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Challenges and Perspectives in Using Virtual Interactions to Conduct an International Student Exchange Programme: The Case of Heuta'18 and Heuta'19 by Universiti Putra Malaysia and Kumamoto University

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Abstract

Our on-going concern has been the internationalisation of the varsity particularly on developing globalised learners in answering the needs for developing matured cross-border education in the age of The Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0) which is now quickened by the outbreak of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the subsequent disruptions of physical contacts. Our flagship experiments of the global classroom—termed as Heuta'18 and Heuta'19—were ones that applied video conferencing, social media and online collaborative tools like Dropbox Paper within the heutagogy framework set for intercultural group learning. These are relatively new forms of educational methods that utilise Web 2.0 tools to realise a humanised learning process. A focus group discussion was conducted among the trainers to identify challenges faced in conducting student exchanges using virtual heutagogy. The findings revealed that the lack of proximities for mental security during online communications as well as the lack of references in understanding the sharp contrast between offline and online behaviours were the main challenges. Surrogation as a cyber identity emerged as a theme that was critical to understanding the new behavioural typology of the students when engaged in online learning.

Keywords: Heutagogy, Learning Behaviours, Online Interactions, Student Exchange, Student Mobility

Introduction

Education is an area that is and will continue to be seriously disrupted by the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The loss of learning and contact hours, the uncertainties of schedules and the changes in the ways of student assessments can dampen the quality of graduates and affect the stability of employment (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). During the

COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions have repeated periods of closures and re-openings of their physical campuses at unexpected and irregular intervals. Policy makers and implementors of education are forced into damage control and carry out educational activities in trial-and-error modes. Among these, the most frequently practised is to conduct teaching and learning online which has suddenly become the main platform of delivery in varsities worldwide. This is perhaps the only viable method of course delivery when students are physically separated from their campuses.

Short-Term Student Exchange Programme

Cross-border education, a major theme in higher education worldwide (Knight, 2006; OECD & The World Bank, 2007), is disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic in a complicated way. It dampens physical travelling but allows great opportunities for a leap in distance education. International exchange activities planned for 2020 were cancelled and varsities are uncertain both about the prospects in the coming year and the preparations needed for them. Administrators are most of the time merely responding to the forever changing situations of the pandemic outbreak without any direction. Different terms are used in varsities of different regions to name their cross-border educational activities. In this paper, international exchange, student exchange and student mobility are used interchangeably.

Before the pandemic, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Kumamoto University (KU) had collaborated in 2018 and 2019 in a student exchange programme as a strategy for the internationalisation of the varsities. UPM has been supporting students' initiatives to apply and participate in mobility programmes offered in Thailand, Indonesia, and Japan as well as in conducting its own inbound mobility programmes. On the other hand, Kumamoto University is one of the 36 selected universities in Japan that offers intense student exchange programmes for the internationalisation of varsities under the scheme "Top Global University" of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Having been given priority in obtaining financial support, KU invites partnerships with universities overseas to conduct mobility programmes for KU students.

A typical short-term student exchange programme is usually held in between teaching semesters and covers a duration of approximately two weeks. The programme is also known by other terms such as "short-term study abroad programme". The student exchange programme organised by UPM and KU is a host-guest design with an emphasis on providing exposure to the language and culture of the visited country. The current practice of mobility programmes using the expository model has been effective in terms of providing exposure to the world outside of one's country. However, it falls short of substantial academic exchanges between the students of the two countries. In most cases, meaningful academic exchange was not possible as the guests were physically placed and guided as a separate group.

UPM-KU Heuta'18 and Heuta'19 Global Classrooms

The communication tools of Web 2.0 today have the potentials for aiding cross-cultural exchanges at a faster pace. Students are not ignorant of each other's countries in today's connected world. The depth of exchange that can happen between students in the current mobility programmes comes into question as the expository model with top-down teaching methods could hardly meet the tertiary level of academic activities. In answering the above-mentioned concerns, the educational student exchange projects between UPM and KU in the

2018 and 2019—entitled as Heuta'18 and Heuta'19—were designed and launched at a time without knowing of the coming COVID-19 pandemic. The academic exchange projects carried out between the students of Universiti Putra Malaysia and Kumamoto University in Japan tested the use of online platforms for students' interactions based on the approach of Heutagogy, which is also known as self-determined learning.

This collaboration utilised a hybrid of “Virtual Classroom” and physical fieldwork. Students in Malaysia and Japan shared in an interactive classroom through webinar conferencing (Zoom). A social media platform (LINE messaging) and a collaborative tool (Dropbox Paper) also allowed students to form small groups based on their interests and create research plans in addition to forming friendships. After five months of Virtual Classroom and online communication, the participants met in person in Kula Lumpur and carried out two-weeks field research in small groups based on their own plans and interests. The topics explored during the projects were about the concepts of plural co-existence in multi-cultural societies as well as various aspects of cultural identities. This had profound effects on the students' experiences and developments in their learning process. The outcome of this programme yielded some implications on the possibilities for education in a post-COVID-19 world. The proceedings of these projects have given ways to the potentials of new forms of borderless education where in-depth cross-cultural exchanges and learning can take place in a global classroom despite challenges and barriers.

Literature Review

Online Learning and Learning Behaviours

Before the acute escalation in the use of online communication tools in learning since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars had been aware that the effects of online learning would transform the way we understand and actually feel the sense of space as well as connect as a student studying or “being” in an educational institution like a university (Bayne, Gallagher & Lamb, 2014). A written account in 2014 seemed to have predicted the current situation of varsities as education institutions rushing for virtual platforms on a global scale:

A network topology might be read as being enacted for the university, in which proximity is not measurable in terms of geographical distance, or authenticity indicated by the immanence of the campus, but university space is rather to do with ‘the network elements and the way they hang together’ (Mol and Law, 1994: 649). ‘The university’ here is proximate because its ‘network elements’—students, teachers, texts, technological infrastructures and regulatory frameworks—are in intimate relation with each other (Bayne et al., 2014, p. 570).

During the pandemic, online platforms have become the dominant, if not the only possible mode of teaching and learning at universities. Unintentionally, the nature of universities has largely become closer to that of distance learning centres. The formation of new proximities in varsity education is however not merely transiting from one form of communication to another. Virtual reality is not “real” in the traditional sense of proximity-based on geographical and physical connections. Learners may thirst for replacement of the psychological connection or attachment to physical space and person. There is a need for spatial certainty by distance learners (Bayne et al., 2014).

Another issue of online learning in a student exchange programme is the social aspect of distance collaboration (Blair & Briggs, 2019) which has been a regular theme in the discourse of instructional technology. The increased flexibilities and possibilities made available by Web 2.0 tools have in turn made trust and relationships critical issues in online learning. Any discussion about the use and effectiveness of social media cannot be separated from the issue of trust (Al Qundus & Paschke, 2018), which is a central theme by itself for student exchange activities.

Online learning involves a set of distinctive learning behaviours. The integrative nature inherent in any learning process including online learning should not be ignored and reduced to the mere application of learning tools (Fawns et al., 2019, p. 293). A new form of learning that engages the learners and educators “mentally, intellectually and even emotionally with the course” (Bayne, Gallagher & Lamb, 2014, p. 570) is an apt description especially for a learning programme that centralises communication and human skills in a student exchange programme. To grasp the issue holistically and aptly, new research in online or virtual learning should integrate all the three aspects of “digital, social and the material” (Fawns et al., 2019, p. 293).

Heutagogy and Online Learning

When Hase and Kenyon (2000) proposed heutagogy, it was presented as a foundation set on the 1950s’ humanistic theory coupled with the empowered individual space of the 21st century. The central idea of heutagogy is that the learners are to set or at least negotiate, learning objectives, choose their methods of delivery and determine the way of assessment. This is only viable when a high rate of individual accessibility of information is available.

The advancement of information technology, particularly the way our life today is dependent on Web 2.0 tools, is a context that shapes the development of heutagogy. Without easy access to information, the learners could not possibly be empowered. We found that, though not explicitly included in the definition of heutagogy, educational technologies are the defining characters of the practice of heutagogy. Reports that focus on heutagogy and technology are relatively few compared to other reports. These included Blaschke’s (2012) introductory article on heutagogy and Web 2.0 (Hase & Kenyon, 2013, pp. 55–57), Schuetz’s report on the use of blogs (pp. 122–129) and Belt’s discussion on online learning (pp. 178–185).

There are two parallel developments with heutagogy: paralogy and cybergogy. Paralogy is more a bottom-up movement where it is a gathering of people engaging in web-based collaborative peer-learning on a shared topic or task (Corneli et al., 2016). Cybergogy, on the other hand, focuses on instructional design for online learning. Beginning from an online technological standpoint, cybergogy combines elements of pedagogy and andragogy into its framework that aims at “engaged learning” (Wang & Kang, 2006).

Though differing in terms of the context of development and its centric models or lack of models, the focus on individual learners’ emotions, experience, judgement and empowerment as well as the use of online technology as the delivery medium make heutagogy, paralogy and cybergogy “members of the same faith” where the three have been

frequently discussed together as closely related ideas for learning methods in the future (Carrier & Moulds, 2003).

Problem Statement

Cross-border education in the New Normal, as the phrase literally showed, could be a self-conflicting idea. Students gain benefits from international exchange by interacting with real people beyond their textbooks and classrooms. There is a fundamental conflict between the need for students to experience exchange in person by essentially learning through physical interactions and the frequently disrupted physical contact due to border closure, travel ban, campus closure and home quarantine. Accordingly, this study addressed the concerns of the lack of knowledge and methods in conducting tertiary student exchanges in an era of intensified physical distance.

The practical need to search for alternative modes for cross-border education is an urgent one. Expectations on online communication tools as the only means left viable indicate the need to research possibilities, methods, effectiveness as well as the validity of virtual platforms to achieve educational goals in student exchanges. Hence, online learning projects should be examined holistically and not be regarded as a mere technological application (Fawns et al., 2019). The unexplored area of virtual student exchange has concerns on digital applications, social behaviour and the materials used. One critical theme that emerged from our previous projects was the lack of knowledge on the way humans responded and interacted in virtual space in contrast to the physical classroom. Our observations in running Heuta'18 and Heuta'19 showed that discrepancies between personalities manifested through cyber identity and the real person could be troubling in maintaining the smooth progress of an exchange program.

The UPM-KU Heuta'18 and Heuta'19 programmes have a unique context that integrates several inter-related themes of cross-border education, heutagogy, online learning and the global classroom. In the actual implementation of the programmes, one theme may overlap with another and it is difficult to separate them. In search of solutions for cross-border education in the New Normal, a review of the preceding practice of virtual student exchanges in Heuta'18 and Heuta'19 could be significant to provide some factual and experienced-based information at this infancy stage of what might be perceived as a new approach for cross-border education.

Purpose of This Paper

This paper reports on the uncharted challenges faced in conducting student exchange activities in the distance learning mode based on the experiences and observations of the coaches of the Heuta'18 and Heuta'19 projects, which embedded the use of virtual interaction and communication in the global classroom. We hope to make explicit the challenges faced in conducting virtual communication and interaction for international exchanges and provide clear perspectives of the main issues at stake in the area of educational exchange in an era of physical and social distancing.

Methods

This paper exploited the past Heuta-events as the source of observation for an interpretation of the challenges and perspectives that extend into the global COVID-19 situation. A

qualitative study reviewed the implementation of a student exchange programme, using Focus Group Discussion (FGD) as a method to collect information from the coaches who were involved in conducting the program over two years. It focused on virtual student exchange or student exchange conducted with distance learning mode using Web 2.0 tools. The purpose was to explore issues that accompanied such mode of learning. We used a practice-based approach to the topic but contextualised loosely within Bayne, Gallagher and Lamb's (2014) notion of new proximity and Fawns, Aitken and Jones's (2019) notion that online learning should be understood comprehensively from all digital, social and material perspectives.

This paper addressed the present scenario of COVID-19 related disruptions derived from the virtual interaction component embedded within the design of the student exchange programme under review. Just as Bayne, Gallagher and Lamb (2014), as well as Mol and Law (1994)'s articles, could be applied to today's situation, experience from any educational practice using online tools or platforms could be useful to the current online learning worldwide.

Structure of Heuta'18 and Heuta'19

The experimental exchange programme focused on in this paper was implemented in 2018 and 2019. Heuta'18 was carried out in April-August 2018 with 16 Malaysians students from Universiti Putra Malaysia and 12 Japanese students from Kumamoto University. Heuta'19 was implemented in April-August 2019 with 8 students from UPM and 6 students from KU. The participants were mainly undergraduate students of various specialisations and of different seniority. There were also a few Malaysians students from postgraduate programs.

The object materials under review were Heuta'18 and Heuta'19 organised by Universiti Putra Malaysia for Kumamoto University. Table 1 shows the components of the online interactions involved in the design of the programme.

Table 1: Components of the virtual (online) interactions involved in the Heuta'18 and Heuta'19 programmes.

Component	Online tools	Behaviour	Duration and frequency	Materials involved
1 Online lecture	Zoom, video conferencing LINE messaging	Around 20 students from each university attending a lecture in a classroom setting with an LCD projector and sound system. Some students use the mobile app simultaneously in the classroom. While attending the lecture, students simultaneously conduct intragroup communication using LINE messaging.	90 minutes per session, one section per month for four months.	Recorded video lecture shared on YouTube before the meeting; PowerPoint presentation by a group; documents.
2 Group meeting	LINE video calls	Students conduct meeting according to the group assigned to discuss and decide the Study Contract.	From time to time. Average once a month for a span of four months.	Students sometimes refer to the Study Contract posted on Dropbox paper.
3 Group discussion	LINE chat	Students communicate, interact, discuss and decide the Study Contract for the group by casual messaging.	Along the programme period of six months. No time restriction.	Guidelines and suggestions given by coaches.
4 Group discussion	LINE Notes	Same as above, but the interaction is structured according to a specific topic.	Along the programme period of six months. No time restriction.	Some topics of discussion were given by the lecturer on the LINE Notes.
5 Group discussion	Dropbox Paper	Students log on to Dropbox Paper to share and contribute to the Study Contract in written form.	Along the first five months, until the Study Contract is finalised.	Study Contract that contains research problems and method of investigation; randomly shared

Conceptual Framework for this Paper

The Heuta-global classroom contains the perspectives of learning outcome and learning process. This paper is limited to the examination of one specific aspect of the learning process, which is the process of virtual (online) interactions that took place during the program. Data of the study was collected through Focus Group Discussion participated by the coaches who took part in the Heuta-programmes, complimented by an interpretation conducted by the research team. As stated above, the Heuta-programmes have other significant dimensions such as the learning outcomes, the change of awareness of the students, and the effect of heutagogy as an approach in education. For these, data were collected separately and are excluded from this paper.

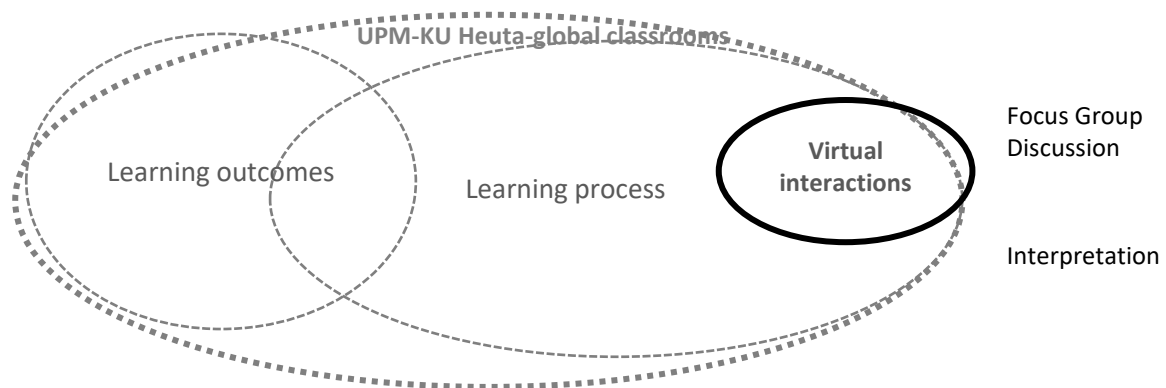


Figure 1 Conceptual framework for this paper

The Focus Group Discussions (FGD) employed specifically selected participants based on individual knowledge, skills and experience and a systematic sorting out of discussion data (Nyumba et al., 2018). The four coaches who participated in FGD were homogenous in their background. They were academics trained with a master's degree and above and were involved in lecturing or tutoring undergraduates. They had specific knowledge and experiences as the key persons in the implementation of Heuta'18 and Heuta'19. They were involved in carrying out all components of the programme, guiding the group interactions through the various online platforms stated in Table 1, overseeing group progress as well as physically leading the student groups during the ten days fieldwork in person near the end of the programme. The coaches were therefore the relevant informants in revealing the actual conditions in implementing the virtual interactions in the student exchange. The participants of FGD were Phyllis Toh Chze Woon, Wong Siao Ern, Lee Shien Wei and Chan Cheong Jan.

The interpretation of the findings was achieved through collaboration by two educator-scholars—Joshua Rickard and Chan Cheong Jan—who had both been implementing distance student exchanges as well as coping with the disruptions in their day-to-day work of lecturing and supervising undergraduate and postgraduate students online. The ideas used for interpretation and discussion were also derived from discussion carried out among the researcher team and with an individual educator.

Results

The results of the Focus Group Discussions, based on the coaches' two years of experience in organising the international student exchange programme in the distance learning mode using Web 2.0 tools, revealed that the challenges of the programme included issues of technical set-up, schedule adjustment, adapting to new proximity, language and cultural differences, issues related to the mechanism of social media tools, and emotional adjustment of the organisers or trainers.

1. Technical Setup

In planning student exchange activities in the distance mode, the technical setup was essential in ensuring efficient communication through video conferencing with minimal setbacks. Video conferencing required equipment that could accurately capture and transmit audio and visual inputs. Such equipment (mics, cameras, display screens and cables) are often costly, especially those that can accommodate different forms of interactions; such as capturing audio of spontaneous speeches from participants seated in different parts of the room, or visuals of each participant seated in a group.

A tremendous amount of work was needed for technical set-up, it was very exhausting. The video conference involved two groups with each group having around 20 members. I had to secure effective display on the other side so that they can hear the lecturer and individual participants clearly, the microphone was a big issue. Individual speech in video conferencing is costly. Though we have the equipment, the troubleshooting (process) was exhaustive. Another part of (my) stress (came from the need) to secure both sides to do the same things and effectively. Averagely speaking, the setting up for one webinar takes three hours minimum or more, sometimes it may even cost up to one or two days. This is to create the possibility for individual speech and response and also to use different media and forms of activities during the webinar. (Chan)

A video conference (using Zoom) that enabled active engagement of students could combine the use of several social media tools (LINE, WhatsApp), collaboration tools (Dropbox Papers, Google Docs) and various sharing of media (YouTube, PowerPoint). The synchronisation of real-time media sharing was one major challenge as the sharing and presentation of activities and research outcomes were central to students exchange activities. Managing group presentations and intragroup coordination, while coordinating media playback within the same session required meticulous planning and setting up (Figure 1). Furthermore, technical troubleshooting could be extremely time-consuming.



Figure 2 Role of a coach in planning a video conference in student exchange activities

2. Uncertainties and Constant Adjustments of Scheduling

The coordination of time for group tasks within individual groups could be difficult. Notably, finding time for online discussions could be challenging due to conflicting schedules of the participants. These unending adjustments not only affected the learning of the group, but also the planning and logistics of running the program.

My concern was to balance between self-determined versus structured learning. I had to decide between keeping participants on track, that is, (for me) to take more control, and emancipation, that is, to let learners take control. How structured can it be? How much to demand? Participants took advantage of the flexibility for less engagement and being too lax in time and completing assigned tasks. In a real scenario, we could expect that “there is nothing achieved”. (Wong)

3. Getting Used to New Proximity

In virtual communication, the sense of being situated in a particular space, and the sense of connection to a real person is taken away. This causes the persons involved in virtual communication to thirst for a substitute for the proximity inherent in real-life communication. The new proximity or the lack of proximity, formed during online interaction had provided a space conducive for avoidance and detaching oneself from getting engaged in group activities. Passive or withdrawn behaviours were observed during online communication and messaging. Some participants were extremely reticent or even silent in response to questions posted by coaches and other more active members. When some participants replied to messages, they were slow and selective in their responses. The lack of prior physical contact made getting a sense of the other’s character and rapport building difficult.

Malaysian participants reflected that the group video call was awkward because they had no prior physical contact, the trust was not yet there. (Wong)

As a planner, there is a very high level of anxiety on whether the things got through. It affected my video conference as well because I could not know if they watched the explanation video that I tasked them to watch before attending the conference, there was no way to confirm the simple act of watching. Although in class we know students never do it, there is a sense of security because the students are there physically; if online, we couldn't tell whether they were busy, hardworking, etc. not able to know creates anxiety- like throwing stones into the dark, they disappear and nothing comes back- the anxiety continued for a long period, and when feedback was received, it took too long. In addition, there is an element of doubt - doubting of the other party - even after the programme, I still doubt if they watched the video, a feeling of possibly being cheated by the participants. (Chan)

I suffered from anxiety of receiving no response from participants. There are a large number of possible reasons and situations behind this whether told or untold. Coach has to deal with this, the anxiety and the actual lack of response. I tried to handle uncertainties while striving to show empathy. Coach has to do a lot of roles play and simulation of communication in [my mind], [I] always ended up thinking alone, anxiety lead to fatigue and confusion, guessing and to assume and take action based on hypothetical thoughts. (I was) hard-pressed to find ways to break through the state of no response. (Toh)

The online platform is conducive for certain behaviour characteristics that could be understood as “cyber persona(s)”; students may behave differently during online activities in contrast with their ordinary offline mode. Students who were “cyber-active” or “cyber smart” during group messaging, for example, could be reserved in a face-to-face interaction, and vice versa.

A participant could give provocative answers that were insightful, this impression was not coherent with his behaviour observed in person. Cyber behaviour is no guarantee of face-to-face communication skills. The interactions in SNS platforms could not show “true human skills” due to an individual's different “personas” online and offline. (Chan)

A participant hardly responded to private messages before the programme, it was a surprise when he showed up during the programme and turned out to be quite outspoken. (Wong)

During LINE conversation, one participant spoke the least. In real interaction, he poured out more. Another participant was totally inactive in LINE. In the end, he was speaking really deep. Some may be quiet before meeting in person. (Toh)

4. Disparity in Language Competency

Competency of the used common language (English) may vary across different students of different backgrounds. This disparity in language competency limits the flow and depth of interaction in a group. Though the issue of the language barrier may be common in exchange programmes, online platforms have created new proximities that worsened the situation.

5. Differences in Social Media Culture

The students may also perceive each platform of social media differently. Some apps may be used only for official matters in some countries, while the same apps may be used for both official and personal matters in other countries. Consequently, participants may perceive the importance of messages communicated differently: some may treat a message in a friendly manner, while others may see it as an “official statement” based on the app or platform used. Hence, confusion may arise and clarification is often needed. The difference in accepted habits and conventions in messaging also affects interactions between participants of different cultural backgrounds. For example, the Japanese students’ tendency towards collectivity in responding to messages in LINE Groups influenced the overall interaction of the group.

6. Inclination and Readiness in Using Tools

The use of social media and collaborative tools can be a concern in student exchange activities conducted in the distanced mode. The usage of certain tools (software or apps, and devices such as laptops, in contrast to mobile phones) may not be the norm for students in a particular country. Subsequently, students may not be inclined to learn and use new tools; prior training and lots of time may be needed to learn and use collaborative tools effectively. The use of such tools may burden the students on top of their existing task in communicating and writing with people of different cultural backgrounds and nationalities. As a result, the communication process was affected, (no response, stalled) and this jeopardised the motivation and flow of learning.

7. Limitations of Tools

The dynamics of conversation flow is shaped and/or restrained by the available mechanisms of certain social media tools. For instance, an attempt to respond to messages could be interrupted by responses from other participants; the flow of the conversation might also change before one could post a response. The compatibility of the software used with the device owned by a participant can significantly affect the user experience and interaction. For example, a certain software that was created specifically for laptops might continuously crash when opened on mobile phones.

Students did not respond due to overflowing of messages in LINE. There may be hundreds of messages [at a given time], and their behaviour is selective in reading and answering, and sometimes, they missed some messages. (Chan)

8. Self-Orientation and Emotional Adjustments of Coaches

The challenges faced by coaches included constant emotional adjustments. Anxiety and a lack of sense of security were often felt throughout the coaching process. The physical absence of students meant that coaches could not rely on observations to gauge the levels of engagement; often they were unable to verify if the information sent was received. Coaches also faced difficulties in evaluating situations of all the parties involved in the communication at that time. The withdrawal or lack of engagement of students caused guessing and confusion, and coaches often had to judge and take action with insufficient information. Lastly, coaches encountered fatigue physically and mentally in managing the responses from each participant through a variety of platforms.

I experienced fatigue in managing response, including getting the response from each participant, like the work of a telephone operator. As a planner, I'm burdened to get a response, the burden is to get the other part that is unseen, to hook on to the loop of communication. Due to the variety of platform of communication—Facebook, Instagram, email—managing response using a variety of platforms caused heavy fatigue physically and mentally. (Chan)

I suffered from anxiety of no response from participants. There are a large number of possible reasons and situations behind this whether told or untold. (Toh)

Discussion

Surrogation in Virtual Classroom

The use of technology in online teaching and learning creates an interface between the instructor and the learners. These platforms become a medium of change from physical identity to cyber identity among the students. This phenomenon, which can be termed as “surrogation”, is where constructs of virtual behaviour develop in substitution of the real self. This tool of surrogacy can activate certain learning behaviours that may be suppressed or non-existent in the physical world and vice versa.

With a surrogate identity during online synchronous learning, students can be found to be more genuine, wild and expressive in voicing their thoughts. On the other hand, some become less verbal when they find that their usual direct interactions have to be intermediated by technology. There are some underlying characteristics of an online class that could perhaps explain some of these virtual learning behaviours.

Firstly, there is less pressure of socially desirable attitudes in the virtual world: ethics and interpersonal skills take other forms in the cyber world and these are usually less strict and less formally established. Speech fluency such as pronunciation and grammar is not so much of a concern in online learning involving short and casual texting. Inhibitions in expressing emotions are aided and simplified by the use of emojis. Emojis becomes a language that is readily available and consumable as it consists of only a few categorical expressions easily understood as compared to the complicated spectrum of temperament in the real human world.

Furthermore, one is not suppressed by look as physical appearance is non-existent in the virtual world. When there is only audio without video conferencing, the profile picture acts as a surrogate; during video conferencing, only the countenance is being exposed. Messages are mostly limited to what are being said or written. There were fewer interpretations needed due to the absence of physical gestures that might complicate situations when what was said was contradicted with gestures. Thus, there would also be fewer worries about being “betrayed” by physical gestures. Delay in time when giving a response is usually acceptable, and it is easy to attribute the delay to the Internet connection most of the time. In addition, there are fewer repercussions or consequences in cyber acts where expressions made in the digital world may not be fully transported in the physical world where another reality exists. Physical-distancing in the real world has led to more social-connecting in the digital world. In virtual teaching and learning where technology acts as a “surrogate”, the set of “truths” especially in terms of epistemology is re-defined. Educational technology has attempted to emulate the physical classroom as well as to provide possibilities beyond the usual physical

learning. Online learning tools such as gamification have been able to promote interactions, engage attention and achieving learning outcome to offset what is missing in the virtual in parallel comparison to the physical world.

The mediated and detached cyber world can be a redefined engaged world by countering or fully utilising any existing act of “surrogation” in virtual learning. This calls for a continual search into the deeper meaning of virtual reality and the online learning mode to create a more effective learning and better education outcome.

Cultural Identity in Question: Potentials for Borderless, Multicultural Education

The major themes researched by the students in this particular programme were multiculturalism and coexistence. These topics proved to be particularly interesting as well as contentious for the participants to reflect on, as education and the media in Japan emphasise a homogeneous society whereas Malaysia highlights a form of polarised coexistence. When learning about globalisation and different cultures, Japanese students often repeat phrases learned in education such as: “We Japanese are one country, one language and one race. We are the same”. While such narratives are aimed at promoting solidarity, the increasing emphasis of “us versus them” in education also reinforces a sense of nationalism, and to some extent, an idea that understanding other cultures and globalised integration is not possible in the Japanese context (Benedict, 2005; Hendry, 2019). On the contrary, Malaysia promotes the idea of tolerance and coexistence among the various racial communities. The reality in the case of both countries breaks these narratives; Japan is increasingly dependent on migrant labour and with a rapidly shrinking population (Sakamoto, 2020), hosts a large number of foreign workers most of whom are, by policy, hidden from the Japanese population (Takashi, 2020). Malaysia, on the other hand, also dependent on migrant labour, is a transit point for a vast array of people moving and mixing from many cultures and backgrounds, some documented and others not.

During Heuta’18 and Heuta’19, the process of mixing undergraduate students from both cultural backgrounds, first through the Virtual Classroom, then through exchanging interests and research planning via social media, and finally during the in-person fieldwork produced profound and unexpected results. Many of the cultural expectations and boundaries were broken down and at times created euphoric experiences and bonding particularly when some of the Japanese students felt that they could express themselves more freely. At other times, there were extreme discomfort and culture shock as the research deepened and became increasingly reflexive.

Some of the groups researched multiculturalism by exploring themes such as “hidden people” and refugee populations in Malaysia. While reaching out to informal organisations supporting undocumented migrants and interactions with people who live “hidden” in Kuala Lumpur, both Japanese and Malaysian students experienced a breakdown of social norms and the realities of the societies which they thought they knew. The Malaysian students particularly faced challenges in questioning ideas of multiculturalism and coexistence after attempting to interact with young children of refugees, whose backgrounds and behaviours were alien and unpredictable for them.

Other group research centred on the notion of cultural identity and brought into question the narratives of society which were the foundations of their experiences of socialisation. This experience of group exploration, fieldwork and questioning in some cases led to breakdown and identity crisis causing students from both backgrounds to internalise and become protective. In other cases, some students formed intense bonds with one another and feel more comfortable with the culture of the other. These students have continued their activities together in both Malaysia and Japan after the conclusion of the programme.

Conclusion

This paper presented a list of challenges faced in conducting online student exchanges based on the experience of implementing Heuta'18 and Heuta'19. The two main challenges faced, among others, were the lack of proximities for mental security during online communications and the lack of references in understanding the sharp contrast between offline and online behaviours. From our experience with Heuta'18 and Heuta'19, virtual student exchange within the Heutagogy framework is viable but comes with two major areas of concern. First, virtual communications are dramatically more effective if the two parties communicating have either a prior in-person relationship or that in-person physical meetings are scheduled at a certain point in the programme. This concern leads to the idea that a hybrid approach that combines online and offline modes of teaching and learning can be the way forward for student exchanges in the future. Second, virtual student exchanges consume tremendous amounts of time and energy for the technical setup and for monitoring the students' responses. Technical setup and students' monitoring can be recognised as a portfolio by themselves upon the usual workload of content planning and implementation as virtual student exchanges require more labour hours than the traditional in-person type of student exchanges.

The application of the heutagogy framework into Heuta'18 and Heuta'19 was carried out to answer the shortcomings of the expository model of student exchange. One characteristic in using virtual heutagogy for student activities is that it can either become exciting for participants with intrinsic motivation or turn into a loose ground of unhappening. In our running of Heuta'18 and Heuta'19, we saw more of the latter. In a certain group, the responses given by the students were so loose that the coach had to take control, to remind and to instruct, and this ironically went against the very idea of self-determined learning. Virtual heutagogy for student exchange programmes can ironically be self-defeating when readiness and willingness of the students are lacking.

Through observations of the coaches reflected in the Focus Group Discussion as well as repeated via sharing and reflections at the individual level, behaviour in surrogation emerged as a problem that required urgent research and clarification. Online behaviours take on characters of their own and we have few clues on how to understand and evaluate them as well as how to reconcile them with the real-life characters of a student. Systematic definition as well as the typology of virtual behaviours are needed. Cyber anthropology has recently been instrumental in de-mystifying virtual behaviour; however, the scope of virtual behaviour has exponentially expanded since the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual communication has become popular as a norm in daily life. Areas like virtual learning behaviour, virtual exchange behaviour, virtual cross-cultural interactions indicate that the diversity of ways and forms of

virtual behaviours have increased tremendously and research to address them are yet to begin.

Critical questions to ask are that if virtual communication and interaction could serve to meet the learning outcomes intended for student exchange activities, could a physically separated virtual interaction be justified as a valid student exchange program? Could a mobility program be justified when no physical movement is involved? A combination of online and offline modes for student exchange is desirable, but there remain issues with the validity of virtual interaction as a form of exchange. This fundamental question must be addressed along with the task of deciphering the nature of the behaviour of surrogation.

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