

THE STANFORD RESEARCH COMMUNICATION PROGRAMME: A CASE STUDY OF BETTER INTEGRATING RESEARCH IN THE TEACHING ENVIRONMENT

A common tension with university faculty is balancing a teaching load with a research agenda. What if these responsibilities were better integrated, or the tensions between them reduced? What if undergraduates were exposed to researchers speaking in an understandable language about their studies? What might the effect of this be in fostering cross-disciplinary communication between researchers, enhancing learning in the classroom, and informing the general public?

SPURRED BY THESE QUESTIONS, AN idea was born at Stanford University. In 1999, a pilot group of thirteen PhD students would attempt to write brief, clear, and compelling statements about their research to share in introductory undergraduate classes. Three years later, the Stanford Research Communication Programme has developed and refined a process and curriculum that builds upon this experiment.

The programme's primary offering is I-RITE, where participants from all disciplines create 750-word statements that describe their research and why it is important in a larger context. The statements must be clear and compelling to 17 year-old students (generally US high school senior/university freshmen), which, in turn, can reach a broader audience.

The core I-RITE programme is a six-week experience conducted mostly online, with supplemental face-to-face meetings. Participants create and revise their work many times over the course of the workshop with help from peers in different disciplines and external reviewers: communication researchers affiliated with the National Communication Association, and undergraduate students. The undergraduates are of particular interest, as they review I-RITE statements in mandatory first-year writing courses at Stanford. By bringing draft research statements to the classroom, students learn the basics of critical reviewing, and begin to understand what

constitutes research in a wide variety of disciplines at the PhD level and beyond.

I-RITE is continuing to build on its core programme with modules that integrate oral components codenamed I-SPEAK, and the ability to include figures or diagrams with the written statement.

I-RITE's success is evidenced by participation from over 200 undergraduates, PhD students, postdoctoral researchers, and faculty from institutions in the United States and Sweden. I-RITE also receives financial support from a broad range of disciplines within Stanford: the Schools of Earth Sciences, Engineering, and Humanities & Sciences; the Graduate Fellowships Programme; the Center for Teaching and Learning; and the Center for Innovations in Learning. The Wallenberg Global Learning Network has also provided initial support for participation in Swedish universities.

Another pilot project of the Research Communication Programme was *Odyssey*, a magazine created by undergraduates that featured completed I-RITE statements, combined with in-depth interviews of programme participants and other researchers. During the Spring of 2002, *Odyssey* secured sufficient advertising to produce 1,500 copies distributed across the Stanford campus, and to major US research universities. One can imagine similar projects could be undertaken in undergraduate journalism or communication courses.

Participants not only use statements in the classroom for teaching purposes, but also as a basis for job talks, grant proposals, and other instances where communicating work to the general public is useful.

For the future, the Research Communication Programme plans to create an organisation that will allow institutions in the US to implement versions of I-RITE. Proposed plans include creating a package of participant and instructor materials for use in workshops, provide instructor training programmes and certification, and showcase best practices from participating institutions. The programme also hopes to expand to countries in Europe; if any institution in the UK is interested in piloting a trial version of I-RITE or using some of the teaching applications in the classroom, do not hesitate to contact the author. ■

Carolyn Gale
Stanford University, USA
cgale@stanford.edu