

ARTICLE

Engaging Communication and Marketing Students in Cross-Cultural Synchronous Online Learning

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Recommended Citation:

Chan, K., & Idris, I. (2023). Engaging communication and marketing students in cross-cultural synchronous online learning (Special Issue). *Asian Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 13(1), 100-117.

ABSTRACT

This Article presents a case study of cross-cultural synchronous online learning between marketing and advertising undergraduate students in Hong Kong and Malaysia. A blended learning flipped classroom model allowed students to collaborate in real-time despite geographical distance. Students completed online learning materials on the FutureLearn platform before coming to class. During class time, students worked in groups and applied their theoretical knowledge to solve marketing problems with cross-cultural elements. The collaboration experience encouraged the development of intercultural competencies and collaborative work skills among students. Course materials were designed to address both the Hong Kong and Malaysian consumer experiences. This Article introduces the course's pedagogical design and the challenges faced in implementation. The effectiveness of the cross-cultural online learning model is evaluated using learning analytics from the FutureLearn platform and an online survey. Best practices for synchronous online learning are recommended. Results indicated that students found online teaching materials visually stimulating, well-organised, and easy to understand. They gained intercultural skills and learned how to better communicate with consumers from other cultures.

Keywords: Cross-cultural learning, international marketing education, problem-solving based learning, research-teaching nexus, teaching leadership

INTRODUCTION

New modes of technology-assisted learning: Synchronous online learning and blended learning

In recent years, teaching and learning environments have been revolutionised by technological advancements. Educators are shifting from traditional modalities to adopt technology-assisted modes of content delivery (Samarasekera et al., 2014). New technology has made synchronous online learning a popular new model, especially in higher education (Martin et al., 2017). Blended learning, which combines face-to-face and online teaching and learning, has become increasingly common. Some scholars label it the “new traditional model” or the “new standard” in course delivery (Norberg et al., 2011, p. 207). Courses taught using blended learning, combining lecture with e-learning, were found to enhance students’ learning efficacy when compared with conventional classroom teaching (Sadeghi et al., 2014). However, the adoption of synchronous online learning and blended learning still faces many challenges.

Synchronous online learning involves real-time interaction between learners using online tools (Martin et al., 2017). These tools can range from instant messaging to video-conferencing and real-time collaborative work on platforms such as Google Docs or online whiteboards. Synchronous online learning models emerged, as improvements in technology made them an increasingly viable (Martin et al., 2017). They have been used widely in the field of language education, as well as in higher education (Martin et al., 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic, which suddenly restricted face-to-face learning, propelled sudden growth of synchronous online learning modes. Synchronous online learning has been shown to result in superior cognitive learning outcomes when compared to asynchronous online learning (Martin et al., 2021). It also has comparable cognitive and affective outcomes compared to face-to-face learning, suggesting that it can act as a reasonable substitute for the latter (Martin et al., 2021).

Blended learning combines face-to-face and online learning modes, drawing on the strengths of each. Dowling et al. (2003) argued that the purpose of hybrid courses was to blend the best aspects of traditional classroom teaching with the best aspects of online teaching. This was envisioned as fostering active, independent learning while also reducing lecture time in the classroom (Dowling et al., 2013). In flipped classrooms, a form of blended learning that combines pre-class video lectures with in-class interaction, pre-class online learning materials are used to enhance the flexibility of learning (Corrias, 2015). Students can learn at their own pace and on their own time, rewinding and reviewing material before class (Corrias, 2015). Flipped classrooms free up more time for valuable interactive learning during class periods (Corrias, 2015). When compared to face-to-face courses, research has revealed that blended learning improves student positivity (Dziuban & Moskal, 2011) as well as students’ sense of community (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). Dowling et al. (2003) found that compared to traditional courses, blended learning can result in higher grades and enhanced learning outcomes. Students also report enhanced learning and motivation (Leh, 2002; Riffell & Sibley, 2003). Several underlying factors contribute to the efficacy of blended learning (Kintu et al., 2017). Those who have had the most success with blended learning initiatives emphasise the importance of institutional support for course reform and planning (Tynan et al., 2015).

Synchronised online learning and blended learning allow learning to overcome distance and time limitations. They can promote collaborative and personalised learning, and overcome the limits of traditional learning modes, such as needing students and teachers to be physically present at a given time and location (Kemp & Grieve, 2014). Nevertheless, there are challenges to implementing online learning. E-learning may be hindered by the high costs of multimedia resources, the high cost of platform maintenance, and the need for frequent user training. Rovai and Jordan (2004) noted that diminished social cues, such as tone of voice and facial

expressions, might lead to misunderstandings that influence learning. There is criticism of blended learning where sometimes the online delivery fails to engage students well (Stewart et al., 2009).

The quality of communication between students and instructors is a central concern in blended learning (Shedletsky & Aitken, 2001). Both students and instructors need to learn how to communicate effectively online. In situations involving online teamwork, both online and offline support are necessary to develop team bonding and meaningful communication. Frequent feedback and design of appropriate online learning activities are the key to success (Han et al., 2021). Without the assistance of pedagogical theory to strengthen course design, random use of technology will not lead to the desired learning outcomes (Aldoobie, 2015).

Cross-cultural learning opportunities

In a globalised world, educators are increasingly concerned with promoting intercultural competencies and global citizenship (O'Brien, 2011). Globalisation has made collaboration with others from different cultural backgrounds a necessity in many fields of work and life. Doing so effectively, however, requires a diverse set of skills and competencies that contemporary education does not always provide. Bennet (2008) identified a series of cognitive, behavioural, and affective competencies necessary for global citizenship. These cognitive competencies include cultural self-awareness and culture-specific knowledge. Behavioural competencies include the capacity to listen, empathise, and manage social interactions. Affective competencies include curiosity, tolerance, cultural humility, suspension of judgement, and the willingness to take risks. Opportunities to interact with people from other cultures is critical to developing such intercultural competencies (O'Brien, 2011).

In higher education, studying abroad has been considered a primary means of fostering intercultural competency among students and developing global citizens. However, with growing technological sophistication, online learning and in particular synchronous online learning has emerged as a new opportunity for teaching intercultural competency. Students can now interact with others from different cultures in real time (O'Brien, 2011). In the Stanford Cross-Cultural Rhetoric Project, one early experiment in using synchronous online learning to enhance intercultural competency, students in the US and Singapore used Skype and a collaborative whiteboard to work on projects together in real time (O'Brien, 2011). In another project, German, French, and Brazilian undergraduate engineering programmes organised virtual student exchanges using a variety of social media tools such as Google+ and Facebook (Bassani & Buchem, 2019). The pandemic has further encouraged the development of virtual internationalisation projects. During the pandemic, students from Ryerson University in Toronto and their peers from the Beijing Foreign Studies University collaborated in a semester-long virtual internationalisation project (Chen, 2022).

Evaluation of these projects suggested that students gained a better understanding of cultural difference and confidence in working across cultures through their collaboration experiences (Bassani & Buchem, 2019; Chen, 2022; O'Brien, 2011). For example, university students from the United States and Korea who collaborated online reported improvements in their communication and collaboration abilities (Hur et al., 2020). Students in teacher education programmes from the United States and Hong Kong appreciated the value of online tools such as Slack and Zoom in facilitating group work (Deng et al., 2021). Chen (2022) noted that online collaborations facilitated international friendships that could further enhance intercultural competence. Cross-cultural collaborations involve social interaction. Zakaria et al. (2004) argued that a successful virtual team needs to establish group relationships, mutual trust, social bonds, and leadership. Guidelines and support should be offered to students to ensure adequate agenda-setting and preparation prior to their meetings in order to ensure effective online interactions (Deng et al., 2021).

Research questions

This Article reports on a project of cross-cultural synchronised online learning held with two classes of marketing and communication students in Hong Kong and Malaysia. The initiative aimed to provide students with exposure to international advertising media engagement strategies and consumer insights in regional markets. Teaching materials originally developed for Hong Kong students were expanded in scope to include materials relevant to Malaysian consumer markets. The course incorporated innovative pedagogy including course-based research and real-time virtual interaction. Four of the thirteen weeks of the course utilised a flipped classroom model. Students from Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) and Sunway University (SU) worked together to complete three in-class assignments. This paper details the course’s pedagogical design, the process of developing course materials on an open learning platform, the challenges of implementation, as well as students’ learning outcomes and experiences. Through analysis of the design and experience of the HKBU-SU cross-cultural synchronised online learning course, the following questions are addressed:

1. How are blended learning activities used to enhance student learning?
2. How does the inclusion of cross-cultural collaborative learning activities cultivate intercultural skills and understanding?
3. What are the best practices for implementing cross-cultural synchronised collaborative learning?

METHOD

Course

The cross-cultural synchronised online learning analysed in this Article brought together two classes of communication and marketing students from Hong Kong and Malaysia. The first was a core course for undergraduate students majoring in advertising and branding at the School of Communication at HKBU, titled PRAD3046 “Audience Measurement and Engagement”. The second was a core course on integrated marketing communication for undergraduate students majoring in marketing at SU. The two courses overlapped in several topics, including media planning, advertising strategies, and promotional tools such as product placement and event sponsorship. Institutional support was requested to arrange a common class meeting time so that students could engage in real-time collaboration. A grant of HK\$100,000 (equivalent to US\$25,000) was secured from HKBU in February 2021 to design the new curriculum. The funding was granted to support cross-cultural learning opportunities for students from HKBU and SU, and to promote internationalisation in the curriculum. The funding supported the employment of a senior project assistant for six months. The resulting course was implemented in the first semester of Academic Year 2021/22 (i.e. September to December 2021).

Platforms

FutureLearn

[FutureLearn](#) was selected as an online learning platform to house the new teaching materials. It was chosen because of its sophisticated integration of text, visuals, video, discussion forums, and quizzes. FutureLearn is a global learning platform founded in 2012 by The Open University. It now has more than 18 million online learners, with over 5,000 courses offered by more than 250 universities and other partners. The first author had prior experience developing two courses using the FutureLearn platform, and students' learning experiences had been positive. HKBU and SU students were asked to sign into the small private online courses and complete the teaching materials, discussion exercises, and quizzes before coming to live classes. Students from the two universities were able to comment on each other's posts in the discussion forums.

Zoom

The Zoom platform was used for all the synchronised online teaching and learning activities. Both HKBU and SU students had over one year of prior experience using the Zoom platform for class delivery and group projects. The group assignments for the HKBU and SU students were announced one week before the class activities. HKBU group leaders were assigned, and they would set up a Zoom meeting link and invite group members to participate. The meetings were recorded and the links were shared with the instructors to assess the overall quality of students' collaborative work.

Teaching materials

Content

It took about three months to develop materials for the FutureLearn platform, and another two months to design the synchronous online learning activities. The last month was reserved for pilot testing, revising the materials based on feedback from the FutureLearn team, and project documentation. Before launching the course, we invited a communication student from HKBU to go over all the online materials step-by-step without participating in the discussion. She recorded the time she spent each week on the materials and identified the parts that she did not understand. Her feedback indicated it would take two hours to go through the materials each week. We fine-tuned the materials to improve clarity and interactivity.

Table 1 shows the weekly schedule for the HKBU Audience Measurement course. This included four weeks of cross-cultural learning (highlighted in green in Table 1). Three synchronous online collaborative in-class assignments were designed based on the content of these lessons. Table 2 summarises the teaching materials, the corresponding in-class assignments, and the learning objectives.

Table 1

Class weekly schedule with cross-cultural synchronised learning weeks highlighted

Week	Date	Topics/Activities
01	Sep 8	Course outline and overview; Role of media agency in the consumer journey and advertising creative process; Hong Kong media landscape
02	Sep 15	Audience measurement for print; Audited audience figures, format of a media plan with print. Audience measurement for free TV; format of a media plan with TV
03	Sep 29	FutureLearn Week 1 material (5%). Traditional and non-traditional media: Audience measurement: coverage, reach, frequency, cost efficiency, source of media audience data In-class Group Assignment 1: Regional print campaign (5%)
04	Oct 6	FutureLearn Week 2 material (5%). Product placement in the broadcast medium and event sponsorships In-class Group Assignment 2: Product placement or event sponsorship (5%)
05	Oct 13	TVB rate card; pre-emption system; reach and frequency table, cost per rating point calculation Individual Assignment 3 on TV audience measurement (5%)
06	Oct 20	Audience measurement in OOH (Out-of-home media, include transport media; posters on street); Group Assignment 4: MTR audience engagement (5%)
07	Oct 27	FutureLearn Week 3 material (5%). Employment of celebrity/KOL as an engagement strategy In-class Group Assignment 5: Celebrity engagement (5%)
08	Nov 3	Debriefing on Group Assignment 4 on OOH; Group Project Briefing (20%); Group Working Session: select topic and search of literature Revision of SPSS for data analysis and statistical tests
09	Nov 10	Google Analytics; In-class Individual Assignment 6 (5%): Write social media posts and measure its effectiveness using analytics
10	Nov 17	FutureLearn Week 4 materials (5%). Search engine optimization and search engine marketing, prepare keywords; Group working time In-class Practice: keyword trend Consultation by groups on data analysis of the project
11	Nov 24	Group Presentation Part 1
12	Dec 1	Group Presentation Part 2 and final examination (30%)

Table 2

Content and learning objectives of synchronous online learning curriculum

Topic	Overview	Learning Objectives	In-class Assignment
Week 3: Audience measurement of traditional and non-traditional media, source of media audience data	Covers audience measurement terminology (e.g., media vehicles, media coverage, TV rating, gross impression) and sources of media data. Most concepts were presented in text. An 8.5-minute video was produced to explain the construction of a reach and frequency table based on audience exposure to the media content. A discussion forum required students to decide on increasing reach or increasing frequency for a brand situation. A quiz with six questions was created.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are able to identify the advertising opportunities in the market • Students are able to apply the concepts of readership and readership profile in selecting appropriate media vehicles 	HKBU and SU students worked together to suggest magazines in Hong Kong and Malaysia for a print campaign for a youth fashion brand. A worksheet with Hong Kong and Malaysian print audience data was provided for students as reference material.
Week 4: Product placement and event sponsorship	Covers different forms of product placement in movies and TV programs, and regulations governing product placement in Hong Kong and Malaysia. A discussion forum asked students to give their opinion on banning advertisements in children's TV programs from the perspective of a parent or marketer. Another discussion forum asked students to identify how a TV program violated the regulations. A video of four minutes was produced to showcase various forms of product placement. Another video of five minutes was produced to showcase different types of event sponsorship. Two quizzes with altogether ten questions were created.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are able to identify the differences in the pet market between Hong Kong and Malaysia • Students are able to identify popular TV programs in the two markets suitable for product placement 	Students were asked to identify a TV programme in Hong Kong as well as in Malaysia to communicate the launch of a pet-friendly shopping mall using product placement. Students identified appropriate TV programmes and prepared a 20-second audio script.
Week 7: Celebrity endorsement as an engagement strategy	Covers the definition of celebrity endorsement, theories related to celebrity endorsers, and celebrity endorsement examples in Hong Kong and Malaysia. Two videos, both approximately 3.5 minutes, were produced. The first video introduced the source attractiveness and source credibility model that identifies different attributes of celebrity endorsement. The second video explained the process and conditions of celebrities' influence in the advertising context. A quiz with four	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are able to appreciate the differences in celebrity endorsement practices in the two markets • Students are able to identify the different attributes of celebrities that make them memorable in the two markets 	An online research assignment was designed. Hong Kong students, either on their own or in groups of two, interviewed one Sunway University student about celebrity endorsers they found memorable and their perception of celebrity endorsement in advertising. The exercise replicated the Chan et al. (2003) study

	<p>questions was created. In the discussion forum, students commented on a government public service advertisement with a female celebrity endorser who was above 60 years old. Students were required to discuss whether a younger celebrity would be a better endorser and to explain the rationale behind their thinking.</p>		<p>included in the FutureLearn platform about Hong Kong adolescents' perception of advertisements with celebrity endorsement.</p>
<p>Week 10: SEO, SEM, and Keyword Trend</p>	<p>Covers the definitions of search engine optimisation (SEO), search engine marketing (SEM), and Keyword Trend. A quiz with four questions was created.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are able to differentiate between SEO and SEM, and acquire skills to increase traffic to a website • Students are able to apply Google Trend analysis to identify the search volume of different keywords 	<p>An industry practitioner visited the class and gave a guest lecture. Students were required to use Google Trend analysis to analyse the effectiveness of different keyword combinations. There was no synchronised collaborative work for this week.</p>

Pedagogical design

Figure 1 summarises the pedagogical design. As the two courses involved were not fully compatible, four out of the thirteen weeks were selected for collaborative work. Topics common to both the courses offered at HKBU and SU were selected. The HKBU instructor went through the course materials used previously and decided which parts should be transferred to the online platform. Most of the examples were based on the Hong Kong consumer market. To expand the scope, the SU instructor provided help in sourcing for examples relevant to the Malaysian market. The two instructors discussed the prompts for discussions and short quiz questions that would be appropriate for both groups of students.

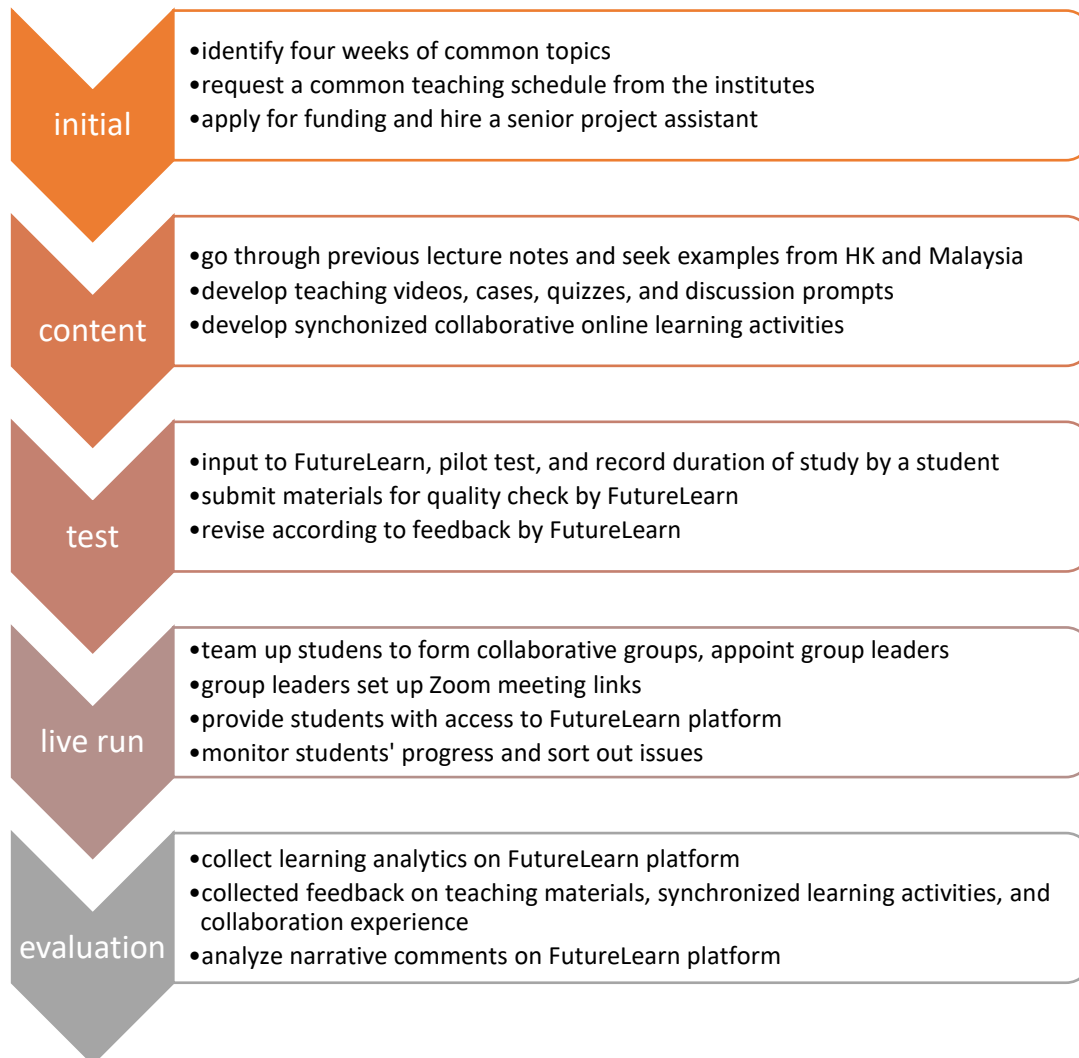


Figure 1. Pedagogical design

The flipped classroom was designed with reference to Rajaram's (2019) framework of pre-class online learning, then face-to-face content delivery, followed by student-centred collaborative activities. Previous studies have indicated that short videos are appealing to online learners (Chan & Tsang, 2018). Concepts appropriate for video teaching were identified and short videos of about three to four minutes were developed. Tables and graphs with animations were also developed to illustrate the concepts. Videos were produced in-house with technical support from the Centre for Holistic Teaching and Learning at HKBU.

Students were expected to go through the course materials in the FutureLearn platform before attending the class. During class time, synchronised online collaborative activities were designed for students to interact, discuss, and present. There were 73 students from SU and 37 from HKBU. To achieve a fairer mix, the 73 SU students were divided into three groups, each of which consisted of 24 students who participated in one of the blended learning activities with HKBU students. As a result, students from HKBU collaborated with a different group of SU students for each assignment.

For students in both universities, participation in FutureLearn classes and the first three in-class exercises were graded. HKBU students who completed the steps of the FutureLearn materials and participated in the discussion on or before the day of the class would receive five points for each week's material (out of a total 100 points for the entire course). Each of the three in-class exercises also contributed five points. Altogether the blended learning content accounted for 35% of the final grade. For SU students, 40 out of 100 marks were allocated for participation in blended learning activities.

Data collection and analysis

Evidence of student learning outcomes was collected from three sources. Firstly, the FutureLearn platform provided weekly information about students' learning activities, including the percentage of steps completed, the number of comments posted on the discussion forums, and the completion of quizzes. The final completion rates of the FutureLearn online teaching materials were compiled at the end of the course. Secondly, to assess the research questions, a survey was conducted on Week 10 of the course. The survey covered HKBU students only because they were required to complete all the assignments in the cross-cultural learning project. HKBU students were given a QR code that linked to an online survey, which asked a total of 10 questions. The first four questions were about the FutureLearn materials. The subsequent three questions were about the blended learning activities, and the last three questions were about the cross-cultural collaboration experience. Students were asked to rate each statement on a six-point scale (1=Strongly Disagree; 6=Strongly Agree). Descriptive statistics were compiled and presented. Finally, on the last week of the class, feedback and comments about the FutureLearn materials were collected from both HKBU and SU students through the online platform.

Furthermore, the challenges faced and the instructors' reflections on the learning process were documented throughout the semester. After each blended learning activity, the two instructors communicated about students' engagement. Issues and proposed changes in the subsequent blended learning activities were discussed. These records supplement our analysis of the learning results and inform recommendations for best practices.

RESULTS

Student participation on the FutureLearn platform

The FutureLearn platform provided learning analytics about the number of steps completed and allowed for review and analysis of students' online discussions. Comments about the learning experience, collected through the FutureLearn platform at the end of the course, provided further insight. According to learning analytics provided by the FutureLearn platform, at the end of the semester, all 37 HKBU students and 68 out of 73 SU students completed 81-100% of the steps in the FutureLearn materials. This was the first experience for HKBU as well as SU students to use the FutureLearn platform, and the experiences were valuable for them. The online materials appear to have been well-utilised by students. For the four discussion forums, the number of posts varied from 85 to 94. However, students posted their analyses or opinions without commenting on one another's ideas. Not much discussion about the topics was observed. Interaction among students through the discussion boards could be enhanced in the future.

Results of the online survey

Table 3 summarises the mean scores and standard deviation of each of the survey items completed by HKBU students.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics of statements from the online survey (N=34)

Part I. Feedback on FutureLearn	Mean*	S.D.
1. The materials on FutureLearn are well organised.	5.0	0.9
2. I am able to understand most of the materials on FutureLearn.	5.1	1.0
3. The materials on FutureLearn are visually stimulating.	5.0	1.0
4. The use of FutureLearn materials made me more attentive in class.	4.4	1.0
Part II. Feedback on Blended Learning		
5. The blended learning activities are relevant to the topic.	5.1	0.7
6. The blended learning activities enable us to have time for deep discussion and presentation.	4.6	0.9
7. I found the learning activities helpful in stimulating my interest in the topic.	4.4	1.0
Part III. Feedback on Cross-Cultural Collaboration Experience		
8. The blended learning activities provide me an opportunity to learn about other cultures	4.8	1.0
9. I gained intercultural skills through working with Sunway University students	4.6	0.9
10. I became more aware of the challenges in communicating with consumers from other cultures	4.8	0.6

* 6-point scale (1= Strongly Disagree; 6 = Strongly Agree)

Overall, students showed appreciation of the materials on FutureLearn. The mean score for the organisation, comprehensibility, and visual appeal of the FutureLearn materials were all 5 or above. Students were slightly less in agreement that the FutureLearn materials made them more attentive in class (mean=4.4). Students found the blended learning materials relevant (mean=5.1). The depth of discussion during the blended learning activities was rated slightly lower, with a mean score of 4.6. Students generally agreed that the cross-cultural collaboration enabled them to learn about other cultures, gain intercultural skills, and become more aware of challenges in communicating across cultures. There was room for improvement in making the learning activities more interesting.

Student narrative feedback

A prompt in the final week of the course asked students for general comments about adopting FutureLearn as an online blended learning platform. Altogether, 71 comments were posted on the FutureLearn platform. One hundred percent of the comments were positive. Students complimented the design of the FutureLearn platform. A thematic analysis was used to examine the texts of students' comments. The phrase "Thank you" or "Thanks" occurred 70 times. A majority of the comments remarked that the materials were informative, useful, inspiring, well-organised, detailed, and interesting. The following are three representative quotes:

"I really appreciate the kind of teaching that makes good use of the online resources and combines the traditional learning mode with interactive learning product of the new-era, and also get more insights from foreign ad practitioner. This is the first time that I have had this type of blended learning. It is easy for me to refer to the resources and could better construct my knowledge, which is greatly helpful! Thank you so much for your considerate and innovative teaching!"

"Thank you so much for sharing such informative materials with us! I have gotten so much useful knowledge from this course and I am sure it will be useful to us in the near future!"

"Thank you so much for providing us useful knowledge and lots of new information, highly appreciated!"

Some students showed appreciation that they had the opportunity to work with students from another culture. The following is representative quote:

"Thank you for providing a platform for us to make friends and learn new knowledge."

A few students complemented the materials' interactive components, which helped them apply the concepts into real-life applications. The following is a representative quote:

"I like the part of practicing through the exercises and discussion right away after the theoretical part."

Students' participation in the online activities, their survey feedback, and their qualitative feedback at the end of the course all suggest that they appreciated the course' multiple innovative methodologies. They participated actively in online learning using the FutureLearn platform and evaluated the experience in highly positive terms. Their ratings of the blended learning activities and cross-cultural collaboration opportunities were also highly positive. The results of the study were in accord with others that suggest that synchronous online learning and flipped classroom models are well-received by students (Chen, 2022; Corrias, 2015). They also concur in the result that synchronous online learning can be an effective model for facilitating cross-cultural understanding and intercultural competencies (Chen, 2022; O'Brien, 2011).

Challenges in sourcing Malaysian examples for FutureLearn teaching materials

Despite the overall success of the cross-cultural collaborative learning model, there were a few challenges in creating and implementing the curriculum. First, due to intercultural differences, expanding the curriculum to encompass another cultural setting sometimes necessitated adjustment in the content. In the creation of teaching materials, it was noticed that product placement in television programmes was not common in Malaysia. As a result, Hong Kong examples and examples from Korean popular dramas were selected to demonstrate various product placement formats. In selecting examples of celebrity endorsements in Malaysia, it was found that most TV commercials with celebrity endorsements in Malaysia were in the Malay language. As a result, only print advertisements in English were used as illustration for the Malaysian market.

Challenges in implementing cross-cultural synchronised online learning

In addition to challenges in content development, several issues were encountered in designing synchronised online learning activities. Firstly, time restrictions limited the depth of collaboration. Students at SU were taking an integrated marketing communication course in which audience measurement was only one of the topics covered. Consequently, collaborative work sessions with HKBU students were limited to one tutorial hour each. Working on a specific task with remote partners in under an hour was a challenge, especially when students had not had any previous interaction. In the first two synchronised online learning assignments, HKBU students were asked to develop a cross-cultural advertising strategy that targeted the Malaysian market. The SU students served as their informants. Students in HKBU would ask for their assistance in creating these advertising campaigns. As a result, SU students took on the role of consultants. They did not need to produce outputs for the advertising campaigns, and their motivation to participate was not as high as for the HKBU students.

Secondly, certain communication problems emerged. As the students from the two universities did not know each other, communication was unsatisfactory in the first activity. Even though pupils were asked to turn on their cameras, some did not. Among the eight groups, one had severe communication problems. Two students in the group accidentally used Mandarin to communicate even though the medium of instruction was English. International students and those students who did not understand Mandarin were unable to participate. To address these problems, students were instructed that in the subsequent blended learning activities, they had to turn on their cameras and converse only in English. To ensure that students had turned on their cameras, students were required to submit recordings of their Zoom meeting for assessment. To further strengthen communication, before launching into the working session, students were encouraged to introduce themselves to one another and given time for free discussion as a warm-up.

There were also technical and logistical problems during the collaboration process. When all group members turned on their microphones, and especially when all the groups were engaged in synchronised activities in the same physical classrooms, there was a lot of audio feedback. As a result, students had to turn their microphones on and off to allow one person to speak at any time. To address this situation, in the second and third synchronous learning activities, an additional physical classroom was booked nearby at HKBU. The feedback problem was substantially ameliorated. Furthermore, during the first synchronous activity, SU students were somewhat anxious when some HKBU students sent out Zoom invitations only one day prior. Subsequently, HKBU students were asked to send the Zoom link for the Wednesday class by noon on the Monday of that week.

Finally, certain portions of the activity content required further refinement. In the first activity, it was found that many SU pupils seldom used print media. As a result, they were unable to recommend any newspaper or magazine titles in Malaysia for a print campaign. The third blended learning activity required HKBU students to interview SU students about their favorite advertisements with celebrity endorsement. The interviewer then proceeded to collect views from SU students about specific execution strategies that made the advertisement memorable. Among the three assignments, the third assignment of interviewing was the most engaging. SU students found the interview activity interesting and were eager to share their favorite Malaysian advertisements with the HKBU students. The free discussion held among students before the collaborative activity also facilitated communication. However, the time limit was an issue because students' Zoom accounts allowed a maximum of only 45 minutes of meeting time. Some SU students selected very long advertisements from YouTube, even up to 180 seconds. Some selected advertisements in the Malay language. They needed to explain the cultural background that made the advertisement special to them. It took some students a lot of time to explain the content of the commercial they had chosen. As a result, there was little time left for the

interview. It was proposed that in the future, students should select only television commercials of less than 30 seconds.

The third assignment could have also benefitted from more advanced preparation. In the original curriculum design, the third assignment involved Malaysian students recommending a Malay celebrity appropriate for a shampoo brand to Hong Kong students. Designing an interview assignment to replace the original one was a last-minute decision. The change was made to introduce more variety to the collaborative assignment format and to encourage greater participation from the Malaysian students. Because of a lack of prior preparation, there was insufficient time to apply for approval from the Research Ethics Committee. As a result, the assignment was positioned as a journalistic interview of personal opinion rather than a course-based research project.

Recommendation of best practices

This project enabled students to learn about the challenges of designing cross-cultural communication solutions through first-hand interaction with students from another country. The experience could not have been gained through textbook knowledge or case studies. Based on this experience of implementing cross-cultural synchronous online learning activities, we recommend the following best practices:

1. Encourage social interaction among students before the collaborative activities. It is difficult to work with strangers. In view of this challenge, student group assignments can be distributed a week in advance and students can be encouraged to interact through email before the synchronous online activities. When students meet up on Zoom, they should be given time to introduce themselves and engage in free discussion before beginning collaborative work.
2. Upload the assignment brief ahead of the online learning activity and allow students to continue the collaborative work after the designated synchronous working session. Both instructors can brief students on the assignment, the learning objectives, and the assessment criteria before the activity. One hour of synchronous collaborative activity is insufficient to produce in-depth discussion and deep collaboration. Students can continue to work offline and meet up on their own schedules to enhance the quality of collaboration and learning.
3. To ensure the online materials are pitched at the appropriate level for both groups of students, a student from each partner university can be engaged to develop the online teaching materials.
4. To enhance cross-cultural learning, students can be asked to respond to at least one post from a student of the partner university during the online discussion forum.
5. As many students may not be familiar with the FutureLearn online learning platform, they should be exposed to the learning platform during class sessions.
6. At the start of the collaboration, a synchronous online class should be arranged. Both instructors can give a lecture on their local consumer market and media landscape to provide background for cross-cultural collaboration and for the rest of the course. The session also allows students to “see” the instructors and students from the partner university.
7. After assessment of the activities, examples of good works can be displayed on the FutureLearn platform to reward students for good performance.

8. For the celebrity assignment, it would have been fruitful to also have the SU students interview HKBU students to enhance cross-cultural learning.
9. Instructors need to be flexible and respond promptly to last-minute changes such as shifting groups in light of student absences.
10. Participation on Zoom can be recorded for instructors' evaluation of students' participation. Marks should be allocated for the activities to encourage active learning.

CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges, the HKBU-SU cross-cultural learning project can be considered a success. The overall student completion rate of the FutureLearn materials was high. Student feedback was extremely positive. Many students commented that the online materials were informative, useful, and well organised. Students reported that they benefitted from the cross-cultural collaborative experience. A few students showed interest in further study. There is much to be learned from this experience for curriculum design and classroom administration. The study reinforces the result of prior studies that blended learning can enhance learning and that synchronous online learning can be an effective means of developing intercultural competency. It provides a model that educators experimenting with similar courses in the future can reference. The study also concurs with prior research that creating room for informal social interaction enhances the cross-cultural collaboration experience (Chen, 2022; O'Brien, 2011). It suggests a few ways to enhance student participation during the online collaboration process. The curriculum design, evaluation results, and best practice recommendations in this paper may offer inspiration to instructors who would like to experiment with cross-cultural collaborative online learning in future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was funded by the Teaching Development Grant (Category: Developing online courses/blended learning initiatives with FutureLearn) of the Centre for Holistic Teaching and Learning of Hong Kong Baptist University (Project number: FL-SPOC-2021-01). We would like to thank Mr. Andy Chan of the Centre for his technical support. Ms. Qiqi Li served as the Senior project assistant, and Ms. Yining Fan served as the teaching assistant.

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