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VIRTUAL CLASSROOM: A MEANINGFUL LEARNER-INSTRUCTOR RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Virtual classroom is becoming the new normal of tertiary education. The traditional teaching and learning in physical classroom have moved to online learning in virtual classroom where the instructors are struggling to engage with the learners. Personal interaction between learners and instructors in virtual classroom has been under threat as they fail to connect and interact effectively. Learners are better engaged in virtual classroom when the learner-instructor relationship are strong. The present study examined the approaches conducted by the instructors to build meaningful learner-instructor relationship. This study further investigated the challenges in building a meaningful learner-instructor relationship. Qualitative method which is semi-structured interview was employed in the study as five instructors had been interviewed to obtain the desired data. Based on the findings, planning the video content, video biography and video feedback were the approaches that can be used in fostering meaningful interaction between learners and instructors. Nonetheless, the instructors faced difficulty in deciding the ideal platform to encourage learners' participation in virtual classroom. Therefore, it is crucial for the instructors to conduct virtual classroom using the platform that can ease the relationship building between learners and instructors. The instructors also informed that diversity of learners has become one of the challenges to enhance their relationship. A meaningful learner-instructor relationship can be impactful for the learners to experience effective online learning in virtual classroom.

Keywords: learner-instructor relationship, virtual classroom, online learning, meaningful relationship



1. INTRODUCTION

The education in higher learning institution has shifted from face-to-face classroom interaction to virtual classroom interaction. Virtual classroom has offered the learners with flexibility in learning, however without a meaningful relationship with instructors, the learners will fail to interact and engage with the lessons effectively. Most of the time, the instructors would not be focusing on the need of building relationship with the learners, and it will never be on top in the instructors' priority list.

Fostering a learner-instructor relationship in virtual classroom may be challenging but according to Martin (2019), learner-instructor relationship in online learning will not only enhance the instructor's efficiency in online teaching, but a meaningful learner-instructor relationship will provide positive impacts to the learners' engagement, satisfaction, and retention in online learning. Learners will be motivated to learn in virtual classroom provided they are having supportive relationship with their instructor. The instructor can construct appropriate learning opportunities if they are always concerned on their learners' need of learning. A meaningful learner-instructor relationship will stimulate both learners and instructor's emotional connection that is needed when experiencing virtual classroom. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the approaches conducted by the instructors to build meaningful learner-instructor relationship. Instructor's challenges in building a meaningful learner-instructor relationship were also investigated in this study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Importance of Learner-Instructor Relationship Building

According to Zelihic (2015), instructors have a huge responsibility in establishing good relationships with the learners. Instructors who are respected by the learners are the one the learners believed to have best interest on their learning (Martin, 2017). Learner-instructor relationship fostered in virtual classroom will surely build positive learning experiences for the learners. Many learners are easily to be reached out and are comfortable to communicate, ask question, and share their challenges than they used to be in a face-to-face classroom (Zelihic, 2015). According to Aydin (2016), the vital aspect of online learning is communication. He further explained that communication generates interaction among the learners and instructors which will foster their relationship in online classroom.

Berry (2017b) in her study mentioned that instructors are suggested to build a warm and welcoming tone in online learning environment and be skilful in integrating the use of video into synchronous learning. She further added that instructors should be able to decide on the platforms that can enhance students' engagement. In Berry's (2019) study, instructors can demonstrate their presence in virtual classroom by giving perceptions to the learners that they were interested in the learners' emotional engagement, and they can provide them with



academic assistance. This will build a meaningful learner-instructor relationship in virtual classroom.

a. Challenges of Learner-Instructor Relationship Building in Virtual Classroom

One of the many challenges of building learner-instructor relationship in virtual classroom is the sense of presence of the instructors and learners. According to Pallof and Pratt (2007, p. 7), they stated that it is difficult to detect the absence of the students in virtual classroom as their attendance might be present but physically and psychologically absent. Kim and Thayne (2015) in their study also mentioned that the learners might not have the interest to build rapport with their instructor. This will affect the instructor's effort in promoting a meaningful relationship with the learners. Building a positive learner-instructor relationship in enhancing learner's engagement in virtual classroom might be challenging due to lack of social and affective support (Kim & Thayne, 2015). Micari and Pazos (2012) in their study mentioned three variables that enhance the positive learner-instructor relationship which are viewing the instructor as a role model, instructor's approachability, and the respect that the instructor shows for his learner.

Bolliger and Martin (2018) in their study found that some learners perceived synchronous online learning like virtual classroom needed commitment and it burdened them as the learners. The difficulty for the instructors in deciding the right platform to be used for virtual classroom can affect the learner-instructor relationship due to lack of connectivity and interaction between them (DeLone & McLean, 2003). Kim and Thayne (2015) stated that video-based lessons are used in asynchronous learning to develop learner-instructor relationship. The video-based lessons should be able to provide a more personalized approach in building learner-instructor relationship in virtual classroom.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative approach by conducting in-depth interviews to gather the desired data. The study aimed to examine the approaches conducted by the instructors to build meaningful learner-instructor relationship. This study further investigated the challenges in building a meaningful learner-instructor relationship.

The participants of the study were five instructors who have taught same English course and had experienced teaching in virtual classroom at a public higher learning institution in Perak. Three of the participants are male instructors and the other two are female instructors. They had been interviewed to obtain the desired data of the study. Semi structured interviews were employed in this study where the participants provided answers for the approaches to build learner-instructor relationship and challenges they faced. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis.



4. MAIN RESULTS

Based on the findings, planning the video content, video biography and video feedback were the approaches that can be used in fostering meaningful interaction between learners and instructors. Participant 2 responded that planning an interactive video content of the lesson will build learners' relationship with the instructor in virtual classroom as he said

"I took effort in producing interactive content for my class. By listening to me teaching for one hour is not effective as the learners tend to lose focus. Hence, I decide to integrate the use of video in my lesson by producing my own video content. Most of the time, I will use the learners as the characters that communicate with me (the instructor) in the video. I just want to make them feel that they will have a role in every lesson."

Over time, the learners will develop their interest in communicating with the instructor as they can feel the connection between them. All five participants had mutual agreement on how the instructor's presence in virtual classroom play a big role in developing learner-instructor relationship. Participant 1 mentioned

"I will turn on my camera during class as I believe my learners will engage better in learning when they see my lively expression."

As Martin (2019) mentioned in his study, by employing similar strategies as used in physical classroom will make the learners feel the instructor's presence virtually. Instead of just listening and watching to a recorded video or interactive slides with voice-over, the learners can feel the existence of a live instructor.

However, Participant 4 responded by stating the challenges he faced about the presence of instructor or learners. Participant 4 said that

"I would always encourage the learners to turn on the camera and microphone during class, however, most of the learners felt uncomfortable and refused to do so. I was quite disappointed when they kept using the excuse of not having strong connection. But at the same time, as the instructor, I try to understand the struggle they are facing."

The disappointment faced by the instructor somehow can affect the instructor's effort to build good relationship with the learners. The five participants agreed that they always involved in making assumptions on their learners' behaviour and attitude which somehow hinder their effort to apply a good approach in building the learner-instructor relationship. Participant 3 shared the same disappointment as Participant 4 as he said

"Most of the time, the learners refused to cooperate in virtual class. They seemed to be silent most of the time and chose not to respond to me."



However, Participant 3 saw the need of having empathy towards the learners as they might be facing challenges in joining the virtual classroom.

“From the beginning, I will check with the students their current conditions. I would say some of them are really struggling to join the virtual classroom. As the instructor, we should have a sense of empathy towards them. By preparing an interactive video content will help the students in their learning. They can repeat watching the video if they are having trouble in synchronous session.”

This is supported by Martin (2019) in his study as he mentioned the video content created by the instructor can be used repeatedly and it will create a sense of presence of the instructor in virtual classroom.

Other than that, the finding also revealed that instructor can enhance the learner-instructor relationship by integrating video biography in virtual classroom for them to get to know one another. Participant 4 mentioned that having a personalised video biography can give the opportunity for the learners to feel connected to the instructors. He stated that

“At the beginning of the semester, I will introduce myself to the learners by creating my own introduction video. Some of the students learn better if they get to know their instructor well”. Participant 1 added that, “I want to have a meaningful conversation with my students so that we can share the mutual feeling in virtual classroom.”

As similar to physical class, moments between learners and the instructor must be created and embraced to grow the feeling of connectedness between them. Three out of five participants agreed that time constraint to conduct virtual classroom was the challenge they faced in building learner-instructor relationship. Due to limited duration of time to deliver teaching in virtual classroom, they somehow neglect the need of bonding with the learners. Participant 1 said,

“There are too many distractions during virtual class that somehow affect the learning schedule.”

Therefore, one of the approaches suggested by Participant 1 is the integration of video biography in virtual classroom. Participant 1 said,

“It will work both ways where at the beginning of the semester, both instructors and learners will produce their video biography to be shared to the other members of the same class.”

He believed that this would develop trust and respect among them and later help to build a meaningful learner-instructor relationship.



The next finding also revealed that all the five participants shared the same response on having a video feedback to enhance the learner-instructor relationship in virtual classroom. Participant 5 said,

“I do not have all the time in the world to give feedback to everyone during virtual class. That is the thing that makes me feel upset because each learner deserves to get feedback on their learning. I found a solution by providing them with video feedback that they can watch after class hours.”

Video feedback is a must to be applied to ensure the learners to have a sense of belonging in virtual classroom. Two of the participants also disclosed that they faced difficulty in deciding the ideal platform to encourage learners’ participation in virtual classroom. Learners are varied and they will have different preferences of platform for virtual classroom. Without learners’ participation, Participant 4 believed that it was almost impossible to build a meaningful relationship with the learners. Participant 5 added to the issue by stating that due to having time constraints and internet availability, it is suggested that integration of the use of video feedback will develop learners’ trust and confidence in dealing and communicating with the instructor. Participant 5 said,

“The learners prefer to be given feedback. Some of them are really concerned about their study and they want to make sure the instructor is aware of their progress. I do not have enough time to give feedback in class, hence I promise them to give them feedback via video. I record myself speaking to assess their performance on assigned task.”

Based on the findings, it is suggested that by providing video feedback can enhance students’ participation in virtual classroom. Participant 3 also mentioned that it is crucial to always remind the learners how important they are in ensuring a smooth process of teaching and learning session in virtual classroom. “

I always remind my students their participation matters the most. It will help me decide what to do in the next class.”

As Participant 4 also mentioned about the video feedback, both instructor and learners will develop their relationship in a sense of having responsibility in the teaching and learning process. Participant 4 said,

“Sometimes, my students will help to alert me if they do not receive the video on time, just in case I forgot to give them feedback on the specified time as promised during class.”

Other than that, the learners can develop their soft skills, for example questioning skill and managing time to complete the assigned task in virtual classroom. Participant 2 said,

“Learners should be responsible on their own learning. We are both



struggling during virtual classroom. There is no excuse for the learners just to wait for the instructor to spoon-feed everything. We, as the instructor should encourage them to ask question whenever necessary and provide the feedback they need for their learning, does not matter during or after class hours.”

Hence, by embedding video feedback during or after synchronous lesson would be appreciated by the students and this will foster strong connections between the learners and instructors in virtual classroom.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the importance of building a meaningful learner-instructor relationship in virtual classroom. Overall, the findings revealed that building relationship and forging connections with the learners will help the instructors to understand and cater the learners’ need of learning. This study also signifies that establishing positive learner-instructor relationship will offer long-lasting implications for both learners and instructor in the process of teaching and learning in virtual classroom. Further research could further discuss on the learner-instructor relationship in virtual classroom by investigating on the learners’ approaches and challenges to sustain their relationship with the instructor for them to have an effective and engaging online learning experience.

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