Community, Connections and Innovation in Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning

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'I am what I am because of who we all are.'
Desmond Tutu, (1999), *No Future Without Forgiveness.*

Abstract

The emergence of the Covid-19 virus had an enormous impact on all of our lives and significantly affected the lives of first-year university students in Japan who began their tertiary education during the initial lockdown. This chapter examines the impact the move online had on these students by analysing videos created by them as part of their academic English as a Foreign Language (EFL) coursework. The videos were analysed and 12 themes emerged which were used as a foundation for new practices focusing on the development of community and connections in online courses, particularly the use of e-mentors.

Keywords: Online learning, emergency remote teaching and learning, digital inclusion, e-mentors, video analysis

Introduction

The emergence of the Covid-19 virus had an enormous impact on all of our lives in a multitude of ways. One group that was significantly affected was first-year university students in Japan as the initial pandemic-related lockdowns and the start of the academic year co-occurred in April 2020. While undergoing their transition into

university life many students found themselves suddenly taking classes online rather than in the classroom face to face.

Worldwide, online courses have been gaining popularity due to the expansion of the internet and mobile learning (Duffin, 2020). However, universities in Japan have been slow to adopt online learning due to the lack of use of learning management systems in courses, and designated budgets and staff for the development of instructional technology (Nakamura, 2017). Mehran et al. (2017) found that even if technology is available its use was not guaranteed and stated that technology has not yet been normalized in Japanese educational settings (Bax, 2011).

Much research shows that online learning is a robust form of education (e.g., Nyugen, 2015; Stack, 2015). Research critiquing online education is plentiful, however, some researchers have found that online classes are more difficult to achieve success in, for example, Xu and Jaggars (2014) and Hart et al. (2018) found poorer outcomes for students in terms of course completion and grades.

According to figures from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in July 2020, all but one of Japan's national universities were either using a mixture of both online classes and face-to-face classes (n=55) or were fully online (n=30). The majority of private universities also used a mixture of online and face-to-face classes (n=492) or were fully online (n=187), with 145 universities remaining face-to-face (MEXT, 2020). The university where this study was conducted was fully online and the sudden switch to online learning as a result of the Covid-19 emergency meant that instead of well-thought-out and planned online courses we were engaged in Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL). ERTL is a response to a crisis and attempts to recreate courses that would ordinarily have been delivered face-to-face, in a fully remote form, with the intention that they will return to 'normal' once the crisis is over (Hodges et al., 2020). This sudden shift to online learning was unprecedented and, at the university described here, the administration, teachers, and students alike were unprepared for it. This

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research is needed to explore how e-mentors can be used in different educational contexts in Japan.

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