

Teaching Effective Communication through E-Learning

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ABSTRACT

To meet the needs of a globalized world, a university curriculum needs to address theoretical and practical skills which emphasise versatility, adaptability and flexibility for a more creative workforce, adaptive in knowledge and well-equipped with a range of skills to actively contribute to the new economy. These skills include people management, problem analysis, communication skills, as well as technical skills for presentation, aspects of delivery and modes of enquiry. The greatest challenge faced by SIM University (UniSIM), Singapore's only university for working adults, is how to respond innovatively to the demand for new and dynamic skills competencies, lifelong learning and e-technologies. In recognition of this demand, UniSIM employs an eclectic pedagogical approach in delivering its courses such as the university core module entitled *Effective Communication* which uses the "blended learning" model, defined as "the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning" (Procter, 2003). This paper examines the development process of this course and its blended learning approach which combines modern technology using interactive learning on e-platforms such as Blackboard with traditional methods using textbooks, face-to-face lectures and tutorials to enable working adults to optimize their learning experience at the tertiary level.

INTRODUCTION

In today's changing economic landscape, emphasis needs to be put on the versatility, adaptability and flexibility of skills. In the dynamic environment of today's workplace, adult learners not only need to be equipped with core occupational skills, but also need to upgrade and enhance their generic and specific employability skills. Educational institutions, especially those focusing on adult tertiary education, are faced with the challenge to respond innovatively to the demand for new and dynamic skills competencies, lifelong learning and e-technologies. These demands have a significant impact on the curriculum, pedagogic approach and the teaching and learning environment. In a context where a majority of working adults seek to acquire such skills and the relevant qualifications while continuing with their jobs, educational processes must respond to the diversity of learners' needs. This paper examines how SIM University (UniSIM) attempts to respond innovatively to the demand for new and dynamic skills competencies and lifelong learning for busy working adults through an offering of highly relevant core courses such as *Effective Communication* which employs a blended form of learning.

Lifelong Learning, Education and Economic Development

It is an undeniable fact that Singapore's future depends upon a workforce of highly trained people for whom constant improvement of skills and educational qualifications is the only way of ensuring continued employability. The need for constant upgrading of skills was highlighted by then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister-in-Charge of Tertiary Education, Dr. Tony Tan Keng Yam, in early 2001 and is even more relevant today: "...education will be the key distinguishing factor between countries which do well in the 21st century and those which do not. We need to strengthen education at every level.... Our universities...need to continually re-examine their roles to ensure that what they offer is relevant and useful."¹

The link between education and economic development is well-recognised. Education needs to prepare learners to participate constructively in the economic development of their societies. Economies such as Singapore are faced with a number of issues that concern the cultural complexity of their societies, the need to maintain conditions for creativity and high quality performance, the continued demand for scientific and technological excellence and the changing nature of employment opportunities. In such contexts, educational processes must respond to the diversity of needs of learners and make sure that the best opportunities for lifelong learning are available for all. Flexibility and receptiveness to needs of individuals is an intrinsic part of open learning contexts and this also extends to the area of curriculum. Most tertiary courses aim to provide students with a broad spectrum of occupational and industry skills. The challenge in curriculum development is to incorporate generic employability skills, or "soft skills" which include learning to learn, literacy and oral communications, creative and problem-solving, personal effectiveness, group effectiveness, and leadership

Against such a context, institutions such as the SIM University (UniSIM) which offer degree programmes in a flexible context assume a marked significance. The student profile at UniSIM is markedly different from that in the other local universities, with many of the learners being adults, in-service and possessing heterogeneous prior knowledge, as contrasted with their counterparts in mainstream education. The programmes are aimed at giving working adults another opportunity for tertiary education and self-development. Statistics show that a majority of the students at UniSIM fall within the 21 to 50 age group, and also that, over the years, students are now younger than in the earlier years. In terms of occupation, the statistics show that students belong to professions ranging from teaching to administrative jobs to security services, and from electronics to management information systems to marketing and sales.

The success of any programme involving continuing education and lifelong learning hinges crucially on its ability to meet changing industry needs as the economy evolves over time. With the shift in employment from manufacturing to services, new capabilities and knowledge will have to be acquired by the workforce to meet changing industry needs. Thus, apart from industry-specific skills required to undertake the various tasks, broader skills involving people management, problem analysis and communications are needed for workers to compete in the knowledge-based economy. This need to imbue Singaporeans with the skills and competencies

for lifelong employability is highlighted in the 2003 Report by the Economic Review Committee (ERC) on the “New Challenges, Fresh Goals”² confronting Singapore as it moves towards its goal of becoming a dynamic, global city. Importantly, to meet the needs of a rapidly changing global environment, the sub-committee report³ proposes the development of a flexible curriculum to bring about holistic education and training programmes for students and workers through wider access to subjects in the humanities, sciences and the arts and an enhanced educational experience to provide for a diversity of talents. More recently, the Ministry of Finance Singapore (MOF) announced in its 2006 Budget Statement that the Ministry of Education Singapore (MOE) will be investing \$2 billion to boost the physical infrastructure of the university sector over the next five years (MOF, 2006). These initiatives show a planned and concerted effort on the part of the Singapore government to build on its human capital to meet the needs of the growing economy.

Flexible Curricula

In the new economy, the old curriculum debates of broad-based education vs. specialization and breadth vs. depth must take on a new dimension. The fundamental question now is how to prepare students for the new economy. In the age of information, the ideal learning outcomes of any degree or diploma programmes would be innovation, integrated knowledge and globally applicable skills. The challenge would be to develop courses and curricula that fulfill such objectives. In the new economy, workers with specific skills in one area cannot be assured of an “iron rice-bowl” or “job-for-life”. There is a need for a more creative and versatile student community, adaptive in knowledge and well-equipped with a range of skills to actively contribute to the new economy.

Broad-based education, such as interdisciplinary studies and curricula, would provide students with a variety of skills and approaches important to the global market of information and communication. But creativity and information management are hard to measure, and employers need degree-holders to be equipped with particular skills and knowledge. The challenge is to achieve a balance, perhaps through a wide-ranging curriculum which includes core courses characterised by both interdisciplinarity and multi-disciplinarity.

In providing breadth, the curriculum should attempt to inculcate a global perspective among learners in their approach to problem-solving and critical analysis. Yet another challenge lies in achieving a good balance between theoretical knowledge and practical orientation of the courses. There is a need to address a synthesis of theoretical and practical skills, an integration of academic learning and development tasks. This includes issues such as communicating effectively and the use of different modes of enquiry and forms of argumentation. The inclusion of soft and technical skills is an essential element of any curriculum and is part of the total learning experience which includes communication skills e.g. intercultural skills, negotiation skills as well as the technical skills required for aspects of delivery, presentation and modes of enquiry. Familiarity with relevant software, as and when appropriate, is as important as having a range of communication skills. The challenge lies in the mix between technical skills and soft skills that students need to succeed in the global environment. While technical competence remains an important factor for undertaking job assignments, the broader

skills like management and communication are critical for the successful accomplishment of the tasks assigned. Against this background, the core courses developed and offered at UniSIM take into account a coherent academic rationale, student demand and market factors.

Core Courses at UniSIM

The core courses, which were all launched in January 2007, aim to nurture critical skills such as communication, negotiations, creativity, inventiveness, entrepreneurship, inter-personal and teamwork competencies, and the ability to cope with uncertainty: traits necessary for success in the new economy. At the same time, there is a need to be aware of the distance learning environment and the need to construct materials which are suitable for independent study and which also encourage interactivity, collaborative learning and a sense of community among the students. A variety of web-based tools and course design strategies must be incorporated in the curriculum. At UniSIM a total of six core courses are offered including *Critical Thinking, Action Learning, Creative Thinking, Learning to Learn, Thinking with Mathematics* and *Effective Communication*.

Of these, *Effective Communication* (COR100) is a compulsory 4 credit unit course for all UniSIM students. However, for those students who may have taken similar courses in the past or who feel that they have already acquired these skills, a waiver examination is administered at the start of every semester. Students have to pay a fee to take the waiver examination and pass it in order to be exempted from doing COR100 and those who pass the waiver are exempted from acquiring a further 4 credit units to make up the required number for graduation. All other students who choose not to take the waiver examination or are unsuccessful in their attempt (they are only allowed one) are required to take and complete COR100 and any two other core courses, all of which are 3 cu courses, from the remaining 5 courses. In total, students have to complete 10 credit units of university core courses in addition to their programme courses in order to graduate.

***Effective Communication* (COR 100)**

As stated earlier, COR100 accounts for 4 cu of a student's total credit requirement in order to graduate comprises academic writing skills and workplace skills. This is because it was deemed at the outset that these were not only essential skills for students while they were pursuing their degrees at the university but also skills that a working adult student population could immediately put to good use at their workplaces. COR100 has been developed based on the "blended learning" model defined as "the combination of a number of pedagogic approaches, irrespective of learning technology used" (Whitelock & Jelfs, 2003). The concept of "blended learning" arose from training settings in organisations where face-to-face learning was combined with on-line training to better fulfil training needs of employees (Driscoll, 2002).⁶ Since then, however, the concept of blended learning has become popular in higher education and has consequently triggered some debate as to whether the term itself is erroneous and should perhaps be renamed 'blended pedagogies' which, according to Oliver and Trigwell (2005) better focuses attention on the varying levels of interaction between tutors and students (p.21). Oliver and Trigwell (2005) argue

further that one serious deficiency in the term “blended learning” is the lack of “analysis from the perspective of the learner” in such contexts (p. 24).

Nonetheless, for the purpose of this paper, the term “blended learning” will be used, for consistency, to mean teaching and learning that employs a combination of resources to enable learners to optimise their learning experience through the use of a text-book, on-line materials that include interactive activities, audio and video resources, as well as face-to-face lectures. UniSIM uses Blackboard as the platform to launch its on-line resources. The personalised intranet version of Blackboard used at UniSIM is called *myunisim* and the university uses this platform for teaching, learning and assessment purposes as will be explained in the ensuing sections.

The COR100 Learning Package

The objective of COR100 is to equip students with the specific set of language skills required to meet the academic writing needs in university assignments, projects and examinations as well as the professional communication needs at the workplace. With this aim in mind, the course materials were developed to cover different formats and styles of academic essays, reports, project proposals, resumes, letters, and oral presentations. The developmental work for COR100 was completed over 6 months in time for the January 2007 intake of students who were the first cohort of students to take COR100. At the initial launch of COR100, approximately 350 students were enrolled in the course. As a compulsory course for all UniSIM students, the execution of COR100 was conceived differently from other courses in regular programmes. In keeping with the blended learning philosophy, the COR100 learning package includes a textbook, a set of on-line materials from a variety of sources that accompany and supplement the content in the textbook.

The textbook entitled *Effective Communication*, was customised by Pearson Education Singapore for the exclusive use of UniSIM students and staff based on materials from two textbooks, namely *The Academic Writer's Handbook* for the section on academic writing skills and *Business Communication Today*^{8th} edition for the section on workplace skills. The *Effective Communication* textbook is further supplemented by online materials from a content cartridge that accompanies a Pearson Education publication book entitled *Excellence in Business Communication* 7th edition and by original interactive, on-line materials developed by a team of writers and educational technologists from UniSIM. Students are given access to the on-line materials with a special access code issued to them at the start of the semester.

While distance learning strategies are usually encapsulated in mass-produced learning materials, often designed to achieve as many of the characteristics of interpersonal communication as possible (Keegan 1993, p. 131) ⁸, it has been recognized that such materials are not sufficient in themselves and must be accompanied by communication processes which link individuals or groups with a teacher (Nunan 1993, p. 195). For COR100, students are given two face-to-face lectures, one at the start of the semester and another in the middle of it. These lectures serve to highlight the most significant aspects of academic writing and workplace skills which essentially make up the course content of COR100. Hence, students are divided into lecture groups of approximately 50 students each with a lecturer assigned to take charge of each group. The assigned lecturer delivers the face-to-face lectures to his or her assigned group of students;

liaises with them on matters concerning the course, addresses their queries on the content or assignments, marks and provides feedback on those assignments. The lecturer's role in this case is crucial because even though there is an overall Head of Programme (HOP) in charge of the smooth progress of the course, each group's lecturer is the students' first level of contact with the university administration. Thus it has been found through observation that although, attendance for these lectures is optional because UniSIM employs a flexible learning system that caters to an adult working student population, many students do make the effort to attend the lectures. Students make use of this opportunity to ask questions and to make contact with their lecturers.

For those students who are unable to attend the lectures, the lecture slides and notes are uploaded in the COR100 portal after the lecture so that students may view and review them as many times as possible. COR100 students are also able to make use of the other learning facilities available on *myunisim* such as the discussion board to interact and collaborate with both their classmates and their tutors. Informal feedback gathered from the COR100 lecturers shows that students are in regular e-mail contact with their lecturers through *myunisim*. Apparently, students do regard this contact with their lecturers as a significant part of their learning experience in this course. This eclectic pedagogical approach enables tutors and students to maximise learning opportunities in a university such as UniSIM whose student population comprises working adults.

Assessment methods in COR100

Students have to submit three tutor-marked assignments (TMA) in order to satisfy the assessment requirements of COR100. The TMAs are based on the content covered in the course. Hence students are tested on critical evaluation of texts for academic writing and on proposal and letter-writing for workplace skills. There is no end-of-course examination for COR100 and hence, it is important for students to perform well in their TMAs in order to pass the course. To maintain assessment validity, the TMAs are designed based closely on what is covered in the course materials. The TMAs are loaded on the COR100 portal at the outset of the course so that students have ample time to read them, understand the requirements of the task and direct questions to their assigned tutors so that they can complete and submit them to their tutors by the submission cut-off dates. UniSIM takes a firm stand with respect to the submission dates of TMAs in order to maintain high academic standards. Students who are unable to meet any deadline as far as TMA submission is concerned have to seek written permission from their tutors well in advance of the cut-off dates. Students with valid reasons are granted up to a 7-day extension.

High standards of academic integrity are maintained through the use of plagiarism detection software for all of UniSIM's TMAs. All students submit their TMAs on-line through plagiarism detection software named "Turnitin" which is linked to *myunisim*. In the case of COR100, lecturers access their individual lecture group's TMAs through a special account that is given to them at the start of the semester. Lecturers who are comfortable with marking the scripts on-line do so by using Microsoft Word functions such as the 'track change', 'highlight' and 'insert comment' functions. Those who prefer to mark on paper print out the scripts and mark them. Lecturers are advised to give in-depth feedback to students on their performance in their TMAs with the view

to help them improve in subsequent ones. The soft copies of the marked scripts are returned to the students through the 'digital drop box' facility in *myunisim*. In the case of lecturers who prefer to mark hard copies of their students' scripts, they would need to scan the marked scripts with the feedback and return them to the latter. Students' marks are similarly recorded on-line in a TMA score database. Students are thus able to receive their TMA scores and their marked scripts electronically. This is another important feature for a university that prides itself on its flexible learning system because it enables working students to gain access to information about their own progress in their courses any time they wish.

Looking Ahead

In sum, it is possible to say that thus far, the 'blended learning' model based on which COR100 is developed and delivered is effective in providing a valuable opportunity for UniSIM's working adult student population to acquire academic writing and workplace skills communication. In looking ahead, as in the case of all learning, there has to be regular review of the course materials and more importantly the delivery of the course materials. Currently, one aspect of the workplace communication in COR100 which the course development team would like to expand upon is that of Oral Communication and Presentation Skills. In the existing course, students do not have the opportunity to showcase their presentation skills because of the need to keep the number of face-to-face lectures minimal. One possible way to circumvent this problem is to allow students to videotape their presentations and then upload them on the COR100 portal in *myunisim*. Their presentations can then be graded and feedback provided by their lecturers. Among several concerns with regard to this method is one that students may not be delivering their presentations to an audience. This is an important factor in any oral presentation situation. Currently, plans are underway to incorporate short workshops with a facilitator as part of the COR100 course for students to attend on a needs basis to address their oral presentation skills needs. Other possibilities include incorporating one more face-to-face lecture on Oral Communication and Presentation Skills for students for students to have hands-on experience in speaking in front of an audience. Clearly, the "blended learning" opens up many possibilities to explore when it comes to course development, delivery and assessment in higher education.

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