

Teaching career development skills using an integrated approach

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Outline

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- Wicked problems in embedding communication skills into discipline-specific courses
- A brief literature review on embedding and integrating communication skills
- Motivation for this approach
- One case study of an integrated course developed with Career Services and taught by the author in a public university in Singapore
- The lessons learnt from implementing these courses
- Implications that could motivate communication skills teachers to embark on embedding and integrating communication skills

Definition of integrated

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- Integrated: Marked by the unified control of all aspects of production from raw materials through distribution of finished products (Merriam-Webster)

Wicked problems in embedding communication skills

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- Academics may not see the teaching of academic literacies as **part of their role**, may be considered as separate from disciplinary knowledge (Jones, 2008)
- The assessment of **'soft'** or 'wicked' competencies (Knight, 2007).
- Development of a **shared vocabulary** in developing academic literacies e.g. attributes and skills may not be understood in the same manner conceptually by academics. Attributes are understood as clusters of skills (Thies, 2012)
- **Process of collaboration** itself and difficulties related to **differences in teaching philosophies, power relations and institutional priorities** (Jacobs, 2005, 2006; Arkoudis and Starfield, 2007)
- Movement towards **horizontally structured programs** inhibits systematic mapping of literacies and planning of literacies development (Green, Hammer & Star, 2009)
- **Very large teaching teams and students** across campuses (Green, Hammer & Star, 2009)
- Variation in **'quality'** (Kraus, 2012)

Literature review - why the integrated approach

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- Best practice principles in embedding the teaching of communication skills (McWilliam & Allan, 2014)
 - Institutional support
 - Cooperation and collaboration
 - Guidance over remediation
 - Multiple approaches to embedding
 - Student-centred focus

Institutional support

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- Arkoudis (2014), best practice principles include the following:
 - Communication skills should be promoted as a **core** competency
 - Communication skills strategies should not only provide support develop their English language proficiency, but support all students in developing the essential skills necessary for success, including writing, speaking, reading and interpersonal skills **in an integrated manner**
 - Communication skills development should be **discipline-specific** and ensure both readiness for **study** and engagement with **disciplinary learning**

Cooperation and collaboration

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- Jones et al. (2001) - The degree of embedding ranges on a continuum
 - Adjunct (weak) - Provide learning support outside the timetabled unit,
 - Adjunct (strong) - Provide discipline-specific support outside the timetabled unit,
 - Integrated - Provide workshops or lectures integrated within the timetabled unit, subject expert may not be present; or
 - Embedded - Co-develops the skills with a discipline expert, CS staff does not teach it

Multiple approaches in embedding communication skills

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1. Communication skills rubrics providing a **common language** for both staff and students across disciplines and guidelines for learning, teaching and assessing communication skills
2. A **community site** for staff on the university's LMS complementing the workshops and providing online resources for teaching and assessing communication skills
3. Professional development **workshops and one-to-one support** for staff on embedding communication skills into teaching and assessment;
4. **Diagnostic and self assessments** for students enabling students to identify particular needs and access appropriate support
5. **Online modules** for students enabling both independent learning online, as well as blended delivery in workshops or incorporation into disciplinary units

Guidance over remediation approach

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- **Guidance** approach suggests **building and developing** students' disciplinary writing skills via embedded academic writing support (Caterall & Ireland, 2010; McWilliams & Allan, 2014)
- Remediation approach suggests deficit-model thinking, “fix-it” approach (Hill et al, 2010). Current help provided on students' writing are remedial in nature (Jackson, Taylor and Adam, 2010; Chanock et al., (2009)

Student-centred focus

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- This approach tends to complement embedded initiatives that encourage students to **critique their learning** and **question their knowledge, beliefs and understanding**, and in so doing, develop greater self-reflection skills, autonomy and self-efficacy (Fenton-Smith 2012)
- Content lecturers and academic-literacy specialists can work independently or collaboratively to **assess students' prior knowledge** and **develop resources and tasks** that lead to more-positive learning outcomes for students (McWilliams & Allan, 2014)

Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT)

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- SIT is Singapore's fifth autonomous university.
- Established in 2009, gazetted as a university in March 2014
- Applied learning / industry-focused university. Degree programmes are grouped into five clusters - Engineering (ENG), Chemical Engineering and Food Technology (CEFT), Infocomm Technology (ICT), Health and Social Sciences (HSS), as well as Design and Specialised Businesses (DSB)
- Caters primarily to polytechnic graduates. The polytechnic students have taken discipline-specific communication skills courses of varying intensity in the polytechnic

SIT Punggol Campus

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Centre for Communication Skills - degrees of embedding

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- The degree of embedding ranges on a continuum where communication skills (CS) staff provide
 - Discipline-specific support outside the timetabled unit workshops - online booking on helpdesk website - manned by full-time CS staff
 - Lectures integrated within the timetabled unit
 - A parallel communication skills course, to a discipline-specific course
 - An independent communication skills course for discipline-specific courses

Motivation for the integrated approach

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- Career coaching in many institutions of higher learning are now handled by career coaches who formerly have recruitment responsibilities in industry.
- This trend is also reflected in the lack of research in the last ten years on resume writing and cover letter writing in journals.
- Aim - share how I developed and collaborated with career coaches from Career Services in my institution to deliver a career development skills course using the integrated approach
- This presentation hopes to revive the call for academics to be involved in the teaching of career development skills, as we still have much to offer, when we work collaboratively with career coaches.

Case: SIE2901 Career and Professional Development Module

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- Institutional support
 - Discipline specific, compulsory for all students before embarking on their Integrated Work Study Program application
 - 2.5 credits (shared course) out of 5 credits, core course, graded
 - Length: 3 hours x 6 weeks
 - Timetabled
 - Class size: 20 students per class
 - Taught by communication skills faculty

Assessment weighting and schedule

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| Assessment Task | Weighting | Tentative week/due date |
|------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|
| Career Planning & Management quiz | 5% | Week 2 |
| Resume Writing | 10% | Week 3 |
| Job Search Skills quiz | 5% | Week 4 |
| Cover Letter Writing | 15% | Week 5 |
| Interview | 10% | Week 6 |
| Class Attendance and Participation | 5% | Throughout the Trimester |

Guidance over remediation (feedback intensive), student-centered focus

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| Week | Course Schedule |
|------|--|
| 1 | Resume writing |
| 2 | Resume writing (peer and tutor feedback, CPM quiz) |
| 3 | Cover letter writing |
| 4 | Cover letter writing (peer and tutor feedback, JSS quiz) |
| 5 | Interview (input and practice) |
| 6 | Mock interview |

Collaboration and cooperation

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- Career Services (CS) is in charge of
 - Two e-learning components which lead to quizzes - career planning and management quiz (seven topics), job search skills quiz (six topics). Students cannot attempt the quiz until they have read every topic in the e-learning component (linear sequencing)
 - Conducting the joint mock interview (panel method - one CS staff and one CCS staff).
 - After the module is completed, Career Services is in charge of ensuring that students gain placement for their Integrated Work Study program (one year) with the identified employers, with one-to-one sign-on coaching by the discipline's designated career coach
- CCS is in charge of teaching and providing feedback on the students' resume and cover letter writing, and conducting the joint mock interviews

Types of integration strategies adopted leading to IWSP placement

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1. Identification of companies for IWSP purposes by Career Services
2. Equipping students for the application process -
 - a. Providing online resources for students to learn independently via quizzes and course materials uploaded to the learning management system (CS and CCS)
 - b. Providing assignment checklist and rubrics to maintain a common language for both CS and CCS staff and students, and guidelines for learning, teaching and assessing
 - c. Providing teacher feedback on the three assignments (CCS)
 - d. Providing students with the opportunity to give and receive feedback from another peer (CCS). Note: Due to the Private Data policy, students' resumes could not be shared publicly
3. One-to-one support by Career Services for students who would like more practice, on a sign on basis, after the module is completed, for the application process

Lessons learnt

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- Communication skills faculty have a role to play in teaching career development skills
 - Moderation of the assignments have found that there was a very close alignment in expectations between CCS and CS staff. Development of checklists and rubric to serve as a common language for CS and CCS staff in teaching and learning processes help reduce differences in teaching philosophies, power relations and feedback given
 - Teaching career development skills helps faculty understand where their students are coming from in terms of their communication skills and how to equip them better based on gaps identified
- A systematic approach is necessary with institutional support
 - Graded module, leading to students' application for the IWSP (tangible and immediate outcomes)
 - Spurs motivation for collaboration and cooperation between CS and CCS staff, and student ownership of the successful outcome of their application

Lessons learnt

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- Small group teaching with a focus on feedback is essential to be effective
 - Students were very weak in presenting their achievements, they were describing their responsibilities, hence lacking in confidence - much probing was required during feedback sessions
 - Students could not see and highlight how skills in previous work experiences could be transferred to their current resume application, to match the job description in an advertisement (especially for students who switched courses e.g. Diploma in Optometry to Bachelor in Sustainable Infrastructure Engineering)
 - Could not build stories based on their educational, work and CCA experiences to captivate the recruiter, in the cover letter and interview

Implications

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- Besides Career Services, academics from the students' discipline will be invited in the future to participate as joint interviewers during the mock interviews.
- Feedback and much practice are primary to helping students improve
 - Teach less content, so that students can focus on improving their writing and speaking based on feedback given by their peers and teacher
- Use of frameworks like CAR (challenge, action and results) and STAR (situation, task, action and results) help students to think and respond in a structured manner

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