What is the 'Something' that Online Teaching Lacks and How Can We Make Up for It?

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This paper is about what I learnt through my first experience of online teaching during the 2020 spring term. Although platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams were very helpful, I realized that something was missing in online teaching and was eager to identify what this was and how to compensate for it. Reflecting on my practices in two courses, I analyzed how student narratives and interactive research helped to fill this void. Chase (2018) explains that "a personal narrative" includes:

> meaning making through the shaping of experience; a way of understanding one's own or others' actions; of organizing events, objects, feelings, or thoughts in relation to each other; of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions, events, feelings, or thoughts over time. (p. 549)

In order to find this missing component, I began a required first-year class in basic academic skills with an Emotional Graph Sharing activity (Deguchi, 2020). In this activity, students reflected on their emotional ups and downs since starting university life and told stories during this pandemic using their emotional graphs (see Figure 1). The aim of this activity was to make students aware that their classmates also experienced emotional ups and downs, which might help them feel better and build relationships with their classmates and teacher in this difficult time. In addition, I organized Microsoft Teams so that students were able to post their thoughts on the pandemic.
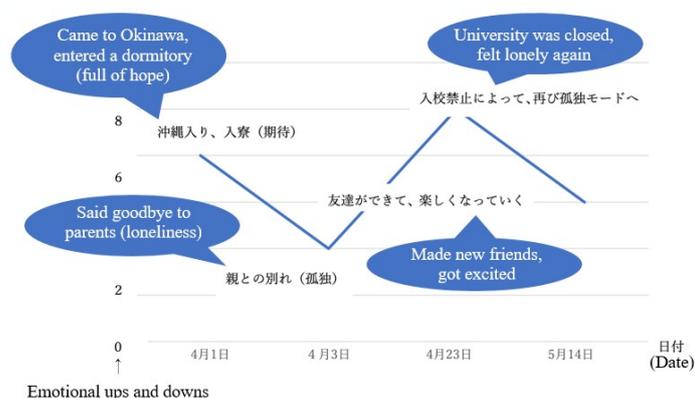

Figure 1. Example of an Emotional Graph

Next, I explored how to help students develop meaning and inform their actions. In a required third-year class for students to develop specialised knowledge, students picked one "dead-end" statement from the class textbook, such as "people think in language" (Hall et al., 2017), they then explored the statement in connection with their own experiences, before sharing their research stories and realizations through this activity. Their presentations were followed by some comments from their classmates and myself. After the class, both the students and I posted comments on all the presentation slides uploaded on Microsoft Teams, which led to reflections on their presentations.

Objectives

To recommend activities that assist teachers in achieving the following:
- Finding ways to form and deepen social connections among students.
- Scaffolding mutual learning which could lead to students' autonomous learning in an online teaching environment.

Practical Implications

The following is a post from one first-year student on the Emotional Graph Sharing activity:

> Although I was not able to start campus life as I expected, I would not have realized how important family are to me and how much support I have been given by others without this pandemic. I feel inconvenienced in online classes since I am not yet used to using a computer and cannot communicate face-to-face. However, there is no other way but to believe this experience will be helpful to me in the future. (Student A)

This student was trying to look on the bright side and wrote that this tough experience would be helpful to her future career. That is, the narrative might show she made meaning through giving shape to her tough experiences during this pandemic, as

Chase (2018) defines. Further, the following are from third-year students' written presentation reflections:

Listening to the classmates' presentation about the same topic encouraged me to look into it more deeply. (Student B)

One classmate talked about how a first language affects second language learning, which I have realized through working with international students and got interested in. I am now planning to write about this topic (in my final report) in connection with my experiences. (Student C)

Students' written reflections suggested they found ways of understanding their own and others' experiences, ways of organizing their thoughts in relation to each other, and ways of connecting and seeing the consequences of thoughts over time, as Chase (2018) defines.

Finally, I would like to refer to what I learnt from the presentation of an elementary school principal about their online learning programme through a blend of digital and analogue approaches (Sawa, 2020). They conducted a strawberry-picking excursion online in which a strawberry farmer, a homeroom teacher and pupils communicated via Zoom. Also, the homeroom teachers regularly visited the pupils' homes to deliver some learning materials, and soon after the excursion, delivered some strawberries as well. The principal said these two approaches, digital and analogue, complemented each other. It might be that the strawberries delivered to the students' homes helped them realize that the activity was not limited to some distant location, giving them personal and tangible connections to the class activity which led to the relevance and completion of the excursion.

Reflective Conclusion

As the above-mentioned students' narratives may suggest, exploring a topic in light of their own experiences, sharing stories and developing their thoughts while giving significance to them might lead to students' understanding of the relevance of the activities and promote autonomous learning. This could possibly lead to a generation of personal and tangible connections to class activities and classroom dynamics, and thus make up for what was previously lacking in online teaching, even without an analogue approach as a complement to a digital approach as suggested by Sawa (2020). Given the implications presented here, the process of the generation of classroom dynamics might be relevant to what is missing in online teaching.

References

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About the Author

Tamiko Kondo is a lecturer of English language education and applied linguistics at University of the Ryukyus, Japan. Her recent research interest is the smooth connection from elementary to junior high school. She won Professor of the Year 2019 in recognition of being highly rated in an institutional course evaluation survey by her students.

Link to presentation on YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3LPIBmIXNc