ICT-based Student Peer International Communication

~Leading to Medium and Longer-Term Success~

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Abstract

This research investigates and reports on the impact of student international ICT-based communication over the short, medium and long term. Earlier research (Lynch, 2015) found that when ICT-based and face-to-face international communication opportunities are combined and presented to students, the students contribute to and benefit from the latter type of communication, while largely ignoring the former. It was previously found that the organizing parties (teachers involved in organizing international communication exchange) discovered that ICT was an essential tool to *set up* such opportunities for students (both in-person and internet-based), but that students ultimately tended to focus only on the non-internet based activities. While that prior research revealed the short-term results of using ICT for student international communication, the medium and long-term results remained unexplored. This research investigates that unexplored area and finds that online ICT-based student-to-student international communication results in a maintained interest in linguistic and cultural exchange, and can make clear changes to students' lives, showing that the role played by ICT in online peer communications is an important one. This research reviews case studies showing short-term impacts of online ICT-based and face-to-face peer communication opportunities, and looks at one major medium to long-term case study. It was found that, while the short-term impact of online ICT-based international communication seemed to be negligible, in fact it led to an increase in study abroad program participation frequency. Students maintained low-frequency yet sustained online ICT-based communications with their peers in other countries after the face-to-face meetings, and this progressed to an invitation to visit again being sent and accepted *between students*. The major case study shows a student being actively engaged with his foreign peers, and how that sparked a series of events resulting in the student being offered an internship abroad and a job with an international organization, and making a decision to study abroad for an extended period of time. While Lynch (2015) proposed that the short-term advantages of using online ICT for international student peer-to-peer communication were limited, this research found that significant benefits were evident over the medium and longer terms.

Keywords: *International, ICT-based, Student Peers, Medium and Long-Term Success*

1. Introduction and Background

Previous research investigated giving students the opportunity to use ICT to support online international communications with their peers (Lynch, 2015). As the educational system in Japan is teacher-centred (Hirasawa, 2010), and students these days (and young people in general) lack representation of their voice (Takao, 2009), it is difficult for them to find the voice space they need to become "independent, self-directed and active contributors" to society (Lynch, 2014). Such a space, however, can be provided in the form of ICT-based communications which, if broad access is provided (Yigitcanlar and Baum, 2009), can make their opinions heard within education and society (Lynch, 2015), offering them opportunities for learning and skill development (United Nations Youth, 2014). Furthermore, as such development is essential for the wellbeing of the nation (Husbands, 2013), it is in the interest of all people to ensure that youths are given appropriate tools to instigate communication with their peers (Lynch, 2014). One group of people who have a great responsibility and opportunity to provide an ICT-based online communication environment is the students' teachers and, for international communications, those who teach foreign languages/culture or are involved in planning international events or trips are particularly well placed to do so (Lynch, 2015).

However, previous research by Lynch (2015) did not find favourable results for online ICT-based student peer international communication. In that research, a case study in which students were given communication opportunities with their international peers using, first of all, online ICT-based communication tools and, subsequently, face-to-face methods, was examined. The organisers (two teachers, one being that of a group of 11 Japanese university students who had signed up to a short-term study abroad program to Ireland, the other being that of a group of 60 Irish secondary school students in a number of classes taking Japanese as a school subject) set up an ICT method of communication which used an online-based Social Network Service (SNS) but included safeguards such as monitoring of member activity. This system avoided the lack of transparency in social and collaborative computing such as in Facebook (Kusk, 2013), while "ensuring contextual integrity" (Lynch, 2015). It turned out that students (of either nationality) almost entirely ignored the communication opportunity provided by the system (just one basic greeting message was sent in total), while they eagerly participated in the face-to-face sessions, including putting in efforts to prepare for such sessions including making non-online ICT presentations such as with Powerpoint, and writing stories and information to exchange with their peers. After the face-to-face sessions, students reported that they were happy with the communication that took place and they would like to do it again. Subsequently, however, the students did not take up the opportunity to send online ICT messages to their peers. In contrast, the organisers sent frequent messages to each other using the open platform. The previous research concluded that, for students' international communication, "traditional methods trump (online) ICT", (Lynch, 2015) and suggested further research paths including:

1. Letting students use an ICT system with a higher brand value (i.e., more familiar to them) than the system they were being asked to use, and evaluating the results.

2. Organisation of online ICT communication after the first face-to-face meeting to leverage the enthusiasm

that the first meeting created, then having a further student-student face-to-face meeting. Through this, student enthusiasm could continue and build upon itself.

It has been one year since that previous research and, in that time, a further group of Japanese students have visited their counterparts in Ireland. The same tendencies to avoid pre-visit online ICT communication were observed, while enjoyment and value regarding the face-to-face meetings was again expressed, showing research result reproducibility and giving confidence in the robustness of the initial research. However, a longer-term evaluation of online ICT student peer international communications has since been made possible as one student from the first group (Case Study 1 in Lynch, 2015) decided to join the study abroad programme not only once more but twice. This research uses his case as a longer-term case study, and finds that online ICT student peer communication had a part to play in his decision. Furthermore, it was found that the online ICT communication he took part in changed his life and career path.

2. Research Method

This research looks at case studies and prior research to provide qualitative data on the benefits of online ICT-based student peer communication when part of a linguistic and cultural exchange program mainly between Japanese and Irish students (with some other nationalities also included as language classes attended abroad were made up of students of many nationalities). The Japanese students were a total of 18 students (seven students for Case Study 1, four students for Case Study 2). The Irish students were comprised of two groups: one group were in upper-secondary school (aged 15~18 years old) and numbered approximately 60 students, while the other group were university students, numbering about 20 people. The "other nationality" students were not counted for this research, but are estimated to have numbered about ten. The researcher met all of the students except for the "other nationality" ones.

3. Case Studies

3.1 Case Study 1 Report

Part of Case Study 1, outlined briefly here, is described in detail in Lynch (2015). Seven Japanese students went to Ireland for one week for cultural and language exchange in spring 2014. There, they met with secondary school Irish students and had conversation time (mainly in English but with some basic Japanese), played sports together, and made cultural presentations. It was found that the students (both nationalities) enjoyed their time together and were "interested in continuing to learn about each other's lifestyles, traditions and cultures" (Lynch, 2015). This case study prompted the people in charge of organising the face-to-face communications events to plan an initial online ICT-based communication opportunity between students of each country using a secure platform open to the students and teachers.

A part of Case Study 1 not mentioned in Lynch (2015) was having the Japanese students meet up with university age Irish students. The Irish cohort were in attendance at a university in Cork, Ireland, and were all

members of their university's Japanese Society, a group that "aims to bring everything fantastic about the Land of the Rising Sun" to their meetings and at which "everybody is welcome" (UCC Japan Soc, 2010). Again, the students were introduced to each other, with a teacher acting as an intermediary. An event was held where the Japanese students gave presentations about life in Japan, and a free talk session was held later.

Japanese students reported not staying in touch with the Irish secondary school students, and reported some online message exchange with the Irish university students (the Japanese society). A student who would later prove key to this paper's medium and long term evaluation of ICT-based student peer international communications, Student A, was part of this Case Study 1 group, and was one of the students who reported sending an online message to the Irish counterparts.

3.2 Case Study 2 Report

Japanese students (a group of four) signed up to go on the Irish study abroad trip, to take place in summer 2014. In advance of the study abroad trip, the coordinators (teachers) arranged an online ICT-based platform for students to communicate with each other. However, although teachers sent over twenty messages on the platform (including some encouraging students to join), the students only sent a total of one message, and this was after prompting by her teacher.

The Case Study 2 students went to Ireland and had similar, positive experiences as those in Case Study 1. When the Japanese students were later asked why they didn't take part in the online ICT communication part, they answered that they didn't realise how enjoyable communication with their peers would be. They said they would continue to actively communicate online with the Irish students but, on asking a few months later, the students said they weren't in touch apart from a short message of thanks after the face-to-face event.

3.3 Case Study 3 Report

Japanese students (a group of fourteen students) signed up to go on the Irish study abroad trip, to take place in spring 2015. Based on the previous experience (from Case Study 2), the coordinators decided not to set up an online ICT-based platform for students to communicate with each other, due to the evident low return on effort. Students took part in a similar program to Case Study 1. Before the beginning of the program, they exchanged analogue methods of communication such as New Year's Greetings Cards and printed photographs. While the organisers were in contact by online ICT methods, the students were offered a traditional way of communications. This continued when the Japanese students visited Ireland, with the program being similar to Case Study 1.

One difference was that there was one "repeater", Student A, from Case Study 1. He had already visited Ireland, and chose to go again (instead of choosing one of about six countries on offer) due to the interaction he had enjoyed during his previous visit. Due to his experience, he was asked to take the role of "student leader", helping less experienced students if they had questions. This was also convenient from a programme management point of view as the Japanese university had decided that it was not going to send an accompanying person (teacher) with

the students.

The result of the programme was, again, a positive one. The Japanese students expressed their satisfaction with the programme and with the interaction they had with Irish students. The feedback from the Irish students and their teacher was similar to before (as in Case Studies 1 and 2). Student A reported back that everything went smoothly, and seemed to have matured through being empowered by being given the responsibility of "student leader". This mirrors is a central tenet of Arnett (1997) (in Stokes, Aaltonen, & Coffey (2015)) who says that through the acceptance of responsibility and the making of independent decisions, young people undertake the character development necessary for the transition to adulthood.

3.4 Case Study 4 Report

The existence of Case Study 4 is, in itself, evidence of the medium and long-term benefit of ICT-based student peer international communication, and revolves around Student A. Student A, it should be noted for this research, is an economics major in his third year at university. While he did not have a strong desire to learn English or foreign culture when entering university (according to himself, his parents, and his seminar teacher), he was a diligent student. His initial reason for joining the short-term (four week) study abroad programme in his first year was that:

1. His seminar teacher happened to be involved in organising the study abroad programme, and recommended to the class that, if possible from a time and financial standpoint, they should join the programme.

2. His mother convinced him that it would be useful for him to expand his viewpoint and agreed to support him.

In other words, the impetus or motivation for him to study abroad was not an internal one, rather it was external (the deeper implications of this are omitted from this paper). Student A went on to join the short-term study abroad programme again the following year (see Case Study 3, above), this time deciding to join himself and convincing others to allow him to go.

Student A went to speak to his career/education advisor a few months after returning from his second trip to Ireland to speak about his further plans. Over the course of various meeting, and with input from his study abroad staff, his parents, and other parties, the following were discussed:

a. Taking a one year break from university to travel abroad (to Ireland)

    The student had decided that he wanted to travel back to Ireland to continue to study English language and culture. His family said it would support him in this. He said that he would use the time and opportunity to think about and work on his graduation thesis. When advised to expand his horizons and study in a different country, the student replied that, due to his connections he had built up in Ireland, going to Ireland was the most logical choice.

b. Application for an overseas internship program with a local company

The student found that a local, well-known company was offering a short-term internship in an affiliate company abroad (Vietnam) during the university summer vacation. The student asked for advice about this, and proceeded with the application (which was competitive and included written and interview applications). He was subsequently accepted to the internship programme as the only student from the university, and experienced work in Vietnam.

c. Job offer from internship programme

The student was offered a job with the company at which he had done an internship programme, at either the Japanese company or an overseas affiliate. The company told him that he would not have to apply using the regular public (student) job announcement channels as, instead, they were ready to employ him using a different, internal method.

d. Application for scholarship funding for research into Japanese business opportunities for and barriers to doing business in Ireland

He applied for government funding for his study abroad time, saying the theme of his research, opportunities for and barriers to Japanese companies doing business in Ireland, was a relevant one. However, the application process was difficult, and some teachers commented that it was more complicated than Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (KAKENHI), the largest competitive funding program for researchers in Japan (JSPS, 2015). Ultimately, his application did not succeed but this was not a reflection of his lack of effort, rather of the competitive nature of the funding combined with his and his advisors lack of experience with applying for such funding.

e. Changes to his career plans

He had wanted to become a teacher in a Japanese secondary school. While he still had not totally turned his back on that career path, he had widened his aim to include work in a university as part of the study abroad support service team, or as a student guidance officer. He was also considering the de-facto job offer he had from the local well-known company with international contacts. It was clear that his career choices and the range of responsibilities he thought he was suitable for had expanded.

f. Hosting

His family had decided that hosting students from abroad would be an interesting way to connect with global cultures, while also noticing more about their own culture. His family had begun to host students for various lengths of time, and those students included French, American, Australian, etc.

When asked if these changes were instigated by the student's experience studying abroad, he replied that it was the contact with his friends in Ireland that had opened his eyes to and made him think about the larger, more globalised society. Giving more information, he explained that, while the face-to-face communication he experienced during his short trips abroad were exciting and fulfilling, it was thanks to online ICT that he could keep in touch with his foreign friends. It turned out that Student A had been using Facebook, email and other

online ICT services to keep in contact with his international student peers (the Irish students in the counterpart Irish university and also the various nationalities he had met in his language class there). This regular online contact had spurred him to think about his goals, revise them, and then consider how those goals could be best achieved. For example, he explained that he learned that it is more common for students in other countries to take a gap year (a year out to pursue other things) or for students to graduate at an older age. This view is backed up with research by the OECD (2011) that found that, on average for OECD countries in 2009, 24% of males graduated from university at age 30 or less, while 7% graduated at over 30 years old (with the remainder not graduating from university). This tells us that about 22.5% of students who graduated from university in 2009 were aged over 30 years old on average in OECD countries. On the contrary, in Japan students enter university straight from school and over 90% of them graduate (Marin and Heckman, 2013), and other research (Stevenson and Baker, 1992) showing that these students are mostly (96.67%) "straight through" students who didn't take a break during their four years, meaning that they were aged about 22 years old at graduation. This shows that Student A's choice is a rare case, made even rarer by his choice to study abroad during his gap year.

4. Findings

Case Studies 1 and 2, as discussed in Lynch (2015) found that online-based ICT student peer international communication was not taking place, despite an environment in which to do so being prepared and offered. Those studies, along with Case Study 3, found that, on the contrary, face-to-face meeting were successful in making students positive about international communication. It could also be found from Case Study 3 that a situation can appear where a student opts to repeat their short-term study abroad experience, even when the contents are the same the second time around.

From Case Study 4, it was found that the short-term study abroad trips had, in fact set the stage for informal online ICT-based student peer international communication to take place, notwithstanding the findings that students did not seem interested in such communication. A student (Student A) made personal connections during the face-to-face meetings and had maintained contact with a number of foreign people. This communication, carried out over the medium and long term, had inspired a student to think more deeply about his studies, his goals and his career path. Furthermore, the student went beyond "thinking" and moved to "action", decided to do an internship program, to apply for research funding, to study abroad for a longer term (of one year), to secure a job offer, and to be more involved in international communication. The results expanded beyond just the student and affected the lives of his family, making them interested in hosting international students.

Could these finding be interpreted as being a success or otherwise? The purpose of tertiary education is one of debate, and has been argued to include:

- educating people with world-competitive skills (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 1998)
- to explore courses and majors before settling on a job and career (Washington Post, 2015)

- as a means to an end: a job (The Chronical of Higher Education, 2015)

- building a successful career (Robbins, 2011, in The Guardian, 2011)

- to push forward the frontiers of knowledge (Willetts, 2011, in The Guardian, 2011)

- facilitate students' deep involvement in wider society and the economy (Willetts, 2011, in The Guardian, 2011)

As the results of Student A's ICT-based student peer international communication led to him covering many or, arguably, all of these, it can be deemed that, although such communication did not show success over the short term, it was successful over the medium and longer term. Therefore, ICT-based student peer international communication can be beneficial and should be continued.

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