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Enhancing lifelong learning skills in higher education: A cautionary tale

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Increasingly, universities and institutions of higher learning around the world are pressured to respond to global and rapid changes in the world of work as well as education policy initiatives to develop lifelong learning competencies in their students. In Singapore, for instance, the launch of Skillsfuture, a national policy initiative to encourage and support Singaporeans to “continually striving towards greater excellence through knowledge, application and experience” (Government of Singapore, 2017) throughout life, has called for local higher education institutions to review and re-examine their curricula and pedagogy with a view to equipping their learners with skills and dispositions to participate in a learning society.

This paper documents our journey as educators in reflective practice to redesign an undergraduate course in science communication to support the development of students as lifelong learners, and our critical reflection on our professional development through this opportunity and process of course redesign. Lifelong learning, as operationalized in our course, is learning that puts a strong emphasis on the intrinsic rather than the instrumental value of education; that engenders a shift in emphasis from learning substance to learning process, from teaching to learning, and from supply to demand in educational provisions; and that nurtures a critical thinking disposition in learners (Aspin & Chapman, 2000; Kehm, 2001).

Beginning from a description of the salient features of the revised curriculum, we will show how the design features of the revised module ES1541 “Exploring Science Communication through Popular Science” support an inductive, inquiry-based and reflective approach to learning the appeals, moves, explanatory techniques and evaluative language use features of communicating science to the public (Sawatdeenarunat, 2017).

Drawing on findings from our analysis of cohort feedback on the module and textual analyses of students’ writing, we will then present a critical evaluation of the course, showing how students perceived the course to engage them highly in both learning and the composing process, valued the transferability of their learning, as well as encountered tensions and challenges in learning science communication using a learner-centred, rhetorical approach (Tang & Sawatdeenarunat, 2017, 2018). Such tensions and challenges related to students’ perceptions of prescriptivism in teaching as well as observed difficulties of their engagement with critical-reflective thinking and writing. We argue that these tensions and challenges draw attention to significant implications for the success of efforts at curricular reform to support lifelong learning as well as the role of continuing teacher development in delivering such efforts. More ambitiously, we would argue the need for a discourse-intensive pedagogy to support educators in teaching for lifelong learning.

We will conclude our paper with a discussion of these implications. In particular, we will suggest that (1) resistance from both students *and* instructors toward lifelong learning dispositions needs to be carefully examined; (2) there may be a need to inquire into the dynamics of teacher-student interaction in the practical realities of the classroom to see how instructors engender a classroom culture that meaningfully supports active learning and engagement; (3) educators may benefit from a discourse-intensive reflective practice or professional intervention to build capacity in educating students to be lifelong learners.

Keywords

Lifelong learning; curricular reform; reflective practice; teacher development

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