

## **Curriculum and Pedagogy**

### **Course**

**News Writing and Feature Writing**, taught at the  
Communication Programme, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia

### **Lecturer**

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Teaching a writing subject is both fascinating and challenging. It is fascinating because the lecturer can engage with various ideas coming from students with different background and interests. It is also challenging to teach a subject that requires a lot of writing skills and other communication-related skills such as thinking skills. Students who are not well versed in the language used in the writing class might be left behind. In my Newswriting and Feature Writing course, it is even more challenging when half of the carry marks are given only when students get two of their articles published in the national Malaysian newspapers!

The aim of the course is to familiarize students with news and feature writing. Newswriting is taught without compulsory publishing. For feature writing, however, it is compulsory for students to get their feature stories published either in English language newspapers in Malaysia, or in the Malay (native language) newspapers. In my class, most of the students chose the latter, with very few students able to get their works published in English. Although attempts are made, it seems the quality is not on a par with national

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newspaper writing. Those published in Malay language newspapers are able to publish in either the Letter to the Editor segment, or the Feature segment. For English newspapers, it is mainly in the Letter to the Editor section.

The main outcome of the course is to produce students who are able to write news and features at the national level as sought by the newspaper industry. It is a gap in the journalism industry and the academy that demands students achieve such accomplishments in writing, as there are so many aspects in newsrooms that are complex and unable to be explained and taught during their studies. At least, for now, I am trying to ensure the quality of students' writing is already at a certain level when they graduate. One of the notable journalists in Malaysia even said, "So it is difficult to get good carry marks in your class!" when I explained the necessity for students to publish in Malaysian national newspapers in order to get 40 percent of the carry marks.

But many of my students are able to get their works published. The most recent academic semester to offer this course demonstrates that with about 150 letters and features published in our local newspapers. Of a total of 170 students, some published more than one. So I told my students, it is not impossible to get their work published, although it seems too tough when I tell them about the requirement of the course.

Besides that, the course also aims to produce students who are able to critique and express their views based on critical thinking and critical writing. Writing a letter to a newspaper at a national level requires not only basic writing and journalistic skills, but also the ability to write persuasively and succinctly. As for journalistic skills, students must be able to produce a letter that is on a timely issue. Here, newsworthiness considerations become an integral part of the early process of choosing 'what topic to write about'.

Then, it comes to understanding an issue, reading about the issue and thus deciding what to respond to on the particular issue. Usually, a good letter explains one point only in-depth. The point is usually 'the main recommendation' or the main subject matter being discussed. Giving too many points is meaningless as it affects the clarity of the work due

to the word limit. Usually, most newspapers encourage letters to be below 300 words.

Students are rewarded by having the opportunity to explain how they got their letters/feature published before the lecture commences every week. Most students share the unexpectedness of it; most are very hopeful that the work will be published, while some share how long they need to wait to have their work in the newspaper. In one case, the longest a student had to wait to get a feature published was up to a month.

As a writer myself, I have always encouraged my students to keep writing, although most of them in the first class, admitted that they are not passionate in the act of writing. However, I explained the importance of writing as a tool for promoting ideas and frankly, to promote themselves in the process by giving a good impression to future employers. I also write to promote ideas, to suggest and to share experience with the readers. This, to me, suggests to my students that I am not the kind of lecturer who only requests students to do something, without doing the same themselves.

Thus, I hope that this space is a suitable place for me to include the works of my students. Unfortunately I am only able to include one (Need for Soft Skills to Succeed by Siti Fatimah Jaludin), as there are few works in English. The rest are my own letters, published by the New Straits Times, the oldest newspaper in Malaysia.

From here, I feel that this would inspire other journalism students to write and try to get their feature stories published. As a first step, write in your own mother tongue if that helps to boost your courage. Later, try to write in the second or third language that you know, in order to sharpen your command of the language, and to nationalize and internationalize your ideas and experiences.

Before I end this preface, I would like to thank Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, for being supportive to my students who are very keen to get their letters into the media. To the students, nothing is impossible once we have the

techniques and mechanics of doing things. Do not let the scepticism keep you under your own shelf!

### **Published letter by a student**

#### **Need for soft skills to succeed**

**By: Siti Fatimah Jaludin**

Published in The Star, March 24, 2014.

I REFER to the letter "String of A's alone won't help" (The Star, March 19) in which the writer said that scoring A's did not ensure a successful career.

The Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) results were announced last Thursday and we should congratulate all the candidates for doing their best.

Getting impeccable results in any examination is a dream of every student at any level, whether in primary school, secondary school or university.

However, the recent SPM results showed that only small number of students got straight A's while others got mediocre results.

One local newspaper reported that 13,970 students got straight A's or 2.97% of the 470,395 students who sat for the SPM.

Some may judge the intelligence of a student based on the quantity of A's obtained in the SPM.

On this, I ask this question: what is the quality of the students that obtained straight A's?

Earning straight A's is not an easy task.

It may be a guarantee of a scholarship or a place in an institution of higher learning, but it will not be enough to ensure an excellent career in life.

My experience studying at the Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM) made me realise that in order to be successful in life one needed to have soft skills, like creative thinking, communication skills, leadership qualities and a positive attitude.

If we are looking for a job these days, employers prefer candidates with soft skills besides the required academic results.

In other words, we will have a better opportunity of being hired if we are able to show proof that we are equipped with soft skills.

Even if you receive results that are not up to your expectation, stay positive and move forward. This is just a challenge for us.

Do not worry, since your journey starts when we move forward.

Cherish your time and take up the challenge!

From the Islamic perspective, Islam teaches us not to give up when failure occurs and always pray to be better.

Failing only means the closing of one door but the opening of a thousand others.

The Quran states: “So, do not weaken and do not grieve, and you will be superior if you are true believers”.

This verse simply shows that we need to be strong and strive hard to achieve our goals.

Let us take charge of our lives by equipping ourselves with soft skills to boost our chance of being successful in our careers and in life.

**Published letters by the lecturer of the course**

**Knowing English can clear misconceptions about religion**

**By: Dr Siti Suriani Othman**

Published in the New Straits Times, November 17, 2014.

I REFER to the letter “If we resist English, we’ll face problems abroad” (NST, Nov 14). The main point that we have to understand is, it is always good to learn more than one language, and it is great to master that lingua franca.

It is true that there are still many of us who cannot speak and write English. When I was in the United Kingdom, people from Libya said that our English was good but it is a weak step to compare ourselves with countries that do not include English in their mainstream education.

If we want to be better, we have to compare ourselves with something that is much better than us.

When I was in Sweden and Denmark, they spoke excellent English, even though they have their own native language.

It indirectly makes tourists feel welcome when they communicate with us.

I have difficulty finding food when visiting countries where the people cannot speak English.

Although this is just a small point from a tourism perspective, the broader message is on the importance of mastering a language: that easy flow of communication makes life easier and smoother.

The same goes for our fresh graduates and, to a larger extent, the act of understanding complex matters.

Through English, which is spoken and understood by many people all over the world, we can correct misconceptions and misunderstandings related to important matters, including religion.

While Islam is one of the religions feared in the West, it calls for all religious scholars to explain the religion in a

widely comprehensible language and in a way that is easy to understand.

However, if this group does not speak English, that would make it difficult for us to correct mistakes and misunderstandings at the international level, because we ourselves are unable to express points and unable elaborate them succinctly.

### **'Wasatiyyah': Moderation key to better living**

**By: Dr Siti Suriani Othman**

Published in the New Straits Times, May 7, 2014

IREFER to the letter "Staying healthy: There's a time for everything" (NST, April 18). It is clear that today, most of us are leading hectic lives due to demanding needs, such as home and work. These often lead people to overdo their jobs and, in some cases, overeat because, for some, eating is comforting.

As suggested in the letter, albeit the busy life, we have to ensure quality time with the family, especially those with young children. Quality time is essential for the development of our young ones. Family bond cannot be bought with money, gained through time sacrificed over work. So moderation should be the key to guide one's lifestyle.

In Islam, moderation is an integral part of a Muslim's routine. The term wasatiyyah is derived from the Arabic word wasat, which means middle, fair, just, moderate, milieu and setting. Another term to show moderation is iktidaal, which can be literally translated as "middle way between extremes" and "upright without losing balance".

Obviously, overdoing something is devastating. One who is successful at work, but abandons the family, will soon realise the meaning of being balanced. One who overuses the body will grow older faster.

The concept of wasatiyyah is so important that Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a well-known Islamic scholar, sees the concept as "a complete and comprehensive understanding of

Islam, which is characterised as being a creed and a way, knowledge and action, worship and interaction, culture and character, truth and strength, an invitation and political engagement, religion and reality, civilisation and a nation".

Academic discussions are needed at both national and international levels to discuss wasatiyyah in depth and how it can become the path of a better living and harmonious nation.

### **Stroke: Family Care, Support Are Pivotal**

**By: Dr Siti Suriani Othman**

Published in the New Straits Times, August 5, 2014

IREFER to the letter "Stroke: Imminent public health burden" (NST, July 17). It is scary to know the increasing statistics, and how a healthy person suddenly finds that he is not able to do much anymore the next day.

To the public, stroke patients are a burden as it costs thousands of ringgit to rehabilitate them.

But from the view of a family member, I see this as a challenge to respond accordingly if a family member suddenly suffers a stroke.

The American Stroke Association website states the factors of strokes that can't be changed and those that can be treated.

On those that can't be changed, family history should remind the next generation to be ready with any possibilities of a stroke attack. Age is another factor. Those more than 55 years old must live a healthier life with less stress. In addition, women are more prone to strokes that kill than men.

On factors that can be changed, lifestyle is the major factor. Inactivity, smoking and bad diet can lead to strokes.

High-blood pressure is the most common reason.

But, all these can be treated if one has regular medical check-ups, diets and exercises.



With an understanding of some of the factors of strokes, family members must start to take care of themselves and each other.

Reminding one another on the level of blood pressure and its consequences can help reduce the risk of stroke.

For families which already have a stroke victim, each family member's support is pivotal. It can be in the form of mental support, energy and in kind.

Take the challenge as a way to gain rewards from God if one aims to be a good son or daughter. The status of parents is clearly explained in many verses in the Quran.

It was narrated from Mu'awiyah Jahimah As-Sulami, that Jahimah came to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and said, "O Messenger of Allah! I want to go out and fight (in Jihad) and I have come to ask your advice."

He said, "Do you have a mother?" Jahimah said "yes".

Muhammad responded, "Then stay with her, for Paradise is beneath her feet."

This shows the importance of serving the parents among Muslims, and if it is done, the greatest reward of Jannah (paradise) is promised by God.

### **Trust: Violation of An Islamic Principle**

**By: Dr Siti Suriani Othman**

Published in the New Straits Times, July 12, 2014

READING reports on the alleged burglary and sex assault by a Malaysian diplomat in New Zealand was devastating.

Media all over the world are reporting this. This incident, especially involving a Muslim, is a violation of one of the most basic principles in Islam, which is *amanah* (trust or trustworthiness).

Diplomats should hold on to this principle more strictly as their acts not only affects themselves, but also tarnishes the image of the country and religion.

In Islam, the concept of *amanah* is not just paying lip service to it but is something that should come from the heart. The status and importance of *amanah* among Muslims is stated in the Sahihs of al-Bukhari and Muslim.

In the Musnad of Ahmad, there is a narration from Saidina Huzaifah saying that, Prophet Muhammad had told us about two things. One of these we have already witnessed with our own eyes. The unfolding of the other is still awaited. The first thing was that, “First of all, *amanah* was sent down into the hearts of the men of faith. Then, the Quran was revealed and the people of faith acquired knowledge from the Quran and practise from the Sunnah.”

It is important for Muslims to fulfil the obligations and duties that give pride to the doer, religion and country.

It has long been accepted by scholars that *amanah* includes everything one is entrusted with by the syariah, from obligations and prohibitions, and every state of life which relates to this world or the hereafter.

An *amanah* worker will always remember that any wrongdoing will reduce his own reward and affect the judgment in the hereafter. Muslims should go back to basics — remember that we live in a temporary world but will live forever in the hereafter.

### **Compulsory education a timely move**

**By: Dr Siti Suriani Othman**

Published in the New Straits Times, October 9, 2014

I REFER to the editorial “Values and the Rule of Law” (NST, Oct 3). It is true that parenting is a pivotal skill to all of us, but sadly, we see some who still feel that parenting is just about “having the kids” rather than “educating the kids”.

This must be made legal, with enforcement of laws, as the Education Act 1966 (Act 550) (Amended 2002) made six years of primary education compulsory for all children aged 6-12.

But what happens after that? If parents do not care, or cannot afford it, can their children continue living with only six or seven years of formal education?

It was recently reported that the authorities will make secondary education compulsory by next year. This is timely because many western countries have made it compulsory for more than a 100 years. Therefore, the process must be expedited. Once it is legal, all parents must be educated as well on the values of education. I have seen cases where parents appear not to care if their children become dropouts.

It's a pity because children are fast learners. It is the "culture and environment of learning" and "meaning of education" that must be instilled in them. Even gifted children, if not managed well, can become dropouts.

Education is a fundamental human right which is one of the five economic, social and cultural rights stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This right, which is Article 26 in the UDHR, states that everyone has the right to free and compulsory education, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages.

Education is one of the fundamental elements in parenting. "Growing physically" means dying (later), but "educating" is lifelong, as knowledge never dies.

### **Unity: Creating, sustaining unifying forces for good**

**By: Dr Siti Suriani Othman**

Published in the New Straits Times, April 21, 2014

IREFER to the letter "Back to Basics: Unity begins at home" (NST, April 16). If this point is taken academically, it echoes the idea of what society is all about as advocated by French sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904).

In the theory of imitation, Tarde argued that society, which comprises individuals, easily imitate what is close to them, such as parents and family members, and later, more authoritative individuals, such as early education teachers.

In the context of Malaysia, if we follow this simple yet effective way of building society, we are actually creating one the way we want it to be. Our society now, in terms of unity, is that our attitudes have never been innovative, but rather "following" what has been done by others.

Similarly, this is how Tarde observes "society", where people have the tendency to follow others, than "see" and then "invent" for better results.

So, let's use this simple way of imitating others to "create" unity among the society. As individuals like to follow other people, parents, family members and teachers are the first group that would help in creating unity within our multicultural society.

The general rule of thumb is that, the more exposure we have about other cultures, the better acceptance we would have on the cultures.

Based on my experience while studying in Nottingham, the UK, for four years (Nottingham has a multiracial community), speaking with the English who live in multicultural areas, most of them appreciate such heterogeneity.

On the other hand, those who have never lived with people of other cultures usually regard such areas as unsafe and unsuitable for living.

While to some extent, in the context of the UK, safety might be an issue, but what we can learn from here is the fact that cherishing different cultures would require a certain level of exposure. Exposure can be in the form of storytelling by parents to children and advice on the types of books children should read.

Cartoons about cultural difference and cultural awareness are examples of how children can learn from others, thus imitate something from there and learn the reality from their future experience.

In schools, the environment actually supports the theory of imitation better. This is because students of various

cultures are already there, learning in school. Teachers are agents who can organise programmes of cultural awareness and these experiences are learnt and told by the students to others.

Through such experience, they will imitate similar attitudes pertaining to cultural awareness in the future. And, for those listening to them, they will also imitate something from the points made. This is one simple step of creating unity.

By creating, when each individual starts to mingle with people from various cultures and get to know their lifestyle.

Attend other cultural festivities, visit our neighbours of different races, or if we do not have much time for that, use various online tools for that.

Send Facebook messages to our old friends, and plan a reunion, requiring all to wear their folk costumes.

All these can be done at individual level, if not by parents or teachers. When each of us imitate these actions, the level of unity will gradually increase.

Although it is wrong to claim the direct association that it has, it will help to "create" unity over time.

Living in a multiracial country like Malaysia needs effort to sustain it.