

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE USING ICT

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาในระดับมหาวิทยาลัยมีวัตถุประสงค์หลักข้อหนึ่งคือ การผลิตบัณฑิตที่สามารถเป็นผู้นำชุมชน ผู้นำประเทศและผู้นำโลก ในยุคอินเทอร์เน็ตและโลกาภิวัตน์ในปัจจุบัน ทักษะ การพูดเชิงโวหารเป็นทักษะสำคัญที่มีอิทธิพลต่อความเห็นสาธารณะและกระตุ้นให้เกิดการกระทำทางสังคม ผู้นำจึงต้องมีความสามารถในการมีส่วนร่วมในการพูดสาธารณะที่มีประสิทธิภาพซึ่งหมายถึง การสื่อสารสาธารณะในเรื่องที่เกี่ยวข้องกับชุมชนและโลก ไม่ว่าจะเป็นผู้นำในวงการใด อาชีพใด รวมถึงผู้นำทางธุรกิจ บทความทางวิชาการนี้เสนอมุมมองที่เหมาะสมสำหรับการอภิปรายผ่านทางอินเทอร์เน็ตซึ่งรวมถึงระดับการมีส่วนร่วม การใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ การประนีประนอมหรือการรู้จักประมาณ (moderation) การนิเทศสาธารณะและอุปสรรคต่างๆ

Abstract

An important objective of university education is to produce graduates who will be leaders of a community, the nation, and the world. In today's era of the internet and globalisation, where discursive and rhetorical skills feature strongly in influencing public opinion and mobilising social action, a leader needs to possess the ability to participate effectively in public discourse, that is, communication in the public sphere that touches on the concerns of the community and the world. This is true for leaders across all disciplines and professions, business leaders included. This paper presents insights obtained from an initiative carried out at Universiti Putra Malaysia where the online discussion board or forum platform was used as a means to inculcate the skills of public discourse in English through the online media. Practical aspects for the implementation of an online forum project that include level of participation, use of English, moderation, public orientation, and affective barriers are also presented.

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INTRODUCTION

Ability to engage in public discourse has been regarded as an important skill possessed by leaders past and present. In today's era of the internet and globalisation, where discursive and rhetorical skills feature strongly in influencing public opinion and mobilising social action, a leader needs to possess the ability to participate effectively in public discourse, that is, communication in the public sphere that touches on the concerns of the community and the world. The skill to articulate words that can engage, convince, and move listeners to action have been the hallmark of great leaders, at least to the people or community led by them.

An important objective of higher education is to produce potential leaders of a community, a nation, or the world. To achieve this lofty ideal, universities must equip students with the requisite skills that will enable them to be groomed into leaders. Producing leaders who are able to effectively engage in public discourses should no longer be left to chance, or availability of inborn talent of students, but should involve concerted effort on the part of universities to provide appropriate training to cultivate such talent.

Public discourse encompasses any kind of spoken or written communication that engages members of a community around topics or issues that affect the world around them (see Sellers, 2003). The notion is closely related to Habermas' conception of the 'public sphere' where discussion on social and political issues by members of the public is seen to exert influence on public opinion which becomes a force to mobilise action (Fraser, 1990). Thus, public dis-

course, as a rhetorical act that shapes public opinion (see Hauser, 1998) is an important vehicle where citizen voices are heard and the seeds of social change are sown and nurtured. In many universities around the world, public discourse, whether in the oral or written mode is offered as a university level course. The ability to participate in public discourse is seen as an important part of citizenship education (Brammer & Wolter, 2008; Schattle, 2008) as well as an essential leadership skill.

This paper presents the insights and lessons learnt from a project that was carried out at Universiti Putra Malaysia where the online discussion board or forum platform was used as a means to inculcate the skills of public discourse in English through the online media in ESL (English as a second language) students.

THE ONLINE FORUM AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

In recent times, an emerging discursive space that has hosted much public discourse and which has exerted a tremendous influence in the public sphere is the internet. Online public discourses are able to reach the various levels of public, from local community to national and worldwide audiences. In Malaysia, in attesting to the power of discourses on the internet to influence public opinion and social action, the vice-chancellor of a local Malaysian university proposed that a course specifically to teach students how to blog 'ethically' and 'accurately' be offered at the university (see "UiTM sedia tawar", 2008).

While universities need not go to the

extent of offering a full-fledged course on blogging, I strongly believe that university students should be exposed to the use of the internet to engage in public discourse, whether at the local community or cross-national levels to learn the requisite skills a future leader must have. Participation in online discussions require ability to communicate and articulate one's views in the written mode. As such, the job of training students in the use of language and expression, as well as in the interactional discussion skills in a virtual community often falls on the shoulders of language teachers, particularly English language teachers, as most international forums use English as the language of participation. However, it is my contention that to make substantive gains in forging such skill as writing in English among students whose native language is not English, university lecturers across all disciplines should incorporate the element of an online discussion board in their respective courses to mandate articulation of ideas by students in the public sphere.

The project that has been implemented in Universiti Putra Malaysia since the year 2008 involves 3,500 students a year, participating in discussions on an online forum platform. The students registered in small groups whose discussions are moderated by course instructors and student leaders. The students learned very quickly that private writing, as well as writing that is only meant for the eyes of the examiner or lecturer, and public writing, require different attention and a different set of skills and attitudes. The online discussions students participate are expected to serve as training ground for them to acquire the necessary competencies to eventually become opin-

ion leaders and competent participants in global discourses.

Although this project was incorporated as an ICT component in an English writing course at the university, it was observed that many non-English based courses had started to include such initiatives as part of the course requirements.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN IMPLEMENTING AN ONLINE FORUM

When designing an online forum component for a course, there are several important considerations that should be taken into account, if the online forum is to be effective in fostering public discourse abilities among students.

When I presented the framework for the Universiti Putra Malaysia forum project in the International e-Learning Conference held in Bangkok in 2008, I was informed by several members of the audience that it was difficult to get their Thai students to participate in the online forums they had implemented in their respective universities, as the students were too shy to write in English. I would like to follow up on that conference presentation in this paper by sharing some insights related to aspects of implementation that instructors need to think through when initiating such a project.

Levels of Participation

The instructor has to decide on the level of participation that is targeted. Students of today are of the net generation that are all too familiar with the internet. Most of them have no problem using the internet for a

variety of purposes, especially for social networking and information exchange (see Figure 1). However, when it comes to serious discussion of ideas, where putting across one's ideas in a coherent stream of argument is required, many students fail miserably. Figure 1 below illustrates the levels of participation that online communication can take. At Universiti Putra Malaysia, we expect students to move beyond social chatting and the information exchange type of communication (Levels 1 and 2), towards the ability to discuss ideas with their peers and to respond appropriately to questions from forumers (Level 3).

All too often, online forums set up by instructors that are meant to foster active intellectual discussion regress into lower-order levels of participation. It is not uncommon for instructors to find their forums being used for the organising of social events instead of the assigned intellectual discussion on the ethics of stem cell research, for example.

Also, in terms of language output, instructors may find students writing one-sen-

tence questions and answers, in which case the objective of training students to write extended argumentation will have been defeated. Thus, any implementation of online forums should be carefully planned with appropriate mechanisms to ensure that participation by students remain at the targeted level.

Language of Participation

It must be recognized that to participate fully in discussions in the global arena, mastery of writing in the English language is a prerequisite. Public discourse that aims to achieve a greater 'reach' beyond local shores to international communities must necessarily use English as its language of communication. For students whose native language is not English, writing in English is a problem that restricts their participation in online discussions in the global communities. This does not mean, however, that they should not try to overcome this problem. Restricted or closed discussion groups within a campus environment provide a safe place

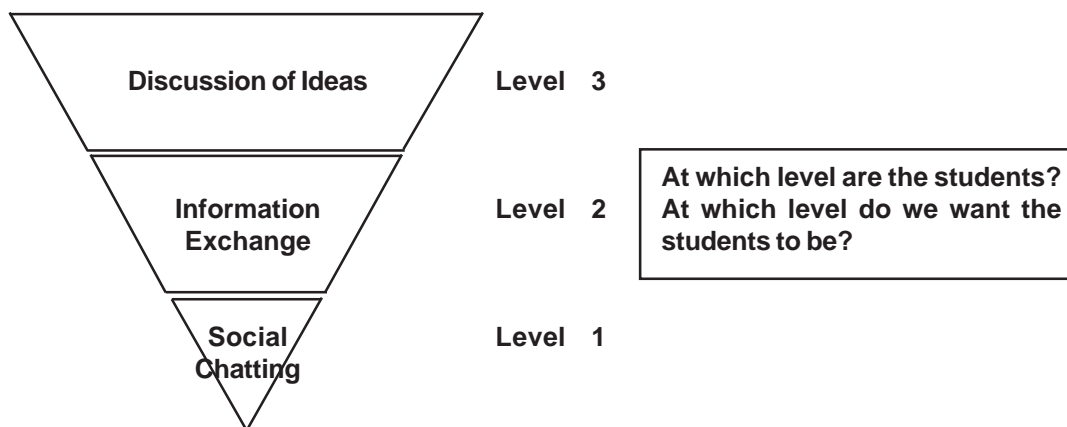


Figure 1: Online Communication: Levels of Participation

Source: Yap and Chan, 2009.

for students to practice public writing. When they are ready, they may be weaned into more open discussion groups. Thus, it is important that students begin their journey of online public writing using the language that will enable them to access trans-national public discourses in the long term. Online forums implemented in universities that aim to produce potential world-class leaders must consider making English the language of participation.

Moderation

All online forums with a learning objective must be moderated. Suffice it to say that no forum runs on auto-pilot. An instructor may find that none of his or her students are participating at all, or students are not participating at the required level. Rules of participation must be clearly spelt out and moderation tasks duly assigned either to instructors and selected students. Moderators should be provided with adequate training so that they are able to perform their job effectively. It is the job of moderators

not only to keep the discussion going at the targeted level of participation, but also to ensure that rules are adhered to, and to deal out ‘punishments’ such as warning, barring and banning when necessary. From my own experience, I have found there were sometimes hackers or intruders who entered the discussion groups purely with the intention of promoting their illegal wares such as pornographic materials and drugs. This is a very serious problem that calls for vigilance on the part of the IT security officers, the moderators and the students themselves. Students have to be taught how to flag and report inappropriate materials posted in the forums. Above all, moderators must motivate students to participate, facilitate interactions between forumers by sometimes playing the devil’s advocate, and give encouraging comments to students’ attempts to communicate.

Public orientation

In the spirit of public discourse, an online forum that aims to foster public discourse

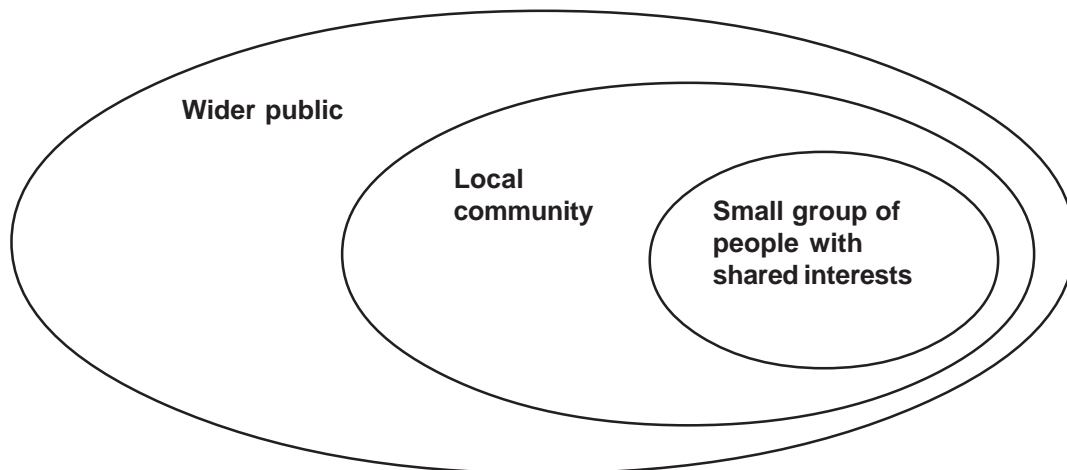


Figure 2: Example: Levels of Public Orientation

skills must attempt to engage students on issues of public importance. This means that the issues thrown in for discussion in the forum should be carefully planned such that it encourages the highest level of public debate. It is clarified, however, that there are various levels of 'public', in the sense that any group of people with shared interests can be broadly regarded as 'community' or 'public'.

Thus, instructors must decide at which level of 'public' their students are ready for and provide the level of public orientation of issues that are appropriate for the students. For example, a topic such as 'the economy of long-distance dating' may not be a topic of national importance, but is relevant to many university students whose sweethearts are far away in their hometowns. What instructors should be looking out for is that discussions do not regress into the purely personal and expressive domain. In public discourse, we encourage reasoned arguments with a view to engaging with the community, for the benefit of all (see Flower, 2008; Mathieu, 2005).

AFFECTIVE BARRIERS

Instructors need to understand that public writing is not an easy task for students to do. Apart from the technical skills of writing and mastery of the English language, there are affective or emotional factors that pose as barriers to participation. This includes apprehension towards writing, inability to accept criticism or comments from peers, having one's writing and ideas judged by the public, lack of confidence in expressing one's ideas in English, and so forth. While

instructors should be sympathetic towards their students, they should be aware that participation itself is the best cure for fear of participation. Sometimes, throwing students into the deep end works well in helping them overcome their fears and take the first step into the world of public discourse.

For example, Figure 2 below shows the feedback from a student in my writing class who reported making progress in aspects of the affective domain such as confidence to participate, love of writing, and ease of interaction with peers, despite her apparent lack of proficiency in the English language. Similarly, gains in confidence to write in English are exemplified by the feedback given by another student after one semester of participation in the online forum (Figure 3), who stated: "The most wonderful thing is that I wrote them all in totally and fully in 'English' !! I never did any forum like this before".

These examples show clearly that lack of English proficiency should not be a reason for not participating, as the gains made in the affective domain and the motivation to communicate may yet provide the impetus for these students to improve in their use of English.

CONCLUSION

Public discourse skills are essential skills for a leader. Regardless of disciplinary and professional orientation, universities must make concerted effort to inculcate such skills in their students who are the future leaders of the nation and the world. In teaching students to communicate in the public sphere using the online forum, universities are in

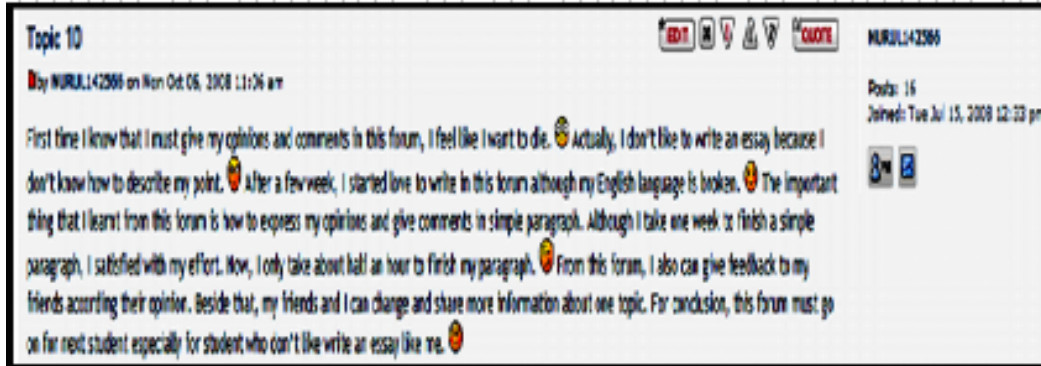


Figure 3: A Student's Feedback
Source: Chan and Yap, 2008a.

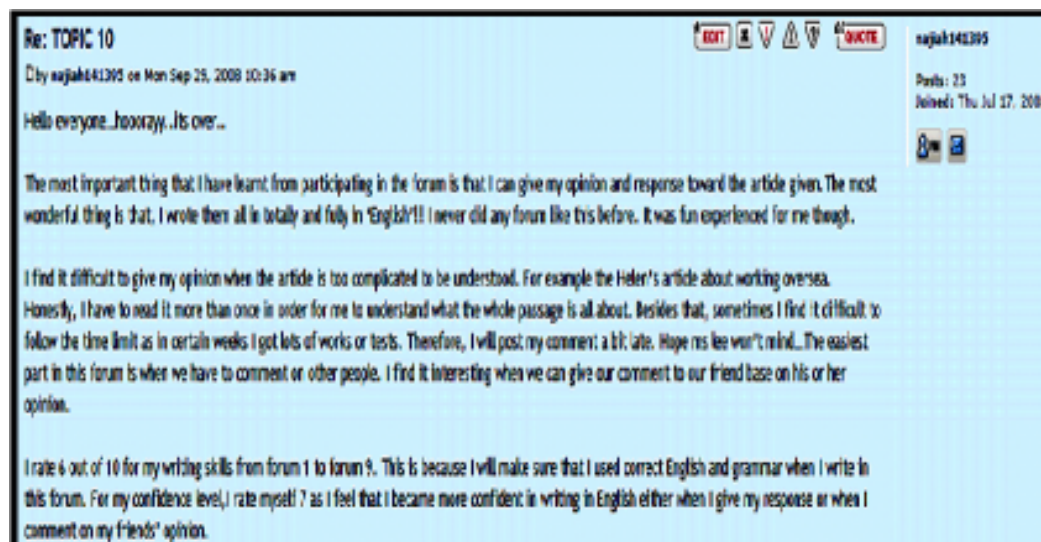


Figure 4: A Student's Feedback
Source: Chan and Yap, 2008b.

essence providing their students with the knowledge and skill to harness the use of the ICT as a powerful medium of public discourse. Finally, it is hoped that more university lecturers will take up the challenge of training students in the skill of public discourse regardless of the field of expertise, as leadership is honed across all areas of knowledge.

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