

Connecting with Educators From Abroad via Zoom

A Powerful Teaching Method

Hani Morgan

Introduction

I had previously read about how teleconferencing technologies could be used to connect students from different countries with the intention of exposing them to a new culture. I even wrote an article about how educators were using such technology to promote cross-cultural understanding and motivation.

However, I had not implemented this type of teaching in any of my classes. To find out how effective this technology could be as a tool to promote cross-cultural understanding and motivation, I organized several sessions so that my American college students could interact with teachers in Nepal via Zoom.

One of my goals was to teach my students how to use an innovative instructional method with their future students to promote understanding of different cultures. I also wanted to increase their interaction with people from a culture different than their own, because my university is located in an area that lacks the cultural diversity of large urban cities.

Another goal I had was to start a project that involved working with a developing country. I knew that technology was being used to educate students in third world countries and wanted to see how effective this form of teaching could be.

My students were enrolled in a class designed to prepare them for teaching elementary social studies. This course included content about the importance of multicultural education. I was hoping that

these sessions would show my students how valuable and easy it can be to expose their future students to another culture and how teaching with technology has the potential to educate people in a developing country.

Theoretical Framework

This study explored several theories involving transformational education. The study was designed to integrate technology to promote this method of teaching. Various scholars have offered differing theories involving transformational education.

Slavich and Zimbardo (2012), for example, described *transformational instruction* as teaching that “involves creating dynamic relationships between teachers, students, and a shared body of knowledge to promote student learning and personal growth” (p. 569). One of the advantages of implementing transformational teaching this way relates to its power to develop individual and collective self-efficacy (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012).

Freire’s approach to education, often referred to as *transformative education*, has also been described as transformational (Rennick, 2015). It involves a kind of pedagogy that empowers people living in developing countries (Freire, 2000). This type of pedagogy provides people in third world nations with an awareness to improve their condition. It includes creating critical consciousness, which can help more privileged individuals see the inequalities their less privileged counterparts endure. This process encourages more privileged people to improve the lives of marginalized groups. My research was designed to integrate technology to apply these two forms of transformational education.

Literature Review

The kind of education Freire promoted

involves a type of teaching that encourages social action to improve the lives of underprivileged people. Freire is recognized as one of the leading authors on this form of education. He believed in an education that would develop critical consciousness, which can be described as the process of developing the ability of assessing social, political, cultural, and economic contexts and then taking action (Din & Ahmed, 2017).

The actions taken often involve resistance to oppressive practices. Because they can lead marginalized people to revolt, Freire’s theories are usually viewed as radical. However, gaining an awareness of oppressive practices in developing nations can also encourage more privileged people to help those living in less privileged areas through a peaceful process.

Various ways of implementing technology today fit this approach of pedagogy. Many organizations, for example, have started programs to increase educational opportunities for students without adequate resources for learning. For instance, some educational programs allow students in developing countries to take courses in which they learn content through prerecorded videos.

A notable article describing how courses with prerecorded videos transformed the lives of people in developing countries appeared in the *New York Times*. This article mentioned how online education improved Battushig Myanganbayar’s life. When Battushig was 15 years old, he earned a perfect score in Circuits and Electronics, the first massive open online course (MOOC). Such courses are free or nearly free and available to anyone with an Internet connection.

Battushig’s score was impressive because he was a teenager who had aced a difficult MIT course, despite living in a country where one-third of the population

Hani Morgan is a professor in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education at the University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

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is nomadic. Out of 150,000 students, he and 339 other students achieved a perfect score. This achievement was made possible by the actions of his school principal, an MIT graduate who succeeded in providing science and technology labs for his students.

In recent years, many institutions, including the University of Texas, Harvard, and Caltech, have developed MOOCs. Such courses not only provide an affordable, high-quality education but also help schools find outstanding students from all over the world (Pappano, 2013).

The second form of transformational education this study is based on involves the approach Slavich and Zimbardo (2012) have described. According to their version, in this type of pedagogy, one of the instructor's main goals is to facilitate learning of key course concepts to enhance students' personal development and attitudes toward learning.

In the 21st century, the integration of technology can be crucial because students are accustomed to learning with digital tools. Failing to include digital resources often contributes to a disconnect between students' experiences in and out of school (Ahn, Bivona, & DiScala, 2011). Thus, using digital resources during instruction generally improves student attitudes toward learning.

One study, for example, found that instruction with an interactive whiteboard led students to develop positive perceptions about the use of this tool (Önal, 2017). The heavy reliance on technology my study required therefore matches a style of instruction linked to positive attitudes toward learning.

With regard to enhancing students' personal development of key course concepts, my course is intended to help students apply the NCSS (National Council for the Social Studies) standards and the Mississippi Social Studies Framework. One of the NCSS standards is on culture and cultural diversity, requiring teachers to provide instruction on these topics. The Mississippi Social Studies Framework includes competencies and objectives that require developing knowledge about the places that minority groups come from.

Method of Research and Participants

My research can be best described as a case study. I used a qualitative approach and relied on observations, a brief survey, several class discussions, and email communications to gather data. One set

of participants consisted of 15 students enrolled in a social studies methods course in a K–6 teacher education undergraduate program. All but two of these students were female. Most of the students were between 20 and 30 years of age, with one woman in her 30s and one man in his early 40s. The other set consisted of my colleague and three Nepali teachers. My colleague travels regularly from New York to Nepal to work with teachers and students.

Procedure

I started my research after my colleague agreed to collaborate with me. Our goal was to connect my American students with three teachers in Nepal using videoconferencing technology. Although most of my students were in class with me during these sessions, two of them were taking the course online. When my class connected with my colleague and the Nepali teachers through our class computer, these two students joined the Zoom sessions from home through their personal computers.

Two Interactive Sessions

Session 1 The first session introduced the American students to Nepal and its people. During this session, I connected with my colleague via Zoom. Zoom consists of teleconferencing software that provides superior video quality even if participants are abroad. Signing up for a basic Zoom account not only provides users with free teleconferencing software but also allows them to share their screens and to connect with many participants simultaneously. Zoom also allows users to record each session.

My American students first connected with my colleague before he went to Nepal so that he could talk about the methods he applied for teaching students there and prepare my class for speaking to teachers in this country. During this session, he described interesting aspects of the country. Overall, the discussion enthralled my students. Some of the questions they asked included how it felt to be an American in Nepal, how their methods of education differed from those used in America, and how people from Nepal perceived America.

My colleague explained that people in Nepal had a high regard for America because it was a wealthy country. He also mentioned that teaching in Nepal is usually entirely based on textbooks and that people there resist other forms of teaching because they do not consider it education. To counteract this detrimental approach

to education, he would sometimes take students for a walk through the community to interact with shopkeepers so that they could learn about their surrounding area.

Session 2 Before the first session ended, my colleague discussed how my American students might interact with teachers in Nepal so that the two groups can learn about each other's culture. One method he suggested was sharing photos and talking about different aspects of the two regions.

I agreed to use this approach, hoping that my students would learn more about Nepal and that the Nepali teachers would learn more about America. I succeeded and wanted to describe my research to provide educators with ideas for organizing similar projects with their students.

In addition to a computer, my classroom was equipped with two speakers, a projector, and a large screen in front of the room. These tools helped make these sessions engaging and enjoyable. While the speakers allowed my entire class to hear everything, the projector and screen enabled the class to see everything the teachers in Nepal wanted to show my class.

The "share screen" tool was extremely useful because it enabled everyone to download photos and show them exactly as they appeared on the computers that were used. Any photo that was shown on the computer in Nepal could be seen on the computer and large screen in my class exactly as it appeared on the computer in Nepal, and the Nepali teachers could view my class's photos using the same process.

Participants' Photos and Discussions

When my class connected to Nepal, my colleague suggested that a few of my students speak first. One of them then came to the front of the room and talked about her family as she showed several pictures, including one of her husband, father, and children. The American students talked about the area where they lived, aspects of American culture, places they visited, and some of their hobbies.

For example, one student showed a picture of his family after they had dressed up for Halloween. He said that this holiday was a fun time of year when kids in America dress up and get candy. He also showed pictures of parts of Hattiesburg, where my university is located. Finally, he explained that Hattiesburg and Mississippi are fun places to be.

Another student showed a photo of the time she visited the Grand Canyon.

The teachers in Nepal then shared some of their photos and explained various aspects of their culture. Although they seemed to enjoy speaking to my students, my colleague mentioned that they were nervous and shy.

One of them showed one of her relatives wearing traditional clothes for a festival, and another showed a photo of a traditional Nepali dish. After a few members of both groups had had a chance to show photos, I asked whether the teachers in Nepal had questions for my class. My colleague mentioned that they had not prepared questions for us and suggested that we ask them questions.

One of my students then asked if the headdress one of the teachers was wearing in one of the photos was worn on a regular basis in Nepal. The teacher who showed this picture mentioned that it is only worn for special occasions and that in the photo he showed, he was wearing it at a wedding. Another student asked whether Nepal had good coffee. One of the teachers responded, saying that although most people in Nepal drink tea, they do have good coffee.

Findings

Several themes emerged from my research: a heightened level of motivation, cross-cultural understanding, and new knowledge on implementing technology.

Motivation

These sessions excited my American students. They motivated the teachers in Nepal as well. My data supported these conclusions in several ways. First, I could see the excitement in my students' eyes. Although I know from previous experience that lectures sometimes lead my students to sit passively in class and lose interest, connecting with people in a different country sparked much more excitement and promoted curiosity about the way of life in that part of the world.

Many of my students became eager to show more of their photos after the second session started, hoping to share them before class ended. Although the first session occurred before my colleague left for Nepal, it excited my students as well because they had not previously experienced a videoconferencing session in my class. Simply integrating a new way of providing instruction was beneficial.

In addition, my colleague, who was in New York City at this time, captured my students' attention by holding his computer near a window to show them

the high-rise buildings they do not get to see in Hattiesburg. To confirm that the heightened level of motivation I observed was not a misleading impression on my part, I surveyed my students. In addition, I talked about aspects of these two sessions with them.

These surveys and discussions supported my observations. They showed that my students not only enjoyed the project but also learned content I intended to teach. In addition, many of my students mentioned they would use such a teaching strategy with their future students. After each session, my students took a brief survey consisting of three questions:

How did you feel about today's class?

Did you learn anything?

Did today's class provide you with ideas for implementing effective social studies teaching?

One of the students wrote the following in response to the question concerning how she felt about the session:

I really enjoyed today's class. I thought it was great that we got to connect with teachers from another country to learn about their culture. This was definitely something I have never done before as a student, but I thoroughly enjoyed it!

I also wanted to find out how my colleague perceived this project and ask him if he thought children in Nepal would benefit from interacting with people from America via Zoom. To get this feedback, I emailed him a few questions after the second session. In one of these questions, I asked if he thought children in Nepal might enjoy a videoconferencing session. In response to this question, he wrote,

The children would be most excited about such a conference, they love the chance to do anything on the computer, and some are not as shy as the adults for speaking to the camera.

In a separate email about how the teachers perceived this project, he wrote,

The Nepali teachers were fascinated by the students in Mississippi, when the students described and offered photos of their friends, their celebrations, and the sporting events they attended. The Nepali teachers were glad to share photos and stories of how they celebrated their Newari Culture. They all expressed their desire to continue these exchanges.

Cross-Cultural Understanding

These sessions allowed both the Amer-

ican students and the teachers in Nepal to develop cross-cultural understanding. For example, one student wrote the following in response to one of the questions on her survey:

I learned a lot about the culture in Nepal and the people. I learned about the meals that they sometimes eat and their celebrations. Their families are much like we are here in America, but their food and dress is very different from ours. This was a great learning experience.

During our discussions, another student mentioned that this kind of interaction would benefit elementary students, allowing them to have a fuller understanding of a culture. She said that information from videoconferencing sessions is current, but information from a book may be outdated. She also appreciated being allowed to ask questions to people from Nepal. This student perceived this approach as a superior method since textbook work lacks this interaction.

Other students mentioned that talking with people in developing countries would teach children how privileged Americans are. When I emailed my colleague to ask him if he thought children in Nepal might learn from a project similar to this one, he wrote,

They definitely will learn, with more practice, to be more comfortable speaking in public, which is a major issue here.

New Knowledge About Integrating Technology

In response to a question about the usefulness of the sessions in providing new ideas for teaching, one student wrote,

Today's class will be useful to me because this is something that I could implement one day in my classroom. We had pen pals when I was in elementary school, but I think when I become a teacher, I would like to implement something like we did today so that students could see each other. It was very interesting!

The new knowledge about implementing videoconferencing technology to communicate with people in developing countries encouraged my students to want to try to integrate this approach into their own teaching practice after they graduate. This outcome is significant because online education similar to the kind my class experienced has the potential to enhance the educational opportunities of students in developing countries, rural regions, and low-income areas.

Implications of Our Project for Educators

The success I experienced when connecting my class to people in another country has important implications for educators interested in using videoconferencing technology or other forms of online communication for teaching students. In recent years, free teleconferencing software like Zoom has become widely available. Such software is higher in quality than that used in previous years, providing a superior online experience similar to the one my class had.

Any educational institution with an Internet connection and computers can take advantage of this teleconferencing technology and other free online resources. Online education similar to the kind my class experienced has the potential not only to add a dynamic element to teaching but to enhance the lives of students living in areas with poor educational systems.

Vivien Stewart (2012) explained how this method could be beneficial to people in these locations in her book about international models of excellence:

[Technology] enables students to take virtual courses on a wide variety of subjects even if there are no teachers who specialize in that subject in their schools. This is especially helpful in underresourced schools, whether rural or urban, or for simply exposing students to a broader, richer curriculum than is available in some local schools. (p. 160)

She noted that in developing countries like Brazil, videoconferencing technology is used to educate more than 20,000 students in 700 schools in remote areas in the Amazon jungle.

As previously discussed, courses called MOOCs allow educators to provide educational opportunities to students in developing countries. However, such courses provide a less-than-optimal learning environment. Unlike traditional courses, MOOCs do not limit enrollment, leading large numbers of students to sign up. Consequently, instructors cannot provide individual attention to students. In addition, cheating is difficult to control. For example, one professor discovered that 20 people had submitted identical homework for a course. Many students also cannot do the university-level work these courses require (Pappano, 2012).

While MOOCs may hinder learning for some participants, online learning via teleconferencing software with smaller numbers of students offers many advan-

tages with fewer issues. My research, for example, showed that online learning with a smaller number of students promotes cross-cultural learning by connecting students and teachers from different countries. Other research found that it allows schools to connect with educators and experts interested in providing their expertise to less fortunate students from around the world (Stewart, 2012). Technologies like Skype and Zoom are perfect for schools and students located in rural areas that may not have access to the educational resources children in urban areas have.

Closing Thoughts

Connecting with people in different countries through teleconferencing software can be motivating and educational. Students tend to prefer interacting with live people from a different area rather than merely learn a new topic through textbooks and worksheets. This form of teaching can be especially valuable for pupils in developing countries, rural areas, and low-income areas because students in these areas usually lack the educational opportunities available in other regions.

Online education without teleconferencing communication can be valuable as well for these students. Some free courses developed by universities, called MOOCs, have allowed students to enroll in classes they would otherwise not be able to take, permitting them to learn valuable content to enhance their chances to succeed academically. Unfortunately, these courses fail to provide an adequate learning environment for many students. Large numbers of students typically sign up, making it difficult for them to receive individual attention.

Despite the limitations of interacting with technology, online education, whether with or without teleconferencing software, can enhance learning and improve the lives of underprivileged students from all over the world. This form of teaching will likely continue to expand and improve as educators increase their awareness of its benefits and find solutions to reduce its drawbacks.

With regard to transformational education, my project showed that when implemented well, this approach to education fulfills the goals it was designed to achieve. My students provided evidence of developing self-efficacy toward using technology to transform the lives of people in developing countries. Dynamic relationships were

created among all groups involved. Student learning of key course concepts occurred, and attitudes toward learning improved. As a result, I am eager to continue this work in the future and hope to work with both Nepali teachers and students.

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