CONSTELLATIONS
HUMANITIES AT NTU
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Dear colleagues, students, alumni, and friends,

Welcome to Constellations, the new magazine for the School of Humanities, NTU Singapore. The name is inspired by the stars that have captured the imaginations of poets, philosophers, scientists, and engineers for centuries.

“Constellations” was chosen from a list of names submitted by SoH staff, - from the English Programme, to be specific, for which, many thanks! “Constellations” has complex associations and lends itself to a nuanced usage that conveys the vision of the new School of Humanities. Coming from the Latin ‘con’ meaning ‘together’ and ‘stella’ meaning ‘stars’, it suggests constellations of different subject disciplines, each forming a distinct group consisting of component ‘stars’. It can mean, too, ‘the section of the heavens occupied by such a group’, i.e., the Humanities part of the universe. A constellation can also mean ‘a group or configuration of ideas, feelings, characteristics, objects, etc, that are related in some way’: hence our connecting with other constellations beyond our own as the interdisciplinary focus of our inaugural issue amply illustrates. The constellations trace a path between the stars, just as we seek to cultivate a dynamic community that is creative, critical, and responsive to fundamental issues of our times.

We’ve been thinking a lot about the future of the Humanities following the re-organisation of the schools and the ways in which this development enhances opportunities for collaboration, civic-engagement, and interdisciplinary research. Our lead article tells the story of how various faculty came together to investigate the issue of global warming. Contrary to the popular perception that environmental concerns can be resolved simply by using science and technology, the humanities play a crucial role in inviting people to think critically about these issues and to spur us to take collective action.

We believe the best way to honour the Humanities’ past is to build its future. This issue of Constellations includes an exciting work of creative non-fiction entitled Atuk by Natasya Ismail, one of many young authors to develop and hone their talent at NTU. We hope to showcase more creative works over the coming years. The Creative writing programme has already happily scored a major success through Nuraliah Norasid, who is not only the first to graduate with a PhD in Creative Writing from NTU, but also won the 2016 SGD25 000 Epigram Prize for Fiction with her debut novel, The Gatekeeper.

K.K. Luke
Chair, School of Humanities
Environmental Humanities

A sustainable symbiosis between the arts and the sciences

Claudia Tan, Lui Jia Yi, Karen, and Tan Zi Ying
Climate change is often treated as a political issue but it should not be. Scientific evidence for warming of the climate system is unequivocal and it is extremely likely to be the result of man-made pollutants that require strict regulation. However, in 2003 the respected strategist for the U.S. Republican Party, Frank Luntz, urged the party to emphasise that the evidence is not complete: “Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled, their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue”. Fifteen years later, political debates around climate change continue to swirl. Scientific knowledge is always provisional, uncertain, and evolving but this is not to say that it can be simply dismissed. Instead, it is more urgent than ever to heed the warnings of scientists, anticipate and mitigate against the risks of climate change, and reconsider our relationship with the environment.

The environment is a matter of critical importance in both local and global contexts. While scientists play an invaluable role in making discoveries that have the potential to benefit all of humankind, the humanities help separate rhetoric from reality and make the key issues understood by a wider audience. A deeper understanding of environmental concerns across disciplines is necessary for tackling the challenges that humanity faces. This article introduces some of the ways in which faculty and students at NTU are engaging with environmental issues in new and imaginative ways.

What are the Environmental Humanities?
The Environmental Humanities is a broad and multi-faceted area of study including linguistics, literature, art, and philosophy and each discipline takes a markedly different approach. They are united by a concern with the relationship between humans and the natural world and typically focus on cultural practices, perceptions, and historical traditions.

Assistant Professor Miles Powell (History) explains: “The Environmental Humanities studies how humans interact with their environment. The difference with the physical sciences is that you do not examine the environment in isolation, but at the intersections between nature and artifice. That includes how humans have transformed and conceptualised environments, and how they have sought to achieve sustainable interactions with their environment.”

Assistant Professor Samara Cahill (English) supports this interdisciplinary perspective by arguing that we need to cultivate what Gillen D’Arcy Wood calls “systems literacy,” a broad-based familiarity with multiple disciplines: “This means, if you are coming from the humanities, familiarising yourself with the sciences and, really, all of the STEM disciplines,”

Deputy Director William Clune of the Sustainable Earth Office (SEO) agrees, emphasising how the humanities help us to understand the importance of context: “You can’t just take a solution from one place and assume it’s going to work someplace else. Sustainability solutions have to be culturally appropriate. The humanities are the important lens through which we understand culture and society and the philosophers and artists lead the way on these issues.” The fresh perspectives of humanities scholars supplement scientific findings and

broaden environmental studies by focusing on how environmental issues are registered by the arts and communicated to the public.

In January 2017 Asst Prof. Cahill launched the Sustainable Earth Film Series, which consisted of weekly screenings of films that consider sustainability issues, such as James Cameron’s Avatar and Hayao Miyazaki’s Princess Mononoke. Students and staff were invited to attend viewings and to engage in informal discussions. Initially planned as a four-week event, the series was so well-received that it was extended for another two weeks to include M. Night Shyamalan’s After Earth, Healing Fukushima, a documentary by Associate Professor Sulfikar Amir (Sociology), and ad-hoc viewings of Avatar: The Last Airbender.

Such events provide invaluable opportunities for scholars and students in the humanities and the sciences to interact and exchange their views about the representation of environmental concerns in film; they thereby facilitate well-rounded, interdisciplinary conversations, which continue to impact students after the event itself concludes. Indeed, as Asst Prof. Cahill notes, these screenings motivated students to undertake URECA (Undergraduate Research Experience on Campus) projects that investigate related issues such as the representation of coal, apocalyptic science fiction, and treatments of masculinity and environmental resources in Steven

Is Climate Change Real?

Since 2011 U.S. President Donald Trump has been stating on Twitter that climate change is a conspiracy that is designed to stifle U.S. manufacturing and that previous administrations had expended too many resources on the issue of global warming. On 1st June 2017 the United States stated that they would cease all participation in the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change mitigation. However, Article 28 of the Agreement states that the earliest effective withdrawal cannot take place before 4th November 2020 until which date the U.S. is obligated to maintain its commitments. The next U.S. Presidential election takes place the day before, which means that Trump’s successor may reverse this decision. The climate change debate looks set to run well into the twenty-first century.

Associate Professor Teru Miyake (Philosophy) explains, “There is a lot of debate about things like global warming and climate change and what is established by science. Some people doubt that global warming is happening. Others insist that it is a certainty. We know for a fact that it’s happening. If you have an oversimplified view of how science works, the research on global warming and climate change may not agree with your preconceived knowledge. Science is much more complicated than that and so you need to pay careful attention to what goes on in climate science.”

Assoc Prof. Miyake studies epistemology, with a specific focus on how knowledge about the Earth’s deep interior is derived from observations of seismic waves. The manner in which people gain knowledge about a topic frames how they come to perceive it.

Assoc Prof. Miyake cites an example that may justify skepticism. “If you go to museums or if you go and look in a book, you’ll see those cut-away models of the Earth that show a core, a mantle and a crust. And you might think, well, how do you know that there’s a core? Nobody actually dug a hole down there, right?” Philosophy’s study of how knowledge is derived is hence crucial to understanding why people may not recognise problems such as climate change, persuading them to look at things differently, and motivating them to be more concerned.
Universe and Avatar. The popularity of this event and its influence on student research trajectories and outcomes demonstrates how the Environmental Humanities encourage engagement with sustainability and the environment outside the classroom.

Ongoing communication between the humanities and sciences is of utmost importance. “In SEO,” says Mr. Clune, “we try to make our programmes multidisciplinary, while also taking into account that sustainable solutions must be culturally appropriate.”

One way that SEO facilitates multidisciplinary discussions is through the S3 symposium. According to Mr. Clune, these symposiums support innovation by including technological, economic, legal, and governmental perspectives. They bring together people working on sustainability across disciplines to share their perspectives. He adds, “People in all the disciplines go away with their wheels turning. The key for it to be effective is to make it open and welcoming to everybody.”

**Inspiring the Next Generation**

Environmental Humanities modules taught across the School of Humanities at NTU encourage students to think about their role in climate change. For example, Assistant Professor Ivan Panović’s module, Ecolinguistics: Language and the Environment, analyses how language represents the relationship between humans and their environment, and how it can shape either ecologically damaging or harmonious practices.

With respect to how language affects the way we think, he remarks, “The word ‘environment’ often refers to our surroundings. Thus, it is something that is outside, surrounding us. This tends to put us at the centre, at the top of the food chain. The word ‘resources’ comes to mean something that is there for us to use. As we can see over the last century, there have been dramatic changes that seem to be irreversible. Great damage has been done to our ecosystems which jeopardises the life-sustaining systems of this planet.”

Asst Prof. Panović also cites examples from other cultures to make students mindful of ecologically harmonious language: “Most traditional Japanese haiku is really about nature and the appreciation of the small things around us,” he observes. “They are about rain, water, leaves, and animals, which are represented in a very defined format and within a very specific genre.”

The main goal of his module is to demonstrate how language plays a role in environmental sustainability today, and how students can contribute to it by using language ethically. He states, “You may end up working as a copywriter in advertising and I will feel better that you are aware of this and familiar with how consumers can be manipulated, like when we talk about ‘food production’ instead of slaughtering animals.”
Another course in the Environmental Humanities at NTU is Introduction to Sustainability, a compulsory online module for all undergraduates administered by the Sustainable Earth Office. “The whole idea,” Mr. Clune explains, “was to create a multidisciplinary approach. It’s engineering, but it’s also governance and policy, business and economics.” He expresses interest in having a humanities topic in the future that takes for instance, palm oil, a regional issue, as its focus.

Mr. Clune is currently working with Professor Ben Shedd, an Academy Award winning filmmaker at the School of Art, Design and Media (ADM) on a film about sustainable buildings. “The next phase,” he says, “is going to be an even bigger move, a massively open online course, where everybody can see everyone else’s perspectives.”

In addition to courses in linguistics, SEO’s online course, Asst Prof. Powell’s The Green Earth: Issues in Environmental History, and Asst Prof. Cahill’s Introduction to Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature: Ecocritical Enlightenments, students can look forward to future changes and additions that further promote the Environmental Humanities. With Dr. Kira Alexandra Rose joining the English programme as a Postdoctoral Fellow this year, her expertise in water scholarship will be harnessed by Asst Prof. Cahill as they jointly re-organise her core module to include contemporary sources on environmental ethics, activism, and climate change.

Water prices have increased by 30%
According to Asst Prof. Cahill and Dr. Rose, the revamped module, “The Ecological Thought: Environmental Consciousness in Literature and Beyond,” will “approach environmental consciousness from a number of perspectives so that students get a fuller picture of current work in environmental scholarship and creative production, past and present, across regions.”

Dr. Rose will also teach a new Environmental Humanities module, The Environmental Imagination, starting in Fall 2018. The module approaches climate change holistically by placing contemporary creative sources – including literature, film and documentary, visual art, and sculpture – into conversation with environmental history, public science writing, and climate communications research.

Asst Prof. Powell, meanwhile, offers Marine Environmental History, which examines a range of issues, including those explored in his upcoming book on the global history of human interactions with sharks in the twentieth century; it also addresses depictions of marine environments and indigenous and industrial fisheries, transboundary issues particularly important to marine environmental history.

Students visit the S.E.A. Aquarium while reading Susan Davis’s Spectacular Nature, which covers the anthropology of Sea World. As Asst Prof. Powell points out, “humanities scholars should never lose sight of what we do best, which is connecting environmental issues to power structures, politics, culture, economics, race, gender and class.”

The growth of the Environmental Humanities at SoH, which also houses the Sustainability Research Cluster, attests to its faculty’s commitment to helping students to understand their role in sustainable development through an array of perspectives. Scientific study is invaluable, yet so are public awareness and action, activated by the arts. In other words, one need not necessarily be an expert in science to make conscientious, informed, and valuable contributions.

As a representative of SEO, Mr. Clune acknowledges the value of interdisciplinary collaboration under the banner of the Environmental Humanities, which provide an integrated approach to sustainability. He agrees that the humanities speak to key issues pertaining to culture and the environment and shed light on people’s changing mores, such as their stance on meat consumption and the treatment of animals.

Continuing to incorporate the Environmental Humanities into classrooms will enhance awareness and sustainability efforts at NTU, one student at a time. Attending to the impact of critical and creative efforts in the arts and humanities on environmental outcomes will enable scholars to mobilise their knowledge, contribute holistically to conversations about climate change, and effectively tackle large-scale problems using interdisciplinary solutions.
In the morning right after dawn, my mother shook me awake by the shoulders and beckoned towards the plain heliotrope baju kurung, whose sleeves were already two inches too short for me, hanging over the wardrobe on a wire hanger. A black chiffon scarf was draped over it, creases streaked across the smooth, almost translucent fabric. I couldn’t even remember when was the last time it was unearthed from the deep caverns of abandonment, dust and scattering baby pink mothballs – it was probably when my paternal grandmother died two years ago. In an instant, I was reminded of the previous night’s events – Atuk was no longer with us.

We were the first ones to arrive at Wak Jin’s (my mother’s younger brother, oldest son in the family) house where Atuk’s body would be returned from the morgue to be bathed and prayed for the last time. A few stray hairs had managed to creep out of my scarf as I sat cross-legged on the straw mat, prompting me to habitually bury them back into the inner cap that was already feeling too tight for my rather bulbous head. I had never been particularly close to any of my cousins, who were years ahead of me and at the point of reaching the prime of
adulthood. Their conversations were often limited to how busy their working schedules were, recent disastrous dating experiences and impending engagement or wedding preparations. As to be expected, I was often left out, not that I minded very much. During the funeral, however, things had taken a particularly different turn as they began directing their attention towards me. Perhaps the sobriety of the situation had negated the usual triviality of their conversations.

“So how do you feel about Atuk’s death? You seem to be okay with it,” asked Yazid, Wak Jin’s youngest son, sucking on a Hacks sweet.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I’m alright I guess.”

“How much do you think Atuk left for us in his will?” Khadijah, his older sister, asked in her nasal tone that often annoyed me.

Picking at his stubby nails, Yazid chuckled silently to himself before his lips pressed themselves into a hard, thin line, as though realizing that it wasn’t right to laugh at a funeral. Having been frequently excluded from their company, I had developed a particular tendency to gaze at them with fascination, connecting them to the stories I had eavesdropped from the elders’ conversations. Like how as a child, in the effluvia of two teenaged sisters who shared the cramped space of their bedroom, Yazid had stolen Triumph bras from his sister’s bedroom and wore them over his imitation Chelsea football jerseys, flaunting them playfully in front of his mother who had simply brushed him off. Meanwhile, one of his sisters, Khadijah, who was formerly the pride of the family for being the only granddaughter to study in a madrasah, was forced to drop out of school because she had flunked every subject except for Malay.

“Jenazah sudah sampai,” announced a corpulent man, cutting into my thoughts, as he entered the gates in an oversized kurta and a pair of cargo pants overflowing at his bare feet.

An ephemeral silence pervaded the house as we heard the shuffling of shoes being taken off at the corridor, followed by the baritone murmurings of unfamiliar men and the audible swish of washed-out denim brushing against kneecaps as they streamed in from the door with the corpse of my grandfather in their grips. My eyes fell onto his face, leached of colour, his thick lips almost curved into a smile as though he was still alive, greeting me like he always did whenever we arrived at his flat bringing sliced guava dusted with plum powder (the only type of fruit he ate) or dosai drenched in fish curry from his favourite Indian stall.

I couldn’t bear to make eye contact with my mother, who was standing at the kitchen door with her sisters. It would be too painful for me to live with. Paralyzed by the sudden emptiness that traced the footsteps of the funeral bearers, my cousins and I didn’t move as it finally registered in our heads that the body was not Atuk. It was not the man we grew up hating as children, not because he ever scolded us for stealing freshly fried rempeyek without my grandmother’s permission, but because of the perpetual grimness of his face that fixed terror on our hearts – the same man who sat on his high stool, facing the opened windows of the bedroom with a cigarette in between blackened fingers to wave at us until our figures were simply dots on the road and the man who slipped old, crumpled two-dollars notes from the sixties into our pockets and told us to get some ice cream from the mamak shop. The only thing left to haunt us was the dust of lost evenings, the smell of curry that never quite left our fingers and the image of Atuk as a sturdy man of eighty mounted over his bicycle slowly fading from our minds.
Mediating between the disease, the patient, and the physician

Ivy Chua, Izza Haziqah, and Rafiq Ismail
What is the Medical Humanities?

Medical Humanities is an interdisciplinary endeavour that investigates the social, cultural, philosophical, linguistic and historical contexts of medicine and healthcare. Medical Humanities scholars research a variety of issues including doctor-patient interactions, the spread of diseases in world history, and the flourishing genre of illness narratives. As well as providing insight into one of the most basic and universal of human concerns these disciplines inform the science and practice of medicine.

Faculty members in the School of Humanities (SoH) have founded a new Medical Humanities research cluster as part of a drive at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) to enhance interdisciplinary learning and research. We speak to them to grasp a fuller understanding of their work, which offers insight into medicine beyond the treatment of physical ailments.

Scholars in the humanities aim to shift the perception that medicine is a utilitarian discipline confined solely to the natural sciences. By analysing the history of medicine, interrogating the social interactions that govern it, and examining the lived experience of health and illness, they are reviving the human face of medicine across various fields.

Medicine, in its modern formulations, has adopted a biomedical paradigm in which the body is seen as being akin to a machine. This paradigm, focusing solely on biological factors, offers a specific but narrow definition of health as freedom from pain, defect, and disease. This definition was challenged in the mid-1970s when medical practitioners developed a more holistic understanding of medicine, considering variables beyond the physical body such as social factors and the subjective experience of sickness. This new ‘biopsychosocial’ medical model, spearheaded by psychiatrist George L. Engel, now lies at the heart of inquiries in the medical humanities.

Emphasising Patient Care

For linguist and Chinese language scholar Assistant Professor Lim Ni Eng, biopsychosocial medicine is underscored by a simple yet fundamental principle.

“People tend to forget that medicine is inherently humanistic. I think that doctors tend to look at the un-human human body. No feelings, no thoughts, no mind” stressed the linguist. “Medicine is about one human being trying to cure another.”

Asst Prof. Lim is at the forefront of understanding the uniquely Singaporean experience of medicine. In collaboration with the Urology Department at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, Asst Prof. Lim records doctor-patient interactions and analyses conversations that occur in the consultation room.

His research assists medical practitioners in honing their situational awareness when communicating with patients and elucidates how patients perceive medical messages. This enhances the quality of doctor-patient interaction, ensuring accurate and safe diagnoses.

“In the end, it’s about sensitising doctors to the rich and complex...”
tapestry of interaction,” said Asst Prof. Lim.

For Assistant Professor Michael Tan from NTU’s School of Art, Design, and Media (ADM), the humanities can promote health and wellbeing directly. “I think in terms of what the arts can actually do to enhance the understanding of humanities within the medical context,” said Asst Prof. Tan. Asst Prof. Tan’s work fuses the arts with the medical humanities for public engagement. His current projects include the AD4H Lab, which explores the use of art and design for health and wellbeing, and a collaboration with the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) and the National Arts Council (NAC) which investigates the impact of art programs in nursing homes. Asst Prof. Tan looks forward to engaging partners and corporate players from the medical industry in more in-depth discussions between the public and private sector on the role of art in medicine.

Asst Prof. Tan intends to use the AD4H Lab as a platform for international networking through which students, teachers, and academics can engage in discussions about the medical humanities. He is also a firm advocate for global exchange. His efforts include establishing ties with Durham University and King’s College London, British institutions with distinguished reputations as leading global research centres in the medical humanities.

Although her primary research seeks to understand the evolution of medical and pathological patterns, her work also has impact in the present day. “We help the current population to improve or understand some of their health issues,” said Asst Prof. Yeh. “For example, in certain geographical areas, certain populations or ethnic groups are more vulnerable to infectious or genetic diseases”.

As such, her findings facilitate the fight to prevent the same diseases that ravaged the ancestors of a community from blighting their descendants.

Beyond creating meaningful impact in the local communities where she conducts her research, Asst Prof. Yeh also seeks to nurture the growth of Singapore’s research in the medical humanities by establishing close working relationships with international colleagues.

### Historical Data, Contemporary Benefits

While Asst Prof. Lim seeks to understand contemporary interactions between medicine and the humanities, medical anthropologist Assistant Professor Ivy Yeh Hui-Yan examines the connections between history, disease, and human genealogy. Working in remote regions in North-West China, Asst Prof. Yeh traces the historical and biological evolution of medicine and charts the movement of disease following patterns of human migration.

“In the end, it’s about sensitising doctors to the rich and complex tapestry of interaction,”
The Cultural Context of Medicine

Whether focused on contemporary or historical medical practices, the medical humanities seeks to understand the cultural context of medicine.

In his research into doctor-patient interactions, Asst Prof. Lim notes that medicine works differently in Singapore than in other regions such as the U.K. and U.S. In those areas, medical data is largely consistent due to the relative homogeneity of their societies, with recorded interactions often involving doctors and patients of the same ethnicity and culture. In Singapore, however, there is a conglomeration of disparate cultures and ethnicities of both doctors and patients. Asst Prof. Lim’s investigation of doctor-patient interactions remains at the forefront of efforts to understand how cultural differences affect medical practice.

The importance of culture also extends to literary studies. For medieval literature expert Assistant Professor Katherine Hindley, studying instances of medical discourse in medieval writing offers insights into both medieval society and how medical views have progressed and evolved.

Through her initial plan to look at the way medieval society thought about writing, Asst Prof. Hindley became intrigued by uses of medical charms in medieval texts.

"Many medieval people would not be into the idea of prayer alone as healing, and not seeing a doctor. They thought lots of things could cure you" notes Asst Prof. Hindley.

In the Middle Ages, reciting healing charms aloud or using written incantations as physical ingredients in medicinal brews were common practices. While these principles have been largely dismissed by modern science, the practice of imbuing the written word with the ability to produce results in the material world lives on outside institutionalised medicine.

The changing perception of diseases over time has impacted modern medical attitudes, including how mental health and disability are socially perceived today. As such, Asst Prof. Hindley’s research allows for an alternative understanding of medical progress by observing the evolving definition of medicine.
“Back in the medieval period, there was a much broader way of looking at health,” said Asst Prof. Hindley. “If you think of the placebo effect, you can see how charms might have a scientifically measurable impact on the body. I think many elements in medieval medicine have to do with making people feel like they have been understood. That mindset extends further to questions like how do we keep people healthy, happy and improve their quality of life. The medieval perspective of medicine looks at the world more broadly and that, I think, is valuable,”

Current Challenges
While research in the medical humanities offers exciting insights and possibilities, it faces its fair share of challenges.

Asst Prof. Lim notes the need for further integration between the medical field and the humanities and would like to see more medical humanities modules being offered. Given the opportunity, Asst Prof. Lim would also like to have these modules taught not only to students in the School of Humanities, but also to medical students in NTU’s Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine.

“Humanities scholars have a lot to offer doctors in terms of reacquainting them with the premise that medicine is inherently humanistic, and to expand their horizons beyond their daily physiological studies” added Asst Prof. Lim.

Asst Prof. Tan also recognises the potential for collaboration between the arts, humanities, and the medical fields. He states that this can be done once the medical industry buys into a “more refined understanding of what art is doing to people” and “recognises what the arts can do with respect to health and wellbeing”.

To this end, several medical humanities courses currently run at NTU. These include Asst Prof. Hindley’s Magic and
Medicine in Medieval Literature while, over at ADM, Asst Prof. Tan aims to run a postgraduate photography course leading conversations on visual methods in arts for health. Assistant Professor Park Hyung Wook, a historian of science and medicine, teaches Health and Illness in History and The History of the Body and Assistant Professor Graham Matthews (Literature) teaches Literature and Medicine. Through research, teaching and continuous public engagement, the field of Medical Humanities is set to go from strength to strength in Singapore.

Future Opportunities
Research in the medical humanities has already yielded a positive impact on Asst Prof. Yeh’s and Asst Prof. Tan’s teaching practices. Each has established a student-centred pedagogy, echoing the principle of patient-centred care. As Asst Prof. Tan explains, the idea of ‘people-centeredness’ varies according to who he works with, be it the patient when he is in hospitals and nursing homes, or his students in class. Both scholars, as a result, eschew an instructor-led teaching philosophy in favour of taking the role of enabler in a more interactive style of teaching.

Asst Prof. Hindley builds on her understanding of changing perceptions to reassert the value of medical history and to change many students’ initial perception of medieval society as backward and unintelligent. To achieve this, Asst Prof. Hindley finds it useful to talk about medicine due to its strong association with science, epistemology and reasoning. She explains that while medieval medical ideas may seem to be baseless, new scientific investigations on some medieval cures such as Bald’s eye-salve reveal them to be medically sound. This often surprises her students and provokes them reconsider and reexamine how knowledge is created and understood.

Concluding Thoughts
In 1958, the physician Henry Borsook stated: “Without scientific knowledge, a compassionate wish to serve mankind’s health is meaningless. But scientific knowledge without wisdom is a frozen storehouse”. The Medical Humanities seeks to bolster that wisdom and help patients to express and overcome their pain, suffering, worry, anguish, and the sense of something just not being right.

Its tangible research benefits for our communities further underscore the importance of the medical humanities as a key research area that is beginning to gain traction in NTU and Singapore society.

Given the varied and interesting research projects that medical humanities scholars have embarked on at NTU, we can only expect the further growth of this field as one of the most dynamic areas of research in Singapore today.
That words come with meaning (‘have’ meaning) and stand for or correspond to ‘things’ is an age-old belief. We may even say that it is ‘common sense’. However, this “habitual attitude towards words”, as C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards call it in their book The Meaning of Meaning, published almost a century ago in 1923, turns out to be a deep fallacy. In fact, Ogden and Richards went so far as to say that such beliefs are a form of “superstition” and should be given up as quickly as possible by any right-thinking person. The reason why Ogden and Richards think that this is superstition is that they realised that words don’t stand for things directly but serve to initiate ‘mental processes’ which then result in references to ‘things’ (i.e., ‘meanings’).

What’s more, it’s common belief to think that most words have a definite meaning. There are the odd cases of homophony (sun, son) or polysemy (bank – money bank vs. river bank) of course, but by and large, one word one meaning. The truth is, when we consider words a little more closely, it turns out that most of them are polysemous. Thus, ‘rock’ can be used to refer to ‘stone’ but it is also used quite commonly in the sense of ‘rock-and-roll’, as in ‘rock star’ or ‘rock concert’. Indeed it can also go with several other words such as ‘rock sugar’, ‘rock candy’, ‘rocking cradle’ and ‘rocking chair’.

It is said that the 500 most commonly used words in the language has 14,000 definitions in the OED – on average 28 senses for each word!

And with words like ‘truth’, ‘democracy’ and ‘beauty’, you can imagine how complicated things can get once we drill down into these things.

Incidentally, even very small words, like prepositions and particles, turn out to have multiple senses. For example, the preposition ‘of’ (or –‘s) can ‘mean’ rather different things in different combinations. Thus, ‘of’ as in ‘the King of France’ is very different from ‘of’ as in ‘the city of New York’, ‘a work of art’, or ‘tug-of-war’.

There can be no better way of illustrating this point than to cite a fun poem written by William Cole called ‘foolish questions’. 
Foolish Questions
(William Cole)

Where can a man buy a cap for his knee?
Or a key for a lock of his hair?
Can your eyes be called an academy
Because there are pupils there?
In the crown of your head, what jewels are found?
Who travels the bridge of your nose?
Could you use in shingling the roof of your mouth
The nails on the end of your toes?
Could the crook in your elbow be sent to jail?
If so, what did he do?
How can you sharpen your shoulder blades?
I’ll be damned if I know, do you?
Can you sit in the shade of the palm of your hand
And play on the drum of your ear?
Do the calves of our legs eat the corn on our toes?
Then why does it grow on the ear?
Can the calf of his leg eat the corn on his toe?—
There’s somethin’ pretty strange around here.

If words can be used to mean so many things, then how could we ever know which is the right meaning of a word on any given occasion of its use? A simple (or simple-minded?) answer to this question is: It all depends on the context. This is of course entirely true, but then we would just be shifting the problem from ‘word’ and ‘meaning’ to ‘context’, so that the question now becomes: What is context, and how do we know on any given occasion what the context is?

This is hardly the occasion to tackle such vexing questions, but I would like to quickly outline, in a sketchy fashion, the shape of an answer to this question.

We need first to abandon (as Ogden and Richards rightly recommended) the idea that words are symbols which ‘stand for things’. Rather, we should start thinking of words, as recommended by Wittgenstein, as tools or instruments that are used to do things (social actions), and as, following Alfred Schutz and Harold Garfinkel, as indices that don’t so much ‘stand for’ things as suggest directions and locations that the hearer or interpreter should look in her mind (within the body of knowledge that constitutes her past experience) so as to retrieve relevant bits of knowledge to construct a context which will make it possible for her to make sense of what the speaker is trying to do with the words that he is using at this very moment in time.

It may be best to show how this scenario works with an example. In speaking to a colleague recently, he marvelled at how ‘the same expression’ could mean very different things, sometimes even opposite things, in different situations. One such expression which he cited is ‘Of course!’. Without going into details, we should be able to see how, under different circumstances, and in response to different questions or suggestions, ‘of course’ could be taken to mean very different things. Thus, in response to someone asking ‘Can I take this chair?’ in the canteen, it could mean ‘by all means, go ahead’, but in response to a student’s ‘Is this assignment to be submitted before Friday?’, the same utterance (by a teacher) would more likely be taken to mean ‘You ought to know!’.

We should therefore say that, rather than being ‘carriers of meanings’, words serve more like signs or signposts showing hearers possible ways of interpreting and understanding speakers’ intentions (‘what they want to do’). The hearer will then ‘decipher’ and interpret words in such a way as to construct a context and a meaning in her mind at the same time. So, beauty is in the eye of the beholder after all!

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Assessment Innovation

Dynamic new approaches to teaching and learning in the School of Humanities
Educators in the School of Humanities are developing some of the most creative and exciting approaches to learning by adopting an “assessment first” strategy. Rather than creating content to then be tested under exam conditions, our professors aim to enthuse and inspire students by focusing on the skills and abilities that they will develop upon completion of the course. The course content is then carefully curated to structure student learning in the achievement of these skills and this practice often leads to the development of new and exciting assessment methods.

The growth in innovative assessment methods coincides with the launch of NTU’s vision to develop and sustain a learning environment that foregrounds five core values. Dubbed the ‘5Cs’, this initiative is designed to imbue NTU graduates with the following attributes sought by Singapore employers: competency, creativity, civic-mindedness, character, and communication. Recognising that reliance on a limited range of assessment strategies may not adequately account for all of these attributes, our professors in the humanities are designing innovative new approaches to teaching and learning.

Teaching and learning thrives on forward momentum, on the sense that we are consistently improving, and this applies to students and educators alike. What follows is a selection of assessment innovations that we hope will inspire new pedagogical methods that help develop students’ skills in creativity, communication and critical thinking and to face up to future challenges.

**Creative Projects**

Creative projects offer students the opportunity to consider new ways to make their academic work accessible to a wider audience. They are invited to consider questions of form, become technological innovators, engage with civic society, and work together as a team. This assessment method also challenges students to reflect on the core values of their chosen discipline and to evaluate the merits and limitations of positions from other disciplines.

Assistant Professor Ivan Panović from the Linguistics and Multilingual Studies programme (LMS), teaches Delectable Tongues: Language and Food. The course’s final assignment is a creative project that requires students to present their academic findings using an interactive medium such as a video, skit or even podcast.

Although the students’ topics have to be approved by Asst Prof. Panović, they are given leeway to decide exactly how they want to present their findings. “This approach lets students choose how they want to be assessed,” Asst Prof. Panović explains. By taking responsibility to present academic research in new ways, students demonstrate their creativity and enhance their analytic skills, preparing them for their future careers.

Asst Prof. Panović also teaches Language in Society, with an assessment that requires students to illustrate their findings on a poster, with ample images and descriptions. Subsequently, a poster exhibition is held in the corridors of the HSS Building, open to all students and professors in NTU. The audience can then vote for the best poster online. Showcasing their work to a cross-disciplinary audience encourages students to not only be creative but also enhances their communication skills. Translating academic discourse into something that is accessible to a non-specialist audience helps enhance students’ knowledge and understanding of their chosen discipline while preparing them for interpersonal communication in their future workplaces.
Associate Professor Hallam Stevens (History) teaches Feasting and Fasting, which focuses on the origins of food and beverages. Assoc Prof. Stevens holds food tastings in class that pique students’ interest because they are able to engage all of their five senses while learning about the history of food. For instance, making chocolate from scratch, tasting it and learning about it ensures that students benefit from a lesson that is both practical and intellectually rigorous.

Students are invited to design a food menu that challenges them to gather and analyse historical sources while enhancing their design skills. Year 3 student, Elango Gopalan, thoroughly enjoyed this hands-on assessment. He revealed, “I went around Michelin star restaurants in Singapore to gain inspiration from their menus.”

The food menu assesses not only students’ research and presentation skills but their ability to work in a team and negotiate creative solutions. While students develop knowledge and understanding of the origins of food through their historical research, they are also tasked with presenting the content of the food menu in simple terms as this visual and creative assignment has to be clear for ‘patrons’ to understand.

Associate Professor Francesco Cavallaro (LMS) offers Word of Mouth: Transmission of Oral Culture and gives students the option to submit a poem for their final assessment. Assoc Prof Cavallaro encourages students to test the real life application of theories from the course by letting them use oral composition as a tool to assist in the formation of their written poem. Students experience the application of linguistic theories for themselves as it unfolds various and unique ways of using their poetic imagination.

In Codes from the Past, Assoc Prof Cavallaro introduces students to the study of cryptograms, which are puzzle-like codes that reveal a hidden message. To encourage student participation, Assoc Prof Cavallaro encourages students to submit original cryptographs; they are even given the choice to create their own language by coming up with an entirely new alphabet system and syntax. This form of assessment gives students the opportunity to directly experience the history of cryptograms as they try their hand at creating their own codes or languages. Niki Cassandra Eu Min, a student from the course notes: “By asking us create something, or to make your own discovery about something real and concrete, it forces you to learn more about the subject.” Two of the students’ cryptograms are so impressive that Assoc Prof Cavallaro intends to publish them in the prestigious Journal of Cryptology.

**Social Media**

Students born after 1995 are part of a generation who have grown up alongside the smart phone and the ever-widening reach of social media. Although concerns have been raised about addiction, mental health, and harassment on social media, these platforms can also be forces for positive social engagement, a means of developing resilience, empathy and more open and prolific communication on public health issues.

Incorporating social media into teaching and learning has the benefit
of reaching students through a medium with which they are intimately familiar. The formal constraints of the various platforms can also foster creative approaches to course design, necessitating experimentation with form and content that extends beyond the traditional classroom environment.

Winner of the John Cheung Social Media award (2015), Dr. Cui Feng from the Chinese programme is an advocate of using social media to enhance the learning experiences of students. He argues that creating a “new teaching environment with the application of IT propels students to be active in their learning, boosting their ability to gather and utilise knowledge and to solve societal challenges”.

Through the online student video response application, Recap, Dr. Cui invites students to post weekly video responses to a prescribed question as a mode of assessment. Students are also able to use this platform to consult Dr. Cui about the lessons and course material. As students are given the option to present their responses in either Mandarin or English, Recap provides them with additional opportunities to exercise the translation skills learnt in class.

Similarly, Asst Prof. Panović has incorporated an Instagram assignment into Delectable Tongues. He shares food photographs online — an activity that many students already practice — and invites them to connect the images with concepts taught in class. Students are required to contribute two Instagram photographs, with a caption that comments on the relationship between food and language, to the module’s main Instagram account (@delectable.tongues) where other students are able to view and respond to their favourite posts. Third year student, Thng Jing Wen, noted that the activity brought academic concepts into everyday life: “it was fun to hunt for food products with an interesting etymology while grocery shopping”.

On History of Information Technology, Assoc Prof. Stevens asks students to create a website to illustrate the history of particular technologies using either Wordpress or Wix as their medium for website design. Through this process, students experience a variety of methods to organise information and they can incorporate elements such as images, videos, or diagrams of historical timelines. This flexibility in form allows for information to be presented in a more accessible manner. Assoc Prof. Stevens asserts that although the students were initially intimidated by the assignment due to their lack of experience with website design, many produced extremely creative websites.

Matching Prof Steven’s enthusiasm for online interaction is Assistant Professor Yong Wern Mei from the English programme. Asst Prof. Yong offers a course entitled Feminist
Studies in which students are required to post a 300-word response to topics covered in class on the course blog. This blog assignment provides students with a platform for them to articulate their thoughts without being limited by the formal register of an essay. Since students are expected to comment on each other’s posts, the blog allows them to practice honing their arguments with the knowledge that their posts will be open to contention from other readers.

The blog posts also allow students to extend their discussions beyond the classroom and to speak about their own personal experiences. Moreover, students are able to analyse works which are not typically considered “academic”. One prominent submission Asst Prof. Yong remembers involved two students who conducted a social experiment; they created a persona on a dating website in order to experience first-hand how women were treated online.

Continuous Assessment
Many faculty members in SoH have converted their modules to assess students continuously rather than with a final exam at the end. This is because students can put their ideas into practice as they go rather than cramming at the end, it highlights areas for improvement at an early stage, students can build on their existing knowledge, and it encourages high levels of knowledge retention. Continuous assessment offers the opportunity for innovative activities both inside and outside the classroom that test students on skills that will be of benefit to them in their future careers.

Assistant Professor Christopher Trigg from the English programme sets unorthodox assessments that stem from his desire to help students develop practical and transferable life skills as well as develop awareness of the socio-historical context of the various course texts.

In Early American Literature, Asst Prof. Trigg prescribes a re-visionary exercise to be completed in groups of four. Students are asked to research an author and to re-write one of his or her texts in a different style or genre. This allows students to gain valuable insight into print culture and they attain transferable skills through increased exposure to the practice of editing. This exercise also demonstrates that the purpose of a text can be illustrated not just through content, but also through the form, style, and presentation of the work.

Year 2 English student, Jesleen Soh, believes that Prof Trigg’s assignments “allowed her to understand literary works from a range of perspectives, including from that of a bookseller.”.

Asst Prof. Trigg also has a group exercise in Early Nineteenth Century Literature where students are tasked to compare different versions of the same text using online tools such as Juxta. This exercise encourages students to observe the process of story revisions in literature and to develop useful skills in interpretation.

Taking his lessons beyond the classroom is Assistant Professor Kevin Riordan from the English programme. In Advanced Drama, Asst Prof. Riordan aims to unpack the notion of prioritising the texts in the formal study of theatrical plays by putting the spotlight on other aspects such as its performativity and technicality. In his Anthropological Fieldwork assessment, students are asked to turn everyday observations into a theatrical act. Year 4 English student, Shereen Rafi states: “As a student taking a drama module, you have to learn how to study people and their behaviour, and I am glad the fieldwork forced me out of my comfort zone in that respect”.

"THE BLOG POSTS ALSO ALLOW STUDENTS TO EXTEND THEIR DISCUSSIONS BEYOND THE CLASSROOM"