Title	Virtual Learning and Cross-cultural Experiences
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Citation	With Corona or Post Corona : The Opportunities and The Challenges for Virtual Learning and International Exchange. 2021, p. 1-3
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/84832
rights	
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Virtual Learning and Cross-cultural Experiences

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From With Covid-19 to Post Covid Era

Covid-19 broke out worldwide in the beginning of last year, which soon resulted in pandemic, and since then - since the start of this new academic year here in Japan in April 2020, teachers and students at schools, universities and colleges, have been forced to teach and learn online for entire one year. I think we've already learned quite a lot, that virtual learning has advantages as well as disadvantages.

Of course, there are disadvantages. Students are 'locked out' from campus. They are banned coming to campus; they cannot use labs, library, gym, and other facilities physically; they have to refrain from doing extra-curricula activities, which we call 'circle' activities in Japan - you know students organise kinds of 'circles' like tennis circle, dancing circle, etc. at universities and colleges - ; and, plus, what is the most serious problem is that they have to stay home and cannot meet and talk with friends in person on campus. I know they've had so far a really hard life, not only physically but also mentally. I feel so sorry on that.

However, there are advantages as well. Students can repeat watching online course content at any time if they like; students and teachers are able to manage classes interactively enough online, even better than doing it in a real, physical classroom, utilising such online meeting systems as Zoom, Webex, and Google Classroom, discussing different topics in breakout rooms, posing questions via 'chat'; and most importantly, hybrid classrooms have been emerging, combining a real, physical classroom and virtual classroom, which will make it possible for students and teachers to meet face-to-face each other in person in classroom and online at the same time, depending on individual availability. There are a lot of possibilities. So we have a hope.

Hidden Curriculum

What is 'hidden curriculum'? It is a sort of unintended side effect of schooling, they say, those lessons to be learned informally through school environment, atmosphere, friendship and senior-junior relationship.

Both positive and negative aspects are involved. Let me give you some examples. Social norms like elitism, exclusiveness and intolerance, and also gender-biased culture, these things are the results of negative side effects of hidden curricula on the one hand. On the other hand, social inclusiveness, tolerance for different cultures and gender-free consciousness could also be learned through hidden curricula if good environment and atmosphere are provided and nurtured.

In school, you learn a lot of things outside classroom, aside from following officially programmed courses. You chat with your friends on the corridor of school building's floor, you eat with your friends at a student canteen and cafeteria, you visit your friends at their dormitory rooms and lodging-house rooms, where you learn things like social norms and cultural values of the place where you live. What you do for learning norms and values at your home country is true and the same for your cross-cultural experiences too. When you move physically from your home country to a foreign country to study abroad at any educational institution, you learn norms and values of the place where you stay as a visitor from overseas.

In order to learn norms and values which are unfamiliar to you, you need to know how to read face expression of a person you talk to, to sense the meaning of pause and silence during a conversation, as well as to grasp the meaning of bodily signs people make, etc. in real communication, which might be difficult in virtual learning. Plus, you also have to use your imagination. Imagination, that's the thing which is required to understand hidden aspects of communication. But, working mechanism of imagination has to be trained, nurtured, motivated and determined with some concretely set-up environment and atmosphere, supported by positive attitudes of surrounding participants.

Conclusion

Learning online will be part of 'new normal' after the current Covid-19 crisis ceases. It can be a revolution of higher education system, brought by the ongoing innovation of ICT. Finally, I think success of the future virtual learning online depends on; First, how to create a virtual cross-cultural community of international student life, boosting imagination in virtual learning space, and also; Second, how to manage hidden curricula on the margins of learning community in cyber space at

the same time. Opening a virtual international cuisine café might be an interesting idea, for example. During lunch time while you're learning online, you can bring foods of your home country in front of your webcam to show to your online classmates. What do you think?