths. They may seek employment in areas where they are responsible for a range of activities spanning patient care, regulatory affairs, pharmaceutical manufacturing, sales and marketing of health products, and many more. As with any other professional, it is essential that pharmacists be conversant in oral and written communication so that they may function optimally and effectively in their chosen working environment. To be more specific, pharmacists in their line of duty may be required to carry out a range of activities, including the following:

a. Provide drug information to other healthcare professionals and patients.
b. Give instructions/advice to patients.
c. Make referrals to other healthcare professionals for follow-up consultation.
d. Write scientific reports or magazine articles.
e. Make oral presentations to the public or other healthcare professionals.
f. Present results of studies on posters or PowerPoint presentations.
g. Write standard operation procedures for pharmaceutical manufacturing processes.

In view of such requirements of a pharmacist, it is essential that Pharmacy undergraduates learn the skills and art of effective communication. Herein lies the motivation for the collaborative module between the Department of Pharmacy (DoP) and the Centre of English Language Communication (CELC)—SP1203 “Foundation in Effective Communication”. DoP began on the premise that it would be good to have a module that allows Pharmacy undergraduates to achieve the following learning outcomes:

(i) Write content-rich articles in a logical, systematic and evidence-based manner.
(ii) Be able to express opinions and make sound conclusions from evidence.
(iii) Write a concise technical article in laymen’s language.
(iv) Communicate scientific data in poster, fact sheet or pamphlet format.

As evident from the above list, DoP, as the domain expert, brings to the collaborative project the articulated communicative needs of the practitioner. From the perspective of CELC, the communication specialists, the collaborative module offers the opportunity to tailor a niche communication course that meets the needs of practitioners in a specific profession and where the lessons resonate with them. At the same time, CELC offers Pharmacy undergraduates an understanding into how their professional communication may be perceived by the lay person, and how the communication could be calibrated to achieve its purpose.

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For choice of a subject, both DoP and CELC decided that the new collaborative module should focus on the theme of “patient safety”. Students would be directed to read and discover information pertaining to patient safety with respect to healthcare and drug therapy. Content experts from DoP would be invited to give students introductory lectures on specific topics related to the use of medications in safe and effective ways. Following the content lectures, students would be coached by CELC to complete a series of exercises, namely writing a fact sheet, designing a pamphlet for consumer education, writing an argumentative essay, conducting a small survey, and presenting the data in a poster.

Turning to pedagogy discussions, both DoP and CELC embrace the belief that the collaborative module provides an opportunity for the two departments to come together and develop a new module that addresses the gap in the Pharmacy curriculum. It appears that a cross-discipline approach to offering a professional communication module would be beneficial for the Pharmacy undergraduates. This special project would also harness the individual strengths of both departments. On such considerations, SP1203 was designed and approved to be implemented in Semester I of Academic Year 2007/08. The AY2006/07 intake of Pharmacy undergraduates was the first group of students to read SP1203 as an essential module in semester I of their second year.

When it came to setting up the module, we did encounter some hurdles that were nevertheless quite smoothly overcome with good teamwork between the two groups of staff. DoP staff explained in detail to their colleagues from CELC what Pharmacy undergraduates would typically do in their study where effective communication would be required. They also described the pharmacist’s job and the activities that would require effective communication skills. The staff of CELC then worked on trying to understand the circumstances of Pharmacy undergraduates, in order to effectively manage and allay their apprehension about not doing well in the module.

DoP and CELC have since seen the first cohort of students who read SP1203 in DoP graduate from NUS. These students were also invited to participate in a survey to give their feedback on SP1203. From the class of 118 students, 22 (18%) responded to the survey. The majority of the students commented that the module has helped them in writing a concise technical article in laymen’s language. 27% said it helped significantly while 45% felt it helped somewhat. 18% of the respondents also said the module only helped them a little in communicating scientific data in poster, fact sheet or pamphlet formats, while the rest of the respondents (82%) were of the opinion that it has helped them somewhat or significantly. Of the respondents, 18% said that the module did not help or helped a little when it came to writing essays. Overall, 59% of the respondents were happy to say that the module has helped them significantly in preparing a poster for scientific presentation while the remaining 41% said it has helped them somewhat.

We also obtained qualitative feedback from the final year students, including the following:

- “SP1203 has helped increased my awareness on the importance of tailoring our information appropriately for the audience to understand. It has helped built my confidence in poster presentation.”
- “It has taught me how to organise my thoughts and present them in an attractive manner.”
- “Learning how to do up the scientific poster did help a lot in my Final Year Project.”
- “I think the poster presentation gave me experience which I used in my FYP. The essay writing was also quite helpful as I learned to write more scientifically.”
- “The feedback sessions with the tutors for my essays were extremely helpful in guiding me to angle my point of view.”
- “[I am] able to communicate information in a detailed, concise and straight-to-the-point manner.”

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Effective Communication and the Law Student

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It is often assumed that the law student has adequate, even superior, communication skills, and that there is little that professors and instructors need to do to enhance these skills. While a large number of law students are indeed good communicators, they are expected to go well beyond good communication to master the art of persuasive and critical communication. Often, they are expected to provide critical analyses on not just what the law is, but what the law ought to be. A fairly good communicator may well be able to perform the descriptive task of what the law is, but stumble over the prescriptive element of what changes are required to make the law more just.

The important task, then, is to instil a curiosity in the law student to go behind a particular piece of legislation or court case to identify the stated objectives of the rule in question so as to prescribe the changes that may be needed. To do this, they must be able to discern the societal issue, problem or ‘mischief’ that a particular rule is designed to address. In turn, these are very often influenced by varying social, political, moral and cultural nuances that impact upon the issue at hand. Faced with the differing and often conflicting policy choices that these forces throw up, the student will then be able to prescribe a set of solutions that provide the fairest legal response suitable both for the place and the time. Questions like whether only women (and not men) should get court protection against spousal abuse, whether a killer who is provoked to kill should receive a lighter sentence, or when a party to a contract should be able to avoid her obligations under that contract can all be addressed only through an appreciation of the surrounding policy imperatives that may differ across time, or across different societies for that matter.

How then do we get the student to articulate such ideas effectively and to appreciate the surrounding nuances? One way could be to have students engage in more simulations of cross-border/cross-cultural dispute resolution in class. We already do this amply in the Faculty of Law in the form of mock trials (“moot courts”), but perhaps we can replicate more of this in the classroom. The aim is to sensitise students to the practical problems faced by the parties to the dispute, and to have them apply theoretical constructs to the real world. In this regard, it is important not to present the facts or issues explicitly to the students, but to have them infer or deduce these from various sources.

Hence, the dispute could typically be presented in the form of a set of correspondence between the disputing parties, and students are expected to identify (or infer) the issues of contention from the correspondence, documentation and e-mail exchanges as well as any relevant surrounding circumstances. In the process, students are required to “role-play” and to represent the various stakeholders. In terms of displaying the persuasiveness of their arguments, students would be expected to present their arguments both in written form (in what is often referred to as a “brief” or “memorial” that other students can be assigned to critique) and in oral form. Again, while the law school has in place trial simulation practices like moot court sessions, it may be beneficial to replicate these in regular classes to better illustrate the issues at hand.

The setting need not even take the form of a mock trial or a dispute. I have used the following simulation in my Aviation Law and Policy course: the students are assigned as government negotiators for several countries, some of which are in favour of (and some against) the process of further liberalisation of the airline industry (i.e. letting foreign airlines come in and take up market share at the expense of local airlines). The scenario takes the form of a journalist or a consultant who arrives to interview them.
for their stands, with a view to preparing an influential policy document or article. Those in favour of liberalisation tend to be from countries with stronger airlines (such as Singapore), and must thus attempt to put forward their views without sounding like they are facilitating a “grab” for their airlines in lucrative markets such as Indonesia. Quite clearly, an appreciation of geopolitical realities and sensitivities is in order! On the other hand, those resisting liberalisation would try to take a balanced view without sounding overtly protectionistic (even if that was their instinct) in an increasingly trade-dependent and consumer-oriented world.

There is thus a lesson on nuanced advocacy, diplomacy and negotiation, which is what really happens between countries after all.

In this manner, it is hoped that the student is suitably prepared for tasks that do not only entail mastery of the facts in a dispute, but also of the communication and articulation of persuasive arguments that take into consideration relevant political, social and even cultural factors. ■

Using the “Daily Bad Habit Tracking Exercise” to Reduce Barriers to Listening

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Introduction

This article discusses the core module SW2105 “Relationship Skills and Social Work”, a practice module which is a prerequisite for all social work major students before they can register for their first field placement. Two thirds of this module is devoted to training students on core interpersonal skills, namely ‘active listening’, ‘non-verbal communication’, ‘empathy’, ‘paraphrasing’ and ‘probing’. Essentially, students learn skills in engaging clients. The remaining one third covers ‘awareness of diversity’. The focus of this paper centres only on the teaching and learning of active listening.

Active Listening

Listening is not merely a skill; it lays the foundation not only for helping relationships but for all relationships. Full listening means listening actively, listening accurately and listening for meaning (Egan, 2010). Carl Rogers (1980, cited in Egan) passionately called it empathic listening, i.e. being with and understanding one’s clients and their world. To listen actively and empathically, one has to put aside one’s own concerns in order to be fully with the client.

In this sense, active listening is hard work. Most first and second year social work students are, however, unaware of their tendencies to succumb to passive and distorted listening. Egan (2010) attributes the causes of distorted listening to: filtered listening, evaluative listening, stereotype-based listening, fact-finding listening and sympathetic listening. The culture and values we are socialised into formed filters in the way we receive information. These tendencies for distortions are ingrained in us and operate almost automatically when we interact with people. In training social work students to listen actively and empathically, it is not possible to eradicate all these obstacles to active listening. Instead, bringing these unhelpful habits to the conscious level is the first step. Awareness is
the basis of choice; without awareness, it will be impossible for us to consider how our habitual reactions hinder us from being with our clients, let alone understanding them.

To aid students in identifying their habitual and negative mental activities of labelling and judging, a structured checklist entitled the “Bad Habit Tracking Exercise” (hereafter known as BHTE) was given to students. This was modified from a web-based resource ([http://www.leadershipletters.com/2003/10/17/barriers-to-listening-1/](http://www.leadershipletters.com/2003/10/17/barriers-to-listening-1/)), and has five categories of ‘bad habits’ comprising 28 items collated into a six-day-week checklist. Students were asked to be mindful and observe themselves in their daily interactions, with particular attention paid to listening to others. They have to check against the list at the end of the day to see what ‘bad habits’ they had committed that day while listening to their friends or family. On the reverse side of the checklist were six spaces for short daily reflections (about 5 lines each day). Students worked on this BHTE on alternate weeks (the third, fifth and seventh week of the semester). The design rationale behind asking students to work on the exercise during alternate weeks rather than every week was based on research findings indicating that spaced practice generally promotes longer retention than massed practice (Demster, 1990).

Three BHTEs conducted over five weeks were analysed. Of the 53 students taking SW2105, 45 sets of the BHTE were collected for analysis. The checklist of frequencies of occurrence of ‘bad habits’ completed by students (45 students x 3 weeks = 135) over five weeks were analysed by Microsoft Excel. Qualitative analysis of the short individual written reflections was performed by the careful reading and coding of all journal entries (135 individual reflections x 6 entries per week = 810).

**Findings**

There was minimum fall in the ‘bad habits’ between the first and second exercise. However, an obvious drop from the second to third exercise was observed.

**Frequencies of Occurrence of ‘Bad Habits’**

The 28 ‘bad habit’ items on the checklist are divided into five categories, and the scores of each item from the three BHTEs are compiled in Figure 1. Three items with extremely high accumulated frequencies over three exercises, which all fall within the category of ‘habits’, are ‘mind wandering’ \( f = 330 \), ‘multitasking’ \( f = 283 \) and ‘thinking ahead’ \( f = 248 \). The category with the second highest mean score is ‘external distractions’, and the top three items are ‘noisy environment’ \( f = 168 \), ‘interruptions’ \( f = 153 \) and ‘time pressure’ \( f = 140 \). With regard to the category of ‘filters’, the three items that occur most frequently are ‘assumptions’ \( f = 166 \), ‘interest’ \( f = 144 \) and ‘expectations’ \( f = 100 \). The fact that the three extremely high items of ‘mind wandering’, ‘multitasking’ and ‘thinking ahead’ all fall within the category of ‘habits’ explains the overall high mean score of this category (174.8) as compared to ‘external distractions’ (132.0), ‘filters’ (98.0), ‘insufficient attention to non-verbal cues’ (67) and ‘trigger words’ (50.2).

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Figure 1. Scores of the three BHTEs

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There was a clear drop in all categories between the second and third exercise (Figure 2). A drastic drop can be seen in the ‘habit’ category \( (f = -143) \) followed by ‘filters’ \( (f = -50) \). The overall scores of all ‘bad habit’ items showed a two-fold drop between the second and third exercise \( (f = -239) \) as compared to between the first and second exercise \( (f = -103) \). Overall the three BHTEs spaced across five weeks appears to be useful in reducing the occurrence of unhelpful habits in the students who participated \( (f = -330) \).

**Expanded Awareness**

It appears that students found the prolonged (over five weeks) and spaced (every other week) exercises of mindfulness and reflections aided their discovery of unhelpful habitual relational styles which they were previously unaware of. The mindfulness exercise not only allowed them to observe their behaviours when listening, but was also useful in helping them detect thoughts and feelings that emerged. This allowed them to observe the contents of their consciousness (through internal and external dialogues) rather than simply being absorbed by them (Hart, 2004).

**Students’ commitment**

Whether this pedagogy yields positive learning largely depends on students’ level of commitment. Students had to be motivated to faithfully carry out the daily mindfulness exercise and reflections on alternate weeks.

The BHTE was designed as part of the module’s continuous assessment, with small marks assigned to all the exercises.

**Conclusion**

Similar to most metropolitan cities, the pace of life in Singapore is very fast. People are always pressed for time, and attentive listening is not part of the culture in this city. It does not help when the ability to multitask is often lauded as an asset, because people are busy with many activities and responsibilities. For university undergraduates, their lives are packed with deadlines, examinations and social activities. Being mindful and reflective is countercultural both on and off campus. Hence, learning to listen well in this cultural context is especially crucial in social work training, as it does not come naturally to most people.

**References**


“If all my possessions were taken from me with one exception, I would choose to keep the power of speech, for by it I would soon regain all the rest.”

(Daniel Webster, 19th-century American statesman (Secretary of State), orator and lawyer)

Communication in any environment, whether in business, government, academia or sports, matters deeply because even if you are the most talented corporate employee, academic or sports professional in the world, you will not succeed if others do not understand you or are not persuaded to follow your lead. From presidents and world leaders, chief executives and leading entrepreneurs to national coaches and team captains, their ability to communicate effectively rarely comes naturally—it requires a conscious effort of constant practise and application.

The world is enjoying a bonanza of major sporting events in 2010, from the FIFA World Cup in South Africa to the FIA Formula One World Championships (the Singapore leg of the race was held in late September), as well as the Commonwealth Games in Delhi, the Asian Games in Guangzhou, and of course, the inaugural Youth Olympic Games (YOG) in Singapore. In sports, as in business and in life, we can observe some important lessons about the “art” of communication.

We consider it an art, and not a science, because in any given communication or speaking situation, there is no single fixed recipe or formula to apply. In fact, what, when, why and how we communicate depends on a volatile cocktail of different factors which encompass various objectives, cultural nuances, the nature of the audience, environmental influences, historical circumstances, and so on.

In the sporting events I mentioned, you would have read in the newspapers and sports commentaries about how effective communication (or lack thereof) has a positive (or negative) impact on the team spirit, cohesion, and ultimately performance of a sports team. Much as in business, government, and academia, a sports team’s manager, coach, trainer or captain would possess the greatest knowledge, experience and skills, which would be world class by any standards. However, if that leader is unable to convince, persuade, inspire and motivate their players, subordinates or other people to take positive and affirmative action, all of that experience and skill would not matter.

Let us take the recently concluded 2010 World Cup in South Africa, and analyse a couple of top teams—France and Holland. The French team’s morale and spirit was in a terrible mess, and even their Sports Minister had to step in to deal with the debacle. France, a finalist in the 2006 World Cup, was knocked out during the preliminary rounds in South Africa. Many of the players blamed former national coach Raymond Domenech. In an interview with the weekly French cultural magazine Les Inrockuptibles, veteran defender William Gallas said that “the real problem is the coach…..Domenech was not open—a lot of players were unable to talk to him.” (“It’s all Domenech’s fault, says bitter Gallas”, 2010).

This is in contrast to Holland, the 2010 World Cup finalist together with Spain. The Dutch
team were coached by Bert van Marwijk, an excellent communicator and motivator. This contributed to the strong team spirit in the Dutch camp. As their star striker Robbie van Persie said in an interview, “[w]hat I really like about this team is that we all talk…the team spirit is unbelievable.” (“We can make history”, 2010).

Just looking at the teams from Spain, Holland, Germany, Uruguay and even Argentina (who were under the eccentric but highly revered Diego Maradona), you could sense the strong bond, cohesion and camaraderie among their players. This is due in no small measure to the abilities of the national coaches and team captains to motivate and persuade through powerful and effective communication, which of course assumes that the communicator has a lot of credibility (“ethos”) to begin with, and the highly practised ability to “connect” with people (through empathy or having consideration for the views and feelings of others).

Let us look at the notion of credibility and connecting with people. Most experienced leaders have it, as they cannot gain the respect and reverence of their subordinates and peers without it. Without credibility, a leader cannot communicate effectively, as their listeners will ask the basic question, “Why should I pay attention to you? What have you achieved to deserve my attention?”

In the world of international soccer, most team captains and managers/coaches have very distinguished playing or managerial records or even both. As such, the players, staff and subordinates pay them due respect when they talk. Just think of past and present examples: Sir Matt Busby, who coached England’s only World Cup winning team in 1966), Franz Beckenbauer (West Germany), Johann Cruyff (Holland), Pele (Brazil), Sir Bobby Charlton (England), Michel Platini (France), David Beckham (England), Park Ji Sung (South Korea), and Diego Forlan (Uruguay). Even French soccer captain Patrice Evra (infamously) had greater credibility and respect than their coach Raymond Domenech, so much so that the captain could communicate and persuade the entire team to walk out of a training session before a crucial World Cup match, overriding the coach’s orders. All these sports personalities have a high level of credibility, which allows them to convince, inspire, persuade and motivate others to take certain courses of action (whether rightly or wrongly).

A short note on motivation—every human is motivated by push and pull factors, similar to what we learned in university about Maslow’s hierarchy of needs:

Push factors:
- Ethos (credibility)
- Emotion
- Logic (logos/fact-based)

Pull factors
- Achievement
- Recognition (or affection)
- Power

Yet, as a fresh graduate or undergraduate, without much exposure to the real world or work experience, how can you achieve a sufficient level of credibility to communicate your ideas and proposals?

Credibility (ethos)

Firstly it is important to note that ethos is relative—it changes constantly, based on your audience, timing and environment. For example, who has higher ethos—an NUS honours graduate or an “O” level certificate holder? A Harvard graduate or a college dropout? What if I told you the college dropout was Apple’s chief executive Steve Jobs?

**Credibility (ethos) and connection**

How do we quickly create and establish that connection? Here are a few tips:

- **Do your research thoroughly and prepare well**, whether it is on organisations, individuals, statistics or attributes. The information you collect must be credible and accurate (limit it to 2 to 3 statistics at most). Play it right by knowing what critical assets you want to communicate about your proposal, idea or yourself upfront and then develop two to three concise statements to
describe how these traits match the audience or your listener’s needs. Sports coaches and managers know everything about the players they groom: what their “hot buttons” are, their strengths and weaknesses on the field, their pursuits off the field, family matters, even their opponent’s tactics and attributes.

- **Use personalisation techniques to make your statistics “memorable”**. For example, let us evaluate this statement:

  “Research shows that 33% of all NUS students will be a CEO of a major multinational corporation by the time they turn 38.”

It registers logically, but does not move the audience emotionally. Hence the number is easily forgettable after a few days (or hours!). What would you say instead to make it more memorable?

One suggestion would be to say, “Will each of you turn to look at the person to your right? Now will each of you turn to look at the person to your left?” After that, you say, “One of the students you have just looked at will be a CEO of a major MNC within 15 years.”

- **Have passion**. Speak from the heart, show you really and sincerely care about the topic, and that you care about your listener’s needs.

- **Build a “community” with your audience/listeners**. To find common ground, use emotion and empathy to “identify with” them, not “talk to” them. Sports leaders use the power of empathy that translates to audience-centric actions, such as spending two-thirds of their time thinking of what their people or players want to hear that will motivate them, and the remaining one-third thinking about what they may actually want to say.

However, many of us behave in the opposite fashion, spending two-thirds of our time trying to counter other peoples’ arguments, and to how to correct their knowledge or opinions, while the last one-third devoted to convincing others of our superiority.

Strategic and sincere listening is important to achieve this “connection”. As Dale Carnegie (1937) famously put it, “You can make more friends in 2 days by being genuinely interested in them than in 2 weeks trying to get them interested in you.”

- **Leverage referrals and testimonials**—from mentors, lecturers, supervisors and your “network” of influencers or lobbyists within and outside the organisation that you are trying to persuade.

- **Appearance and body language**. The way you dress (which should be professional), and the way you conduct yourself (through your body movements and posture) exhibit your confidence, honesty, integrity and enthusiasm.

**Giving feedback: The “sandwich” approach**:

Often, coaches have to give their players feedback and performance reviews during different and frequently high-pressure occasions. It may be in the locker room or the field during play intervals (e.g. half-time of a match), and during training or strategy/tactical planning sessions. In such emotionally-charged environments, when a team is losing or playing below par, it is up to the coach or manager to “lift” their spirits and inspire individual players improve their game after the interval. They often employ the “sandwich” approach, which is also used often in business situations.

- First, you apply the top slice, i.e. you say what is good so far, the positive aspects of their game performance.
- Second, provide the “meat” or “filling” by firmly highlighting areas for improvement or development in their game.
- Lastly, apply the bottom slice. Finish on a positive note by providing your players with assurances that will boost their confidence in their own abilities so that they can go to the next level. Give positive feedback about their overall performance in the game.

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According to Joy Fawcett, a member of the US national women’s soccer team and three-time Olympic medallist, “It’s easy for coaches to pick out the negatives on the field – the thing that they want their players to do and point them out. If they can do it in a more positive way, they can accomplish both. Recognize the things that you want them to do and point it out, whether it’s ‘I really loved how you got back on defense,’ or ‘I really loved how you took that shot.’” (Thompson, 2010)

On a less hectic and more formalised training practice session, coaches and managers often use the “B.O.O.S.T” feedback model to provide performance feedback and critique:

- **Balanced** = Strengths vs Weaknesses (physical, psychological, skills)
- **Observed** = Play behaviour actually seen (e.g. the number of times passes have gone astray at the practice match)
- **Objective** = No subjective, judgmental labelling; challenge the behaviour, not the person (e.g. do not say “you are getting complacent and lazy”; instead say, “you need to increase your work-rate and passing accuracy by 30% in each half”)
- **Specific** = Give specific examples of behaviour, not some fuzzy, generalised statements (as shown in the previous example)
- **Timely** = As soon as possible (A.S.A.P), which for immediate reflection (i.e. do not wait until the end of the game). Usually coaches immediately give constant and instant feedback to their players, so that the compensatory behaviour can be effected.

In conclusion, we can see how sports can provide invaluable lessons in communication. In addition to the formal communication that occurs during training practice as well as during tactical or strategic planning meetings and presentations, there is also the informal dialogue that takes place in any sports team, especially during the heat of a match or race. This informal communication also happens along the corridors, in the canteen, around the water/coffee kiosk, and in the changing rooms.

Throughout this article, our examples have mainly been from the sport of soccer, but these lessons can also be gleaned from other sports such as Formula One racing:

“Communication more than anything else is how we motivate people at Jaguar….in terms of making everyone feel that this is a worthwhile enterprise to be part of, its absolutely communication….honest and open communication.” (Jenkins, Pasternak & West, 2005)

**Endnote**
1. Bob is a 1980 FASS graduate (Economics/Sociology) with three decades of sales, marketing, business operations and regional management experience within the information and communications technology sector. A pioneer Alumni Mentor to FASS students since 2006, Bob conducted a workshop in May 2010 for students entitled “The Art of Communication - Tips and Secrets”.

**References**


Developing the Communication Skills of Undergraduate Law Students

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Communication skills are perhaps the most important facet an aspiring lawyer’s training—without effective written and oral advocacy skills, the most brilliant substantive legal arguments may lose their potency and persuasiveness. Part of this learning process takes place after the law student has graduated from the University and has commenced his pupillage under the mentorship of legal professionals. However, the foundations for such skills have to be laid during the law student’s academic life, long before he embarks on his legal career. Law moots have thus always been a core component of the undergraduate programme at NUS, where students are tasked with presenting and defending their arguments in a mock trial setting. In addition, a formalised legal writing programme was implemented in the last decade to give law undergraduates a systematic introduction to the writing conventions employed in legal memoranda.

These communication-focused modules comprise roughly one quarter of the compulsory core curriculum taken by law undergraduates in their first two years of law school and may be regarded as part of the skills-based courses offered by the Faculty to its students. In their third and fourth years, students may take electives that expose them to more advanced legal communication skills such as mediation and negotiation, or develop their mooting skills further by taking specialised advocacy-based courses that give them opportunities to receive academic credit for participating in international mooting competitions.

Why have resources been committed towards incorporating such skills-based courses into the undergraduate curriculum? After all, isn’t the (stereo)typical law undergraduate one who is already very articulate and able to express himself without much difficulty? After all, hundreds, if not thousands, of man-hours are put into the admissions process every year where students are required to attend an interview with faculty members and take a writing test before they are given a place at the Law Faculty. The reality is that these admissions criteria only weed out the weakest of candidates—and this is from a pool of applicants with perfect or near-perfect ‘A’-level scores. Successful candidates that eventually gain admission into the Faculty’s undergraduate programme will often have vastly disparate proficiencies in their writing abilities and oral communication skills.

This is perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing course instructors who have to introduce the basics of legal writing to our undergraduate students, catering to the diverse range of pre-existing competencies possessed by the members of each cohort. Students are exposed to standardised conventions of legal writing in their first year of law school and are required to produce legal opinions which follow templates such as the “Conclusion-Rule-Principle-Application-Conclusion” (CRUPAC) model. While students who have had less experience expressing themselves in words often find in such models very helpful methods of structuring their writing assignments, students with stronger writing foundations may find them uncomfortably constricting to some extent. As someone who teaches law students in their first year of law school, I have seen many instances of students using such writing templates as “crutches” for their written work and examination answers, and have had to remind them that they should not feel compelled to adopt such rigid structures when expressing their legal arguments.

The other challenge related to the incorporation of communication skills within the Law Faculty’s undergraduate programme lies in the emergence of a dichotomous divide between skills-based...
courses and substantive courses. The latter category comprises the majority of the modules offered by faculty members that examine various substantive branches of the law such as contract law, tort law and criminal law. Some legal academics take the view that the development of communication skills should be the primary responsibility of the specialised skills-based courses. Course instructors responsible for substantive modules have thus not sat down with each other to review if, where and how they may cooperate with each other to formally or systematically integrate the development of communication skills within the pedagogical objectives of their respective modules.

While it may be fair to say that law students will, inevitably, develop their written and oral communication skills alongside the other abilities they acquire in the course of their tutorials and seminars—including the ability to engage in legal analysis by constructing and critiquing legal arguments—the learning process may not be as effective if conscious efforts are not made to facilitate the development of communication skills as a specific pedagogical objective pursued by the course instructor. The Law Faculty’s experience demonstrates that this can be done in a number of slightly different ways.

Firstly, some modules include class performance as one of their methods of assessment, where 10-25% of the students’ final grade is determined by the course instructor, based on the quality of the questions raised and comments made by each student in the classroom. The student is thus rewarded for cogently contributing his insights to class discussions and effectively articulating his views on the relevant subject matter covered by the course instructor. This method of participation is most effective in tutorial settings with less than 15 students.

Secondly, some modules extend their class performance scoring system to include contributions made by students on the IVLE forum or some other electronic platform. This method is typically used for modules with larger number of students and seminar groups of up to 50 students where it would be difficult to give everyone equal “airtime” in the classroom. The course instructor typically poses various questions for discussion online and reviews the quality of the students’ written responses at the end of the course. The advantage of this approach is that it gives students who might otherwise not have had a chance to be heard in class to express their points of view. It also gives students more time to reflect upon the material they have covered in class before they craft their responses rather than having to think on their feet when questions are orally directed at them in the classroom.

Thirdly, some modules adopt a more structured approach towards assessing class performance by requiring students to take turns making formal presentations to their classmates on topics pre-selected or pre-approved by the course instructor. This method is commonly used in core modules which are taught “sectionally”, where different course instructors have to teach the same subject to large sections of between 40 to 80 students. Student presenters are required to introduce these topics to the class and to lead the discussion with their peers, while the course instructor facilitates the exchange with appropriate interjections that steer the direction of the presentation and provide any necessary clarification.

Other opportunities for developing the communication skills of law undergraduates within the substantive modules offered by the Faculty can be found in the myriad of different writing assignments that the different courses require as part of their respective modes of assessment. These range from shorter “Op-Eds” and response papers to much lengthier research assignments and full-blown Directed Research projects under a faculty member’s supervision. It is probably fair to say that the assessment process for most modules is primarily focused on content and substance rather than style or expression, simply because our course instructors and thesis supervisors do not have the formal linguistic training or technical expertise with the English language that is necessary to evaluate the latter aspects of such written work. Given the undeniable importance of developing and maintaining high standards of written English to the quality of the academic programme we hope to offer to our law undergraduates, this is one facet of the Law Faculty’s curriculum that could benefit substantially from the assistance of colleagues elsewhere in the University who are the real English language experts.
Oddly enough, I do not teach communication skills per se. I say “oddly,” because I am a faculty member in the Writing and Critical Thinking (WCT) domain of the University Scholars Programme (USP). So, if I find myself at, say, a cocktail party and the receiving end of a question that was merely posed out of politeness, or even drunkenness, I just reply, for the sake of simplicity, “I teach writing at NUS.” And what is writing, the thinking might go, if not a form of communication? In fact, writing is the main form of communication in academic and research circles; although we give lectures and talks, we largely communicate our work to fellow scholars via publications. So to teach “writing” is to teach “communication skills,” surely?

That equation, of writing with communication, is one way of thinking about the matter. If communication, as the Oxford English Dictionary would have it, entails “the transmission or exchange of information, knowledge, or ideas, by means of speech, writing, mechanical or electronic media, etc.,” (Oxford Dictionaries Online, n.d.) then communication, whether by writing or other means, would be a kind of vessel or container for thought. In this model, thinking precedes communication, and the role of writing would be to convey, or, quite literally, re-present the thoughts in our heads. In turn, an educator who imparts “communication skills” would help students with, not so much the message, but its medium: how to speak clearly and effectively, how to write with style and panache, and so on. This is the more intuitive understanding of “communication.” And it is a useful one, since it allows us, as teachers, to compartmentalise, and therefore make manageable, our pedagogical tasks. We might even call this notion—this over here is the teaching of content, and then there is instruction on how to communicate—a necessary fiction.

But that is not the way my colleagues and I tend to think of writing. Indeed, that is arguably not how writing works in real life. When we make a shopping list, to pick just one banal example, writing down “pick up coffee” may spur us into also remembering to buy milk. In a more academic setting, we are probably all aware of how lamentably rare it is for the finished essay to perfectly resemble the one that was “in our minds” at the start. Rather, the act of writing changes thinking. Trying to re-port or re-present the ideas we thought we had worked out in our heads usually crystallises, sharpens, clarifies, or complicates them, or the process might—in unhappier scenarios!—even overturn these insights. But writing almost never leaves those “original thoughts” untouched.

In this sense, writing—or its parent category, communication—would be, to all intents and purposes, indistinguishable from thinking. Hence, though the programme in which I teach is called “Writing and Critical Thinking,” its faculty members usually think of the two names in the phrase as denoting the same thing: writing as critical thinking.

Given this, there is no easy answer to the question, “Does the WCT programme teach communication skills?” Or perhaps there is an easy reply, and then a less simple one. Hence, to believe in the “necessary fiction” for a minute, I could explain how WCT classes offer students various opportunities to cultivate “communication skills.” For example, we usually require students to publicly present, to their classmates, their ideas for the final and most substantial paper. Since these are first-year or even first-semester students, this presentation therefore constitutes an early, and thus important, public speaking occasion. Likewise, for all three essays assigned in WCT modules, a student always has to submit...
a first and a final draft. Between the first and the final drafts lies a vigorous conference with the WCT professor: during this one-to-one meeting, although the professor would have already read and commented on the draft, the student writer is nevertheless asked to verbally articulate—and hence, “communicate” in the narrower sense—the argument of the paper. The USP Writing Centre, which is a place students can go for peer conferences, operates on very similar principles: again, the writer offers his or her draft to be read by a fellow student, but the face-to-face conference is also a valuable chance for the writer to hone the skill of “communicating” ideas. In the WCT programme, these are all moments of instruction, direct or indirect, about communication.

The less simple answer to the question, meanwhile, would begin with the recognition, which I have been trying to elaborate, of how we in the WCT programme try to treat writing and communication not as subsequent to thinking, but coterminous with it. In this light, “communication skills” are all we teach (although detailing how we do so would require a separate, longer article)—because here, “communication” refers not merely to the re-presentation of existing ideas and insights, but the formation, in the first place, of those thoughts in writing.

Acknowledgement

Many thanks to my WCT colleagues for their input, though any and all errors are mine.

Reference

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- “It has allowed me to have more confidence in expressing myself.”

- “[The module helped me with] presentation of data in a coherent manner and some relevant writing formats.”

The student feedback also included such comments:

- “The skills [learned from preparing an] argumentative essay that we had to write was not used at all in all our undergraduate modules. It was quite a tedious assignment.”

- “There are too many things to be done for the module. There should be more time allocated for each assignment given.”

Looking forward, we might need to investigate the validity and extent of such comments, and how we might calibrate our offerings in the classroom to address the concerns that prove valid.

Generally, the first batch of Pharmacy undergraduates has found certain aspects of SP1203 to be useful in the course of their study at NUS. The module appears to be a good start to help Pharmacy undergraduates hone their oral and written communication skills. What makes this module unique is the close intercollegiate collaboration between staff from DoP and CELC. This is certainly an example of how cross-discipline modules can help enrich students’ learning experiences at the university. In particular, the individualised feedback CELC staff offered to the students and the provision of professional content by the DoP staff that underpins the framework of all the exercises has proven to be a winning combination in this professional communication module.