

Understanding Asian Cultures and Critical Issues Through Collaborative Online International Learning

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Abstract

With the growth of collaborative online learning, more students are experiencing educational environments characterized by cultural diversity. This paper shall discuss recent COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) practices between Kansai University and International Islamic University of Malaysia from April 2016 to December 2017, and how these initiatives helped enhance academic discourses in a Japanese learning environment. This paper also explores the diversity of learning styles of Malaysian and Japanese students; how cultural differences affect the learning experiences in an online course; and how diversity could stimulate a culturally inclusive learning environment. Various experiential learnings in understanding culture and critical issues prevailing in Japan are also pinned down in this paper. Finally, this intends to encourage learners and instructors to set out an online academic partnership and adopt COIL as a teaching pedagogy which may be relevant in the rapidly expanding field of global education.

Keyword

I. Introduction

The advancement of computer-mediated communication and Internet technology has shaped the landscape of higher education and allowed universities and educational institutes to expand their global outreach through transnational collaboration with multiple institutions.

In general, the growth of cultural concerns in regard to online learning has not been accompanied by a growing number of studies in the field. Although a handful of researchers have begun to explore cultural issues in online education, very few formal studies have been conducted and the results of these studies have been inconclusive. As

the online based learning market becomes increasingly global, it is important for online education providers to have an understanding of the different educational values and cultural expectations of the participants as well as the impact of those differences on learning in order to maintain a competitive advantage in today's e-learning world. As such, there is a need to develop new theories and conduct empirical studies in order to provide guidance for the successful design and delivery of cross-cultural online courses.

The *ASEAN Studies* course offered by Kansai University Global Frontier (KUGF) Program intends to provide students a

fundamental understanding of Southeast Asia through a cultural learning experience by studying the region's common historical, cultural, and regional identity. This is one of the many KUGF courses offered to boost the university's target in attracting more international students and is designed to embolden students from both Japan and overseas to engage themselves in a global interaction resulting to more socially relevant young citizens. *ASEAN Studies*, being an English-mediated course, is aligned with the university's endeavor in internationalizing its curricula. And it thereby pushes to enhance the student body's English-language communicative competence.

Furthermore, it is also one of the courses offered in the university where a *Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)* project is being run-through. COIL is a relevant learning mode employing ICT tools maximized to engage academic activities among students enrolled overseas.

Kansai University Context: COIL Practices at ASEAN Studies

As part of Kansai University's (KU) commitment and efforts towards campus internationalization, *ASEAN Studies* class has employed a COIL-based collaboration with International Islamic University of Malaysia's (IIUM) *Introduction to International Communication* class. Four (4) consecutive COIL activities have been steered up since April 2016. The general objective of the COIL projects is to increase

the Japanese and Malaysian students' awareness on stereotypes on different social issues created by the local mass media.

While the IIUM's *Introduction to International Communication* particularly aims to learn about the international issues associated with communication and mass media, the specific aim of the *ASEAN Studies* is to learn about Southeast Asian countries; geography, politics, history and cultures. However, with the recent COIL projects at hand, *ASEAN Studies* is more focused on **intercultural awareness** and **communicative competence** that are vividly manifested by voicing out student opinions – a process of learning about and understanding culture. Through these opinions, linguistic competence plays a central role and is very much associated with the learning of new culture. However, the focus has always been limited to Malaysia with this recent COIL projects.

The main activities engaged during the projects involved exchanging video presentations and having a one-time live video discussion (every semester) using a communication tool, Zoom. Here are some of the basic highlights of our activities.

Topics Discussed

- A. The Mass Media and the Portrayal of Islam
- B. Japanese Culture and Identity
- C. Refugee Crisis in Myanmar: The Rohingya Muslims

ASEAN Studies has espoused issues on how Japanese perceive Muslims in Japanese society; the depiction of mass media on Muslims and Islam; and some pertinent reasons why Japan's willingness to accept refugees from the Middle East.

① **Facebook Discussion Page**

KU and IIUM students created short video clips and uploaded them to the created Facebook discussion page. This space provided opportunities for students – both from Malaysia and Japan, to introduce themselves before pitching the discussions, questions and comments posted by the members of the two groups.

② **Video Presentations**

IIUM students created videos discussing the image of Japan in Malaysian mass media. In Spring 2017, they created videos focusing on the refugee children's plight during the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. On the other hand, KU students created videos discussing the Muslim and Islam images perceived from the Japanese mass media portrayals. In Spring 2017, KU students discussed several reasons why Japan has limitations opening its doors to refugees from the Middle East.

③ **Live Online Discussions**

Reinforcement of the issues and views discoursed in the Facebook page is necessary for KU and IIUM students. Live communication on a specific date and time agreed upon (by the two

groups) provided better spaces for interaction. This proves to be a suitable learning venue for clarifications and identifications of other concerns not conversed or tackled in during the course of written discussions. The two parties decided to use Zoom which is known for its reliability, thereby limiting the chances of disconnection. Disruptions during live discussions upset the communication flow of the two learning groups.

II. Research Related to Asian Culture in Online Learning

Numerous studies that have examined the cultural differences between Western and Asian education have provided a consistent picture that describes Asian education as a group-based, teacher-dominated, centrally organized pedagogical culture with examinations as the essential way to define performance and compete for higher social status (Zhang, 2007). In Asian education, teachers have absolute authority and the students are not encouraged to question or challenge a teacher's knowledge (Biggs & Watkins, 1996). On the other hand, in Western education, to challenge a teacher or tutor is seen as part of the self-development process as dialogue and interaction are encouraged in the learning process (Robinson, 1999).

Ku and Lohr (2003) found that the Asian students felt uncomfortable with the nonlinear nature of their online courses,

which the researchers attributed to the uncertainty avoidance dimension of Asian cultures. Ku and Lohr's study also found that Chinese and Taiwanese students liked the idea of building an online community among their peers and instructors, which reflects the collectivist-femininity attributes of their cultures.

A colossal number of researches abound all relating to online learning cultures. They imply many range of discussions and analyses. But this paper will only focus on several issues of concern – 1) learnings gained by the students from the cultural differences and how these affect the learning experiences in an online course 2) how diversity could stimulate a culturally inclusive learning environment and 3) the future development of COIL and global education at Kansai University.

III. Methodology

This study was designed as an exploratory study aimed at understanding the emerging cross-cultural issues in the undergraduate course (ASEAN Studies). The case study approach is considered appropriate for such exploratory research because it is considered to be the best in regard to explaining “how” and “why” issues in a complex contemporary social phenomenon (Yin, 2002).

Two focus group interviews were conducted face-to-face with five Japanese students each group. These interviews used an open, free-flowing interview format. The students were

asked to describe their learning experiences in the two-week COIL program and give their perspectives on the impact of culture-related issues on their learning in their courses. Each group interview lasted one to two hours. The interviews were recorded with the consent of each group.

IV. Results and Discussion

Transcripts have been reviewed carefully and made notes of the important patterns, themes and categories that emerged from the data. The reviewed transcripts were later analyzed again to compare with previous summaries of key categories and themes. Similar themes or categories were grouped together. The frequencies of each theme or category were marked. And the following are the results.

① Instruction and Interaction

The students noted more student involvement in regard to the interactions with the instructors in Malaysia compared to those in Japan. The students mentioned that the major difference between Japanese education and Malaysian one is that Malaysian instructors require the students to interact on a regular basis with the peers during the course. Such a teaching method differs from that used in Japan where the dominant method of teaching is a one-way lecture in which the professor teaches and the students take notes. After the lecture, the students memorize the materials in order to pass the exams at the end of the semester.

② Synchronous/Asynchronous Communications

The students perceived that advantages and disadvantages existed in regard to asynchronous and synchronous communications in cross-cultural learning environments. On one hand, the students mentioned that one advantage of an asynchronous discussion is that it is “clear, free of the misunderstandings caused by accents and the impact of the time difference is less.” However, the delayed text-based communication of an asynchronous discussion is unable to convey the nuances of human interaction and, therefore, the students felt that it was difficult for them to figure out the intentions of the other students during group work due to their different working styles and cultures.

The students felt that the synchronous communications helped them to “get to know each other much better thanks to the live interaction.” Nevertheless, this type of communication also presented challenges, especially in scheduling a synchronous conference as the schedule were different.

③ Students’ Experiential Learnings

The feedbacks from the students can be summarized in three important themes:

A. Academic Discourse Engagement

The interviews have revealed that as most students enrolled in the *ASEAN Studies* class are freshman and sophomore students, they have their limitations in terms of international exposure. The class has manifested a great deal of academic discourse on

critical issues faced by the ASEAN region. While Japanese students are very much active to learn geography, culture and history of Southeast Asia – a new region to learn about, but most of them have their own shares of unfamiliarity within the own culture. Evidence of this process of own identity awareness emerged when Japanese students engaged themselves in unfamiliar or newer forms of discourse and their ideas collide with non-Japanese students’ expectations, intervention or inquiry.

B. Re-Discovering Own Culture

After each COIL activity, Japanese students have mentioned that they gained recognition of the differences and similarities of other cultures from their own – either a celebration of the uniqueness of Japanese culture; or a further critical awareness on why such culture or perspective exists in the Japanese societies, in general. Moreover, it is in these moments that Japanese university students assert their opinions and explain why certain notions exist, while making use of social network and technologies, and as they put their everyday electronic media into action.

C. COIL as Social Interaction

The COIL activity exemplifies how an educational method creates knowledge, culture, and social interaction together, and how media production can foster students’ abilities to creatively communicate, alternatively represent, and impact others. The collaborative video production is a

medium through which young students develop “critical literacy” and recognize their potentials for leadership and for peer-to-peer-mentorship. The COIL project illustrates how important it is to create an academic environment where students can learn to lead in demonstrable and powerful ways.

V. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the emerging issues in cross-cultural online learning environments. In regard to online collaboration, it is encouraging to know that cultural differences which originate from different national cultures do not negatively affect the students’ online experiences, but, instead, are seen as a potential factor contributing to more culturally rich learning experiences. Other issues identified in this study, such as language, communication tool use, schedule differences and a lack of diversified cases, may affect a student’s learning performance if the instructors do not take into consideration the needs of the Japanese students. This study indicates that a culturally inclusive learning environment needs to consider diversity in course design in order to ensure full participation of the Japanese students (and Malaysian students).

Since Kansai University started the COIL initiatives in Japan and being one of the few ones practicing them, the university may invest on peddling “Japanese culture” as the university’s main strength. Japanese culture, as a field of study, is one of the most sought cultures in the world. Graham and Mayes

(2007) pointed out that *cultural identities incorporate areas such as curriculum, interaction, collaboration, pedagogy, language, and assessment. They are frequently raised in research literature but are not often addressed satisfactorily.* Given this finding, *ASEAN Studies* proves how Japanese culture and identity is a marketable field of study sparking interests among international students in their home countries. Finally, Kansai University should maximize the fullest potential of this digital media culture and in providing a well-rounded global education in the coming years. And COIL could serve as one of its finest benchmarks.

VI. Implications

The cultural sensitivity of the future university instructor needs to be addressed in an collaborative online learning program if the program takes the initiative to expand its international presence.

A well-balanced use of diversified activities can alleviate the language barriers as well as allow the students opportunities to improve their English proficiency in a variety of ways. The use of audio and visual aids can be of significant help to Japanese undergraduate students.

As this is a program- level case study based on a small sample size of participants from several specific ethnic origins, the generalizations of the results in this study should be exercised with caution. However, we believe that the analysis of the emerging

cultural issues contributes to the limited extant knowledge of the cross-cultural design of COIL courses. In addition, the recommendations raised in this study provide valuable information and insights that can be used to assist distance educators and policy makers of similar programs in designing, practicing, and making policies for students' successful global online learning experiences.

COIL: Future Developments Towards Internationalization at Kansai University

An interesting theme, however, that emerged from the study is that almost all of the students agreed that the cultural differences, which originated from ethnicity, existed, but did not negatively affect their communication or collaboration in learning. The participants seemed ready to accept the differences and looked for the positive aspects that cultural differences bring.

The study revealed the cultural differences in regard to instruction styles. The students noted that the Malaysian instruction style leaned toward a learner-centered, process-oriented style with a focus on interaction and participation, whereas the Japanese style tended to be lecture-centered with an emphasis on exams.

As for future COIL projects and collaborations, establishing partnership with the International Islamic University of Malaysia is an essential ladder in building relationships with institutes of higher learning in the ASEAN region. Successful and continuous COIL projects with IIUM

may serve as working stencil to effectively encourage potential partnerships to forge into institutional collaborations.

Student mobility at Kansai University remains at a relatively growing stage, but has grown at an unprecedented pace in the past years. To maintain its momentum, COIL activities could be essential initiatives in introducing to Kansai University students how academic discussions are conducted outside Japan. COIL could be a fitting provision of how tertiary education abroad functions. Potentials could range from academic partnerships, research collaborations or field visits. A lot of gains can be gleaned from what has been accomplished the past four COIL-enhanced projects. While COIL seems to be a promising educational initiative, it has its difficulty in terms of preparations and communications with partner universities. The biggest one entails recognizing the importance of taking flexible yet plausible approaches and attitudes towards the project. The more is necessary during the conceptualization process where this would certainly require time, effort and patience.

Finally, it is also essential to emphasize that it is imperative not to underestimate the difficulty of persuading Kansai University faculty members. A lot of awareness and exposure must be done which include modifying the attitudes, behavior and perceptions of the teachers on online collaborative learning practice.

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