

Effects of culture on online engagement: The University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) setting

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Abstract

This study covers the experience of the author with a team of learners from the University of the Philippines Open University's (UPOU's) Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia Studies (BAMS) program. The goal of the team was to practice student co-creation of multimedia content, with the hopes of building an online community to support the project, as well as the participants of the project themselves. The project did not succeed, as far as production was concerned, stemming from a failure to foster the level of interaction and engagement necessary to facilitate co-creation, as well as the development of a community. Through interviews with the project members, it was found out that cultural influences were surrounding the lack of success, such as fear of embarrassment and an inherent need for a more established hierarchy. The technology employed did not exacerbate the situation, but it is in a position to be of more help in fostering a higher level of interaction.

Introduction

Open educational practice (OEP) is an emerging field that offers a framework to produce open educational resources (OER) outside established commercial means wherein student co-creation is considered as its highest tier, allowing for collaboration between teachers and students (Stagg, 2014). Success requires a high level of coordination and engagement between multiple individuals. However, it can provide more benefits beyond less collaborative practices. Co-creation also helps invigorate teaching and learning experiences, research activities, student life, and student services (Dollinger & Lodge, 2019, p. 12). With these possible benefits in mind, the author initiated a project to conduct student co-creation in 2018, which ran from April to December of that year. Participants included students and alumni from the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), an online higher education institution, under its Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia Studies (BAMS) program. Developing complex resources such as course manuals was a possibility in the long run. However, a more realistic initial goal of producing simpler content, such as stock photographs, graphics, and audio, was agreed upon and put in place. Existing content, such as old projects, blogs, and assignments the participants have created through their coursework and capstones would also be considered for inclusion. The materials created and collected were to be released for the consumption of the greater learning community at UPOU as OERs. However, the project was not able to accomplish that goal within the time frame allotted, leading the author to question what had transpired. What had been surmised is that student engagement was a constant issue that had a number of causes. Some were expected, such as shifting priorities as an academic calendar advanced. However, an unforeseen finding based on discussions with some participants was behavior influenced by the prevailing culture among participants.

While the Philippines is home to several different ethnicities, they share a common set of upheld virtues that generally characterize Filipino culture (Reyes, 2015). The virtue *hiya*, which directly translates to shame or embarrassment, was identified early on as a hindrance to engagement and

subsequently any progress towards co-creation. The sense of shame or embarrassment is rooted in greater pillar concepts and intertwined with other virtues, implying that other issues might have been in play. This study intended to further explore the manifestation of Filipino virtues or culture-related issues and how they affect co-creation within the locale of UPOU and provide suggestions on how to deal with culture-related issues to improve how a co-creation project can be facilitated.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- Identify and analyze the culture-related factors that affected the student co-creation initiative; and
- Suggest measures to address the factors and help ensure engagement in order to better fulfill the purpose of a co-creation project among students in UPOU.

Review of Related Literature

Student Co-creation and Communities of Practice

Stagg's (2014) proposition of a continuum of open practice (Figure 1) laid out multiple stages of how a higher education institution adopts OER. Adoption culminates at the final stage, where a student or learner co-creation is established. By reaching this stage, learners are at a point where they have built enough self-confidence to work independently or as full collaborators alongside teachers in working with content.

Figure 1

Continuum of open practice (Stagg, 2014)



Dollinger and Lodge (2019) state that there are a number of activities that can be considered as co-creation between students and staff in higher education. These include participation in university governance and co-creation of marketing materials. They proposed a working model for student-staff creation, which is shown below in Figure 2.

A *community of practice (CoP)* is a “group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner &Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1). One can argue that a CoP is a powerful support tool for facilitating co-creation and subsequently increase the quality of the products generated. According to Triste et al. (2018), provided certain considerations relevant to the field and locale, a CoP can lead to the enhancement of quality in knowledge co-creation projects for sustainable agriculture. Included among the considerations is the need for adequate interaction among participants.

Filipino Culture and Virtues Governing Behaviour

The Philippines is seen as the country in Southeast Asia that has been described as bearing cultural diversity and homogeneity at the same time (Borlaza et al., 2019). On one hand, the Philippines is influenced by multiple cultures through colonisation by Spain, the United States, and Japan, as well as contact with the Chinese and the Malay races. On the other hand, colonization itself has been deemed a catalyst for bridging the different cultures either through conversion to Christianity or adoption of an Americanized education system. That said, the argument for homogeneity is countered by Enriquez (as cited by Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000) who cited a cultural divide between the Filipino masses and the elites. This, according to him, is manifested by their penchant towards adapting either the popular or more traditional culture, which are typically opposed to one another.

Reyes (2015), discussed the concepts of *Loob* (relational will) and *Kapwa* (shared identity with others) as the pillar concepts of Filipino virtue ethics as known by the Tagalogs, the largest ethnic group in the Philippines but shared across many cultures. From these concepts stem a number of what are referred to as virtues, which include the following:

- Kagandahang-Loob (beauty or goodness of will)
- Utang-na-Loob (debt of will)
- Pakikiramdam (empathy)
- Hiya (embarrassment)
- Lakas-ng-Loob/Bahala na (courage)

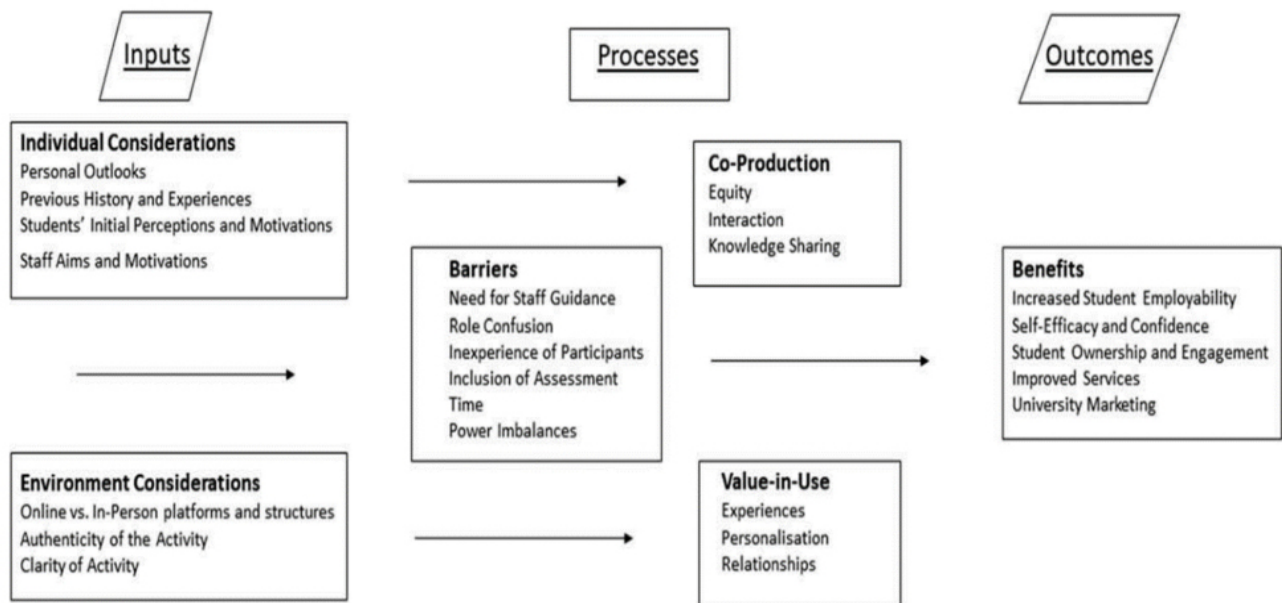
The absence of these virtues is heavily looked down upon in Filipino culture. However, their presence does not guarantee positivity. This duality or ambivalence of virtues was noted by Quito (1994), and even emphasizes the negative. For example, she frames the virtue of *pakikisama* or group loyalty in such a way that while it strives for harmony with others, much like *pakikiramdam*, Filipinos would hold on to this value to the point of turning a blind eye to the wrongdoings of others or forego personal comfort. Reyes conceded that that these virtues can be manifested negatively. For example, the term *bahala na* (come what may) can imply different things. On one hand, it can connote the will to positively confront uncertainty. On the other hand, it can also equate to what is referred to as fatalism, or resignation towards what is perceived as an inevitable outcome. Its direct translation immediately implies negativity, but sense of *hiya* is a Filipino's motivation for maintaining self-control (Lasquety-Reyes, 2016). However, this sense of self-control varies at an individual level and bring a wide array of effects and consequences. For example, in the context of online student interaction, findings from a previous paper (Librero, 2019) showed that instead of being prompted to do better, students would tend to disengage rather than risk embarrassment to themselves and perhaps the disappointment of peers and mentors.

Gaps in Literature

Frameworks, such as that of Dollinger and Lodge's (2019), do not include culture as a factor for positive outcome, either as a barrier or value-in-use in their framework as presented in Figure 2. There are not many focusing on communities of practice as a support system for co-creation, let alone within the context of working mostly online in the Philippines. It is therefore hoped that this study can provide some insight on how to effectively facilitate an online community of practice not just in the Philippines, but to any other locale with similar situations.

Figure 2

Evidence-based model of student-staff co-creation (Dollinger & Lodge, 2019)



Methodology

This paper is the result of an ethnographic case study (Creswell, 2013 p. 492) about The UPOU Digital Collective (UPOUDC), a student co-creation project initiated by the author. The study focuses on the effect of culture on engagement in the project, how it can be addressed in the future, and how technology can be of assistance.

Collection of Data

Data was derived from the following sources:

Questionnaire and Interviews

A semi-structured interview (Krathwohl, 1998) was conducted with willing participants of the co-creation project. A real-time group discussion was preferred. However, interviewees were given the option of answering an online questionnaire. Below were the core questions presented to the interviewees:

1. What is culture to you, in your own words?
2. The intention of a community of practice is to generate and disseminate tacit knowledge among its members, which requires a fair amount of interaction and engagement. Would you agree that a CoP's success or failure is significantly affected by matters of culture? How so?
3. As someone who has been involved in community building efforts within UPOU (such as The Digital Collective), what do you think were the culture-related issues affecting the participants' level of engagement in either a positive or negative way?
4. By now, you would have been exposed to a number of online platforms and technologies to facilitate engagement in an online community. For example, The Digital Collective

was facilitated primarily through Facebook (in a Page, a closed group, and Messenger), a WordPress site, and to some extent, Slack. You'd have also been exposed to other technologies meant to help you both as a member of the community and a UPOU student. Do you feel that these have helped make the community more accessible and inclusive or did it somehow do the opposite by marginalizing certain people? Or perhaps it somehow did both? How so?

5. From a technology standpoint, how do you think can engagement and community be further improved, either by mitigating weaknesses or building on strengths you mentioned?

From the perspective of the participants, the first question was about leveling the participants' perspectives. The second and third interview questions were meant to cover RQ1, while the fourth and fifth interview questions cover RQ2. Participants were given the option to answer the questions either through an online questionnaire, a one-on-one online video interview, or an online video group discussion.

An invitation to participate was posted in a private Facebook group created for the Digital Collective co-creation initiative in 2018. Of its 62 members, six agreed to answer the questionnaire while another three opted for interviews, for a total of nine participants. Of these nine participants, five were identified as *core members*, meaning they were among the most active people in the project closely communicating and coordinating with the project proponent and assisting in facilitating the participation of other members. The other four participants were among the less active members, mostly limited to lurking and occasionally posting messages in the project's Facebook Group. While accounting for less than 15% of the total population of the Group, the set of participants has adequate coverage with regards to the level of engagement.

Participants, when appropriate, were identified as such:

- Participants 1-3 (P1, P2, P3) are core members who opted for a group discussion with the author
- Participants 4 and 5 (P4, P5) are core members who opted to fill the questionnaire
- Participants 6-9 (P6, P7, P8, P9) are members who occasionally visited and interacted in the project Facebook Group and Page.

Author's Observations and Reflections

While the set of data predominantly comes from the study participants, the author was also a source of data as project facilitator and participant for additional perspective. The data from the author comes in the form of recollections, reflective commentary, notes from meetings, as well as informal discussions with other participants. Key points from the author's previous studies were also carried over for this paper to build upon.

Analysis of Data

This study was conducted with respect to the methods prescribed by Creswell (2013) regarding the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in an ethnographic case study. The results of the questionnaire and discussion were subjected to a process of identifying recurring topics and themes.

Findings and Discussion

Research Themes

Through the review of literature and collection of data, the following themes were identified:

- Community and camaraderie – friendships built over time spent through the co-creation project was valued by participants, or at least by questionnaire respondents
- Filipino virtues – *hiya*, the perception that fear of embarrassment, was the most significant but not the only virtue or force behind culture-related behaviors that manifested during the co-creation project
- Hierarchy/Organization – the need for a more defined set of roles and ranks for participants for improved coordination of efforts
- Recognition – it was suggested that participants value earning recognition or credit for their efforts in the co-creation project

Perceptions on Culture

The participants shared a number of points regarding how they define or perceive the concept of culture. While perceptions were articulated differently, they allude to the same observation that culture is a way of life. On one hand, most imply that culture is at play at an individual level, it can also be shared by a group. Due to the concept's ambiguity, it can be argued that all of these perceptions can fit in some of the many ways culture has been defined (Spencer-Oatey, 2012).

A consensus was reached by all study participants regarding culture affecting the co-creation project, including any efforts in developing a community of practice around it. While this study was unable to objectively assess the cultural diversity of the members of the co-creation project, some of the study participants believe it to be the case.

Addressing the Research Questions

What are the “culture-related” factors that affected the student co-creation initiative?

With members of the UPOUDC personally invited by the project proponent, it was speculated by study participants that students being aware of the circumstance of their invitation gave them a sense of pride and initial eagerness to join. The act of joining may have also been influenced by a sense of gratitude towards the project lead, and possibly the fear of disappointing the lead, as well. These are sentiments explicitly voiced by two participants, adding that the act of joining alone was already a source of recognition. This particular behavior is in line with the virtue of *utang na loob* or debt of will or gratitude towards the project proponent.

P5: "Joining DC in itself was rewarding purely by being on the ground floor of something that could have a huge impact in the future."

Recruitment had not been a problem. However, keeping the members engaged was a different issue. As in a previous study (Librero, 2019), *hiya* was highlighted as a factor detrimental to the engagement of students and their interaction with each other. It is believed that this sense of shame may have stemmed from feelings of insecurity or inferiority towards older and more knowledgeable peers, hindering students from the interaction. Certain students hesitate to make

themselves heard for fear of saying anything wrong. For example, one participant expressed being conscious of age and would often defer to more senior members. This can also be identified as a hallmark in Filipino culture, where, whether biological or social nature, seniority is expected to be observed (Torres, 1985).

P4: “I let the people older than me take the lead. I got used to thinking who would follow a xx-year-old like me anyway?”

Another key assertion made by the discussion participants is that, while *hiya* impeded interaction in general, the lack of hierarchy in the community also made it more difficult to facilitate interaction, particularly those which can lead to actual sharing of knowledge and collaboration. Related to *hiya*, one participant, P3, suggested that members, particularly those who were not familiar with each other, may have been cautiously feeling each other out, waiting to establish more familiarity before being comfortable with interacting. P3 directly used the term *pakiramdaman*. It is a term rooted in another Filipino virtue, *pakikiramdam*, which is a close analog to prudence (Reyes, 2015).

Aside from improving coordination for tasks, delegating a leader for sub-groups may also help in establishing or improving social interactions to make disengaged students more comfortable. These observations corroborate with that of Ardichvili et al. (2006), who highlights a similar cultural attribute, the fear of losing face which is said to be more prevalent in collectivistic societies.

While there is no evidence, participants had deemed laziness, among some members, as a possible explanation for lack of coordination or sense of community. However, assuming initial excitement, or at least interest at the beginning of the project upon invitation, it would be more accurate to surmise that this was a show of *ningas cogon*, or procrastination, which is a trait discussed by Quito (1994) where there is a high level of enthusiasm over something at the beginning, which gradually diminishes over time to the point of indifference.

How can these factors be managed to help ensure that students maintain interaction in order to better fulfil the purpose of a community of practice?

Building camaraderie and what would have subsequently been a community among members was identified as key to mitigating *hiya*, as it was noted that students familiar with each other tend to be more comfortable communicating with each other. Gauging from the findings, the inability of the project to facilitate engagement implies failure to establish a sense of community. Basing on Peck's (1987) four stages of community making, what was achieved is called a pseudo community, whose essential dynamic is that of conflict avoidance. As defined, it can be argued that the virtues *hiya* and *pakikiramdam* do connote a desire to avoid conflict or confrontation. As Peck asserts, a true community's essential dynamic would be that of conflict-resolution, which implies that conflict in the first place must occur in order to be resolved. As the co-creation project was primarily conducted online, a set of Web-based platforms were employed. It would then be through these platforms where the problem of building a sense of community can and should be addressed.

Facebook was the primary avenue for communication and information dissemination, with its Group, Page, and Messenger functionalities. A website powered by the WordPress content management system had also been set up as a repository of the OERs that were to be co-created. Slack was also explored for use as a project management tool.

There is a consensus that Facebook was helpful. As the preferred social media platform of all involved. All who joined already had Facebook accounts. According to P2, due to the generally *high level of familiarity over the platform*, there was no longer any learning curve for using its features. Barring Internet connectivity interruptions, accessibility was not an issue. Usage of Slack did not get traction after piloting, since co-creation did not progress beyond initial planning. Therefore, any assessment of the quality of the platform can only be based on mere speculation.

One participant expressed doubt as to whether or not these platforms can offer anything else for interaction to improve. The tools are already there. P1 would assert that it just so happens that they are not being utilized enough due to existing predispositions among community members. P9 corroborates that it would do well to maximize the features offered by Facebook. However, others shared a different perspective. It was brought up that recognition and credit are valued by at least some of the members of the community. They can help build confidence. Recognition and credit were originally meant to be provided through attribution to co-created content. With very little content generated, only a small number of members received such recognition. However, the project proponent's efforts to openly acknowledge effort or even the act of enjoining members indicate a positive response.

P1: "Participation was its own reward."

P2: "It was a proud moment to be recognized by [the project proponent] in front of many other students and to have proof of that recognition/achievement was so satisfying. It also gave me some sense of fulfilment to be able to deliver something that others couldn't/didn't."

P3: "It was really the satisfaction that I was able to share some of my skills that can help future students."

In order to push for a more comprehensive way of recognizing distinguished members, P2 suggested looking into the value of badges. Facebook Groups already have a basic set of badges. WordPress, if used as a community-driven platform, can provide a richer set of badging tools, should the website be used as a community-building platform as well, rather than just a content repository.

Continuing to hold related activities, such as workshops and seminars was suggested by P8. However, this is slightly contradicted by P6, sharing that it is unclear if face-to-face activities are beneficial to the project. From what the author has observed, such activities are a good way of introducing the project to prospective members. However, there is no evidence that it promotes engagement among members themselves. A compromise that can be suggested is to move such activities to online platforms. Since the nature of the content intended to be co-created is in line with P8's suggestion, it can be argued that the co-created content themselves, once available, can be a factor in further enhancing engagement.

P7 expressed interest in convenience, suggesting that consolidating everything in a single mobile application rather than navigating through multiple platforms can also improve engagement. The author argues that developing an app from scratch to match all the features employed in the current platforms used is not feasible. However, an app that bridges the existing platforms together may be an alternate solution.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study participants alluded to how cultural considerations have to be a priority in matters of engagement and community building. The fear of embarrassment and perceived need to avoid conflict ingrained in Filipino culture must be addressed in order for engagement to prosper and the development of the members to a true community to progress. This study found that technologies, specifically those which factor into the co-creation project, do not impede anyone's freedom or ability to interact with others. As some study participants expressed, it would be a matter of making full and efficient use of what is already available.

Tackling engagement in a student co-creation project is undoubted of benefit to the author's own work. However, it can be strongly argued that student engagement is an issue that affects UPOU as a whole since it also deals with it in its formal degree programs. And by extension, generally speaking, online academic activities requiring the coordination and interaction of a group of people would do well with a higher level of consciousness towards culture.

It is recommended that the co-creation project proceed with the findings in mind and to test if the management (establishment of hierarchy and recognitions) and technology (maximizing potential and consolidation of the online platforms used) based adjustments can significantly improve engagement and community building. It is only then can the effect of participation in student co-creation in overall student academic performance be assessed.

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