

CHAPTER 18.

CONNECTING THE DOTS FROM ACADEMIC LITERACIES TO PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

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***Abstract.** At the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), we offer a first-year academic literacies module called Critical Thinking & Communicating (CTC) to all SIT students. The university focuses mainly on engineering, information technology, allied health sciences and hospitality degree programmes. CTC employs a critical thinking model to teach students how to write and present for academic purposes in contexts and problem scenarios that are customised for their fields of study. All teaching materials are designed based on the “Understanding by Design” model, beginning with discussions with content professors to understand the academic writing and speaking outcomes required of students in their degree programmes and then working backwards to design instructional materials. While CTC is designed to help SIT students with their writing and speaking needs in their content curricula, research informs us that a single academic literacies module taught at the start of students’ degree programmes may be inadequate in enabling students to adapt and repurpose the communication of their content through students’ undergraduate years and into their professions.*

The Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) offers approximately 40 undergraduate programmes that range from engineering, health and social sciences, chemical engineering and food technology, infocomm technology to design and specialized business spread over five academic clusters). The academic clusters are business, communication and design (BCD), engineering, health and social sciences (HSS), infocomm technology (ICT), food, chemical and biotechnology (FCB) (Jaidev, 2021; Singapore Institute of Technology [SIT], n.d.).

About 95 percent of the students who apply to SIT degree programmes are likely to have completed a three-year diploma programme at one of the five polytechnics in Singapore (SmileTutor, n.d.). A small percentage have completed either the G.C.E “A” Level or the International Baccalaureate (International Baccalaureate Organization, n.d.). In general, students who have completed their “A” levels and IB have had some instruction and experience in academic writing, citation conventions, etc. and are, as a result, more likely to transfer this prior knowledge to their university assignments (Robertson, Taczak & Yancey, 2012). By comparison, those who have taken the polytechnic route, which would be the majority of SIT students, tend to be less competent in academic writing because they enroll in the polytechnics after their G.C.E “O” Level examinations (SEAB, n.d.) and polytechnics usually focus less on academic writing and more on communication skills for the workplace, such as resume and cover letter writing, job interview skills and possibly some report-writing. As can be gleaned, students come into SIT with varying levels of communicative competence in academic writing and, as such, it makes good sense to provide some focused instruction in it to help all students manage their university assignments. It is precisely to address this need that the Centre for Communication Skills (CCS) was formed in 2015.

CCS was rebranded as the Centre for Professional Communication (CPC) in January 2024 so that the centre could better align itself with the university’s concerted effort to build ties with industries, companies and overseas universities of applied learning where faculty and students could engage in translational research in real projects. Herein lies the challenge for CCS/CPC faculty to equip students to manage their university assignments through instruction in academic literacies while also preparing them to become adept at professional communication that they need when they go out on their extended work attachments and into their professional world. This chapter will explain how curriculum decisions were made in SIT to help students to recognize the similarities and differences between academic and professional communication and to draw on prior knowledge to repurpose their writing and speaking skills to suit different audiences, purposes, and contexts (Beaufort, 2007; Robertson, 2011). It will also provide insights into some of the challenges encountered when proposing and implementing large scale curriculum change in the way communication is taught in SIT.

THE CENTRE FOR PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

Historically, the Centre for Professional Communication (CPC) at the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), previously the Centre for Communication

Skills (CCS), was instituted in 2015 to provide instruction in both writing and oral presentation skills to undergraduates through distinct or “stand-alone” communication modules. While the communication modules were designed based on typical academic literacy needs in a predominantly engineering and science university by including such topics as technical report-writing and scientific presentation skills, at that time these modules were not compulsory for all students. Content professors who were degree programme leaders included these modules in their content curriculum based on time and space “left over” after they had incorporated all of the subject matter content modules they felt were essential for students. The situation was compounded by the fact that, at the time, assessment of content assignments focused almost exclusively on the inclusion of required material, with minimal, if any, consideration of how that content was written or presented orally. Consequently, there were several programmes that did not have a communication module but with students who required writing instruction to help them write their content assignments or those who needed input and guidance in designing and delivering an audience-centered technical/scientific presentation.

As it stood then, students who did not have a communication module consulted with CCS faculty through an online writing and presentation service provided by CCS faculty called CCS Communication Helpdesk. Students could book a one-hour consultation slot to seek help with their content assignment writing or presentation needs. It was common that at certain points of the year, when students were writing their capstone, final year projects, honours theses, etc., there would be a surge in the number of those seeking consultation through this Helpdesk. In time, however, due to the increased demand for such consultations and faculty’s inability to cope with the number of requests for face-to-face consultations, CCS Helpdesk became an online peer tutoring service involving SIT student peer tutors. Peer tutors who were competent at writing and presenting were carefully selected through recommendations from their faculty and encouraged to apply to be peer tutors who would provide online consultation to other students. Applicants were interviewed, selected, trained on how to provide consultation and feedback by CCS faculty and then assigned students. Successful students are not only paid \$20 an hour for providing consultation and feedback that they provide but also would have this extracurricular activity documented in their degree transcripts when they graduate. The online reservation service is managed by a CCS and now CPC administrative assistant. A significant point to note here is that, while these one-off consultations were useful for students to pass the particular assignment or project paper, it is possible that they did not provide adequate, follow-up instruction to help students to draw on previous knowledge and adapt it to new writing tasks (DePalma & Ringer, 2011).

It became apparent that students needed more purposeful and sustained, follow-up instruction throughout their degree programmes to equip them with the knowledge and skills to recognize similarities and differences in writing demands and required outcomes of new tasks (Yancey et al., 2018, 2019).

Common practice for effecting major curriculum change in any institution of higher learning (IHL) is to gather adequate concrete evidence to support the need for change. As a first source of evidence, feedback was sought from discipline faculty about their students' ability to write their content essays. Feedback was also sought from workplace supervisors of SIT students on attachments in companies regarding students' ability to communicate their content, write emails and simple reports. Additionally, input from professionals who served on SIT programme advisory boards and survey findings on the views of employers of SIT graduates were gathered. With information from such key sources that SIT students needed to not only communicate their disciplinary content in university assignments but also engage different stakeholders at the workplace, CCS was in a better position to request that communication skills be taught as a core university module in all degree programmes in as early as Year 1.

There were a few other considerations in support of this proposal as well. First, the majority of SIT students came from polytechnics in Singapore where the communication modules focused on workplace communication. Thus, few were equipped with the ability to write extended content assignments where they needed to synthesize and cite information from multiple sources to develop a cogent argument. Another consideration was that male Singaporean students typically came into the university after having served two years of national service in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) or Singapore Police Force (SPF), during which time it is likely that they have had little opportunity to think, write or talk about disciplinary content. These important considerations underpinned the need for a core academic literacies module aimed at equipping students with the necessary writing and presentation skills for survival in university. Consequently, in September 2020, at the start of a new academic year, an academic literacies module entitled Critical Thinking and Communicating (CTC) was launched in four-degree programmes: robotics (RSE), digital communication and integrated media (DCIM), pharmaceutical engineering (PHE) and speech and language therapy (SLT).

CRITICAL THINKING AND COMMUNICATING

The CTC curriculum was designed based on critical thinking models, such as the Paul-Elder critical thinking model (Paul & Elder, 2020), and the kind of writing outcomes the content professors expected from students. Typically,

CTC taught students the basics of writing a critical reader response, a persuasive proposal that required them to conduct mostly secondary research, and presentation skills. Contexts and problem scenarios were customised for every discipline using backward curriculum design principles or the “Understanding by Design” model by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005). The decision to use backward design involved CCS faculty working closely with content faculty in each of the disciplines to create typical contexts and scenarios that students could easily identify with for both classroom activities as well as continual assessments. For instance, students might be asked to write a proposal for a robot designed to direct traffic in a busy mall, or to read an article on the media’s role in advancing the United Nations’ 16 Sustainable Development Goals and develop a critical response that engages with multiple perspectives. Classroom activities included several smaller scaffolding tasks on how to synthesise information from multiple sources, analyse published material for accuracy, depth, breadth as well as to write with logical sequence, etc. Similarly, oral presentation lessons include scaffolding activities on how to select information to develop and deliver a persuasive scientific presentation to meet the needs of a specific audience. A student who went through this system and who now works as a consultant at Det Norske Veritas (DNV) Maritime Advisory expresses that he writes proposals and coordinates projects with shipowners, charterers, and internal experts as part of his daily work. He adds that he learned about adapting his communication style to match an audience’s needs at SIT which he applies at work “before presenting proposals on maritime decarbonization strategies, I study my audience’s background and adapt my communication style accordingly” (Personal Communication, Tuesday 2 September 2025).

Since its inception in September 2020, CTC has offered first-year students in all SIT university programmes help in managing their writing and presentation demands in their content modules at university (Lillis, 2003). Despite that, it was clear even before this curriculum overhaul was effected that a single 12-week module offered in Year 1 would be inadequate in equipping students to write more complex and lengthy assignments such as fieldwork notes, user requirement manuals, technical reports, literature reviews, capstone projects, honours dissertations, final-year projects, critical reflections on their clinical attachments, and reflective logs on their extended work attachments as they progress to Years 2, 3, and 4. It became clear that, while CTC exposes students to academic writing genres such as critiques, report and proposal writing as well as research and citation conventions, we needed to continue to scaffold more advanced writing skills by helping students to repurpose the basic writing knowledge and skills acquired in CTC in year 1 to other more complex, writing tasks in later years (Boyd et al., 2020; Langer & Applebee, 1987).

At this juncture, it is important to note that although CTC was initially designed as a writing-intensive course to strengthen students' academic writing and, to some extent, their oral presentation skills, its focus is likely to shift in response to the widespread use of AI in writing and SIT senior management's encouragement for faculty to integrate this technology into their teaching. One suggestion has been to encourage students to use AI at the brainstorming stage of writing and to incorporate more opportunities for them to talk about the content of their writing in a viva or oral defence to validate assessment of students' true level of critical thinking and communicative competence. With this, it is possible that the initial conception of CTC with a 70:30 ratio in favour of writing, may change. Currently, students have to submit a signed declaration both on the percentage of AI use and on what it was used for, for example, points of discussion, paraphrasing, or grammar. Additionally, the assessment rubrics of written assignments have been tweaked to focus more on discussion and evaluation of content rather than language because grammar and sentence structure can easily be perfected with the help of AI software. Curriculum revisions related to AI use are a work in progress.

COMMUNICATING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Along with the proposal for CTC to be offered to all SIT undergraduates, the inadequacy of a single academic literacy module offered to students at the start of their university education was raised to the SIT Board of Studies (SIT-BoS). The proposal which represented the collective views of CCS faculty argued that a single 12-week academic literacies module, taken in the first trimester of their first year in university would not prepare students adequately for the longer, more complex university assignments which they would need to do in their senior years. Also, while faculty agreed on the need for professional communication skills, including email, minutes writing, and intercultural interaction, the content curricula had no room for additional standalone modules. Therefore, CCS faculty proposed to the SIT-BoS that it embed advanced writing knowledge and skills instruction in subsequent years, i.e., from Year 2 onwards, based on outcomes identified by content professors in their discipline-specific assignments within the content curriculum. Additionally, professional communication instruction including such topics as interpersonal communication at the workplace, email, and meeting minutes could also be embedded within curriculum time before students embarked on their extended work attachments and at intervals and when they returned to the university to meet with their academic supervisors. Communicating Across the Curriculum (CAC) was also approved by the BoS and launched along with CTC in September 2020.

At this juncture it is important to state that CCS had already been piloting CAC based on requests from individual content professors. For example, a food technology professor who required his students to write a literature review on sustainable solutions for food shortage requested a CCS faculty to deliver a three-hour workshop on how to write a literature review for that assignment. To deliver the workshop, content professors and CCS faculty discussed what to cover so that students might draw on their prior knowledge of synthesizing, verifying and citing accurately when incorporating information from multiple sources, taught in their first year CTC module and then transfer and adapt that knowledge to new assignments in subsequent years with the addition of discipline-specific conventions (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). A third-year food technology student who has taken CTC and subsequent CAC workshops explains that in her third year, when reading research papers for her capstone project, she “made sure to assess the authors’ tone and check whether the paper was results-focused rather than containing too much personal opinion.” She added that the process helped her to be objective and not to immediately arrive at conclusions until after “sufficient analysis was carried out.”

Another example of knowledge and skills transfer can be observed in this quote from an SIT student who now works as a tunnel engineer who explains that he regularly updates his senior management via email, “translating technical details into clear, concise insights for decision-making.” He adds that the knowledge and skills he acquired from the professional communication CAC workshops at SIT have equipped him with “the ability to communicate complex engineering concepts in a structured and professional way, whether in writing or during high-level discussions.” In short, the proposal for CAC to be formalised alongside CTC was based on the rationale that there would be a *light but uninterrupted emphasis* on the importance of communicating effectively, both for academic purposes as well as for the workplace. The CAC model thus positions the Integrated Work Study Programme (IWSP) as a site of writing transfer, where students must apply rhetorical knowledge gained in academic settings to professional contexts. Thus, the aim of this continual scaffolding of writing and speaking for both academic and professional purposes, audiences and contexts is to enable students to transit seamlessly from university to a professional workplace realm such that they are able to communicate their discipline knowledge and to interact socially with their colleagues and superiors (Eady et al., 2021; Peltola, 2018).

CTC and CAC were approved and formalised by the BoS and had the full support of the senior management of SIT because they were aimed at elevating the communicative competence of SIT graduates when they entered the professional realm and workforce even as early as in their extended work attachments.

To ensure that students took CAC seriously, senior management decided that it should be credit-bearing. Consequently, attendance at CAC workshops was awarded a total of three credits from Year 2 to 4. To make it easy to incorporate CAC within the content curriculum of degree programmes, CAC was delivered in a few different ways including face-to-face seminar/workshops in small groups, synchronous online large group lectures, asynchronous e-modules with in-built assessments, and consultation clinics where CCS faculty would answer questions and provide feedback on student writing in small groups. In addition, CCS faculty also sat in to assess content presentations especially for final-year and capstone projects, honours thesis presentations and Integrated Work Study Programme (IWSP) presentations.

At SIT the extended work attachment (six to 12 months) is a 20-credit compulsory module referred to as the Integrated Work Study Programme (IWSP) and students must complete it to graduate with a degree. Students who pursue degrees in the allied health services must complete a clinical attachment similar to the IWSP that other students complete. The IWSP and clinical attachments are, therefore, real workplace contexts where students have to apply their disciplinary knowledge to real workplace problem situations, write and talk about their content to superiors and peers, work with senior colleagues on team projects, contribute proactively to discussions, write emails and take meeting notes/minutes, etc. They also need interpersonal and intercultural communication knowledge and skills to complete their attachments successfully. So, during the IWSP, professional communication often takes precedence over academic literacy and this was an important consideration for CAC.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED WHEN PROPOSING CURRICULUM CHANGE

One of the main hurdles when proposing a major curriculum change was the process of getting the support of content professors, some of whom believed that all students who came into SIT would have completed some form of communication skills module; as such allocating time in the content curriculum for a 12-week, 48 hour, 4-module credit compulsory academic literacy module was in some way diluting the content curriculum. They argued that, as a university of applied learning, distinct from Singapore's research-intensive universities SIT needed to maximize curriculum time beyond content delivery by giving students opportunities to work on real projects in laboratories and makerspaces. Some even argued that it was uncommon, particularly among universities in the UK, to incorporate a compulsory academic literacies module in science and engineering degree programmes and that it was only students whose English

proficiency fell short of university entry requirements that should be required to take such courses and that such courses should not be credit-bearing.

Our response to this argument was that about 90 percent of SIT students were from the local polytechnics where any communication module that students had taken would have been focused on workplace communication such as resumes, cover letters and job interview skills because the polytechnics in Singapore train students for the workforce. While many polytechnic students do enter the workforce upon graduating with diplomas, there are a significant number who apply to universities such as SIT to obtain degree qualification. There is a high likelihood that many of these students would never have written a position paper or research-based essay which they would be required to do in their content assignments. In fact, here are some students' feedback on the CTC module:

Beginning the first trimester of university learning about proper presentation skills and report writing, teamwork and communication skills are essentially what I always wanted and needed. I definitely feel that this provides a firm foundation of what is expected of students when doing and approaching report writing and presentations not just for the module itself but also for further similar assignments in other modules. This allows students to be on the same page, especially when it comes to citation, how to approach report, etc. (Student A/robotics programme)

Being structured differently compared to other modules, CTC allows me to have more opportunities at groupwork and allow me to hone my speaking and writing skills through project work. It also allowed me to explore many interesting topics and provide meaningful solutions to intriguing present issues. (Student B/Sustainable Infrastructure Engineering-Building Services)

Being able to analyze information and back up my claims will allow me to gain the confidence and trust of my intended audience. (Student C/Mechatronics Systems)

This module made me realize that purely having knowledge of our core subjects isn't enough in today's world. We should continue to improve on other skills such as our soft skills, etc. in order to perform well. (Student D/aircraft systems engineering)

Following the university-wide implementation of CTC and CAC, CCS faculty were assigned the role of module leads to oversee the delivery of both CTC and

CAC in the four clusters. In keeping with this, CCS faculty liaised with content professors to understand the specific writing and speaking outcomes in their content assignments so that they could develop customised teaching and assessment materials. This part appeared to be fairly uncomplicated as CTC was a university core module. However, getting useful feedback from content professors on the writing outcomes of their assignments as well as scenarios and problem situations in their disciplinary fields was tricky because, while some could not quite identify what their students needed to be able to do, others were simply difficult to contact or pin down to get useful information. Scheduling for CTC classes was also left till after time had been allocated to content modules so that some CTC classes had to be taught late in the evenings. This was a problem because CCS has always operated on a lean full-time team of faculty; we rely, as a result on a large pool of part time tutors who sometimes found it inconvenient to teach in the late evenings. However, since 2020, some of these teething problems have been resolved.

At the time of writing this article, CTC and CAC have been offered across all degree programmes for approximately four years and the first batch of graduates who have had this *light but uninterrupted emphasis on* communicating effectively are out in the workforce. At this point, systemic longitudinal research on the effectiveness of the new curriculum is underway but the results are unavailable.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED WITH COMMUNICATING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Within clusters, CCS faculty who served as CTC module leads (ML) for programmes also provide individualized and customized support to each of those programmes by way of planning the CAC instruction for their Y2 and Y3 cohorts. This support includes liaising with the content programme leaders and the administrative personnel who assist with the scheduling of the embedded instruction. Such support provides a crucial step in the whole process of CAC delivery because only after the scheduling is done, can the CCS faculty who serves as ML begin to develop materials for the CAC and deploy faculty (both full time and part time) for the CAC engagements. As a rule, we try to deploy full time CCS faculty to conduct the workshops before we recruit part time tutors for a number of reasons. First, full-time CCS faculty are required to teach a certain number of hours per trimester (the university academic year is divided into trimesters) and conducting CAC workshops is counted towards fulfilling those hours. Second, it was decided that to maintain oversight of the quality of the workshops, full time faculty needed to be involved. Third, and perhaps the most important reason is that teaching CAC to help students to draw on their prior learning to repurpose that knowledge and skills for new purposes,

audiences and contexts provides valuable data for research. Also, as CAC provides opportunities for faculty to teach professional communication skills that students need at the workplace, facilitating such workshops is one way in which CCS/CPC faculty could experiment with helping students to connect the dots from writing and speaking for academic purposes to writing and speaking for professional purposes. However, not all CCS faculty shared this last perspective as some preferred other areas of research in applied linguistics and therefore viewed teaching CAC as a distraction or an additional burden to their main work at CCS SIT which was to teach CTC. As a result, the teaching of CAC workshops has come to rely more and more on part-time tutors with just the oversight of the CCS faculty who serves as the ML.

To help retain a steady and committed pool of part-time tutors to teach CAC workshops, a survey was distributed to all of them in 2022 requesting them to indicate the topics they are interested in. This was because CAC topics were and still are quite diverse and we wanted to ensure that we only deployed tutors who were skilled in delivering specific workshops, for example, writing systematic literature reviews for nursing students, writing fieldwork notes for engineering students, poster design and presentation, product pitching, scrum meetings, etc. The majority of the part time tutors responded to this survey, the results of which were collated and current deployment of CAC teaching is matched against the tutors' indicated preferences.

To ensure the quality of instruction in CAC workshops, all full-time faculty and part time tutors delivering workshops are evaluated by the students. Prior to the commencement of CAC workshops, all facilitators will receive an automated email (set up by the CAC administrative team) to confirm their engagement along with a QR code that they can use during the workshop. The QR code contains a link to a survey on Qualtrics that students are required to fill out at the end of the sessions. This survey contains questions regarding the perceived effectiveness of the workshop content and the facilitators' delivery.

One of the problems that we have encountered continually with CAC workshops is student attendance. Students are sometimes not aware that CAC is credit-bearing and therefore attendance is mandatory. Sometimes it is because the degree programme leaders have not highlighted this to them. Poor attendance can be demotivating for the faculty, regardless of whether they are full-time or part-time because they have spent time preparing for the workshops.

Another problem arises when content professors delay sharing their assignment briefs, assessment rubrics and the discussion that CCS faculty need to have with them in order to customize the workshops for their students' specific communication needs. This delay can cause considerable stress to CCS faculty who need to develop the materials and share them with other tutors so that all

those involved in the teaching of that CAC workshop may be equally prepared to deliver it. Yet other content professors request CAC workshops without identifying the specific writing or speaking requirements of the assignment which makes it difficult to prepare the materials. Finally, there are some who forget that CAC is a requirement from Year 2 onwards and as such do not schedule any for their students. Among this category of content professors are those who get to the end of the academic year and realise that they now need to fulfill the CAC hours and, therefore, request random workshops that are not pegged to any assignments which defeats the whole purpose of CAC.

CONCLUSION

Since late 2020 when the module critical thinking and communicating (CTC) as a university core module and communicating across the curriculum (CAC) a university-wide embedding programme to elevate the quality of writing and speaking of SIT students through university and beyond were officially launched, both have matured in many ways. Most of the teaching materials have been developed for CTC although there is continuous improvement of activities and assessment and several CAC workshops have been delivered across degree programmes with favourable feedback from both students and content professors. Having said that there are still occasional administrative glitches such as timetabling issues and the problem of inadequate facilitators, both full-time and part-time to deliver the embedded instructional workshops. As a result, discussions are ongoing about developing more self-directed learning e-modules that could be customized to serve as CAC workshops.

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