Encouraging participation in public discourse through online writing in ESL instruction

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Abstract

In recent years, writing instructors have started to adopt pedagogies that integrate classroom writing with happenings outside the classroom (see Weisser, 2001; Flower, 2008; Mathieu, 2005). The goal of writing instruction is no longer limited to competence in terms of language, style and techniques, but is expanded to encompass civic literacy. This orientation of writing especially at university level intertwines with the aim of higher education to produce individuals who are empowered to contribute towards a better world through participation in public discourse. In a study conducted at Universiti Putra Malaysia, 1,400 students were required to write publicly in an online forum on issues that affect the lives of the students and the community in which they belong. At the end of the course, the students completed a survey aimed at identifying the extent to which the writing course that adopted a public orientation was effective in socialising students towards becoming independent participants of online discussion. Specifically, the study sought to uncover the students' perceptions on whether they had improved in their writing skills, their confidence to write in English in the public sphere, the effect of audience on their writing, the value of participation in online public discussions, their intention to participate in the future, and the reasons for future participation or non-participation. This paper presents the results of the study and discusses the contribution of a public orientation in ESL writing instruction in fostering ability and motivation to participate in public discourse among university students.

Keywords: ESL writing instruction; online discussion; public discourse; public writing; writing development.

Introduction

In recent years, writing instructors have started to adopt pedagogies that integrate classroom writing with happenings outside the classroom (Weisser, 2001; Flower, 2008; Mathieu, 2005). The goal of writing instruction is no longer limited to competence in terms of language, style and techniques, but is expanded to encompass civic literacy. Writing instruction is thus imbued with a loftier meaning and goal whereby it must strive towards the uplifting of society. This intertwining of the goals of writing instruction especially at university level with civic awareness is mutually beneficial for both the development of writing skills in students and the development of society. While students are taught to write for the betterment of the world around them, the community-based concerns that students examine help them become better writers. Debates and issues in and around the local and global communities that touch the hearts of students provide real-life content and the drive for learner writers to write with real passion.

This pedagogy of socially-driven writing in which social activism is at the heart of writing converges with the noble aims of higher education in producing leaders who are in touch with issues affecting the world around them. Public awareness as opposed to insularity in thinking is an inherent responsibility of higher education that requires civic literacy skills that can be effectively taught through a public orientation of writing instruction.

Public writing and ESL writing instruction

An important challenge in higher education is in producing individuals who are able to contribute ideas and opinions towards issues of importance to themselves as well as to the various levels of community in which they belong. In the era of the Internet, the 'community' has expanded beyond one's immediate physical surroundings to cross-border communities and professional groups. A major avenue through which individuals interact and make an impact at the various levels of community is participation in the online discussion board. Effective and contributing members of online communities are expected to be able to articulate their views, advocate causes, organize community action, or lend support to others' views in discussion boards.

It is interesting to note that writing and composition instructors have taken to the notion of civic literacy and moved beyond academic writing that focuses only on language and techniques of writing. Weisser (2002) asserts that composition studies must involve raising awareness of public issues and that writing should be conceived as a civic duty to initiate political and social changes. Similarly, Mathieu (2005) who advocates a pedagogical approach that takes writing out of the classroom and into the "streets" (p.2) believes that writing should be made 'public' (i.e., writing should contain elements of public interest) so that social concerns can be highlighted by such writing, apart from the pedagogical value of the method being an effective means to motivate students to learn to write better.

Since the advent of the internet age, the World Wide Web has provided a platform for communities to meet online and discuss issues, and for individuals to have their voice

heard in the public sphere (Noraini Md Yusoff, 2009). The Internet has thus become an instrument that can be suitably put to use as a platform for implementing writing with a public orientation. Mathieu (2005) notes that most composition teachers use the Internet to publish their students' writing and to create a space for students to connect with the local communities. The "public turn" in writing instruction as described and advocated by Mathieu (2005: 1) puts in focus the role that writing instruction can play in contributing to the fostering of civic awareness among students.

The use of online tools to teach language to ESL students has been widely used in ESL instruction. Many studies have provided favourable accounts of the effectiveness of using online writing tools specifically with ESL students. For example, the use of blogs was found to have a positive effect on students' reading, writing and critical thinking skills (Nadzrah Abu Bakar, Hafizah Latif & Azizah Ya'acob, 2010). The online discussion board was found to have brought shy ESL students out of their shell and participate actively in language learning tasks, and provided equal opportunities for students to voice their opinions (Campbell, 2007). Other studies have described the usefulness of online writing tools to facilitate more interaction between the teacher and the student and among students, and provide more timely feedback (Krish, 2006).

Harnessing the power of the Internet affords the writing instructor the advantage to integrate the teaching of writing skills and civic awareness, thus building the skills and attitude necessary for students to gain access to online public discourse and to engage with the world around them.

Factors affecting ESL students' participation in online public discourse

Campbell (2007) observed several reasons why ESL students are reluctant to participate in face-to-face class discussions. Among them are shyness, lack of confidence in speaking English, fear of making mistakes and losing face, fear of wasting class time as they require a longer time to respond in English, and discomfort with the argumentative style of discussion which they may see as confrontational. The last reason, however, has been shown to be not exactly true by Holmes (2000, in Campbell, 2007) and Tani (2005, in Campbell, 2007). From the authors' own experience in teaching ESL students, it is clear that ESL students in Malaysia are not shy in presenting their opinions and arguments in their own native language, but they may feel impeded when the communication is in English.

Two important factors appear to constrain ESL students' participation in online public discourse. First, among the skills required for a student to be an effective participant in online discussion boards and blogs is foremost, the ability to articulate his or her views in English, through the mode of writing. As a large proportion of mainstream discussion boards on the Internet uses English as the medium of communication, the opportunity to engage with communities of the world is open only to those with the ability to write well in English. In this respect, ESL students face real barriers of access to online public discussions if they are unable to write in English. Access to getting heard in the public and global arena thus is determined by the level of one's ability to write his or her communication in English.

Second, communicating in the public sphere does not come easily to a large proportion of students, less so when such communication is in the form of writing in a foreign or second language. Affective factors such as writing apprehension and fear of criticism, as well as lack of confidence to handle the interactional requirements of online communication play a part in enabling and empowering, or conversely, obstructing participation.

As a group, EFL/ESL students who are not confident in communicating in English through the written mode are disadvantaged in terms of opportunities to be heard through the online media. Thus, in an EFL/ESL context, the role of English language writing instruction in developing public discourse abilities is clear. Writing instruction must necessarily involve development of both writing skills to articulate ideas and opinions coherently in English, as well as the confidence to write in public and interact with the local and global communities. Further, the types of writing taught should go beyond the purely personal and expressive types of writing to those that articulate elements of public interest, to be read by the public. In this regard, there is a need for writing instruction that is designed to specifically help ESL students practice and develop their writing skills in a public discussion context, thus contributing to the objective of producing university students who are able to engage in public discourse with the community and the world at large. In this study, we sought to find out ESL university students' perceptions on what they had gained from a writing course that incorporated an online discussion activity that required them to write on public issues in English, and

consequently the extent to which such an activity may succeed in developing skills and attitude favourable towards future participation in public discourse among the students.

The online writing project

In the study conducted at Universiti Putra Malaysia, we examined the extent to which the use of an online discussion board as part of a university ESL writing course requirement served to encourage ESL students towards participation in public discourse. Specifically, we sought to find out the students' perceptions on:

1. whether their writing skills in English had improved

2. whether they had gained more confidence to participate in online public discussions in English

3. the effect of audience on their online writing

4. the value of participating in online public discussions

5. intention to participate in future online discussions on their own

6. reasons for their intention to participate or not to participate in online public discussions in the future

While the main purpose of the study includes students' perception on how effective the online writing project that specifically adopts a public orientation is in improving their ability to write in English in a public discussion context, it goes further to find out whether the project has succeeded in motivating them towards further participation in public discourse on their own in the future.

The online discussion board activity was incorporated into the university writing course that aimed to teach the basics of academic writing to students. This online component of the course provided the platform for students to write opinion and argumentation paragraphs and for the exchange of ideas through interaction with other writers.

Method

A total of 1400 students who had enrolled in the writing course participated in discussions in the online forum for ten weeks. The online writing project targeted a level of participation that required students to write in English extended paragraph-length opinions and arguments on current issues, and provide comments on their friends' writing. In short, the type of written communication in the discussion board was expected to go beyond social chatting and short information exchanges, to the level of discussion of ideas (see Figure 1).
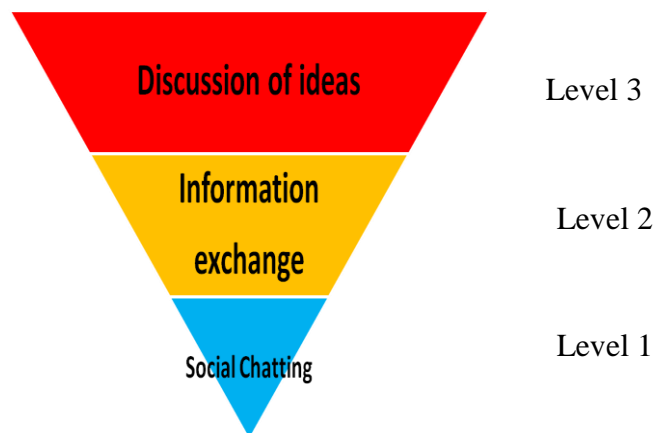
Source: Yap and Chan, 2009.

Figure 1:   Online communication: Levels of participation

Thirty instructors were involved in the project. These instructors taught writing skills in traditional classroom-based lessons, and moderated the online discussion board for their respective groups of students. It was made clear to the students on the outset that the role of the instructor is to monitor and moderate the discussions. They were not expected to provide extensive feedback on the grammar and use of language of the students. Furthermore, students were to contribute to the discussions and interact with their peers, and not rely on the teacher to direct them.

To achieve Level 3 of participation (Figure 1), the reading-to-write approach was adopted, whereby students read articles or reading material posted by the instructor and wrote their comments on them. The reason for using this approach is that apart from exploiting the complementary cognitive processing that exists between reading and writing for better facilitation of knowledge construction (Hudson, 2007), this approach takes account of the fact that articles published in newspapers and magazines provide an indication of issues that are relevant to the community. In the weeks where newspaper articles were not used, the researchers posted short accounts of specific issues that could generate discussion among the students. In the last week of the project, that is Week 10, the students were asked to write about their perception of the online discussion activity.

To prevent the comments regressing into one-liners or short transactional exchanges, a word limit of not less than 200 words per comment was imposed. Two sample articles and writing prompts used in the project are presented in the appendix. (Note: The sample article was posted in Week 3 of the project. Therefore more guidance

on how to go about the task of writing the response was provided for the sample article than the ones provided in the subsequent weeks).

Survey instrument

At the end of the course, the students completed a survey aimed at identifying their perceptions on their English writing skills development, their confidence to write in public in English, the effect of audience on their writing, the value they place on participation in online discussions, and reasons for their intention to participate or not to participate in future online discussions. Out of the 1400 students, 963 returned the questionnaire (68.6% response rate). Eventually, 907 questionnaires were analysed after removing those with missing values.

The questionnaire contained several sections: Section One requesting demographic information of the students and their level of online participation at the beginning of the course, Section Two which consists of four Likert-type items on the students' English writing skills development, Section Three which consists of seven Likert-type items on the students' confidence to write in public in English, Section Four with two questions on the effect of audience on the students' writing, one question on the students' perceived value of participating in online discussions, and two questions on their intention for future participation, and Section Five that contains an open-ended question asking the students for reasons for their intention to participate or not to participate in online public discussions in the future.

Profile of the subjects

The subjects of the study were undergraduate students enrolled for a university writing course, comprising 69.5% female and 30.5% male students. Their ages ranged from 17 to 29 years, with the mean age of 20.81 years and a standard deviation of 1.38. Most of the students owned a laptop (80.7%), and about slightly less than half of them (40%) reported having problems getting internet access some of the time.

Level of participation in online communication

To assess the level of participation in online communication among the students, a number of statements on ICT activities and skills were given in the questionnaire. The students indicated in retrospect whether or not they had the skills or had participated in the activities prior to the commencement of the writing course.

The results presented in Table 1 showed that the activities that were the most prevalent among the students were those that involved getting information from the Internet (more than 80%), and communication with people whom they know (e-mailing – 68.5% and chat – 54.5%). Uploading and downloading non-text materiasl were also common among the students (42.2% and 30.1% respectively).

What is clear from these results is that the students were largely ICT literate and had access to computers and internet service. Furthermore, the participation of the students in online communication was largely for social and transactional purposes (social chatting and information exchange levels, as depicted in Figure 1). Only one

activity that is also transactional in nature, that is posting questions in forums to solve problems (16.9%), did not have a high level of use.

As for participation at Level 3, the low scores for activities and skills that are indicative of a higher-order level such as participating in online forums (28.6%), having a blog (12.7%), building own webpage (7.6%) and hosting online forums (4.6%) showed that the students were not strong in public discourse participation which requires contribution of ideas and extended discussions as members of online communities.

Table 1. Online communication activities and skills of students

No	Online communication activities and skills of students	Percentage ('Yes') n = 907
1	I surf the Internet for ideas and information.	80.3
2	I use the Internet to send and check for emails	68.5
3	I use IRC/Yahoo/MSN Messenger/Skype or other programmes to chat with my friends and coursemates.	54.5
4	I upload and share non-text materials on the Internet. (e.g music, video, pictures, etc)	42.2
5	I download freeware from the Internet	30.1
6	I have participated in online forums that interest me.	28.6
7	I join online chats with strangers on the Internet	19.2
8	I post questions in online forums on the Internet to solve my problems.	16.9
9	I have my own blog.	12.7
10	I play online games on the Internet.	10.9
11	I can build my own webpage.	7.6
12	I host my own online forums.	4.6

Results

English writing skills development

The students were asked to rate their agreement on a 4-point Likert-type scale against statements that represent their perceptions about whether they had improved in their ability to write in English after the course. The results showed that the means for each of the statements were 3.00 and above (see Table 2), with an overall mean of 3.07 (SD =.44) across all the four items. This indicates that as a group, the students agreed that they had benefitted in terms of their English writing skills development. It was noted that the highest mean obtained was for perceived improvement in critical thinking skills (M = 3.16, SD = .552), providing support for the ESL instructors' common practice of having students discuss and write about current issues to help build critical thinking skills that in turn support better writing.

Table 2. Perceived improvement in writing skills in English

No	Description	Mean n=907	SD
1	increased awareness of grammatical mistakes in writing	3.05	.627
2	improved writing skills.	3.08	.548
3	developed critical thinking skills	3.16	.552
4	increased awareness of current issues	3.08	.579

Note: strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, agree = 3, strongly agree = 4

Confidence to write in English in the public domain

To gauge students' confidence to participate in online public discourse, seven items in the questionnaire were constructed to obtain students' self-reported confidence to write in

English in the public domain after the course. Table 3 presents the means obtained for each of these statements.

The overall mean on the measure of confidence to write in the public domain was 2.88 (SD = .38), showing clearly that the students were not very confident. As shown in Table 3, the concerns that contributed most to this lack of confidence appear to be the students' worries over grammatical accuracy (M = 2.53, SD = .726) in their writing, and the difficulty in formulating appropriate responses to their friends' posts in the online forum (M = 2.74, SD = .608). On the other hand, the students were relatively confident in expressing their ideas to others (M = 3.08, SD = .552) and were not uncomfortable about having their writing or ideas criticized by their friends and teachers (M = 3.02, SD = .581; M = 3.02, SD = .607).

This finding is significant on two counts. First, it is expected that worry over grammatical accuracy specifically and committing errors in the use of language in general are the main contributors to students' apprehension towards writing in English in public. As characteristic of Asian ESL students in general, Malaysian students are hung up on grammatical accuracy as the benchmark of proficiency. Thus, this fear of making grammatical mistakes is the first hurdle students must overcome before they will be comfortable posting their writing in public.

Second, it appears that the major reasons for students' apprehension to write in public are neither lack of confidence in saying what they wish to say (or writing what they wish to write) nor fear of receiving criticism on their writing. Rather, it is the fear of interacting and debating with other writers in the forum that pose a difficulty for them.

We interpret this as an indication that the students were not prepared to play a collaborative role in building ideas through active interaction with peers. They are more comfortable to remain in the familiar territory of writing to prompts and having others (traditionally, their instructors) read and provide feedback. When the role is reversed whereby they are expected to read others' writing and build on the ideas of others, they feel uncertain about how it should be done.

Table 3. Confidence to write in public in English

No	Description	M n=907	SD
1	like getting responses to my posts	2.93	.604
2	like responding to friends' posts	2.74	.608
3	not afraid of having writing or ideas criticized by friends	3.02	.581
4	not afraid of having writing or ideas criticized by teacher	3.02	.607
5	not afraid of making grammatical errors	2.53	.726
6	more confident in expressing ideas to others	3.08	.552
7	more confident to participate in other online forums	2.83	.649

Note: strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, agree = 3, strongly agree = 4

Effect of audience on students' online writing

The study examined the perceived effect of audience or readers on students' writing. The results showed that the students did not consider audience an important factor in motivating them to write better (see Table 4). Furthermore, when peers (M = 2.70, SD = .660) were compared with instructors as audience, the students showed a clear preference

for instructors (M = 2.90, SD = .656). Students' placing more value on interaction with their instructor could be tied to their expectation for teacher feedback on their writing.

This shows the students' implicit view of the nature and purpose of the online discussion activity, which they expect would follow the 'teacher assigns→student writes→ teacher gives feedback' sequence. In this model of writing, peers do not feature. If this finding may be interpreted as an indication of the students' lack of interest in treating writing as social activity, it does not bode well for the students' progress towards independent public discourse participation.

Table 4. Effect of audience on students' online writing

No	Statement	Mean n=907	SD
1	I write better when I know my friends will read what I have written	2.70	.660
2	I write better when I know my teacher will read what I have written	2.90	.656

Note: strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, agree = 3, strongly agree = 4

Perceived value of participating in online public discussions

To gauge the students' post-course perception of the value of participating in online public discussions, the statement 'All university students should know how to participate in online forums' with a 4-point Likert scale was presented in the questionnaire. The mean obtained was 3.33 (SD = .646) (see Table 5) indicating that having gone through the course, the students have appreciated the value and importance of participation. In fact, in terms of percentages 41.3% 'strongly agreed' with the statement and 51.7% 'agreed', making the total of all the students who agreed 93% (n= 907).

Table 5. Perceived importance of participation in online discussions

No	Statement	Mean n=907	SD
1	All university students should know how to participate in online forums.	3.33	.646

Note: strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, agree = 3, strongly agree = 4

Intention for future participation

The students were asked to indicate whether they had any prior experience participating in any kind of online public discussions before the course. Only 28.5% of the students reported having any such experience. After the course, the students answered either 'yes' or 'no' to two statements to indicate their intention to participate or not to participate in public online discussions on their own in the future:

1. *I would like to learn how to participate in other online forums /blogs.*

2. *I will participate in other online forums on my own.*

For the first statement, a very strong 81.2% indicated that they would like to learn how to participate in other online forums, and for the second statement, an encouraging 52.8% stated that they would actually participate in other online forums on their own (see Table 6).

Table 6. Intention to participate in online discussions in the future

No	Statement	Percent ('Yes') n= 907
1	I would like to learn how to participate in other online forums /blogs.	81.2
2	I will participate in other online forums on my own.	52

These results show the strong interest and intention generated by the course in the students to participate in online discussions, despite their problems with writing in English as ESL students, reflecting the high value they placed on the activity. Student A's feedback on the forum, as shown in the following excerpt, illustrates this point very aptly.

First time I know I must give opinions and comments in this forum, I feel like I want to die. Actually, I don't like to write an essay because I don't know how to describe my point. After a few week, I started love to write in this forum although my English language is broken. The important thing that I learnt from this forum is how to express my opinions and give comments in simple paragraph. Although I take one week to finish a simple paragraph, I satisfied with my effort. Now, I only take about half an hour to finish my paragraph. From this forum, I also can give feedback to my friends according their opinion. Beside that, my friends and I can change and share more information about one topic. For conclusion, this forum must go on for next student especially for student who don't like write an essay like me.

Another example of a student's feedback is shown in the following excerpt. Student B is more fluent compared to Student A, and the number of posts by Student B (24 posts) also reflects his ability to write more prolifically than Student A (16 posts). Thus, it is clear that not only students who are fluent in the English language appreciate learning to write in online forums. Students who are struggling with the language, too, can and do overcome their fear of writing in English and learn to enjoy writing in online public discussions.

Writing in the online forum is such an amazing experience. Before this, I never write anything through online like this online forum. It is an interesting task and also gives many benefits to me. The most important thing that I have learned in this task is I can express my thought without feeling restricted. In fact, I get to know the latest issues, amazing stories by the people out there and many more. In addition, I get a chance to know what exactly my friends' opinions and ideas. The thing that is quite difficult for me when participating in this forum is to develop my sentences

and words. I found it quite hard because I want to develop my sentences excellently, so that it will become interesting for the readers. However, I found it is quite an easy task since all the topics given are related to our daily life. Hence, I can easily think of the related situations and experiences in writing my comment. Rating my writing skills? Hmm. I don't know how to rate my skills. I just do the tasks given from time to time. And I hope that my writing skill is improved after this long journey has passed. But, my confidence to write in English from Topic 1 to Topic 9 is getting better. I can feel my improvement to write my opinion. I think that I am more confident in express my opinion. Finally, our task is over!! Thanks to my friends that have leaved comments and suggestions for me. I do appreciate them. And final thanks to Miss Lee!! ☺☺ Anyway, I would like to wish Selamat Hari Raya to all my friends. And wish you all best of luck for the upcoming final exam…

Students' reasons for future participation or non-participation

To find out whether the online discussion project has succeeded in moving students towards becoming independent participants in public discourse in the future, we examined the answers given by the students to an open-ended question in the questionnaire asking them for reasons for their intention to participate or not participate in such public discussions in the future. Some of the more common reasons are sampled and summarised in Table 7.

Table 7. Reasons to participate or not participate in online forums in the future

Reasons for intention to participate	Reasons for lack of intention to participate
• *I will be more aware of current issues.* • *I like to express my opinion, read other's opinions – get another perspective.* • *To get information … to gain more knowledge and to fill up free time with beneficial activities.*	• *I don't have time. Too time consuming.* • *I like to keep my life personal and private.* • *I don't like to write.* • *Not fluent in English.* • *The discussion may [be]come too open… about anything including sensitive issues.*

• *I will be more confident to share my opinion with others, especially from other countries.* • *I can improve my writing and thinking skills.*	• *To avoid unnecessary information from outsiders… too many different ideas may confuse us.* • *I prefer writing journals for myself and for my own record.* • *No/slow access to the Internet.* • *This activity is still new to me.*

The main reasons for intention to participate expressed by the students have to do with their wish to improve their writing skills and gain more confidence to write in English in public. The students also cited gaining more knowledge and awareness of current issues as reasons for their interest to participate. On the other hand, the reasons for not wanting to participate are '*no time/too time consuming*', '*don't like to write*' and '*not fluent in English*'. There were also reasons that were less commonly cited, such as '*the discussion may become too open… sensitive issues*', '*to avoid unnecessary information from outsiders…too many different ideas may confuse us*' and '*prefer writing journals for myself and for my own record*'. These results show that some of the students were not yet ready for open or public discussions, preferring instead to tread in their more familiar private ground.

Conclusion

Are the students ready to participate in online discussions and contribute to public discourse? Insofar as the students have felt that their writing skill in English has improved, that they are confident to write their discussions in a public forum, and that they appreciate the value of such participation in an online forum (with over 50% stating

they would go on to participate in other forums on their own, and over 80% wanting to learn more about participating), we are confident that the online public writing project has indeed helped the ESL students to move a step closer to acquiring the skills and attitude needed for participation in public discussions. However, to the extent that the students show a preference for instructor feedback while being less excited over their peers' responses to their writing, there is yet work to be done to shift the mindset of the students towards accepting a socially and publicly oriented pedagogy of ESL writing instruction. It is recommended that ESL writing instruction harness the benefits of public writing both for the learners and for the community by incorporating online discussions in writing courses, and at the same time, contribute to the empowerment of students to enter into public discourse in the global community. Towards this end, writing instruction adopting a public orientation, and specifically facilitated by the online platform can play a significant role.

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Appendix:

Sample article and writing prompt

Your Health/Holistic Healing: Hooked on homeopathy
By Rajen M.

In April 1986, I graduated from Universiti Sains Malaysia with a degree in pharmacy. I was somewhat arrogant about my abilities as a pharmacist — the so-called "drug expert" and was fascinated by drugs — how and why they worked. My four years of training did alert me to their side effects but I was convinced of the therapeutic potential of these complex chemicals.

I chose to go into clinical pharmacy — the most exciting application of pharmaceutical knowledge — helping patients in hospital maximise the effects of the drugs they are prescribed while minimising the potential side effects. I did my internship in Kuala Lumpur General Hospital.

Then, something happened to me that would forever change my perception of modern medicine. I started having a strange rash on my back which reappeared every three weeks or so. The rashes were not itchy. However, they would sometimes bleed, causing embarrassing bloodstains on my shirt. The rashes would be there for a week or so and then disappear. Being the "drug expert" that I was, I started to self-medicate. I tried creams, ointments, shampoos, and scrubs. When that did not work, I resorted to anti-histamines, antibiotics, anti-fungals, and even steroids. I did this alone initially but then in consultation with some of the brilliant doctors with whom I had the good fortune of working with. This went on for about two years. Nothing worked.

Finally, I was put on a powerful new anti-fungal. It worked minimally. However, the fine print in the package insert warned about liver failure and the need to go for biannual liver tests. Clearly, this was not a long term solution.

Lizard Eggs
Desperate and at the urging of my mother, I decided to call on a homeopath. At that time, it was for me an act of blasphemy, given my faith in my medical training and in pharmaceuticals. Alternative medicine was, in my mind, spooky stuff. It was unscientific. I considered the practitioners to be charlatans and con artists.

The homeopath I consulted did nothing to reverse my negative perceptions. In fact, he reinforced them. He sat in a dark and dingy room. He was poorly dressed and appeared to be half-listening as I poured out the story of my two years of agony. He prescribed two "medicines". I was aghast. The "pills" that he gave me looked like lizard eggs. "Put them under your tongue," he said. "Let them stay there for a while. And no coffee or tea."
I did not believe him, or his lizard eggs. Nevertheless, I took them and his advice because I was desperate and had already paid him. Little did I know then that my life was going to change forever. After taking the pills I had very bad diarrhoea that night. I continued taking them, and nothing else seemed to happen. Three weeks later, the rashes did come back, but just 10 per cent of what they had been in the past. I was stunned.

Almost nothing had happened in my two years of trying the best of what modern medicine and the pharmaceutical industry had to offer. Suddenly, one attempt by a homeopath and I was half better. I went back to the homeopath with renewed faith, amazement, and even admiration. I thanked him for my rapid improvement. He seemed disappointed that I was not completely cured. He prescribed another dose of the pills. "It will never come back," he promised me. True enough, it never did.

Cured
The following month, I went back to him to try and understand what had happened. How was it that I had been cured in two sessions with such an unorthodox method? He explained, using terms such as "energy", "vibration" and "electromagnetic field". I was astounded. My four years of pharmacy education and two years of pre-university biology and chemistry had not prepared me for this. My curiosity was aroused. I plunged into the world of alternative medicine. I read whatever I could grab my hands on and spoke about it with whoever I came in contact with.

I devoured whatever I could read on homeopathy. Being a pharmacist, I wanted to know if my "cure" was merely a "one off" thing. Could it have had a placebo effect? That means that some medication works simply because the patients believe that something is being done and want it to work.

Homeopathy
However, there were many trials in medical literature that were very scientifically done. Furthermore, homeopathy worked on babies and even on pets. Clearly, there were no effects of the drug recipient's belief system at work here.
The more I discovered, the more interested I became in the quiet power of herbs, Ayurveda, traditional Chinese medicine, chiropractics, osteopathy and a host of other

therapies normally associated with "the lunatic fringe". I began to understand that some of these healing arts had been around long before the modern medicine that I had been trained to worship. Ayurveda, for example, has been practised for 4,000 years. Interestingly, these arts have survived the powerful dictates and lobbies of modern medicine.

I realised that these therapies are not only gentle but also powerful. Unlike synthetic drugs, these ancient therapies work with the body systems, yielding almost no side-effects. Indeed, they are more preventive than curative and are more in line with the two tenets of Hippocrates: First do no harm, and let food be thy medicine and let thy medicine be food.

Holistic Medicine
I left the pharmaceutical industry and world of modern medicine to pursue my new-found fascination with not medicine but healing itself. The more I dug, the more I was awed. I signed up to do my doctorate in holistic medicine, a healing system that aims to merge the best of modern and ancient medicine with the patient's interest in mind.

To my pleasant surprise, the local alternative medicine industry welcomed me with open arms. My pharmaceutical credentials were welcomed. I was invited to sit on committees that worked with both the minister of health and the prime minister. I was asked to head the team that drew up the National Herbal Blueprint that was tabled to the Cabinet.

Journal
I also noticed that little research on tropical herbs was being done and recorded. So working with a prominent professor of botany and plant physiology, we set up the Journal of Tropical Medicinal Plants, the first journal of its kind in the world focusing on the tropical medicinal plant industry. The journal is now in its eighth year.

How amazing that a journey that started with a desperate visit to a homeopath has changed my life in a way I could never have imagined.

Adapted from: Rajen, M. (20 January, 2008). Your Health/Holistic Healing: Hooked on homeopathy, New Straits Times.

Prompt

Write your response to the above article in a paragraph of about 200 words.

To help generate ideas for your writing, compare the writer's position towards the topic with yours.
- What is the writer's attitude towards alternative medicine? What is your attitude

towards alternative medicine?
- What is the writer's attitude towards modern medicine? What is your attitude towards modern medicine?
- What supporting points does the writer offer to support his position?
- What details/explanations/reasons/examples can you offer to support your position?

Begin with an opening sentence that states either the overall position of the writer or a specific point made by the writer that you wish to respond to. Next, write a topic sentence that states your most important response. Then, support your position with relevant details/ explanations/ reasons/ examples.