

EDITORIAL

## “Always a Work in Progress”: Enhancing Online Teaching and Learning and Developing Students’ Life Skills

CHNG Huang Hoon

Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, and  
Associate Provost (Undergraduate Education), National University of Singapore

Correspondence:

Name: Associate Professor CHNG Huang Hoon

Address: Office of the Senior Deputy President and Provost, National University of Singapore,  
21 Lower Kent Ridge Road, University Hall, Lee Kong Chian Wing, UHL #05-01D  
Singapore 119077.

Email: [pvochh@nus.edu.sg](mailto:pvochh@nus.edu.sg)

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## **“Always a Work in Progress”: Enhancing Online Teaching and Learning and Developing Students’ Life Skills**

I was in conversation with a colleague recently, and at one juncture, alluding to the improvements and refinements she continues to put into her courses, this colleague said, “it’s always a work in progress”! To that, I had responded that “we owe it to our students to do as much”, to keep on improving and refining our course offering.

Indeed, I believe that teaching is a craft that requires such constant attention and refinement. Our work, as educators, is truly never done! This work in progress also embodies the shift we are all making towards a scholarly approach to teaching and learning, and the papers we share on the [AJSOTL](#) platform exemplify this shift.

We are delighted to share six pieces in this volume of *AJSOTL*, which address two broad themes: namely online teaching and learning, and the teaching of life skills. We begin with two papers that address issues relating to quality enhancement in online teaching and learning, after which the remaining four papers on life skills follow.

Anyone who has been involved in technology-enhanced teaching and learning (as instructors or learners) will attest that teaching online requires changes to practice, including course design, approaches to assessment and feedback, and strategies for supporting students who often in this virtual environment are expected to work more independently. At this point in its development, there is much room for enhancement of the online experience that can add value to student learning. The first paper, by Maniclang and colleagues, is an evaluation of the effectiveness of improving the learning experience through enhancing webcasts with digital tagging. Maniclang *et al.* share their evaluation of the learner experience on the online network platform “Stand Alone Media” (SAM) and compares it with that on MedSpace in order to investigate if the additional affordances provided by SAM, such as digital tagging and learner navigation via keywords, will improve the learning experience. They report that the students recruited to test out the platforms gave top marks to SAM.

Many massive open online learning courses (or MOOCs) utilise peer grading, both as a logistical solution for big class sizes and importantly, also as a learning experience in itself for students, as they learn through reading and

grading other people's work. It is therefore important that grading protocols be provided to support these assessment and feedback processes. The second paper featured in this issue is "Improving peer grading accuracy in MOOCs: The effects of prior experience, time spent on grading, and training" by Nikan Sadehvandi, for a course offered through KyotoUx. As the title suggests, a number of variables were investigated for their effects on peer grading, and the findings suggest that the higher the course investment by peer graders (e.g. investment in the form of training, or familiarity with course materials; and *not* prior experience or amount of time spent grading), the more agreement among different peer graders (i.e. inter-rater agreement is high). This is an important insight, given that good assessment practices play a critical role in ensuring the quality of a course.

Harvard educationist Tony Wagner (2014) listed the following as the seven "survival skills" students need for the future—*critical thinking* and problem solving; collaboration across networks and leading by influence; agility and adaptability; initiative and entrepreneurship; *effective oral and written communication*; accessing and analysing information; curiosity and imagination. These are needed to address what he has identified as the "global achievement gap", referring to the absence of explicit training in these skills in most school curricula in spite of the recognition of their importance. Of these, critical thinking and communication are the direct focus in our second set of papers.

Lam, Mok and Gan's article "Enhancing undergraduate students' confidence in research and communication through integrated course design" focuses on both developing communication skills and the process of scientific inquiry, thus bringing together both the teaching and learning of communication skills *and* the principles of thinking in scientific research. This integrated approach to knowledge and skills development has been shown to raise the confidence level of students, both in terms of research and communication.

Staying with communication skills, the next paper by Fong Yoke Sim also focuses on (English) communication skills, of (international) graduate students in the context of an English communications course. The paper reports on determining their needs through a questionnaire designed and administered by the author. Through this study, Fong recommended more university/community support for international students and suggested the incorporation of specific aural-oral tasks, to help non-Singaporean learners who are less proficient in English.

As the title of the paper by Chiang and colleagues suggests—"Importance and impact of a longitudinal ethics, law, and professionalism curriculum on medical students' knowledge and professional attitudes" places the issue of ethics and professional attitudes at the centre of discussion. We cannot overemphasise the importance of developing ethics, professionalism, and empathy particularly in professions like law and medicine, and the need to prevent what the authors called, "ethical erosion". Attention to this set of issues in a longitudinal study is therefore crucial and timely, to say the least.

The final piece offered by Hwang Yun Hye provides an interesting perspective from a course on landscape design. The paper is entitled, "Site research in landscape design studios" and is a reflection on the important life skills of logical thinking and synthesis, in addition to the disciplinary knowledge associated with the architectural design studio. Students are taught to respond to site-specific issues, think through the development of the entire concept, and to bring relevant knowledge to bear on the challenges presented by the site in a holistic/synthesised way. In this course, students are trained in an *integrated* fashion to display both subject knowledge and skills, much like the integrated course design discussed in the earlier paper by Lam *et al.*

We thank the authors for sharing their work with us and with our readers. We hope that readers will enjoy this collection and will contribute to the developmental spirit of *AJSOTL*, through sharing their feedback and knowledge either with the authors and/or with us at *AJSOTL*. We can be reached at [ajsotl@nus.edu.sg](mailto:ajsotl@nus.edu.sg).

#### REFERENCE

Wagner, T. (2014), *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need, and What We Can Do About It*. New York: New York Basic Books.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHNG Huang Hoon is Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature and Associate Provost (Undergraduate Education) at the National University of Singapore. She is a member of *AJSOTL*'s Editorial Board. See more at: <http://cdtl.nus.edu.sg/ajsotl/people/chng-huang-hoon/index.html>.