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Teaching evidence-based writing using corporate blogs

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Abstract – Teaching problem: Students' written assignments show that they tend to list ideas rather than provide evidence-based arguments. This might be because they do not have a framework to base their arguments on. **Research question:** Does the communication model framework help students to write evidence-based arguments when evaluating the communicative effectiveness in corporate blogs? **Situating the case:** The ability to engage in argument from evidence is one of the Next Generation Science Standards for scientific and engineering practices. Thus, it is important for engineering students to know how to present evidence-based arguments. The communication model framework was introduced to provide students with a framework to base their arguments on. This framework builds on the genre-based and academic literacies approaches to teaching writing. More companies are now using corporate blogs (an open, participatory and globally networked social media tool) to engage stakeholders directly across multiple contexts. The framework is useful in analyzing evolving genres like corporate blogs because it is not only structured but also flexible. **About the case:** This teaching case describes the use of the communication model framework as the basis for students' arguments. The framework was used in a general writing course for engineering students. Working in groups, the students used the framework for their oral practice critique and also their critique assignment on a given piece of academic writing or corporate blog. They also had to write a reflection paper individually at the end of the course. **Results:** Overall, the mixed groups and international students groups made a stronger attempt to apply the framework compared to the Singaporean students groups. The students' educational backgrounds, the group dynamics within the group and the nature of the

discussions affected the level of adoption of the framework in their writing. **Conclusions:**

This teaching case reflects the value of mixed group, face-to-face discussions, and personal reflection in teaching students evidence-based writing, and calls for more research on flexible frameworks as genres evolve.

***Index Terms** – Communication model framework, corporate blog, first-year undergraduates, teaching of writing, evidence-based arguments.*

INTRODUCTION

Educators often lament that undergraduates have poor writing skills – students tell knowledge [1] or reproduce lecture content [2], and present unsubstantiated, incoherent and ungrammatical arguments [2, 3]. The reasons for students' poor writing may lie beyond a lack of skills, especially for first-year undergraduates. First-year undergraduates may not be aware of the differences between high school writing and undergraduate writing [2, 3]. Their writing often reflects surface learning where they reproduce the lecture notes in their assignment, rather than deep learning where they synthesize ideas from multiple sources. My own observations of student writing over two decades show that students' writing seem to be narrative-like (linear and chronological) rather than evidence-based (evidence provided to support a claim). In addition, students' writing tend to be writer-centered (they write for their own understanding) rather than reader-centered (making the effort to make their writing coherent to their reader). Another possible reason for the lack of evidence-based argument in their writing is the aim of first-year general writing courses. In many institutions, the aim of these writing courses is to ensure that students have a good foundation in the mechanics of writing so that they would be able to undertake undergraduate education successfully. The importance of mastering the mechanics is critical in light of the increase in the number of international students whose first language is not English. For many educators, evidence-based writing should be taught in more advanced writing courses in order not to compromise on the time spent helping these students master the mechanics of writing. In reality however, with constraints in manpower and time, this might mean that evidence-based writing is never taught. Even in writing classrooms where evidence-based writing is taught, students are required to write essays on different topics which require them to do a certain amount of

research. The research process in writing the essays hones students' research skills but may not cultivate students' ability to write evidence-based arguments. This is because students are not given any framework to base their arguments on in their pre-writing discussions or writing. Evidence-based writing however, is an important skill that engineering students need to learn early in their undergraduate education. [4] identified the ability to engage in argument from evidence as one of the Next Generation Science Standards for scientific and engineering practices. Thus, this teaching case describes the use of the communication model framework as the basis for students' arguments. The framework was used in a general writing course for engineering students. Working in groups, the students used the framework to write a critique on a given piece of academic writing or corporate blog.

The information and analysis presented in this paper is based on the observations of a reflective practitioner and not the outcome of a formal research study. After using the framework for four semesters and continuously revising the course content based on observations, feedback from my colleagues and students, and the quality of the students' written assignments, I wanted to explore the following research question: Does the communication model framework help students write evidence-based arguments when evaluating the communicative effectiveness in corporate blogs? The communication model framework refers to the analysis of communication acts using the six components of the model: context, participants, purpose, channel, noise and feedback [5]. Evidence-based arguments refer to arguments with a claim-evidence paragraph structure [4]. Communicative effectiveness refers to the company's ability to align its business messages to its audience via a proper analysis of the context and purpose of the communication, and the channel used, in order to reduce noise in the communication and increase positive feedback from its readers.

A corporate blog is a social media tool that is open, participatory and globally networked where the company engages stakeholders directly across multiple contexts [6]. Blogs are very useful tools as they provide a single multimedia and interactive platform for companies to do viral marketing, market research, customer support and crisis communication in real time while catering to separate, specialized audiences.

In the following sections, I will situate the teaching case in literature, present the methodology used to collect data about it, describe the teaching problem and the resulting solution, and close by stating the implications, limitations and suggestions for future research.

SITUATING THE TEACHING CASE

The purpose of this section is to identify the key research and theories that guided it. I will first present how the literature was selected, the theories that influenced the development of the curriculum, and justify why I used the communication model framework to teach students evidence-based writing.

Selection of Literature I searched online sources for information regarding the main keywords in the research question using the NTU “One Search” engine which turns in results from databases, journals, e-books, books and dissertations. Keyword search phrases included “communication effectiveness,” “corporate blogs,” “how to teach arguments,”

“communication model,” “genre analysis,” “academic writing,” and “approaches to teaching academic writing.”

I shall now elaborate on two important keywords in my research question: corporate blogs and evidence-based argument.

Corporate Blogs In recent years, more companies are embarking on using blogs to interact directly with their customers [7]. The user-generated content in the blogs increases customers’ interaction with the company and this translates to an increase in customer satisfaction [8], brand loyalty, market share and profits [9]. Past research have investigated various aspects of corporate blogs like the relationship between the type of postings and the level of consumer engagement [8], the orientation of blogs and its effect on brand communication [9], the blog-user satisfaction aspects [10, 11] and the impact of corporate blogs on organizational social capital [12]. However, there is a lack of research on the communicative aspect in corporate blogs [13]. In my search on “corporate blogs,” there were many results on how to design effective blogs, and tips on effective corporate communication. However, there is not much information on effective corporate communication specific to corporate blogs. In addition, educators seldom teach the communicative aspect in corporate blogs because blogs, being a social media tool, consist of so many interactive features and networked links that it is difficult to provide a structure for students’ analysis. Hence, I am proposing the communication model framework to help students evaluate the communicative effectiveness in corporate blogs.

Evidence-based Arguments The ability to engage in argument from evidence is one of the Next Generation Science Standards for scientific and engineering practices [4]. Thus, it is important for engineering students to know how to present evidence-based arguments.

Arguments have a claim-evidence (data + reasoning) paragraph structure where students present their data and explain their reasoning on how the evidence supports their claims [14]. Students however, often have problems presenting good arguments. A source of the problem stems from students' misconception about what constitutes argument. One common misconception students have about argument is that it is similar to a debate. However, these two terms have different nuances. Debates are persuasive in nature, and often involve using emotional appeals to persuade readers that the stated position is correct. Argument writing on the other hand, strives to present clear evidence to support claims made and making the case for the argument based on the merit of the argument [15]. Other problems that students often commit in argument writing are: the inability to understand the context or the nuances for the argument clear enough to make clear and valid claims, present strong data and reasoning to support the claims taking into account other points of views, and writing in an objective manner [16].

Two heuristics that are useful to teach students evidence-based writing are the Aristotle and Toulmin forms of argument [17]. Both forms of argument complement each other (Table 1) as they emphasize that writers have to develop their ideas clearly and objectively, using credible citations. Both forms of argument are also dialogic in nature as they encourage writers to respect their audience's intellect and to analyse their audience's stand on a topic, their doubts and to address those doubts in a compelling and ethical manner. The Aristotle form of argument consists of 3 components: logos (logical development of ideas), ethos

(credible and trustworthy presentation of ideas) and pathos (measured emotional appeal to the audience). The Aristotle form of argument raises writers’ awareness about the danger of making fallacious statements in all the three components of the argument. The Toulmin form of argument brings the idea of a dialogic argument (with the audience) further by requiring writers to question the validity of their claim via the warrant and backing, addressing the audience’s rebuttals and qualifying the evidence writers present to support their claim. The Toulmin form of argument has six components: claim (the position or conclusion of the argument), grounds (reasons supporting the claim), warrant (the principle or chain of reasoning connecting the grounds to the claim), backing (reasons supporting the warrant), rebuttal (exceptions to the claim) and qualification (the degree of conditionality asserted). For this course however, only three components were taught – the claim, grounds and warrant. I chose to focus on these three components because I had only six weeks to teach the students evidence-based writing. So I was concerned that if I covered too much material, the students would be overwhelmed with too much information that they would settle for surface learning rather than deep learning.

TABLE 1
MAPPING THE ARISTOTLE AND TOULMIN FORMS OF ARGUMENT TO THE
EVIDENCE-BASED ARGUMENT STRUCTURE

Evidence-based argument structure	Aristotle	Toulmin
Claim	Logos	Claim (and warrant)
Evidence (data and reasoning)	Logos Ethos and pathos	Grounds / reasons to support the claim

In the following sections, I elaborate on the two dominant approaches in the teaching of academic writing before proceeding to justify why I used the communication model

framework to teach students evidence-based writing when evaluating the communicative effectiveness in corporate blogs.

The EAP/Genre-based Approach Swales defined genre as

comprising a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the genre and influences and constrains the choice of content and style [18, p. 58].

The genre-based approach in teaching writing thus involves three elements – the social motivation of the texts, the cognitive organizational structures and the lexico-grammatical functions of the discourse [19]. The social motivation of the texts refers to whole texts being classified according to their social purpose. The cognitive organizational structures and lexico-grammatical functions of the discourse are closely linked to each other because the cognitive operations reflect the linguistic means to achieve the communicative function. Two pedagogies to defining and analysing social genre that influenced writing framework are the systemic functional analysis (SFL) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) pedagogies.

SFL claims that genres can be identified in terms of its schematic structure because each genre has certain cognitive and lexico-grammatical characteristics. In addition, these characteristics align with the schematic structure of the genre through a mediating concept called ‘register’ that relates language to the social context through the variables of field, tenor and mode [20]. The field of the discourse refers to the nature of the social action taking place

while the tenor of the discourse refers to the nature of the participants in terms of their statuses and roles. The mode of discourse on the other hand, refers to the channel (spoken or written) and the rhetorical modes (persuasive, expository or didactic) of the discourse.

The ESP framework to analysing social genre however, relates to the creation and reporting of knowledge within particular disciplines. Students need to know the cognitive patterns of textual organization for each type of social genre as each has its own conventionalized schematic structures and these structures are expressed using specialized vocabulary related to addressing and appealing to the audience for the purpose targeted. For example, a technical proposal requires a particular schematic structure and the content of the proposal is expressed using specialized vocabulary in persuasive language.

In summary, the SFL and ESP pedagogies involve teaching students the social motivation, cognitive organizational structure and linguistic realizations of the discourse. However, the SFL pedagogy focuses on the use of register as the mediator across multiple contexts and channels for various audiences while the ESP pedagogy focuses on teaching students the use of conventionalized schematic structure and specialized vocabulary appropriate to the specific discourse community the writing is meant for.

Academic Literacies (AL) The AL approach originates from practice-oriented research notably by [21]. In their 1998 paper, their findings revealed that academic staff often found students' writing problematic because faculty and students had contrasting expectations of student writing across the disciplines. In programmes that integrate a number of disciplinary approaches, the study found that one of the major causes for the difference in expectations was due to the epistemological differences underlying the different disciplines that affected

the structure and argument required in each discipline. Two quotes taken from the findings include “in history, the use of evidence is particularly important” or “in English we are looking for clarity of expression” [21, p.162]. Hence, the AL framework advocates a more dialogic framework compared to the traditional genre framework in teaching academic writing, focusing on issues of identity, power and authority in student writing across the disciplines.

The following section explains how the communication model framework builds on the genre-based and AL approaches, and justifies why I used it to teach my students evidence-based writing.

The Communication Model There are six components in the communication model: *context, audience, purpose, channel, noise and feedback* [5]. In analyzing the *context* of the communication, students have to take into account the social (nature of the relationships between and among participants), historical (previous communication that has taken place), physical (location, environmental conditions, and time of the communication), psychological (the mood and feelings of the participants) and cultural (the beliefs, values, attitudes, and social hierarchies of the participants) aspects of the communication between the participants (the company and users of the corporate blog). For example, in a classroom (physical context) for a core course (historical context), the participants are the students and the tutor (social context). The students do their best to excel in the course and tutors do their best to teach the course well (psychological context) using student- or teacher-centered pedagogies (cultural context). The intended *messages* that *participants* (senders and receivers/audience of the messages) send to each other should be clear. The messages could however, be distorted

due to internal *noise* caused by differences in the participants' beliefs, feelings and attitudes; or external *noise* from the participants' environments. In terms of *channel*, the sender of the message could choose to convey the message via verbal and/or visual channels. In doing so, the sender needs to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each channel. A good indicator of the effectiveness of the communication can be gathered from the *feedback* received from the receiver of the message. If the *feedback* received matches the message conveyed, then the *noise* level in the communication is probably low and vice versa. Even though there are six components in the communication model, the model views the communication process as systemic. The components interplay with each other where students need to

analyze the *context* or communication situation and think actively about possible communication choices available (*channel*), adapt the message (*purpose*) to inform, amuse, persuade or influence the (*audience*) in order to reduce the level of *noise* in the communication and increase the possibility of getting relevant *feedback* [22, p.46].

Justification for Using the Communication Model Framework in Teaching Evidence-based Writing Evidence-based writing is dialogic and calls for a clear and credible presentation of the writer's claims and evidence to the target audience. The communication model framework is also dialogic and could help writers present their evidence taking into account not only the *context*, *audience*, *purpose* and *channel* (as in the genre-based approach) of the communication but also the *noise* and *feedback* in the communication (as in the AL approach). In addition, the communication model framework is not only structured (has six components to help students plan their writing) but also flexible (can be used to analyse any

communication act). These characteristics of the framework are particularly helpful to analyse corporate blogs which are “evolving into multiple genres, meeting different exigencies for different rhetors” [23, p.9]. Furthermore, the framework introduced for the written section would also be used for the spoken section taught in the second half of the course. The communication model framework was adopted as the framework was suitable for both the written and spoken sections of the course.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this case was to explore this research question: Does the communication model framework help students to write evidence-based arguments when evaluating the communicative effectiveness in corporate blogs? This section presents the methodology used to collect data for this teaching case.

Participants The students were students from my four tutorial classes, taking *Effective Communication*, a first-year core engineering course in a university in Singapore. A majority of the Singaporean students have GCSE “A” level qualifications and a minority has International Baccalaureate qualifications. The international students have the equivalent qualifications from their native Asian countries. As the case was performed within the context of normal teaching duties, the case has been approved under expedited review by the Institutional Review Board of my university.

Data Collection This case is not a formal research study but a teaching case where as a reflective practitioner I continually revised the course content over four semesters with the

aim of addressing my research question: Does the communication model framework help students write evidence-based arguments when evaluating the communicative effectiveness in corporate blogs? Revisions to the course content were made based on my observations, on the students' oral practice critique on a corporate blog (week 7), evaluation on the students' written critique assignment (week 8) and reflection paper (week 11); and also student feedback during the tutorials and informal consultations with me. The information presented in this paper is based on summarized data collected from my classes for the fourth semester. Data for the students' oral critique were based on comments I wrote in my notebook while they were doing their presentations. Common weaknesses in the students' oral critique were identified and consolidated from my tutorial classes. Data for the written critique assignment were based on the critiques submitted by three groups of students who chose to do a critique on a given corporate blog (the other groups chose to critique the given academic writing text). The data was analyzed for students' ability to provide a brief explanation of the context, audience and purpose of the communication, and statement of a clear thesis in the introduction; a clear claim-evidence structure in the body paragraphs; and a strong summary of the points made in the conclusion. The critique also had to conform to the characteristics of academic writing where academic writing is thesis-driven; requires a logical and systematic development of ideas with citations; and uses an objective, concise and formal style of writing. Data from the reflection papers were analyzed based on recurring themes that appeared in the papers regarding writing and/or EMBC. The data for all the assignments were only analyzed after the semester was over to meet ethical considerations.

ABOUT THE TEACHING CASE

This section presents the case of teaching students evidence-based writing in their critique assignment by first describing the problem this case was trying to address, and then the course within which the critique assignment was developed and implemented, and the results of the implementation.

The Teaching Problem The students' written assignments over the past semesters show that students tend to list ideas rather than provide evidence-based arguments. This might be because the first-year undergraduates are not aware of the differences between high school writing and undergraduate writing [2, 3]. High school writing focuses on presenting a topic sentence and supporting ideas but undergraduate writing needs to go beyond the mechanics. Topic sentences need to be phrased as claims and students need to present evidence to support their claims. Another possible reason for the lack of evidence-based arguments in their writing could be the lack of a framework (especially in general writing courses) for students to base their arguments on. Thus, the curriculum has to consider providing students with a framework to evaluate the given texts and their own writing, and to enhance their ability to present evidence-based arguments.

Teaching Constraints In designing the curriculum for the first six weeks of the course, I had these practical constraints:

- The first two sections of the course have to be delivered over a period of six weeks in a one hour lecture and one hour tutorial per week mode.

- Typical class sizes for a lecture and a tutorial were about 500-600 students and 30 students on average per semester respectively.
- The cohort taking this course consists mainly of Singaporean students whose first language is English and a sizeable percentage of international students whose first language is not English.

Thus, there was a need to offer course content that was pitched at a level that is not considered ‘remedial’ to the Singaporean students or too difficult for the international students. The pedagogy used to engage the students must also be suitable for large classes, and the framework chosen must also be suitable for the spoken section of the course which was taught in the second half of the semester.

Course The *Effective Communication* course was a 2-credit first-year core course offered to undergraduate engineering students. This course preceded a discipline-specific writing course that students take in their second year. The aims of the course were to introduce students to the principles and processes underlying effective communication, help students recognize what constitute effective expository and persuasive oral and written communication, and equip students with the skills to communicate ideas effectively in speech and writing in a variety of settings.

I taught the course as part of my normal teaching responsibilities so no special budget or release time was needed. I lectured the first half of the course on the General Principles of Communication (Lectures 1 – 3) and Effective Written Communication (Lectures 4 – 6) and my colleague lectured the second half of the course on Effective Spoken Communication (Lectures 7 – 14). The tutorials were taught by me and other communication skills

colleagues. As this course had a very large student cohort (about 2000 students per year), tutors followed the given course materials closely in order to ensure standardization in delivery across the classes.

The course did not use any textbook. Available textbooks in the market on academic writing were too basic as they mainly catered to foreign language students. A textbook consisting of compiled materials from various sources was used for two semesters previously but it was not well received as the students mentioned that they could not see a direct link between the content in the textbook and the critique assignment. Thus, a list of references was provided at the end of the PowerPoint slides for each lecture for students to explore the lecture content further if they were interested.

TABLE 2
COURSE OUTLINE FOR THE FIRST SIX WEEKS OF THE COURSE

Lecture	General Principles of Communication	Deliverable
1	The communication model, context, audience	Written critique
2	The role of message/purpose	
3	The role of noise (including channel) and feedback	
	Effective Written Communication	
4	Academic writing	
5	Business writing	
6	Electronically-mediated business writing (EMBC)	Oral presentation
7-14	Effective Spoken Communication	
1-14	Summative assignment	Reflection paper

The section on General Principles of Communication covered the different components of the communication model framework. In Lecture 1, I introduced students to the first two components of the communication model: *context* and *audience*. The tutorial focused on

various scenarios which showed how a lack of analysis of both components resulted in ineffective communication. The second lecture focused on formulating a specific *purpose* or thesis. Effective communication is about getting the specific purpose of the communication across to the audience [24] and to do so, students need to have a clear thesis. The second tutorial thus focused on getting students to analyze scenarios using the context and audience components of the communication model, and formulating a thesis as to whether the communication was effective or ineffective. The third lecture focused on the *noise* (anything that distorts the clarity of the communication), *feedback* and *channel* (subsumed under noise) components. The common way to discuss *noise* is based on external and internal noise [5]. However, I chose to focus on four common types of noise I found in my students' communication (differences in perception, inappropriate analysis of a *context*, inappropriate choice of *channel* and intercultural misunderstandings) for a deeper and more focused discussion that the students could relate to. *Feedback* was not taught explicitly as it is difficult to take on the role of the receiver in many communication scenarios as each receiver has different profiles. *Feedback* was thus seen as a gauge with regard to the level of *noise* in the communication. For example, if the *feedback* received did not match the message sent at all, the *noise* level in the communication is considered high and vice versa. The tutorial included a sample of student writing in which the students had to analyze the writing using the communication model framework, formulate a thesis on its (in)effectiveness and rewrite it in groups. In order to impress on them the reader-centered nature of communication, the students had to list questions they had in their mind when they read the other groups' answers and share these questions in class.

The section on Effective Written Communication presented how the framework can be applied in academic writing, and EMBC. Academic writing and EMBC were chosen as the genres to be taught because the students will engage increasingly in academic writing in the course of their study and a majority of the students participate actively in student activities which require them to communicate with external business organizations. In Lecture 4, the students were taught to plan their writing in line with the *context, audience, purpose, channel* and characteristics of academic writing following [25]. If the students do not conform to these characteristics, the *noise* level in their essay will be high and the reader (the professor) will have difficulty understanding their writing (*feedback*). I also introduced them to the Aristotle and Toulmin forms of argument. The tutorial thus focused on identifying whether the expository and persuasive texts given were effective or ineffective using the communication model framework. In Lecture 5, I touched on the *context, audience, purposes* and *channel* of EMBC, including the characteristics of business writing following [6]. The tutorial touched on identifying the effectiveness of different business messages using the framework. In Lecture 6, I touched on three types of business messages which are commonly used in companies [6] – instant messaging, emails and corporate blogs. The students presented their critique orally on a corporate blog of their choice in tutorial six following the assignment guidelines (Figure 1). Each presentation was about five to seven minutes. The presentation was not graded. I provided each group with feedback after each presentation and gave them a general summary of things to take note of at the end of the tutorial. The students wrote their critique assignment using the same guidelines and submitted it in week 8. The deliverable for Lectures 1 – 6 was a 1000-word critique assignment written in groups of four to five students (the students chose their own group members). I had students write a critique assignment rather than an academic essay on a title of their choice because I only had six

weeks of lecture. Thus, I wanted the assignment to focus on two aspects: the students needed to use the framework as a basis for their argument, and their paragraphs must have the claim-evidence structure. It was easier to do so when the students had the same text to critique on so that they could focus on these two aspects rather than spend time researching on their topic, a skill which many of them were already familiar with in high school. The critique assignment was assessed following the guidelines in Figure 1 and marked for content, organization and language.

<p>In writing your essay, you should divide it into 3 sections: INTRODUCTION, BODY, and CONCLUSION:</p> <p>In the introduction, you should give an overview of your essay by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• stating clearly your overall assessment of your chosen text• summarizing or suggesting the main factors accounting for the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the text, in relation to the communication model framework. <p>In the body, you should</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• restate the main factors as your claims for each paragraph• provide specific evidence from the text in support of your claims• further elaborate on your assessment with a systematic discussion of your chosen text, in relation to the communication model framework <p>In the conclusion, you should re-iterate the main points of your essay and sum up what can be learnt from your analysis.</p>
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Fig 1. Guidelines for writing the critique.

The section on Effective Spoken Communication is elaborated briefly here as it is not the focus of this paper. This section uses the same communication model framework as the written component, and builds on skills learnt in the written component like audience-centered communication, having a clear thesis, and making evidence-based arguments. The students learnt about the *context, audience, purpose, channel, and noise* in making expository

and persuasive public speeches. These included topics on features of expository and persuasive speeches, analyzing the audience's needs, managing stage fright, articulation and projection, paralanguage, and non-verbal communication. The deliverable for this section was a three minutes individual oral presentation where students presented a prepared expository or persuasive speech on a topic of their own choice. This topic had to be aligned to their classmates' (the audience in the assignment instructions) interests.

The reflection paper was a 450-500 word individual assignment written at the end of the semester. It served as a summative and reflective piece of work. It required the students to elaborate on two main insights they have learnt from the course. In relating their personal communication experiences, they had to analyze what they felt went wrong in the communication, and how they could improve their communication in the future based on what they learnt in the course.

Process for Developing and Piloting the Written Component of the Course

The course developed over a period of four semesters. Two prominent changes made to the course were the time spent on teaching academic writing, and the focus on one type of EMBC that is, the corporate blog.

One prominent change made was the time spent on teaching academic writing. In the first two semesters that I taught the course, there was only one lecture on academic writing, and two lectures on business writing. The emphasis on business writing was because I felt that students were more familiar with academic writing than business writing. In the following

two semesters however, I revised the time spent on teaching these two genres. I received feedback from the students and fellow tutors that the course was too content-heavy and more elaboration on the academic writing component would be helpful to students in writing their critique. Thus, the lecture on academic writing was stretched to two weeks. The content for Lecture 4 remained the same while Lecture 5 focused on teaching students to revise their writing for *noise* specifically for weak claims, fallacies, irrelevant supporting ideas, and informal or personal writing style. These weaknesses were common problems that I saw in students' writing. The second change made was the decision to focus on just one type of business writing that is, the corporate blog. As the time spent on teaching EMBC has been shortened to one week, it made sense to teach just one type of business writing rather than three. The corporate blog was chosen as compared to email or instant messaging as it allows students to see for themselves how *noise* and *feedback* in the blog affected the effectiveness of the communication.

The following section provides a brief walk-through on Lecture 6 which is the focus of this teaching case.

A Brief Walk-through the Teaching of the Corporate Blog In Lecture 6, I showed them how to deconstruct corporate blogs using the communication model framework. I told them that the *context* in which business communication takes place is to develop relationships with customers. In addition, the *audience* in business communication is varied and yet specialized. The *purposes* of business communication are also varied, ranging from viral marketing to crisis management. Furthermore, there are various *channels* to convey business messages for example letters, and emails. The business messages in these channels however have common

characteristics, according to [6]. The messages are audience-centered (messages are expressed in terms of the customers' benefits), emphasize the positive (what the company can do rather than cannot do), credible, objective, courteous, and clear. Electronically-mediated business messages like corporate blogs are digitized and thus not only have multimedia capability but also have the advantage of being accessible anytime, anyplace. Business messages that do not match the *context*, *audience*, *purpose*, and characteristics of the *channel* are considered *noise* in the communication. A high level of noise in the communication reduces the quantity, and quality of *feedback* received.

I then went through with them two corporate blogs: one effective and the other ineffective. An example of the discussion for the effective corporate blog is given below. I showed the students a blog by a famous company. I highlighted to them that this was an effective corporate blog. One of the reasons is that the blog targeted a closed community (potential and current customers). Thus, the company had an *audience* broad enough to justify the effort in maintaining a corporate blog (there are users who are at various stages of familiarity with the company's wide range of software) but narrow enough to have common interests to continue posting in the blog. Information in the "about us" section further revealed the *context* for the communication between the company and its readers. The information revealed that the blog (physical context) was created because the company's software developers wanted to get to know the users of the products better, and to have a meaningful conversation with them (social and historical contexts). In addition, the developers were very excited about sharing what they knew with the users (psychological context) as they wanted the community (the customers) to participate with them in the development of future software (cultural context). The blog's tag-line reinforced the *purpose* of the blog as it stated that the developers wanted to talk about their work but listen to the users.

Furthermore, the blog fulfilled the characteristics of EMBC, thus reducing the level of *noise* in the blog. The information in the blog was *audience*-centred, catering to the readers' needs. For example, there were three forums that the readers could participate in – “coffeehouse” for technical novices, “tech off” and “coding4fun” for more technical readers, and site feedback for the readers to provide feedback regarding the blog. The postings were also categorized as “most recent”, “most viewed”, and “top” postings to cater to the readers' desire to read the latest and more popular posts. The blog also utilized the multimedia capability of a digitized *channel* by using videos rather than text to present the products. The use of videos to explain the features of the software greatly reduced the information load on readers. Furthermore, the readers could converse with the developers via a synchronous forum (twitter) or asynchronous forums like “coffeehouse”, and “tech off”. In addition, it was easy for readers to navigate to the information that interested them as all the columns and postings had short descriptive titles. The blog also managed to emphasize the positive. The company could deal with some readers' complaints professionally because the company had a clear posting policy. The postings in the blog were also credible because the readers knew that they were conversing with the actual developers of the products, who knew the products inside out. The developers also wrote their replies in a conversational and clear style, according to the level of technicality required in the forums the readers were posting in. All these efforts have garnered positive *feedback* from the readers as the number of new users increased every day, current discussion threads were growing with new postings and new discussion threads were being created. In summary, the corporate blog was an effective blog because the blog developers considered the *context, audience, purpose, and channel* of the communication, and this reduced *noise* in the communication and garnered them positive *feedback*.

Results The research question for this teaching case was: Does the communication model framework help students to write evidence-based arguments when evaluating the communicative effectiveness in corporate blogs? The following observations were taken from the students' "practice" critique, the critique assignment, reflection papers, and feedback during informal consultations with me or in class.

Observations from the students' practice critique: The students presented a critique orally on a corporate blog of their choice in week 7 following the assignment guidelines. Overall, the students' practice critique showed that though the uptake in using the framework varied between groups, the students were making the effort to use the framework in their critique. Some of the students were very diligent in going through the lecture slides and incorporating many keywords from the slides in their presentations. However, many of them were listing ideas following the components of the framework, and have not progressed to using the framework as the basis for their arguments. An evidence of this is reflected in their thesis. One group used three components of the framework as the claims to support their thesis that the blog was effective: The blog was effective because it used good *context* (claim 1), *purpose* (claim 2), and *channel* (claim 3). However, they did not realize that the claims overlapped each other because the context of the communication provided the rationale for the purpose of the message, and the channel chosen to communicate the message. Another group was better at forming their thesis: The blog was effective because it was purpose-specific (claim 1), user-friendly (claim 2), and credible (claim 3). The claims do not overlap and various components of the framework could be used as the basis for their argument.

Their presentations also show that they have not fully internalized the claim-data-reasoning structure in their argument. For example, even though they mentioned several categories of audience, they did not provide data (specific examples) from the blog itself. Instead, they just provided a plausible general explanation based on their assumptions. For some groups, specific examples were provided from the blog but they did not provide the reasoning to explain how the examples supported the claim. For example: “The blog was effective because the interface was suitable for the targeted audience (claim). The Disney blog used bright colours and cute pictures (evidence).” They did not explain how using bright colours and cute pictures attracted the attention of the intended audience who are parents and young children.

Furthermore, many of their critiques focused on the user-satisfaction aspects of the blog like the blog’s interactive features, and did not incorporate the characteristics of business communication. When I highlighted this at the end of the tutorial many groups mentioned that they were more familiar with personal blogs and thus chose to highlight features that were available in personal blogs. I mentioned that they have to incorporate the business communication aspect in their critique because the corporate blog is first and foremost a business message, and it being a digitized channel was an added advantage.

In summary, the students’ presentations show that they preferred to stick to what they were more familiar with rather than to attempt to use the framework as the basis of their arguments or to integrate the characteristics of business communication in their critique. This hesitance is understandable because in tutorials four and five, students mainly analyzed the given texts one component of the framework at a time, and were not required to structure their arguments following the assignment guidelines. Thus, this was their first attempt in aligning their ideas

to the assignment guidelines. Another possible reason for the varied uptake in using the framework could be because the presentations were informal, ungraded, and lasted only about 5 – 7 minutes per group. Thus, some of the students did not take the presentations seriously. The students appreciated the feedback after their presentations as they mentioned that now they knew what they should focus on when writing their critique. I also noticed many students taking notes as I gave them feedback as they knew that I was modeling to them how to structure their arguments for the critique assignment.

Observations from the Critique Assignment: The three groups that chose to critique the blog consisted of one mixed group (consisting of Singaporean and international students), one Singaporean group, and one international students group.

The critique by the mixed group had a clear thesis. There was also a strong attempt to justify their claims using relevant examples from the blog. However, their reasoning on how the evidence supported the claims made was unclear as they used complex sentence structures (to keep to the 1000 word limit), resulting in unclear links between phrases in the same sentence. There were also moderate expression and language issues in the critique which affected the clarity of their critique.

The critique from the Singaporean group did not have a clear thesis as their claims overlapped. The claims stated were: There was no continuity to the discussion in the blog, there were inadequate interactions on the blog, and there was noise in the blog which distracted the readers. Although the students did not use the components of the framework for their claims like what happened in the practice critique, their claims still overlapped. This

was because one of the reasons for the inadequate interactions in the blog (claim 2) was due to the lack of continuity in the discussion threads (claim 1), and the reason for the lack of continuity in the discussion was because the discussions did not meet the readers' interests or needs (claim 3). In addition, even though the evidence presented for each claim were relevant, there was a lack of logical development of ideas at the essay level because the evidence presented were repetitive. Their critique seems to reflect some form of work distribution among the group members where three members each wrote the claim and evidence for one point, and the other member edited the critique for language. The compiler/editor in the group however failed to revise for coherence as the critique lacked flow (did not tell a compelling story). There were also minor expression issues in the critique.

The critique from the international students group showed that they had a clear thesis. Their writing problems were more at the paragraph level where the link between ideas in the same paragraph were unclear. The authors made claims without providing the evidence to support the claims (in italics) such as "the blogger predominantly post products, *covering a myopic perspective of the products,*" and their reasoning was based on assumptions like "the blogger could have omitted certain reviews by other users." There were also moderate expression and language issues in the critique.

Overall, the students' critiques show that there was a stronger attempt by the mixed and international students groups to use the communication model framework as the basis for their arguments as compared to the Singaporean group, which concurs with [26]'s findings on how students' prior knowledge affects their adoption of new approaches to teaching writing. The framework did not however, help to improve the students' language proficiency (and it

was not meant to do so as it is mainly a heuristic). Feedback from a mixed group who came to see me for consultation on the critique assignment provided insight on the Singaporean students' hesitation to use the framework. The Singaporean students asked whether the framework was necessary for writing the critique. They mentioned that the assignment was similar to their "A" level General Paper as the arguments followed a claim-evidence structure. Hence, they felt that it was not necessary to use the framework. The international students on the other hand, have not taken the General Paper and appreciated having a structure to follow, and a framework to base their arguments on. I reminded them that General Paper essays were persuasive in nature while the course focused on arguments where readers are convinced regarding claims made solely based on the merits of the evidence presented [15]. Thus, the framework was introduced for them to use as the basis for their arguments. Another Singaporean student in the group mentioned that writing the critique required a lot of work. When I prompted him to explain what he meant, he mentioned that they had a lot of discussions within their group but they could not agree on who was right and who was wrong, and they came to see me because they wanted to know whether they were on the right track. I reassured them that a diversity of opinions is a good thing in academic writing as this meant that they were developing their reader-centered writing skills when replying to their group members' questions. I then explained again how they could use the framework as the basis of their arguments in the critique. A general observation across the groups also revealed that the Singaporean students were often the compiler in the groups as they were perceived to have a stronger command of the English language. However, they were not necessarily the leaders in their groups. This was because the international students in many groups were very proactive and committed in doing the assignment. This contrasts findings by [27] who mentioned that the students who had a stronger command of the

language became the natural leaders in most mixed group teams. The nature of the discussions might also have affected the richness of the discussions. The mixed and international student groups for example, held face-to-face discussions (as seen from the attendance log sheet) whereas the Singaporean group held online discussions.

Observations from the Reflection Papers: A majority of the students mentioned that one of the main things that they learnt from the course was the importance of being thesis-driven in their writing. They mentioned that being thesis driven helped them to write more coherently. An example of a reflection by an international student is shown below:

The theory is very useful in doing my minor in business. As in business subject, we students are required to be effectively write down our ideas in forms of essays. As before studying this module, my writing is so bad that I must take English Proficiency (*a remedial no-credit*) course, most probably because there is no organization in my style of writing. I tend to write “on the flow,” writing according what crosses my mind without organizing them carefully. But then, as I tried to implement this theory, the result is getting quite satisfying marks in my writing assignments. Before starting to write the essay, I plan what things that I write in the essay, using the thesis-driven essay method, giving sources of facts that stated in the essay, and details needed to support my statements. Being concise yet understandable, logical, and avoiding usage of contracted forms helped me a lot, giving me positive comments from my tutors.

With regard to EMBC, one student involved in maintaining the webpage of a private school during her vacation break mentioned that being aware about the characteristics of EMBC helped her to adopt a reader-centered attitude, and emphasize the positive in her communication with the webpage readers. Instead of just listing the facts about the private school on the webpage, she learnt that she had to use phrases that highlighted the readers' benefits if they enrolled in the school. In addition, even though the critique was on corporate blogs, a few students found the communication model framework useful in helping them to write emails, another common EMBC channel. One student mentioned that she became more confident in her role as Business Manager for the upcoming freshmen camp after learning about EMBC. She mentioned that before attending the lectures, she had difficulty crafting emails and unknowingly, the content she wrote often lacked clear topic sentences and were tampered with incoherent paragraphs. With the high level of noise, the recipients had a hard time deciphering her message. After learning about EMBC, she was now capable of crafting a well-structured and coherent email to sponsors, and was receiving more positive feedback from the sponsors.

The students' reflections seem to show that the communication model framework did help to provide students with a framework to plan their writing, particularly in making their writing thesis-driven. In addition, the framework helped some students to transfer their understanding of the characteristics of EMBC from corporate blogs to emails.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This section concludes the teaching case by describing the implications of this case to teaching and research, by examining the limitations of the framework, and by suggesting some ideas for future research.

Conclusions This teaching case hoped to address the lack of evidence-based argument in students' writing by providing students with the communication model framework to base their arguments on. I would like to offer a few recommendations for teaching evidence-based writing based on the observations of this study.

- The students' perception of what constitutes argument writing affected the adoption level of the framework in their critique. Thus, a stronger emphasis on the definition of argument writing, the differences between persuasive writing and argument writing, and how the framework provides students with a basis for their arguments must be made in the beginning of the course.
- The value of discussions within the group is priceless as it reinforces the dialogic nature of arguments, and writing. In addition, mixed groups seem to have richer and deeper discussions as the members come from different education backgrounds, and thus provide an authentic forum for students to realize the importance of being reader-centered, and to revise their writing to be more reader-centered. Face-to-face discussions also seem to be able to facilitate deeper discussions better as compared to online discussions.
- More time could be spent on getting students to practice using the claim-evidence paragraph structure in their arguments. The lectures on the framework could be

condensed to two weeks thus freeing up more time to elaborate on the Aristotle and Toulmin forms of argument, in relation to writing claim-evidence paragraphs. The tutorials on these two forms of argument could then start one week earlier and provide students with more practice and teacher feedback in writing claim-evidence paragraphs. Students will naturally want to stick to what they are already familiar with but with more practice in writing claim-evidence paragraphs using the framework, the possibility of students using the framework in their arguments will increase.

- It is important for students to reflect on their learning to enhance the possibility of transfer of learning to other courses, and areas of their life. In this course, the students were taught to apply the framework in academic writing, EMBC, and public speaking. The reflection paper assignment that students were required to submit at the end of the course “forced” students to stop and reflect on what they have learnt in this course in relation to their personal life. Without the reflection paper assignment, students might not realize the utility of the framework in other courses, and areas of their life. In short, once the course was over, the framework would also be erased from their memory.

Limitations I acknowledge that there are several limitations in this study. The communication model framework is a heuristic tool that helps students to engage in a dialogue with their readers when presenting their arguments. The framework does not profess to help students improve their language proficiency. In addition, the level of students’ adoption of the framework in the students’ written critique was influenced by group dynamics as it was a group assignment. The level of adoption could be different if it was an individual assignment. Furthermore, interaction with the students on their writing was quite

limited as each tutorial lasted only one hour per week. In addition, the students whose assignments I am reviewing for this case were students in my tutorial classes. This might have influenced what the students wrote in their reflection papers.

Suggestions for Future Research Going forward, more studies could be carried out on the use of the communication model framework to teach students the rhetorical complexities in other traditional and electronically-mediated genres, and how this understanding translates to more effective writing in the professional and technical communication landscape. Flexible frameworks like the communication model framework are important because genres are evolving, driven by needs not just in universities but also in the workplace. Corporate blogs for example, exemplify the “blurred boundaries, pluralized workplaces, hybrid identities and ... complex interactions between diverse local and global discourses” [28, p. 495]. With flexible frameworks like the communication model framework, writing teachers could teach students not only the mechanics of writing, but also renew students’ appreciation of academic writing as dialogic, and develop students’ global communicative competence. Global communicative competence consists of three layers: multicultural knowledge, competence in English and the writer’s business knowledge [29]. A consolidation of best practices, cases, and research in various multicultural contexts gleaned from such studies could be a rich resource for writing and communication teachers to refer to and build on, lending further import to the need for flexible frameworks in teaching students global communicative competence.

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