

Perceptions of Hong Kong Students: Usefulness of Current Social Issue Course in Improving Writing Skills

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Abstract—A study was done to determine the usefulness of a Shue Yan Hongkong university course in improving the written communication skills of students. The level of difficulty and preference for the course was also evaluated. The results of a four year study showed that even though the % of students who found the course (moderately useful) neither useful or non-useful (45%) was almost the same as those who did not find it to be so (55%), a large % (70%) would recommend the course to future students. Students realize the importance of the course in their future careers and jobs. The authors recommended the adoption of certain changes in the course content as well as its delivery to develop more student motivation and interest to assist in the attainment of their major objective in the course which is to improve the writing skills of the students. Since the students found the Current Social Issue course to be understandable and relevant to their experiences, the course will continue to be in the curriculum for Mass Communication and Journalism students.

Keywords—Improvement of Writing skills, Current Social Issues, Journalism Curriculum, Mass Communication curriculum.

I. INTRODUCTION

RECENTLY, there has been a substantial increase in the number of university graduates in Hongkong contributing favorably to its competitiveness (So,2012). According to Chao (2013) about 60% are from post-secondary graduates . Owing to the increasing attractiveness of Hongkong universities to international students, locals are experiencing difficulty in being admitted (Yeung,2013). The noticeable decline in the performance of these students in the language skills in both English and Chinese paved the way for a study done to determine if one of the courses, namely “Current Social Issue” is useful in improving the essay writing skills of Mass Communication and Journalism students. Furthermore, it is also known that oral and written communication skills are critical requirements for employability of college graduates. Hence, the importance of good writing skills cannot be overemphasized. There is a need to examine if one of the main course objectives , that of improving written communication

skills is attained from the viewpoint of students who took the course.

In 2009,the Hongkong government has introduced Liberal Studies as a general education course in the New Secondary Curriculum to enhance independent thinking and ability of students to cope with rapidly changing social concerns (Douglass et al,2012). This is in line with the needed periodic review and updating of teaching pedagogy and curricular content to meet these challenges.

Present day students are exposed to varied technologies which are very useful for developing their cognitive, psychomotor and affective skills. Some researchers have hesitations about the benefits derived from the use of digital, electronic devices in the classroom (Lam and Tong, 2012). For beginners, there are available training programs for writing multi-paragraph essays (Schaffer, 2014). These aids should be availed of because they are very useful in developing successfully writing skills of students Overtuf (2014). Many other techniques and guidelines are suggested towards improving students’ writing skills like creating an outline, being specific in the written ideas, reviewing vocabulary and practicing with given feedback (Kerr, 2013).

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE CURRENT SOCIAL ISSUE COURSE

Freshmen university students in Hongkong Shue Yan University taking Mass Communication or Journalism enroll in a “Current Social Issue “ an elective course in the curriculum . Twenty-five to forty students are in a class for a semester covering less than five months. The class meets for a total of fifteen weeks with three sessions per month with each class lasting for fifty –five minutes. The course credit is three units. The essay writing skills of the students are developed in relation to the current social issues on politics, economics, culture, housing, education, youth crimes in Hongkong and Mainland China which are being discussed in class. After the 5th ,10th, and 15th session/lesson, the students hold a seminar where they share their learning outputs/outcomes.

The researcher has taught the course for four years. The students are required to turn in individually an essay weekly until the midterms. During the midterms and final quarters, students work on research group projects which they write about and submit afterwards by uploading to a specific verification scanning software. If the essay does not pass the

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verification system, it is returned to the student for revision/improvement and re-submission. The research paper is written following Chinese Essay or APA (American Psychological Association) format.

One of the major aims of the course is to develop the written communication skills of the students. This research was conceptualized to assess if the course is meeting its objective of training students to write good essays.

III. METHOD

Survey questionnaires were distributed to the respondents to obtain data. Subsequent interviews were done to validate the responses given in the questionnaires. The study was conducted by the teacher researcher who has been handling the course for four years so he was able to do the study yearly involving all freshmen students enrolled in the course. The survey determined the usefulness of the course in improving the writing skills of the students as well as the students preference for the course, and whether they would recommend it or not to succeeding Mass Communication or Journalism freshmen students. A rating scale containing five scales was utilized in all the assessments. The data was organized into pie charts and analyzed.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were more female undergraduate respondents than males. The ratio was 5:3. Some 25% of the respondents were History majors. The return rate of the questionnaires was 80% which was relatively high.

Seventy percent (70%) of the respondents reported the course to be moderately difficult (Fig. 1) The perceived moderate level of difficulty can be due to the kind of topics covered in the course. Being current social issues, students experienced some of these issues and therefore they could relate to them so the ideas they incorporated in their essays came from their own understanding and appreciation of the concepts involved. Their difficulty in the actual writing like adherence to proper vocabulary, organization of ideas, punctuation addressed by more guided practice on essay writing with constant constructive feedback from teachers about the quality of their written work. Teachers' support in monitoring student progress is necessary to sustain the interest of students to keep on writing. As the saying goes "Practice makes perfect". An author on writing says "There is no good writing, only good re-writing". This tells us that we must encourage students not to loose hope and patience if the first initial essays are full of corrections by the teacher. Instead they should strive to keep on writing and improving their re-written work. Initial negative comments from the teachers are corrective measures to remind students not to commit the same errors the next time around.

Student capacities and abilities to learn differ widely hence the teachers must accommodate students who take more time to learn than others. They can resort to various teaching strategies to assist students develop their maximum potential in

writing essays. Allowing the students to reflect on their mistakes and the necessary corrections might lead to more lasting and lifelong learning for the students.

The perceived usefulness of the course in improving writing skills of the students needs to be changed towards more usefulness. Figure 2 shows the significant % of students who reported non-usefulness of the course (35%) which is about the same as those who found it to be neither useful or non-useful (40%). The result is not encouraging and in this regard some changes in the course content and instructional strategies must be adopted to increase usefulness of the course. Students can be exposed to more interactions and discussions with their classmates to have avenues for sharing their learning experiences which will enrich the development of their writing prowess. This will provide stronger support for its inclusion in the curriculum and attract more students to take the course as an elective. The results of the students' preference for the course given in Figure 3 is the same as the results on perceived usefulness of the course in Figure 2. The results reinforce each other. The low usefulness of the course yields low preference for the course.

However, despite the low perceived usefulness and low preference for the course, the students who took the Current Social Issue course will recommend it to future freshmen in Journalism or Mass Communication (Fig. 4). Apparently, the students realize the significance of this course in their future careers and they would like incoming students to benefit from the knowledge gained in this course.

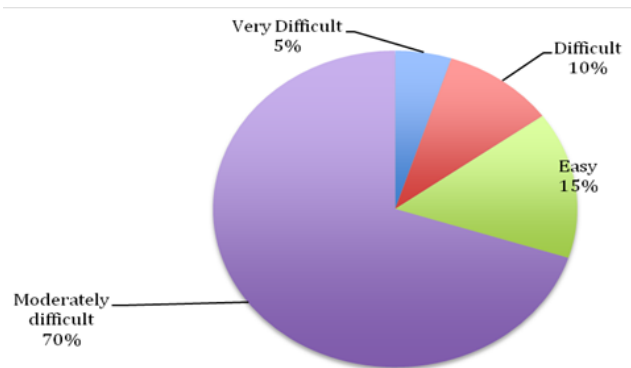


Fig.1 Level of difficulty of Current Social Issue Course

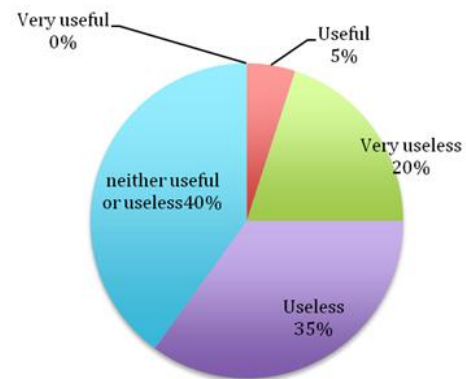


Fig. 2 Usefulness of course in improving students' ability in writing essays

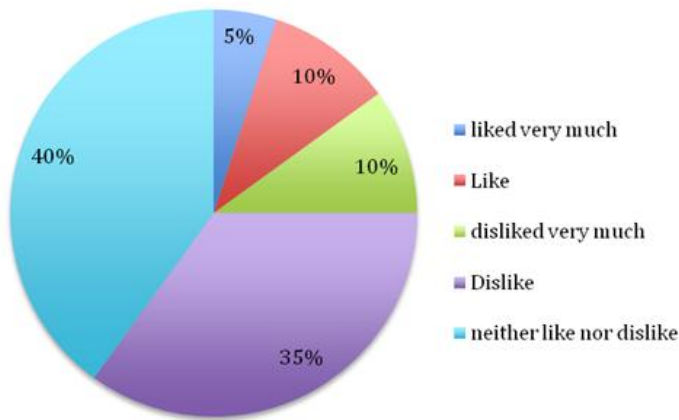


Fig. 3 Preference of the students for current social issue course

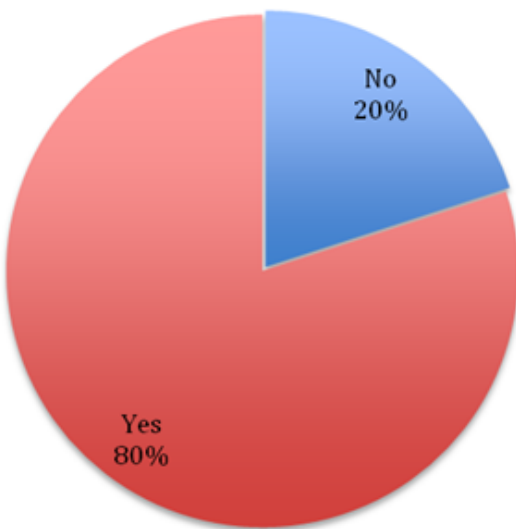


Fig. 4 Students' response as to whether they will recommend the course to future students or not

V. CONCLUSION

Even though the Current Social Issue course was not found to have a high usefulness in improving the students' writing essay competency and students did not overwhelmingly prefer the course, a large % (80%) will recommend that future students take the course. This will necessitate changes to improve course content and delivery to better address a critical need of students who will soon join the labor force and compete in the job market.

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