

# A Case Study of Online Learning for Overseas Postgraduate Students during COVID-19

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**Abstract**—The research is a qualitative case study of a PhD student and a master student from Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia, who study online in China for their overseas postgraduate degree programs in the field of teaching English as a second language. They have kept writing diaries since the very beginning of their online learning experience. It is revealed in their dairies that the use of a number of useful applications of modern information technology products such as Google Meet, Zoom, WhatsApp, WeChat, and school online system can help create desirable learning environment, and the two factors that the consciousness of cooperative learning and the satisfying online environment for the learners also contribute to the effect of online learning. A theoretical framework of community of inquiry is applied in the analysis of the diaries within such a specific context.

**Keywords**—COVID-19, online learning, cooperative learning, modern information technology, community of inquiry

## I. INTRODUCTION

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer create the “community of inquiry” paradigm for online learning environments, which is built on the notion of three different “presences”: cognitive, social, and teaching (Fig. 1) [1].

Their concept encourages the creation of active learning environments or communities in which instructors and students share ideas, facts, and views in online and blended courses.

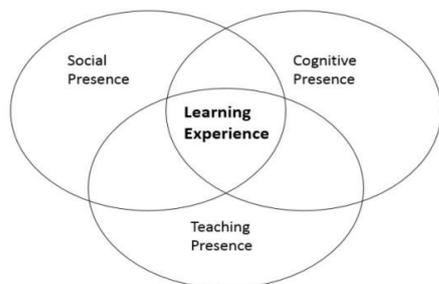


Figure 1. Framework of community of inquiry.

The framework of community of inquiry is a collaborative-constructivist process model that describes the basic elements of a successful online higher education learning experience which is backed by Dewey’s educational philosophy and social constructivism [2].

The COVID-19 epidemic has wreaked havoc on people’s lives in many different aspects. For many students around the world, the problem they face is how to study online full-time when they are separated at home instead of going to school for lessons. In China, for the students who are pursuing an overseas degree, they have no other but only one choice of online learning rather than go abroad to study in a foreign country. All the students are facing the same problem of unfamiliar full-time learning online. Under such conditions, this research is a case study of two Chinese students who are studying online for their degree programs in Malaysia. The researchers, the same as the participants, aim to address the following two questions in the framework of community of inquiry:

- (1) How can students study online in the course?
- (2) What are the factors which may affect online learning?

## II. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts the case study approach. The researchers decide to conduct a case study of their own experiences exploring online learning processes during COVID-19. The advantages of such a case study are listed by Yin as below:

- (1) It probes into a contemporary phenomenon with details under its real-life context;
- (2) It deals with the “technically distinctive” situation in which many more variables of interest than data points are involved [3].

### A. Participant

The participants are two adult Chinese students in the online course of qualitative methods and approaches offered by their registered school, Sultan Idris University, Malaysia. During COVID-19, they have to study online to pursue their overseas postgraduate degrees in the field of teaching English as a second language in this school. Wang is a teacher who works in a higher professional college in China in pursuit of her PhD degree, and Zhong

is a full-time master student without any working experience. It is the first time for both of them to study online for the overseas degree programs without going to Malaysia in person.

#### *B. Instrumental*

The research uses the instrumental of diary. Diaries have been used to record the events of people's daily life for a long time, but as a data collection method it has been favored by researchers since the 1970s. It asks the participants to keep record of their daily life, and then the researcher can investigate into it. As is stated by Dornyei, "qualitative study involves the study of people in their natural contexts, with as little obtrusion as possible. Diary studies can satisfy this requirement to a large extent" [4].

#### *C. Procedure*

The participants are required to write a diary about their online learning experience each week in a month period at the beginning of the new semester. Then the diaries are used as data for analysis.

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results in the diaries collected for data use are shown in Appendix A.

#### *A. Discussion about the First Research Question: How Can Students Study Online during the Course?*

Wang and Zhong list in their diaries about the use of the modern information technology products such as Google Meet, Zoom, WhatsApp, WeChat, and school online system. First, the instructor can give lessons by using Google Meet as the main online platform, and on such a platform, teachers and students can communicate with each other face to face by video or by sound instantly. Second, the students can view and download the materials posted on the school website where they can also join the online forum for debate. Third, the teacher can inform the students and the students can send instant messages on WhatsApp or WeChat whenever they have any question. Both sides can also set up chat groups in WhatsApp and

WeChat for online meeting and group discussion. The teacher can offer help and give feedback by using these useful tools on the internet.

#### *B. Discussion about the Second Research Question: What Are the Factors which May Affect Online Learning?*

##### *1) The consciousness of cooperative studying*

Both Wang and Zhong record their learning experience with the teacher and the classmates. In the online environment, the cooperative spirit directly affects the outcome of studying. On the one hand, the teacher and the students need to cooperate in the study program. It is not only limited to the teacher centered instruction, but also reflects in all the tasks the teacher assigns and the students fulfill. Feez summarizes that basic elements of task-based instruction are purposeful tasks that stress communication [5]. Nunan defines communicative task

as the classroom work which involves learners in comprehending and interacting [6]. Thus, it is the purposeful cooperation between the teacher and the students that ensures the communication and the completeness of the task in the online classroom. On the other hand, the students should also cooperate with each other when they have pair work and group work. Olsen and Kagan describe cooperative learning as organized group learning activity in which learner takes responsibility for his or her own and increases the learning of others [7]. When the cooperative learning occurs on the internet, it requires everyone to use modern information technology to achieve the completeness of learning activities and success of individual development. What's need to be specifically mentioned in this case study is that it is an adult learning environment with a clear goal of obtaining a degree for everyone, which enhances the determination of every student to cooperate positively for all the learning tasks. Additionally, all the students meet the least requirement for a program in the field of teaching English as a second language, which means they have the language competency to communicate with each other in English almost without problem even when they have different cultural background. Otherwise, they would have more problems in communication. And due to the personal attribute of the professor, all the experiences the participants have are on the positive side. It may be different in other cases.

##### *2) The online learning environment for the learners*

Both Wang and Zhong record their learning experience in the online learning environment by successfully using the online tools and completing all the tasks in English. The participants have no problem with the instruction offered by the teachers in the medium of the English language, no problem in communicating in English in peer work or group work with other students in the same class from different countries by using online communication devices, no problem in dealing with different situations in the online environment of virtual classrooms or on the online communication platforms. If the participants are not adult students at such an internet information technology capable and self-disciplined age, say, much younger or much older, or if they have great language problems as obstacles in both studying and communicating, will it be much more different? In online classes, if the students have language problems or technical problems, they will need to attend some relevant training courses in advance or ask for a course coordinator to solve all the problems.

The results of this case study are in accordance with the "community of inquiry" paradigm for online learning environments in Fig. 1, which entails the notion of three different "presences": cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Garson defines cognitive presence as the "exploration, construction, resolution and confirmation of understanding through collaboration and reflection in a community of inquiry", social presence as the "ability to project one's self and establish personal and purposeful relationships", and teaching presence as

the “significant determinate of student satisfaction, perceived learning and sense of community” [8]. According to the two participants’ learning experiences reflected in their diaries, first, they are trying to form a network of teacher and students, students and students through online classes and interaction after class by means of modern information technology. In the forming community of inquiry, they collaborate with other students and reflect on their own learning in different situations, which facilitate a constructive learning process in the cognitive perspective of the learners. It is argued by Tuckman and Jensen that learners need to be integral part of the group and collaborative decision making process which goes through four hypothesized stages — “forming, norming, storming, and performing” [9]. It should also be noted in this case study that the participants meet the teacher and the classmates from different countries of the course online without seeing each other in person, and they are both foreign students who are not in Malaysia. The context is different from those cases in which teachers and students know each other in person before the launch of the online courses during the pandemic in a local school. It is a constructive process for them to have a social presence of the overseas school, to feel like a member of the degree program in a foreign country through the interaction with the teacher and classmates, and the learning of the course. Besides, in the project work and group work, the participants show great willingness to establish a relationship with other students, which help them to fulfill all the learning tasks purposefully and successfully. When the group members have different social and cultural background, they employ English language abilities to communicate and understand each other, in which the speaking skill and the communicative competence play an important role in the discussion and cooperation. It is also stated that making group feel secure to communicate openly around a common goal alongside constructing effective communicative and social bonds helps a community to sustain itself [10]. Last but not the least, the teacher’s systematic and interactive design of the course under the requirement of the school, which incorporate the classrooms and platforms of the virtual world, the information and idea exchanges between teacher and students, and the instruction, implementation and completeness of tasks and projects, also motivates and guides the participants to experience a satisfying learning journey in the community of the overseas school. Gilbert and Dabbagh conclude that “the number and type of facilitator postings also increase the level of interaction between students” [11]. It is proposed that it is the time to move from understanding what an efficient online experience is to designing such experience [12]. The feedback from the students including diaries in the perspective of learning may serve as a means for the teacher to design a better online course in the perspective of teaching. In terms of teaching presence, a teacher is the soul as the designer and regulator of the whole course. In a multi-cultural context, a teacher can help the students to have a social

presence by his or her own teaching presence. Designing different types of online activities and tasks in class which demonstrate the social and cultural background of the students are worth exploring; Case studies of local background can also provide overseas students with a scenario of the local education environment; It is always a problem that the input of the teacher and the output of the students appear to be insufficient in class due to the limited duration of a class, how to make up for it relies on the meaningful tasks designed by the teacher for the students to practice after class.

With regards to the method of diary, if students can share diaries with each other, it can help them with the grasp of metacognition. Metacognition refers to individuals’ reflection on their own thinking [13]. It helps individuals have positive attitudes towards learning and adjust their learning methods in the process of learning. In a community of inquiry, if students have strong social presence and strong link with each other as a united community, every method and all the reflection shared can function as a bridge of metacognition.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The research is a case study of two participants who experience online learning in an overseas degree program for a month period under COVID-19. It discovers in their dairies the use of useful modern information technology to facilitate satisfying learning environment, and investigates into the two factors may affect the online learning, namely, the consciousness of cooperative studying and the online environment for the learners in the framework of community of inquiry, which is one of the most extensively used frameworks in online teaching and learning [14]. The connection of the factors and the outcome is shown in Fig. 2.

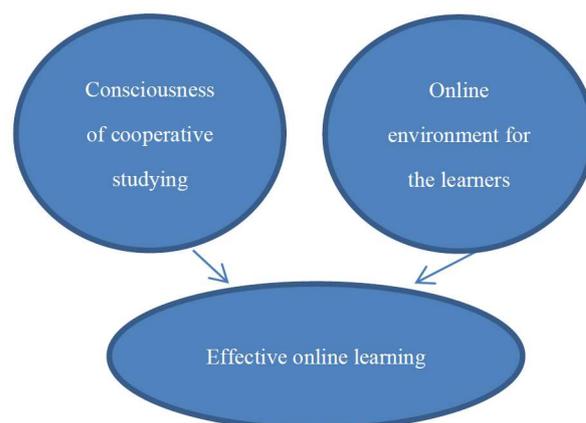


Figure 2. Factors of effective online learning in the framework of community of inquiry.

Due to the limitation of the participants, the number of the samples, and the one month duration of this empirical study, there remains a greater space for more variables to be discussed. Moreover, the case study of online learning under COVID-19 can be extended to more areas where participants with different social and cultural background involve.

#### APPENDIX DIARIES OF TWO PARTICIPANTS

##### Diary of Wang

November 9th

According to my PHD tutor's suggestion in her email, I register the course of qualitative research methods and approaches. During Covid 19, the course is held online each week. The professor uses Google Meet as an online classroom for all the students to attend her weekly lecture. The software allows my classmates to talk freely whenever they have any ideas after the lecture. She also opens an online forum on the website, and some students have already started the discussion there under the topic of personal understanding of qualitative research. My classmates come from different countries with different native languages, but all can speak the same language, English. Communication online helps learning!

November 16th

The professor introduces several research methodologies to us in the online course. She uses PPT to present the concepts, emphasize the main points and illustrate the relevant examples. She also aligns a group task for all of us to act as a holder and different speakers in an online forum with a topic related with teaching English as a second language. I join in a group of four female students, two Malaysians and two Chinese from mainland China, and we have different accents in English. Luckily we have no problem understanding each other's accents. We discuss about our roles in the task together and then prepare for what we need to talk in the forum separately.

November 23rd

My group succeeds in the collaboration of putting all we prepare together into an online forum script. Then we record it by using the cellphone tool called Zoom. After we submit our recording to the professor, she gives us positive feedback. During the preparation stage, our group members understand each other further as we have different cultural background. When we share the ideas about English language teaching, our group leader Jane shows her excellent ability of time management and language competency. We also learn from each other's different perspectives.

November 30th

I am in another task of pair work to conduct a small-scaled research project with my classmate, Zhong. After determining the research question, we look for the relevant literature of online learning separately. The professor also asks online if we have any question about the task. She is very nice and are always willing to help at any time.

##### Diary of Zhong

November 7th, Sunday

This is the second semester of my master's degree. I found that I had some shortcomings in methodology last year, so I chose to register for qualitative research methods and approaches this semester. Due to COVID19,

I'm unable to go to Malaysia for offline face-to-face learning. The Professor uses Google Meet as the main online teaching platform. She publishes and collects our assignment through the school website--My guru, At the same time, she uses WhatsApp group to collect our opinions and get feedback. We can communicate with each other in the group, express our views and ask questions. Really looking forward to next week!

November 15th, Monday

This week's lecture benefited me a lot. The professor was very considerate. She understood our learning anxiety and comforted us with her own experience. She introduced us to several research methods through slides. She marked the key points in the slides and explained the relevant examples with pictures and charts. And she organized an online forum with four members as a group to discuss related topics. I had an in-depth discussion with three female students from Malaysia about whether teaching can be done only through English. We kept sharing our opinions, which was a very good experience.

November 23rd, Tuesday

Before the recording, we held an online meeting through Google Meet and updated our thoughts through Google documents. It is a very convenient way for us to break through the limitations of time and space and share our ideas all the time. Since we come from different countries, have different educational backgrounds, we can discuss the topic from different perspectives. Except for me, the members of our group are all in-service teachers with rich educational experience, I really learned a lot from their presentation.

November 29th, Monday

The professor gave us positive comments and feedback about our presentation, and then I started my second task. This task professor asked us to work in pairs to conduct a small-scaled research project. Since my partner and I are both from China, we use another online communication platform, WeChat, to discuss and share the data we collected. The COVID19 epidemic has really affected every aspect of our life. We are all trying our best to adapt to the inconvenience of online courses, while our professor is very considerate and give us a lot of help.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### AUHTOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Kai Wang is mainly responsible for the draft of this paper. Jingjing Zhong participates in part of the literature review and data collection. All authors had approved the final version.

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