

CHAPTER 22.

STUDENT WRITING IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MADRAS: TRADITIONS, COURSES, AMBITIONS

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Writing courses and related initiatives at the University of Madras make available to the students the skills of writing. According to their programs and interests, students are trained in many forms of writing, including professional, creative, and research. This profile describes some techniques and assignments used as part of these writing opportunities in various disciplines. It attempts to critically understand the role of the university in forwarding new trends in writing and communication that play a major role in establishing careers of students and that are shaping the development of the academic and creative world. The author describes in detail his own expanded uses of writing in a literature course. Further, the essay spells out the progress of “soft skills” programs in several languages, by which students gain new horizons in language acquisition. Finally, it projects a range of new writing/communications initiatives by which the university can expand its importance in the burgeoning economy of its region.

The 153-year old University of Madras (UOM) is the mother of almost all the old universities of Southern India. It is an affiliated, state university under the Government of Tamil Nadu. The university area of jurisdiction has been confined to three districts of Tamil Nadu in recent years. This is consequent to the establishment of various universities in the state and demarcation of the university territories.

Through its long history, the university has diversified its teaching and research. UOM has produced two presidents for the Government of India and has three Nobel laureates to her credit. The university imparts both undergraduate and post-graduate education through over 100 affiliated institutions

that are spread over the districts of Chennai, Thiruvalluvar, and Kancheepuram. Apart from teaching, research activities in arts, humanities, science, management, and technology are the main portals of the university.

The 68 university departments of study and research are spread over four campuses organized into 18 schools, each of which offers post-graduate courses in part-time and full-time PhD programs and diploma and certificate programs (<http://www.unom.ac.in/>). Addressing education needs of an even larger population of the country, the university offers both undergraduate and post-graduate education through the Institute of Distance Education (IDE). Some of the courses offered by IDE have no parallel in this country.

HISTORY AND HERITAGE

The Public Petition dated 11 November 1839 initiated the establishment of the Madras University. In January 1840, with George Norton as its President, the University Board was constituted, but it was not until 1857 that the university was established by an act of the Legislative Council. The university was organized on the model of the University of London (Hunter, 1886; Mahalingam, 1974; University of Madras, 2001). By 1912, endowments were made to the university to establish departments of Indian History, Archaeology, Comparative Philology, and Indian Economics. In all there were 17 University departments, 30 University teachers, 69 research scholars, and 127 University publications in that year. Later, the research and teaching functions of the university were encouraged by the Sadler Commission, and the gains of the university were consolidated by the enactment of the Madras University Act of 1923. About this time, the territorial ambit of the Madras University encompassed from Berhampur of Orissa in the North, Trivandrum of Kerala in the Southwest, Bangalore and Mangalore of Karnataka in the West and Hyderabad of Andhra Pradesh in the South. However, Indian independence in 1947, the setting up of the University Grants Commission in 1956, and changes in the political, social, and cultural milieu brought several amendments to the University of Madras Act of 1923 to permit qualitative and quantitative changes in its jurisdiction and functions.

MOST SALIENT GEOGRAPHIC, ECONOMIC, AND CULTURAL FEATURES OF ITS LOCATION

UOM is located in Chennai, formerly known as Madras, the capital city of the Indian State of Tamil Nadu. Chennai is the fourth most populous metro-

politan area and the fifth most populous city in India. Located on the Coromandel Coast of the Bay of Bengal, Chennai city had a population of 4.34 million in the 2001 census. The urban agglomeration of metropolitan Chennai has an estimated population of over 8.2 million people.

Chennai's economy has a broad base of auto, computer, technology, hardware manufacturing, and healthcare industries. The city is India's second largest exporter of software, information technology, and information-technology-enabled services. A major chunk of India's auto manufacturing industry is based in and around the city. Chennai Zone contributes 39 per cent of the State's GDP. Chennai accounts for 60 per cent of the country's automotive exports.

Chennai is an important centre for folk songs and Carnatic music and hosts a large cultural event, the annual Madras Music Season, which includes performances by hundreds of artists. The city has a vibrant theatre scene and is an important centre for the Bharatanatyam, a classical dance form. The Tamil film industry, one of the largest in India, is based in the city; the soundtracks of the films dominate its music scene.

The University of Madras is spread over six campuses, viz., Chepauk, Marina, Guindy, Taramani, Chetpet, and Maduravoyal. The main campus of the University of Madras is located in Chepauk. The stately and historic Senate House, the Library building with its imposing clock tower, the spacious Centenary Auditorium, and the massive Centenary Building are some of the important buildings of the university campus at Chepauk. Most of the science departments are located in the Guindy Campus of the university. The campus at Taramani houses the Dr. A. Lakshmanaswamy Mudaliar Post-Graduate Institute of Basic Medical Sciences. The Oriental and Indian languages departments, the Post-graduate Hostel for Men and the University Guesthouse are located in the Marina Campus. The University Union for Sports and its pavilion are on the Spur Tank Road in Chetpet. The Botanical Garden of the University is located in the Maduravoyal campus.

WHAT "LITERACY" AND ESPECIALLY "WRITING" MEAN TO STUDENTS AND TEACHERS IN UOM: WHY THEY WRITE, IN WHAT LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS, IN RELATION TO WHAT GOALS?¹

By and large, the students and teachers of the University of Madras (UOM) assume that "literacy" and especially "writing" mean only writing sessional tests and end-of-semester examinations. Writing practice here is clubbed with examination of students' memory and understanding of their subjects. English is the

medium of instruction at UOM, but is a second language for the students, who bring with them a broad range of first languages: Hindi (national language), Tamil (regional mother tongue), Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada, Sanskrit, North Eastern Tribal languages, Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. UOM also admits international students who speak English, French, Sinhalese, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, and other languages. Is writing practice different from examination of subject knowledge? It remains a question here. Proper attention for writing practice is not professionally administered in universities such as UOM in India. Students write their three sessional tests per semester and end-semester examinations in English, except for the students in their respective language departments. For the most part, the goal of students here is to score top-ranking marks and not to improve their writing skills. However, there are a few elective courses in writing, described below, that serve other student goals.

WHAT STUDENTS WRITE IN THE INSTITUTION: DISCIPLINES, GENRES, ASSIGNMENTS

Though the medium of instruction in UOM is English, students write in other Indian and regional languages depending upon the respective language departments in the campuses. Students answer objective type or multiple-choice questions in one word; they also write short notes in 50 words, paragraphs in 150 to 200 words, and essays in 500 words or more. This is the general examination pattern in UOM. In science disciplines, students write lab experiment reports of two or three pages, do statistical analysis, and submit a Record Book as a part of general examination writing. Data-based reports, field studies, interview transcriptions, and media reports are some of the assignments given in the departments of Archeology, Journalism, Economics, Econometrics, Statistics, and Management Studies. The departments of Literatures, Languages, Geography, History, Politics, Psychology, and other human sciences assign book reviews. Some of the Departments of Indian Languages in UOM encourage students who are interested in creative writing in their respective mother tongues, among them English, Tamil, and Malayalam.

Writing per se is the subject in several courses offered by Journalism and English. For example, Journalism offers a course in technical communication that includes manual writing, flier design, and brochure design and writing. A core course in Journalism introduces writing for radio, television, TV news, cinema, and the Internet. Peer review is an important element of this course. The objective of the course in Copy Editing is to introduce the students to the basic skills of editing as applicable in the field of publishing and journalism. The

Department of English offers an elective course in Writing Skills that features thesis writing, proposals, and research writing. Other courses offered by English will be described in later sections of this essay.

WHO “CARES” IN THE INSTITUTION ABOUT STUDENT GROWTH IN AND THROUGH WRITING? HOW IS THIS CONCERN—OR LACK OF CONCERN—SHOWN IN FUNDING, REQUIREMENTS, ATTITUDES, ACTIONS?

UOM does not have an official body in charge of students’ growth in and through writing. The respective research supervisors during the preparation of research dissertations for post-graduate degrees, the Master of Philosophy in various disciplines, and doctoral degrees will normally address the writing and editing skills of the student scholars. For sessional or periodical tests, end-semester examinations, and submitted assignments, the respective course coordinators take care of the evaluation of writing.

The University Students Advisory Board (USAB), which is funded by the university and partly supported by the Government of Tamil Nadu, and the Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Centre for Economic Studies, fully funded by the Government of India, conduct writing courses for the socially disadvantaged students of the university and her affiliated colleges. This Centre periodically conducts coaching classes for students to take up various job-oriented competitive examinations. Subject experts do conduct writing practices in their respective fields. USAB is very much interested in helping students get suitable job placements; they very often conduct job fairs in collaboration with leading Info Tech companies. USAB also facilitates student-oriented programs, such as remedial coaching classes, and conducts training for students who aspire for competitive examinations. Ample writing exercises are given to test students’ writing skills. Neither USAB nor the Ambedkar Centre has a writing program per se, but developing such courses in the near future is a possibility.

ONE ILLUSTRATION OF SUCCESS IN TEACHING WRITING IN A DISCIPLINE

I trained a set of 14 pre-doctoral (Master of Philosophy in English) students who opted an elective course entitled “Discourses of Domination, Resistance, and Emancipation: Race, Caste, and Gender” during the academic year 2007-2008. This course focused more on writing skills than others I have previously

taught. The students had to prepare two assignments, and then present them as papers. After presentation, students were asked to share the presented papers for peer review. After this step, they were asked to interview experts on the topics of research that they had prepared, presented, and peer reviewed (e.g., Gajendran, 1998; Guru, 1998). These interviews were later transcribed and prepared in a format fit for publication. My task as the coordinator of this course was to compile all of this work as an anthology having the following features:

- Broad division of chapters containing individual papers
- Bibliographic essay on race, caste, and gender (to which three students contributed)
- Compilation of the interviews with experts, relevant to the themes of the student papers
- Compilation of official/archival/gubernatorial documents gathered by the students as additional information on their themes.

For example, a student who presented a paper on trans-gender interviewed a trans-gender leader in Chennai, who in turn directed the student to the government office where an order issued in favor of trans-gender was available. The student annexed this document to the proposed anthology for the benefit of future researchers. This student also contributed to the section of the bibliographic essay on genders.

For the M. Phil. students of the Department of English at the University of Madras this was a new educational experience. Normally, students of literature will not go out for field study here. In this course, students shared that they had enriching experiences during interviews with subject experts, activists, writers, critics, and political leaders. One of the students interviewed a Minister for Social Welfare. For her, it was a thrilling experience. Some of them told me that they learned the art of interviewing through transcribing the recorded interviews. Students who felt very shy in the class benefited from going out to attend seminars and present papers with the help of their peers. I wanted to give a social science perspective to literary and cultural studies research such as this. Normally, some of the best social science work will have a literary touch. I wanted to experiment with this type of research with my team of students, and this fusion worked out very well, as I could see this in the writings and the interesting titles given by the students to their papers.

Through this complex assignment, students developed the following:

- Interviewing skills
- Book review skills
- Research paper writing methods
- Proposal writing methods
- Looking at literature through a social science perspective

- Team research skills
- Self-editing skills

WHEN AND HOW HAVE GROUPS OF TEACHERS MET TO DISCUSS AND PERHAPS PLAN WAYS TO HELP STUDENTS GROW AS WRITERS? WHAT HAS RESULTED?

Though there is no professional group of teachers to teach writing skills to students of their respective departments, the Department of English has been offering courses on technical writing and copy editing for the past five years as electives for the students of all disciplines in UOM. The coordinator of these courses has received overwhelming response from various departments. Students are made aware of the importance of mastering the nuances of the written language. Examples are taken from real life work scenarios. For example, the students are shown examples from the print media where errors have been overlooked. Thus, they are trained to be sensitive to language use. The students go through a very result-oriented training program in different kinds of writing assignments. The results of this training have been positive. Select students in a class exhibit enthusiasm to become flawless writers.

NEW INITIATIVES IN TEACHING WRITING

The University of Madras has been offering the Soft Skills program for its students. It is mandatory for every student in the MA, MSc, MCom, and MBA programs of the university to acquire eight credits from this program to successfully complete their post-graduation degree. The objective of the program is to enable students to understand and produce the target language accurately and fluently. Emphasis is on the four skills/modules—listening, speaking, reading and writing—with writing given the most emphasis. The Soft Skills program is offered in English, Spanish, French, German, and Italian. The students learn grammar rules and new vocabulary. They write answers to reading and listening comprehension questions and also take a written test. The students are trained in spelling and punctuation at the level of word and sentence, with later emphasis on content and organization.

In the Communication and Soft Skills program in English, the modules define the various principles of communication and demonstrate its importance using the four skills. The objective of the written skills module is to enable the students to link spoken words and thoughts to writing, demonstrate the impor-

tance of writing without errors, and discuss the process and result of a written work. The students are given ample time during the course to practice writing with precision, accuracy, and clarity of thought. The learners are monitored closely by the faculty, who guide them to successfully process their ideas. They practice writing through such tasks as narrating stories; drafting letters, emails, and reports; writing their resumes and curriculum vitae; writing book reports, reviews, personal stories, job applications, news reports, etc.

The University of Madras has recently (July 2010) outsourced this program to a private educational company. As a University Coordinator for this program, I have control over what is taught. On behalf of the university, I prescribe the syllabus and monitor the company's tutoring; University faculties evaluate the examination given by the company faculty. Thus far, the program has been successful, and I have received many positive responses from the students.

PROPOSED/UNFULFILLED AMBITIONS IN REGARD TO STUDENT LITERACY/WRITING

1. Training in writing for M.Phil. and PhD students: The students enrolled in the Master of Philosophy (pre-doctoral degree) and PhD (doctoral) in various science, arts, and humanities courses at the University of Madras do not have a separate training program for writing skills, and their writing activity is limited to writing dissertations with the guidance of respective research supervisors. A program related to writing for these research students would be an ambitious venture for any member of faculty here, and efforts are being made to draft a program that combines purposeful and original writing with precise and orderly presentation.
2. Writing and translation: The Department of English is conceiving plans for a program for Writing and Translation in consultation with the authorities of the university and other volunteering members from affiliating colleges of the University of Madras.
3. Technical writing and content development: To prepare materials such as websites, user manuals, training manuals, reports, proposals, etc., there is a huge demand for technical writers in software companies, financial institutions, and many other organizations. UOM plans to conduct courses in the above program shortly for students across all disciplines, in collaboration with interested professional and educational institutions in India and abroad, particularly with a corporation in the US
4. Publishing: There is a lacuna in the publishing industry in India due to a shortage of copy editors, proof readers, etc. This area requires excellent

writing skills, error detection and correction skills, and reading comprehension. Opportunities are aplenty in Chennai itself. UOM in collaboration with leading publishing companies plans to launch a program on publishing in consultation with experts in the university and affiliating colleges.

5. Translation: this is an up-and-coming enterprise as part of the publishing industry. UOM has separate departments for Tamil literature, Tamil language, Telugu, Kannada, Hindi, and Sanskrit, as well as programs for French, Spanish, Italian and German. Efforts are being made to make translation an academic discipline. The faculty has given suggestions on how to accommodate translation into the relevant university curricula.
6. E-publishing: A combination of publishing and technical writing will be floated for the students of UOM in future to train them to enrich their occupational and professional skills. Writing practice related to E-publishing alone will be a focal point of this program.
7. Writing for the screen: Chennai, home of UOM, is known for production of films of international quality. There are opportunities for students to step into the movie industry if they master this form of writing at UOM. A proposal has been submitted to the Asian College of Journalism and the Tamil Nadu Film Institute in Chennai for a possible joint venture to float a course on Script Writing for the students of UOM and her affiliated colleges.

NOTE

1. The author wishes to thank the individuals at the University of Madras whom he interviewed regarding writing across disciplines at this university. These interviews are listed in the References.

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