Student Voices on the Use of International Telecollaboration and Sustainability During the COVID–19 Pandemic

Martin Parsons
Hannan University, Japan

Mikel Garant
Beijing Institute of Technology, Zhuhai, China

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown up many challenges to international cooperation, to the promotion of sustainable development, and indeed, to education. This chapter describes a telecollaborative project between university students in Japan and China. The students planned, wrote, recorded, and produced video podcasts on the theme of sustainable development, which were then exchanged via a password-protected, online, collaborative platform. On completion of the project, students wrote reflective essays, which are used here to gain insights into their impressions of topics such as sustainable development and telecollaboration. Results indicate that students improved their understanding of sustainability in addition to developing video editing and podcasting production skills. They also improved their pronunciation as well as other English skills. Overall, they were proud of their podcasts and enjoyed collaborating online with students from another country.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the importance of developing sustainable systems across all areas of human activity has become clear. Human intellectual and technological advancements have led to outstanding achievements, such as sending humans to the moon and returning them safely to Earth, the deployment of systems of satellites which have provided us with a huge range of scientific insights and benefits, the advent of the internet which has provided millions around the world with new possibilities, the development of beneficial medical treatments and drugs, the eradication of health scourges such as polio and smallpox, and much more. At the same time, human economic activity has caused or exacerbated many deleterious phenomena, such as deforestation, loss of habitats leading to mass extinctions, industrial pollution of air and waterways, and climatic changes which threaten the very existence of humans.

While the word "sustainability" simply means to maintain something or to enable it to continue into the future at some given level, the positive and negative effects of human activity such as these are, of course, the antithesis of simply "maintaining" the world's ecosystems and allowing them to continue into the future at a given level. The term "sustainable development", however, is a much deeper and more nuanced concept. It implies the necessity of finding a balance between continued economic growth which may bring improved opportunities for all, and at the same time maintaining ethical standards in development which allow for the dignity of all people and respect for the natural world. The United Nations offers this, originally proposed by the Brutland Commission: "Sustainable development has been defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN, n.d.), which has come to find expression in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (2015).

Turning that aspiration into reality cannot be achieved merely on a local, or even national level. As has become starkly obvious during the COVID-19 pandemic, international cooperation and collaboration are required to deal with global issues. Promoting awareness of issues and problems and possible solutions is now a global concern requiring the attention of all citizens, not merely of those working in governmental institutions or international corporations and the like. Further, it is now an issue which transcends fields and specialities, demanding a holistic approach to problem analysis and problem solving (Fisher, 2015). This makes it a responsibility for all levels and areas of education, including language education. In fact, education is hard wired into the UN's vision for enhancing equality and sustainable development as Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals. Language education may be especially well suited to engaging with these kinds of issues, due to its very nature of promoting communication across borders and between different cultural milieu.

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