

Evaluating Students' Perceptions on the Effectiveness of Online Intercultural Learning Experience via a SPOC

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Introduction

“Internationalization” has become a priority for many higher education institutions across the globe to raise the intercultural competence of their graduates. The major aim is for university graduates to become global citizens possessing essential attributes like a global mindset, intercultural competence, social responsibility and the ability to work in multicultural teams (Soria & Troisi, 2013). Intercultural competence refers to intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural behaviour (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Root & Ngampornchai, 2012). It is broadly defined as having the knowledge about several dimensions of global and international cultures; appreciation of cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity; understanding of the complexity of issues in a global context; and comfort in working with people from other cultures (Soria & Troisi, 2013).

Despite the good intention by universities in developing students' intercultural sensitivity, awareness and maturity through overseas exchange programs (Braskamp et al., 2009) with their overseas partners, not all students can have the opportunity to partake in such programs due to factors like costs, possible delay in graduation, concerns to being in an unfamiliar environment, possible discriminations, etc. (Dessoff, 2006; Shaftel et al., 2007). Notwithstanding, with advances in telecommunication technologies, many institutions are deploying various online learning platforms for curriculum designers to create opportunities for international contact and intercultural exchange for their students with less physical and time constraints. Thus, students' learning contents can be enriched with the integration of intercultural dimensions which contribute to actualizing the concept of internationalizing the curriculum (Leask, 2013). An increasing demand to develop small private online courses (SPOCs) and the emergence of new technologies which allow students to interact with their invited overseas counterparts without leaving their respective hometowns, have given to the concept of ‘Internationalization at Home’ (IaH) (Landorf, Doscher, & Hardrick, 2018). IaH allows curriculum designers to incorporate the international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculums for students to experience within domestic learning environments (Beelen & Jones, 2015).

In order to provide students with the opportunity to learn with their overseas counterparts without leaving their homes, collaborative online learning could be a way forward. Two Asian partner universities located in Hong Kong and Singapore, with the same institutional strategic goal of “Internationalization” had worked together to enrich a diverse group of (n=93) research postgraduate students (referred as ‘teaching assistants’ [TAs] in this paper) by organizing a joint venture on collaborative online learning during the first semester of the 2018-2019 academic year. Participating TAs in this study had different levels of prior online learning experience. A 3-week online course was developed by a team from the teaching and learning office of a leading liberal arts university in Hong Kong (U1), using a proprietary e-learning platform. Out of the 93 TAs, 11 TAs from a leading technological university in Singapore (U2) enrolled in this online course. The purpose of the 3-week online course was to provide TAs with the key teaching and learning concepts and related pedagogies for teaching undergraduates at university. These concepts were similar to the curriculum contents of the TA training courses offered by U1 and U2 respectively. The online learning platform provided a variety of learning features such as the use of videos, quizzes, graded tests, articles and online asynchronous discussion forums for participants from different parts of the world to interact with each other.

The design of the online learning contents, participants’ cultural context, and previous experience in e-learning could influence student perceptions on online learning and likewise affect interaction with overseas counterparts. It was therefore important to study students’ perceptions of their online learning experience to identify factors that might influence online collaborative learning. The design of the online course contents and activities had also taken into the consideration of providing students with the constructive learning environment to support and motivate their learning. It was suggested by Wilson (1996, p.5) that a constructive learning environment was a place where students may work together and support each other with a given variety of tools and information resources to achieve the learning goals by undertaking different teaching and learning activities. It has also noted that constructive learning environments should provide a supportive and motivating environment for students to solve problems, interact with others, and assess their learning (Brandon, 2004).

The aim of the study was to evaluate students’ perceptions on their online intercultural learning experience under a 3-phase strategic framework for implementation. We would like to address how do the intercultural online learning activities facilitate Internationalization at Home? Using a mixed method approach, both quantitative data in the form of online feedback survey, and qualitative data in the form of focus group discussion and an open-ended question set in the online feedback survey, were analyzed. A mixed method is adapted since it allows the identification of trends and new themes related to the area of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Data collected and analyzed from this study could be used for future research to include universities from other parts of the world.

Literature Review

Internationalization in Higher Education

"Internationalization" has become an important topic in the higher education nowadays. In order to nurture students' intercultural competence to work with others from different cultural backgrounds, there is a growing demand for universities to produce graduates who can provide solutions for problems in a globalized society (Hunter et al., 2006). Universities, recognizing this need, have begun adopting intercultural skills as elements of desired graduate attributes, as well as internationalizing their curriculums (Jones & Killick, 2013; Leask, 2013). Intercultural competence is broadly defined as: knowledge about several dimensions of global and international cultures; appreciation of cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity; understanding of the complexities of issues in a global context; and comfort in working with people from other cultures (Soria & Troisi, 2013). It has been suggested that the possession of culturally specific knowledge enables one to be competent and effective in a globalized society (Lovvorn & Chen, 2011).

To aid students in the development of intercultural competence and create a multicultural environment, various programs and changes have been introduced, in formal way such as internationalizing the curriculum (Leask, 2013) and informal ways in the form of co-curricular activities such as overseas exchange programs (Root & Ngampornchai, 2012). Research has shown that studying abroad facilitated the development of intercultural sensitivity, awareness and maturity (Braskamp et al., 2009). However, factors like cost, possible delay in graduation, concerns to being in an unfamiliar environment and possible discriminations were some of the barriers identified to studying abroad or taking part in an exchange program (Dessoff, 2006; Shaftel et al., 2007). These studies although mostly carried out in Western communities, they highlighted the need to identify new ways of facilitating internationalization in universities.

Internationalization at Home (IaH)

With the adoption of the 'Internationalization at Home' (IaH) approach, students did not need to travel overseas to develop their intercultural competence. IaH is defined as a focused incorporation of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments (Beelen & Jones, 2015). Students were able to experience interacting with international students without having to leave their home countries and could be achieved in either formal or informal learning environment. Research has shown that interaction between local and international students within informal programs could improve their perceived intercultural competence (Jon, 2013). To examine the applicability of IaH at the university level, this study highlighted the significance of IaH in promoting intercultural competence.

There were numerous benefits of IaH. These include creating ample opportunities for students to interact with one another. Communicating or building friendship with international course-mates positively influenced students' perceived international or intercultural competence (Soria & Troisi, 2013). Soria and Troisi (2013) also posited that the experience and exposure gained by participating in cultural events and interacting with international students increased their cultural awareness which in turn enhanced students' perceived competence. These studies highlighted the potential of using IaH to develop students' intercultural competence locally.

Technology and IaH

Communication seems to be a crucial factor towards in developing intercultural competence. As discussed earlier, students benefit from the interaction with international students. With the advancement of technology, communication may take place offline/online in a virtual platform. This gives rise to the possibility of adapting online learning platform such as SPOCs to promote the intercultural learning experience. Obonyo and Wu (2008) introduced a web-based forum to postgraduate students as a platform that allowed them to discuss research topic with their counterparts from overseas institutions and found that at the end of the course, there was an increase in the number of local students that were interested to engage in projects involving cross-cultural elements. The study also found that the web-based platform was useful in allowing students to discuss, exchange ideas and collaborate with overseas counterparts (Obonyo & Wu, 2008). Regarding the development of social skills, Larsen et al., (2011) examined whether an online course developed for 'Community Work' could facilitate a group of 50 students with various nationalities, studying either bachelor or postgraduate programs of 'Social Work', to achieve new skills as future social workers. Data collected from the "mixed methods approach" found that participants acquired relevant social skills as a result of their online learning and discussion with students from other nationalities. These findings seem to suggest that there is potential to use online discussion platforms to facilitate IaH.

Harnessing the potential and effectiveness of technology to promote IaH, the adoption of SPOC indirectly promotes internationalization with invited overseas partners. Among the available online learning features as described above, the asynchronous discussion is considered to be the most effective online learning feature to motivate/engage students' online interaction with others (Bernard and Lundgren-Carol, 2001) as they have more time to reflect for thoughtful online discussion (De Wever et al., 2007).

Background of the Study

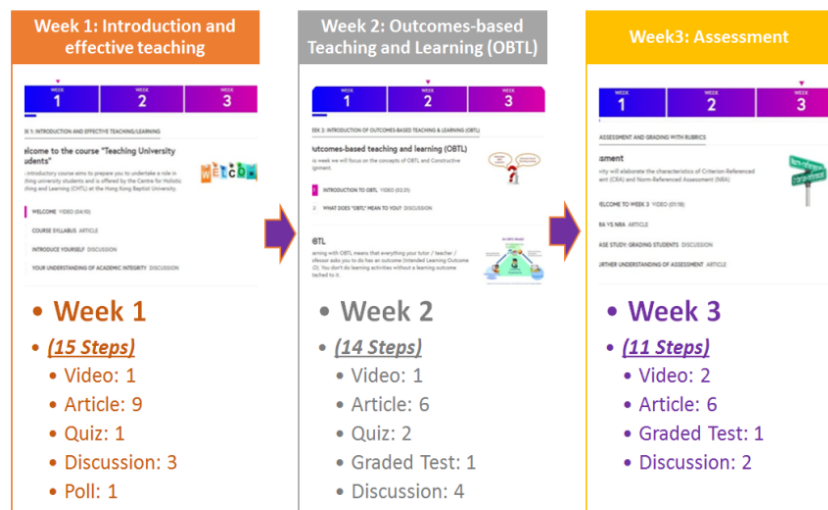
With the intention of providing the best student experience and in line with one of their institutional strategic foci of "Internationalization", U1 has taken an initiative to develop SPOCs since spring 2017. It is anticipated that online learning via SPOC platform offers opportunities for students to develop their self-directed and self-regulatory learning abilities, digital literacies and life-long learning skills. Online learning can also provide students with the platform to cultivate a better world view and intercultural awareness through interacting with their peers from diverse cultural backgrounds. SPOC can be used to support blended learning and flipped-classroom learning. Apart from online learning features as described above, the adoption of the online e-learning development platform has also provided a place on building a social or community-supported learning environment which is conducive to engaging students in online learning and knowledge building. More importantly, it offers opportunities for fostering cross-institutional collaboration in terms of sharing course contents and/or developing joint SPOCs. This kind of cross-institutional collaboration can help broaden students' intercultural learning experiences as well as benchmark the teaching curricula with those offered by invited international partners. A 3-phase strategic framework of implementing SPOC with the different levels of involving overseas counterparts was developed and explained below.

Phases of Implementing SPOC with the Different Levels of Interacting with Overseas Counterparts to Cultivate Intercultural Learning Experience

As a pioneer of developing the first ever SPOC in U1, a course team of 5 teaching staff from a teaching & learning unit decided to take phases of implementing a 3-week SPOC with the involvement of their invited overseas counterparts. The team first developed a 3-phase framework to guide themselves in implementing the pre-designed SPOC to facilitate the cultivation of students' intercultural learning over 3 consecutive semesters. This study focused on the data collected from the semester 1 of AY2018/19 (i.e. third time running of the SPOC in phase III) where overseas partners (teachers and students) were invited for the evaluation purpose. The approaches/actions taken by the course team in each phase of the framework to accomplish the goal of collaborative online learning with overseas counterparts (teachers and students) were explained below.

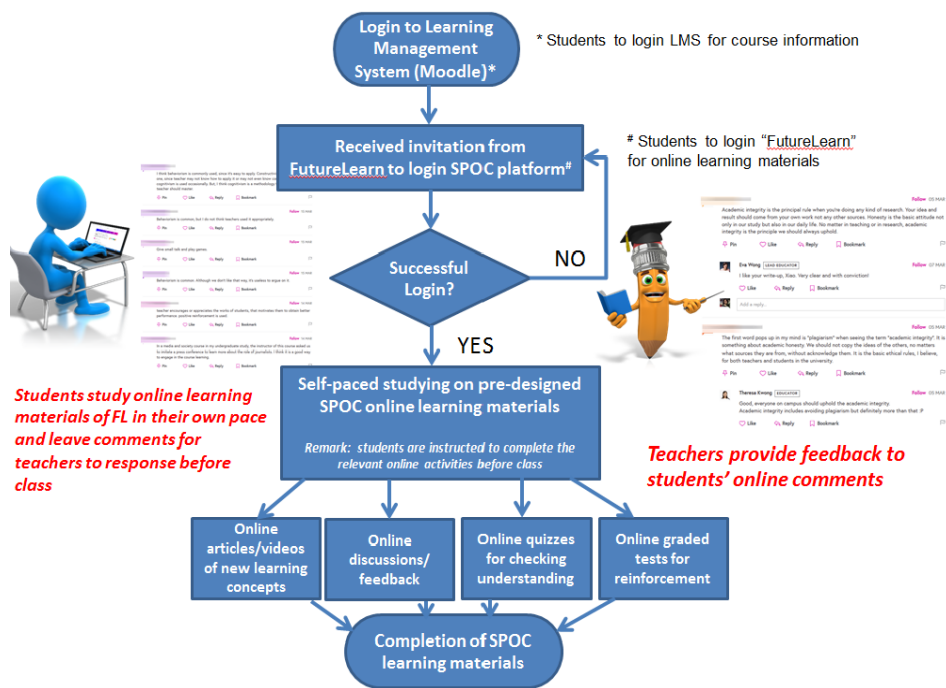
Phase I: Development of a 3-Week SPOC with invited overseas guest speakers but no overseas students' involvement. The course team re-designed an original 7-week face-to-face traditional classroom-based teaching course into a 6-week SPOC-flipped classroom team teaching for TAs on how to teach university students. The aim of the course was to prepare TAs with diverse backgrounds to take up assignment(s) in teaching undergraduate students at university. It provided an introduction to the basic theoretical knowledge and practical skills required to begin teaching at university. The 3-week SPOC incorporated key concepts of the curriculum like introduction and effective teaching, outcomes-based teaching and learning and assessment. Different learning features provided by the online e-learning development platform were incorporated into the SPOC to engage students with different online activities. The layout of the SPOC designed and adopted in semester 1 of AY2017/18 for the first run was shown in Figure 1. Figure 1 shows the learning topics designed for the 3-week online course with a variety of learning activities like videos, articles, quizzes, graded tests, polls and discussions to engage student participation online. The online learning activity of 'Discussion' used as a means to encourage students to interact with their overseas counterparts by sharing their views on the teaching topics.

Figure 1. 3-week SPOC designed for 1st run in semester 1 of AY2017



All participating TAs were instructed to spend about 2 hours per week of the 3-week online self-paced learning and to complete all the online activities before each class. A flow-chart designed by the course team to guide students' online self-paced learning is shown in Figure 2. TAs' online participation was assessed against a given set of participation (online) rubric with a weighting of 15% as an incentive. TAs were encouraged to exchange their views through the online discussions. SPOC-Flipped classroom approach was adopted by the teaching team and different in-class activities were designed to reinforce TAs' online learning concepts with teachers' timely feedback.

Figure 2. Flow-chart of guiding students' online self-paced learning



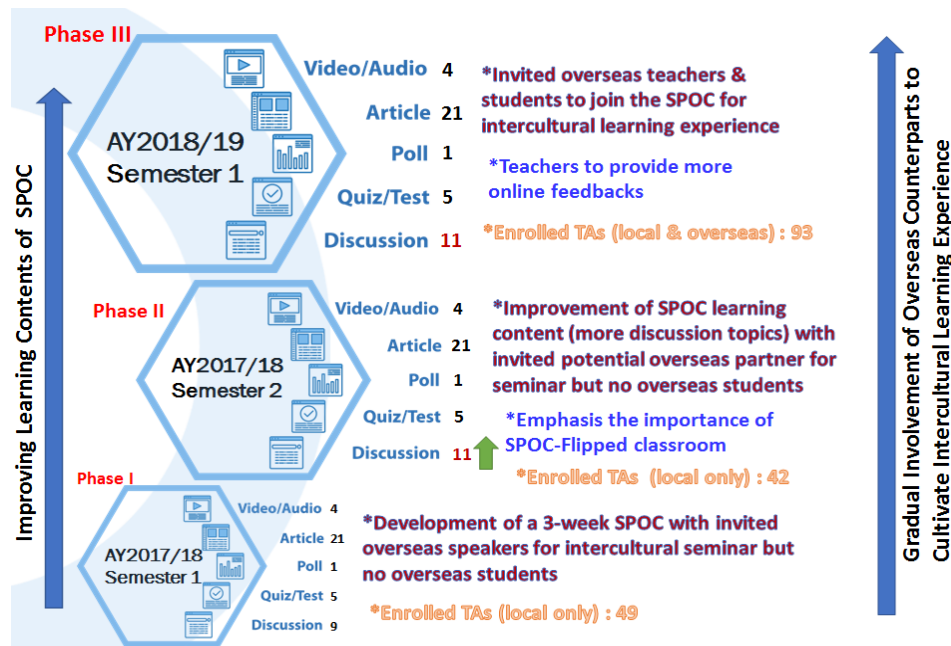
Phase II: Modification of learning contents of the 3-Week SPOC with invited potential overseas partner from U2 as overseas guest speaker but No overseas students' involvement. As part of the learning process for the course team of U1 after the first run of SPOC, the team modified the learning contents of SPOC by (i) increasing the number of discussion topics for better enhancing online interaction, (ii) explaining clearly the expectations of what was required regarding students' active online participation in this SPOC-Flipped classroom approach at the beginning of the course and (iii) increasing teachers' online participation to facilitate online discussion forums in the form of a community as follow-up actions after feedbacks received from the CFQ of phase I.

In parallel to the follow-up actions described above, preparation for inviting potential overseas partner(s) together with their students to join the 3-week SPOC scheduled in phase III was also carried out in phase II. The course team of U1 has taken an initiative to

contact an equivalent functional unit from U2 with comparable expertise and ambit to study the possible collaboration opportunity. It was noted that both U1 & U2 have the common strategic focus of "Internationalization" and similar teaching curriculum for their TA training courses, the two units then agreed to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) at the beginning of semester 1 of AY2017/18 for joint collaboration of teaching and learning activities, including a 5-day staff exchange program offered by each institution and other student learning activities to ensure both parties could receive the mutual benefits from the collaboration. The purpose of the 5-day exchange programs offered by the respective universities was for the nominated representatives to study the respective roles and responsibilities of the two units and the teaching practices for their TA courses, as well as to see the best way(s) of planning the partnership of teaching and learning related activities. Each nominated representative was invited to deliver a guest lecture to the respective TAs during his/her visits. The representative from U2 delivered a topic of "Team-based Learning" to TAs of U1 in semester 2 of AY2017/18 to have a feel on their learning atmosphere of the SPOC-Flipped classroom approach and it was well-received by TAs of U1. The respective person-in-charge of the teaching and learning units of U1 and U2 agreed to invite their respective participating TAs to join the 3-week SPOC scheduled in semester 1 of AY2018/19 since the course contents of SPOC were common to their TA training courses. This online joint venture provided participating TAs from U1 and U2 the opportunity to interact with each other and keep each other company in an online intercultural learning community.

Phase III: Invited overseas counterparts to participate the 3-Week SPOC for intercultural learning experience. In semester 1 of AY2018/19, the 3-week SPOC was a compulsory course for all enrolled TAs from U1 whereas it was an elective course for U2 TAs. There were 82 TAs enrolled with the SPOC from U1 and 11 TAs enrolled from U2 with a total number of 93 (n=93) involved in this study. With the learning contents of the SPOC being improved to increase more online discussion opportunities for participants (TAs and teachers from U1 & U2), more online dialogues and interactions had been observed. The gradual involvement of overseas counterparts over the 3 consecutive semesters allowed the course team to develop their confidence in adopting relevant online teaching pedagogies to facilitate students' intercultural learning experiences. A 3-phase strategic framework of implementing SPOC with the gradual involvement of overseas counterparts to cultivate online intercultural learning experiences are summarized and shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. A 3-phase strategic framework of implementing SPOC with involvement of overseas counterparts to cultivate intercultural learning experience.



Methods

A total number of 93 (n=93) participating TAs with different cultural backgrounds from U1 & U2 were enrolled for this 3-week SPOC held in semester 1 of AY2018/19.

Data Collection

To better understand the perceptions of participating TAs on whether the design of an online course could facilitate their intercultural learning or not, both quantitative and qualitative methods, namely online survey and focus group interview were adopted respectively in this study for data collection.

Quantitative data was collected through the completion of an online feedback surveys. The online survey (see Appendix I) sent to all 93 participants immediately after the completion of the 3rd week of SPOC while their memories of learning with the online course were still fresh. The online survey consisted of eight quantitative questions with an open question to further solicit respondents' views that might not be covered in the eight questions. Students were required to indicate the degree of agreement or disagreement on a 5-point Likert scale to each of the statement (1- strongly disagree, 2 - disagree, 3 - neutral, 4 - agree, 5 - strongly agree. The mean score for each statement was calculated by computing the average scores of students' responses. The survey was anonymous. The valid response rate for the quantitative survey was 49.5% (46 out of 93) and only 35% (33 out of 93) respondents responded to the open-ended question. The data was tabulated and examined using Microsoft Excel, 2010.

Qualitative data was collected through focus group interview. A follow-up structured focus group interview with eight questions (see Appendix II) was conducted after the completion of the 6-week training course towards the end of the semester 1 of AY2018/19. The purpose of the focus interview was to gather more in-depth perception of participating TAs as part of the qualitative analysis. TAs were invited to participate in the focus group. Five participating TAs with different cultural backgrounds were invited on the voluntary basis for an hour face-to-face focus group interview held in the campus of U1. At the beginning of the focus group interview, participants were asked if they had any past experience of online learning and if they had the opportunity to learn with overseas students from a foreign institution. Two out of 5 participating TAs had past online learning experience. The focus group interview was audio recorded and the scripts were transcribed.

Responses were tallied and coded. The codes were examined and redundant codes were regrouped into the positive and negative themes. This process was repeated until all the categories were exclusive and exhaustive and no new ones were uncovered.

Questions used in both the online survey and focus group interview were designed to evaluate respondents' perceptions of their online learning experience and to find out ways for improvement on this kind of online course design for nurturing better intercultural learning experience in the future. The results analyzed from the quantitative method (i.e. online survey) could be further validated by the findings obtained from the qualitative method (i.e. focus group interview) as a kind of backup evidence. Findings from the online survey could be used as prompts to interviewees during the focus group interview to further unveil any online learning related issues that the designated questions might not cover.

With the advantage of using the learning analytic tools provided by the online e-learning development platform, the average number of comments posted per student per SPOC via the online discussion forum over the three consecutive semesters in this study was presented in Figure 11. Figures shown in Figure 11 acted as an indicator of answering the research question of this study, that is participating TAs enjoyed their online learning via the discussions with their overseas counterparts (intercultural learning) with the involvement of teachers giving feedback on the online discussion. It was really interesting to observe that with the increasing number of online discussions over the course of three semesters, together with the involvement of both teachers and overseas students in semester 1 of AY2018/19 (i.e. phase III of the 3-phase strategic framework shown in Figure 3 with the enrollment of both local and overseas TAs), participating TAs become more active in online discussions as reflected from the highest average number of comments posted per student per SPOC of that semester. This kind of active participation of online discussion has facilitated participating TAs' intercultural learning and skills through the exchange of views and ideas on the subject matters.

Results

Both the quantitative and qualitative data collected from the online survey and focus group interview respectively did support participants' intercultural competence by

interacting with their overseas counterparts through online asynchronous discussions. Suggestions were also given to further improve the online course design.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data drawn from the online feedback survey were analyzed and summarized in **Table 1**. More than 50% of the TAs agreed with the perceived benefits and were satisfied with the use of e-learning platform as a tool to facilitate internationalization. Only Question 3, which was intended to measure TAs' perceived competitiveness with TAs from other institution, recorded an agreement level of less than 50%. Table 2 summarized the most occurrence statements raised by the respondents with positive, negative comments together with suggestions for online learning improvement.

Table 1. Summary of online survey for questions # 1 to 8 (n=46)

No.	Question	Mean Score	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1.	I enjoy the online course which allows me to communicate with my overseas counterparts without limitations of time and space.	3.48	56% (26)	22% (10)	22% (10)
2.	The asynchronous online discussions help me appreciate the subject topics better with the different cultural perspectives; i.e. increasing cross-cultural awareness.	3.50	59% (27)	19% (9)	22% (10)
3.	I feel a sense of competition with my overseas counterparts especially in online activities like quizzes, or graded tests; i.e. challenging.	3.34	44% (20)	42% (19)	15% (7)
4.	I become more conscious of my inputs to the online activities like discussion forums, graded tests, quizzes etc. with the presence of my overseas counterparts; i.e. a sense of self-awareness.	3.54	59% (27)	24% (11)	17% (8)
5.	The interactive online exchange of thoughts/ideas has enhanced my critical thinking skills and allowed me to give reflection of my own learning experience.	3.67	63% (29)	22% (10)	15% (7)

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6.	The active online participation of my course teachers and coursemates (both local and overseas) motivate/develop my self-directed learning of the online course.	3.76	68% (31)	17% (8)	15% (7)
7.	My participation of the online learning activities has helped me in learning new knowledge of becoming a future teacher.	3.59	65% (29)	22% (10)	13% (6)
8.	Online learning with good design of interactive activities is sufficient to facilitate learning with my overseas counterparts, even without face-to-face meetings.	3.43	52% (24)	24% (11)	24% (11)

Data collected from the open-ended question (question # 9) of the online survey asking respondents (n=33) to suggest ways of facilitating participants' interaction with their overseas counterparts on online learning. Some of the positive comments received for this kind of online learning platform including, enjoyed the online course, good for discussions and asking questions. Some of the negative comments received including too timely, the discussion was in one direction and could not interact with overseas counterparts. Eight respondents felt that areas for improvement were firstly having a face-to-face discussion to encourage more interaction and two respondents suggested that questions related to cultural differences should be introduced as topic for discussion. These areas of improvement were also identified by the respondents of the focus group discussion and highlighted in red under the column of "Suggestions for improvement" in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of online survey question # 9 as an open-ended question i.e. Based on your online learning experience, please give suggestion(s) on how to better facilitate your interaction with your overseas counterparts with the aim of improving learning for all students involved. (n=33)

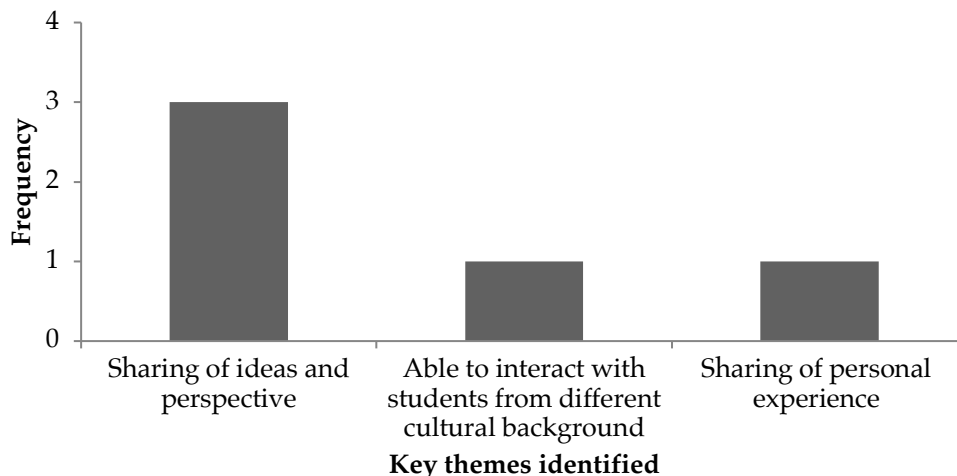
Positive comments	Negative comments	Suggestions for improvement
Make me clear about the goal/ what I have learnt x2	Cancel this part x2	Hope to add some F2F/VC discussions x8
Please continue to inspire more students	More instant information maybe better x2	Please introduce some questions that is cross-cultural awareness x2
	I don't like online learning	

Good for asking questions	Too timely (too much time)	More tutorials
Good for discussions	The discussion is in one direction	Add more interesting materials
The VARK assessment was useful	The online course content is hugely overlap with U2 syllabus	Can upload picture
The knowledge was explained in a very simple but illustrative manner	The lecturers' voice recording is a bit monotonous and rigid	
Enjoy the online course	Can't interact with overseas counterparts in the platform	

Qualitative Analysis

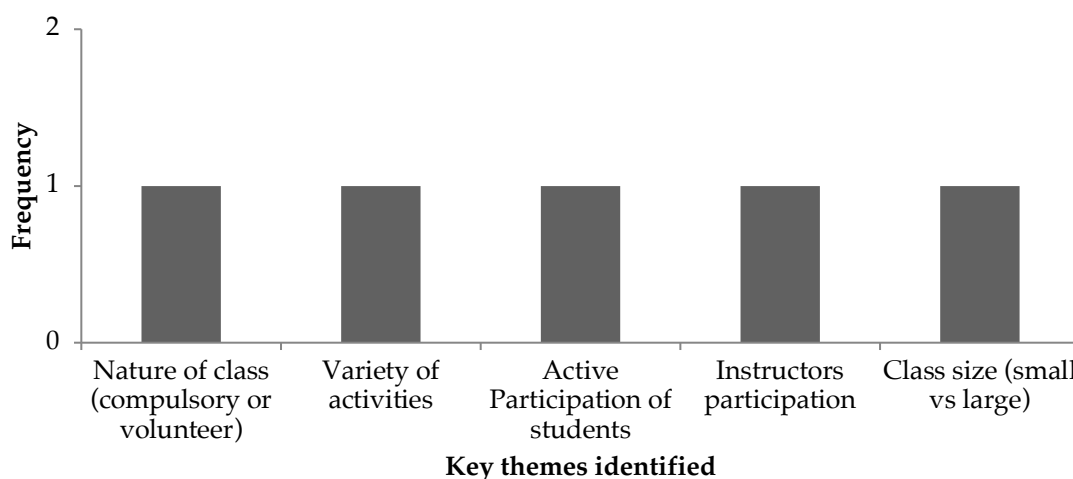
Appealing factors from the 3-week SPOC. Three participants with no prior online learning experience with overseas counterparts were asked to share about the activities that they found to be appealing from the 3-week SPOC. All three participants shared that the platform enabled the idea sharing and perspective with each other. They were able to 'share their experiences, learning before, opinions', their ideas and simultaneously read about the ideas of other participants from other institution. The other two aspects that the participants identified were the ability to interact with other participants and sharing of personal experience. The students shared that they 'can see how we interact ...' and read 'the comment based on real experience'. Figure 4 showed the frequency of the appealing factors identified.

Figure 4. Frequency of identified appealing factors of the 3-week SPOC with overseas counterparts



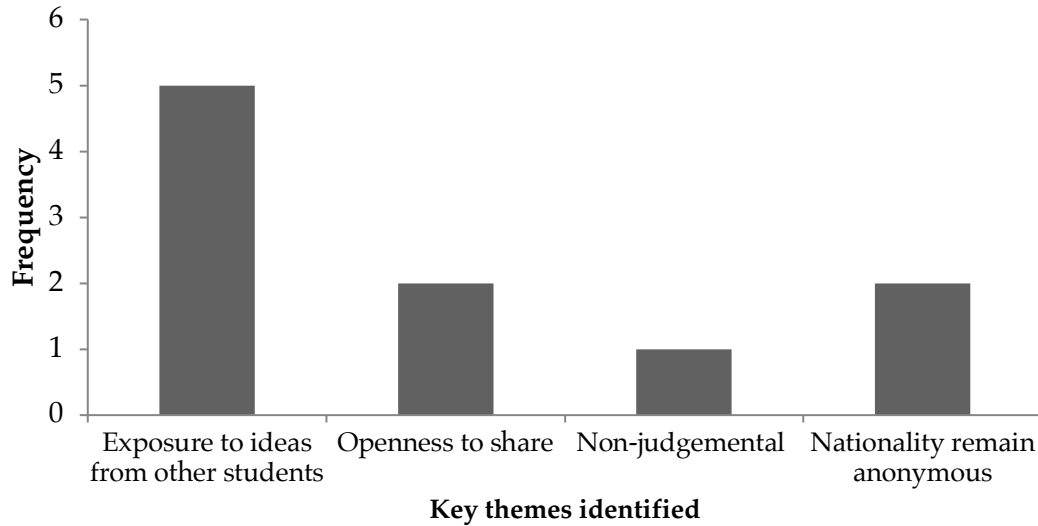
Differences identified between respondents' current and previous online learning experiences. As two participants had prior experience with online learning, the authors wanted to examine if there is any connection between the current online learning experience and their past online learning experience. The participants were asked to highlight their perceived differences between the current online learning experience and past online learning experience. Respondents shared that in the past, participation were not compulsory leading to inactive participation from the students and minimal interaction with the teachers. However, in the current course, participation was compulsory, and the course teachers were also actively involved in online activities like online discussions. They perceived these two factors led to a 'more' active participation in the online discussion. Size of class and the variety of activities that were available on the online platform were the other differences that were identified by the focus group participants. Figure 5 showed the percentages of identified differences of respondents' current SPOC and previous online learning experiences.

Figure 5. Differences identified between respondents' current and previous online learning experiences



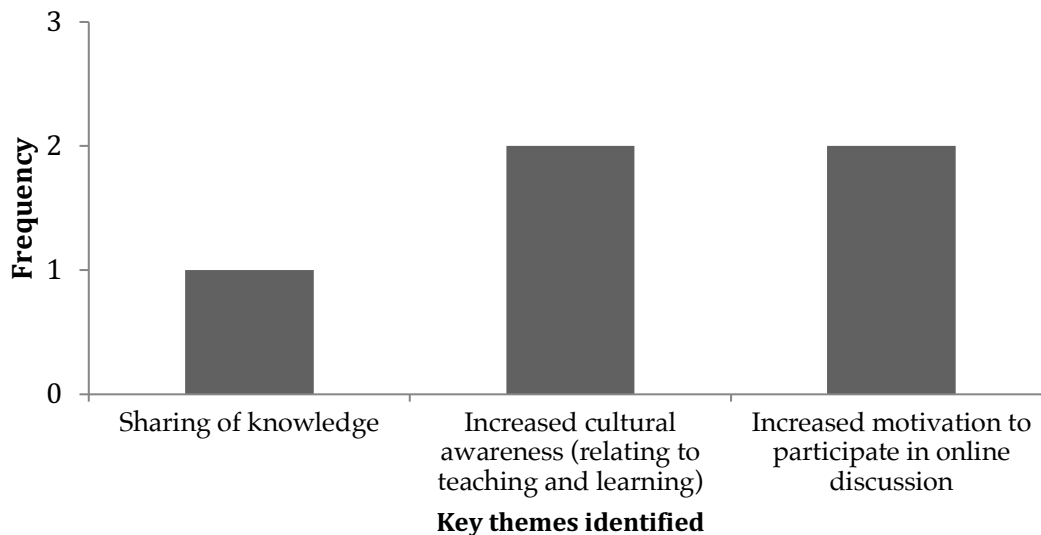
Enjoyable things identified of the online learning experience with overseas counterparts. TAs were asked to share the enjoyable things that they experience as a result of interacting with their overseas counterparts. All the respondents agreed that exposure to ideas from other respondents were the most enjoyable feature. One respondent commented that he or she 'go through their comments and go through their replies because we can get more exposure from their views on these teaching methods'. They were also able to observe similarities and differences of ideas between the two groups of TAs. Other key themes that were identified in Figure 6 including openness to share, ability to remain anonymous (in terms of nationality) and non-judgmental.

Figure 6. Most Enjoyable things identified of online learning experience with overseas counterparts



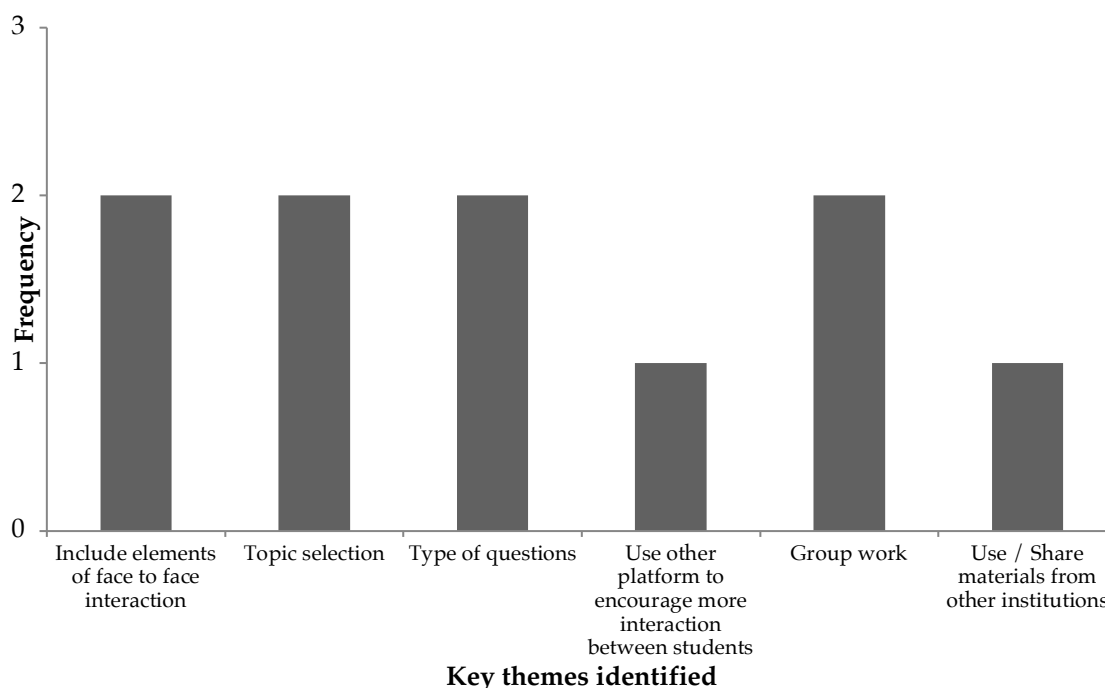
Perceived benefits. The third question was intended to examine respondents' perceived benefit(s) on the subject matter after interacting with TAs from other institutions. Increased cultural awareness, increased motivation to participate in the online discussion and sharing of knowledge were identified as the perceived benefits as shown in Figure 7. They shared that they '*are getting this kind of knowledge from the different country, different culture, into this platform,*'. They were also more motivated to share because '*the discussion online I'll have much more time to organize my language and I can think for much longer time*'.

Figure 7. Identified benefits of participating online learning activities with overseas counterparts



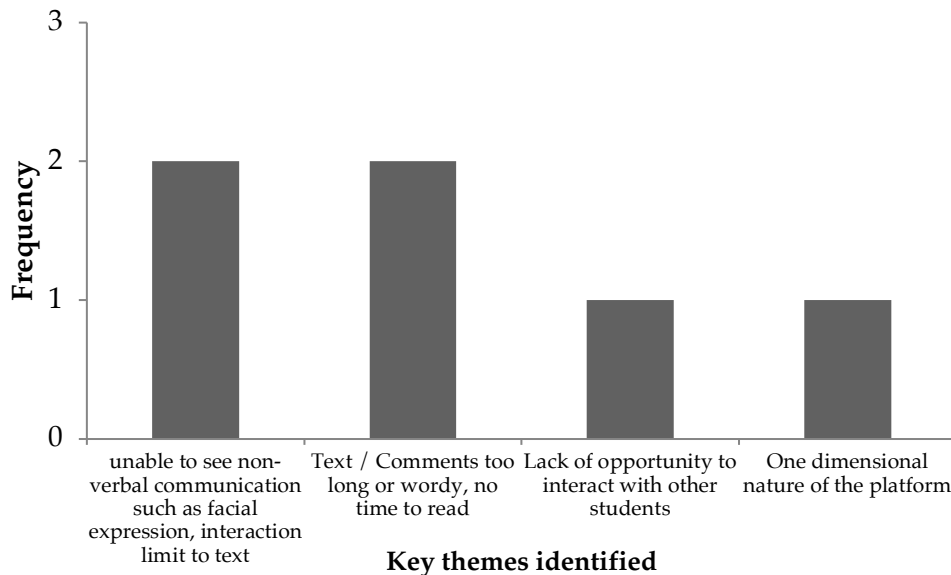
Ways of improvement for the 3-week SPOC. When it comes to improving the current 3-week SPOC, a number of recommendations were suggested. The recommendations include the introduction of face-to-face interaction, select topic(s) and ask relevant cultural related questions to elicit cultural differences on the subject matter, use group work to foster more collaborative learning, use other platform that allows students to interact with each other more and to use or share learning materials of partnering institutions. Figure 8 showed the percentage of the suggested recommendations.

Figure 8. Suggested improvements for the current 3-week SPOC learning



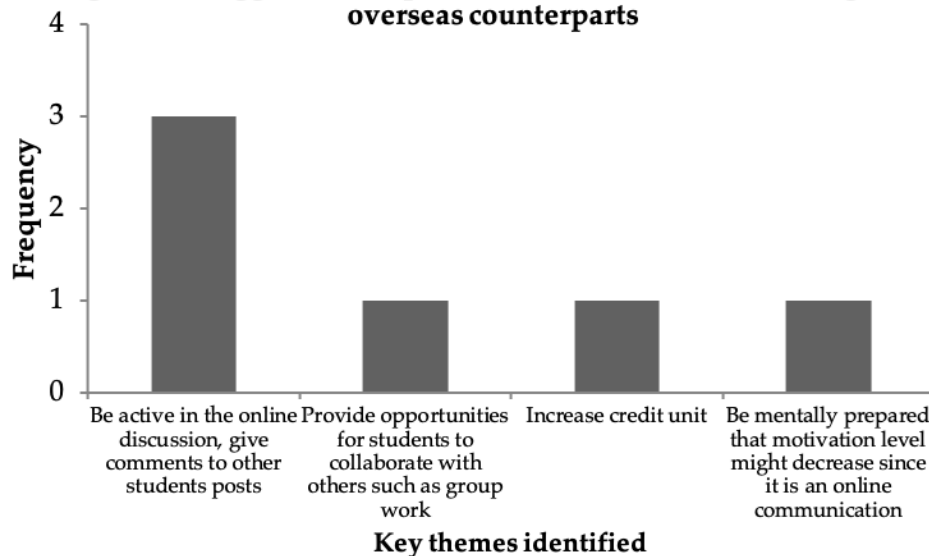
Challenges to intercultural learning via an online learning platform. There were however challenges to online intercultural learning. The TAs cited unable to see non-verbal communication, lengthy text or comments, lack of opportunity to interact with other students and the one-dimensional nature of the platform as the challenges towards achieving cross-cultural learning in a e-learning platform. The platform was viewed as one dimensional because '*We say comment, we give our own comments, but in most cases, we don't reply other people's comments*' and '*we only receive information is based on text*'. The distribution of these challenges can be found in Figure 9.

Figure 9. Challenges in achieving intercultural learning via an online learning platform



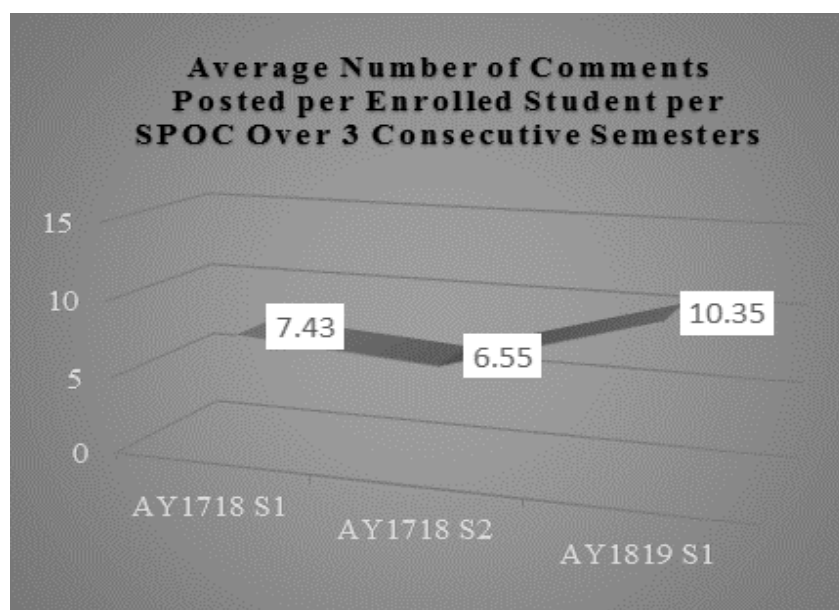
Suggestions / tips for an effective online learning with overseas counterparts. Respondents were asked to share any advice or tips that might be useful for future students who might embark on a similar online course. More than half of them suggested that future students should be encouraged to participate actively online provide comments to fellow students' posts. In doing so, it could increase their interaction with the online counterparts. Other suggestions for an effective online learning could be providing opportunity for online collaborative work, staying motivated throughout the online course or otherwise users would be easily demotivated if being inactive. One respondent requested for an increase in the credit unit. Refer to Figure 10 for the distribution.

Figure 10. Suggestions / tips for an effective online learning with overseas counterparts



Rate of participating online discussions over 3 consecutive semesters. Data gathered from the learning analytic tools of the online e-learning development platform indicated that there was an increase of 39.3% in the average number of comments posted per enrolled student between the first run and the third run of the 3-week SPOC over the 3 consecutive semesters as shown in Figure 11. Figure 11 showed that the highest average score of 10.35 over the 3 consecutive semesters was observed in semester 1 of AY2018/19 where the online learning experience involved the participation of overseas counterparts (i.e. TAs & teachers) from U2 together with active participation of TAs and teachers from U1 for the first time.

Figure 11. Average number of comments posted per enrolled student per SPOC over 3 consecutive semesters



Discussion/Conclusions

The 3-Phase strategic framework for “Implementing SPOC with Involvement of Overseas Counterparts to Cultivate Intercultural Learning Experience” as illustrated in Figure 3 was purposely designed by the course team of U1 to guide themselves in developing a SPOC with involvement of overseas counterparts in different phases to cultivate an online intercultural learning experience for 93 participating TAs. 46 out of 93 participating TAs responded to the online survey. The indicator of using “Average Number of Comments Posted per Enrolled Student per SPOC” as shown in Figure 11 over the three consecutive semesters in this study was to measure participating TAs’ intercultural competence through their active participation in the online discussion. The overall quantitative results collected from the online survey indicated that (i) overall 50% of participating TAs agreed the perceived benefits and satisfied with the use of online learning activities to facilitate internationalization without leaving home; (ii) over 60% of participating TAs agreed that the online learning activities facilitated their sharing of ideas and perspective with overseas counterparts as discussed in both the ‘Method’ & ‘Results’ sections. This kind of active participation of online discussion has facilitated participating TAs’ intercultural

learning and skills through the exchange of views and ideas on the subject matters; (iii) less than 50% (44%) of participating TAs, however, perceived competitiveness with TAs from other institutions on the online learning activities. These findings also echoed with the most frequently cited suggestion by respondents from the open-ended question #9 in the online survey as summarized in Table 2. Respondents had made positive, negative comments about their online learning experience together with their suggestions on how to further improve the design of the online course in order to facilitate intercultural learning.

The overall qualitative results collected from the focus group interview indicated that the appealing factors of the 3-week SPOC with overseas counterparts were (i) able to share ideas and perspectives (Obonyo and Wu (2008); (ii) able to interact with students from different cultural backgrounds; (iii) to share personal experience (Larsen et al., 2011), as illustrated in Figure 4; (iv) the compulsory online participation with teachers' active involvement in discussion forums facilitated active online participation as illustrated in Figure 5; (v) the most enjoyable elements of participating in online learning were the exposure to ideas from other overseas respondents, openness to share and remain anonymous (in terms of nationality), as well as exchanging non-judgmental comments, as presented in Figure 6; (vi) the perceived benefits of this type of online learning were increased respondents' cultural awareness by interacting with their overseas counterparts in the online discussion forums to share and exchange their subject related knowledge as illustrated in Figure 7. This study also revealed that among the many online learning features provided by the proprietary e-learning platform like discussion forum, quiz, graded test, video, article etc., asynchronous discussion was considered the most effective feature to engage students in online interaction (Bernard and Lundgren-Carol, 2001) as students have more time to reflect for thoughtful discussion (De Wever et al., 2007).

With the involvement of overseas partners (both teachers and students) in semester 1 of AY2018/19 on the online learning activities, participating TAs seemed to have higher engagement as reflected from the highest average number of comments posted per enrolled student of 10.35 (see Figure 11) among the three consecutive semesters observed in this study. The higher participation could be due to the content of the discussions. TAs highlighted that they were able to share and learn from each other's personal sharing. They also wanted to know if there were any differences observed between them and their overseas counterpart as suggested in the results.

Despite the many advantages and benefits discovered from this study for cultivating students' online intercultural learning experience with their overseas counterparts, respondents did identify some challenges of achieving intercultural learning via an online learning platform. These include the inability to see counterparts' non-verbal communication like facial expression, no time to read wordy messages, no reply(ies) to other's comments and one-dimensional nature of the online platform. Respondents had therefore expressed different ways of improving the online intercultural learning, which were similar to both the quantitative and qualitative findings of Creswell & Clark (2011), as outlined below:

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- Firstly, introduction of face-to-face interaction in addition to online discussion may further enhance students' online collaborative learning;
- Secondly, provision of different online discussion topics for students to choose, and contextualizing discussions by drawing on diverse student backgrounds and perspectives of a topic;
- Thirdly, provision of collaborative group discussions on authentic content- and task-oriented topics for all students enrolled in the course;
- Fourthly, development of feelings of social presence in online discussion forums as students in distance learning may more likely experience isolation and alienation from the institution because of their physical separation from the institution and from other students as suggested by Garrison (2001). Garrison et al (2001) further pointed out that the role of teachers' online participation in discussion forums is to unite and create a strong sense of community within the online course for content- and concept-oriented discussions. The presence of teachers in the virtual classroom was to facilitate effective student-student discussions and interactions and to attend to any special issues that may have arisen from culturally diverse students.

In summary, a good SPOC design with relevant online learning features in particular, asynchronous discussions could effectively cultivate students' online intercultural learning (Bernard and Lundgren-Carol, 2001). This study had provided evidence on how the adoption of an online learning platform together with an appropriate strategic framework and pedagogical approaches could benefit students' intercultural learning without leaving their respective hometowns i.e. Internationalization at Home. Views expressed by respondents could be used for future reference for designing better online courses for the inclusion of intercultural dimensions and interactions. Although there was no obvious difference found in the findings of this study between U1 and U2, the data collected could be used as a pilot for future study. Further studies could be carried out to include other overseas partners not only restricted to the Asian regions but also other parts of the world to see if any other factors could be incorporated into the design of an online course to cultivate a better intercultural learning experience without students leaving their homes. This study has provided useful information with evidence to those universities that would like to develop their students' intercultural competence without leaving homes through the development of online courses.

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Glossary of Terms

CFQ – Course Feedback Questionnaire
SPOC – Small Private Online Course
IaH – Internationalization at Home
MOU – Memorandum of Understanding
TA – Teaching Assistant

Lisa Law - *Lisa's main responsibilities at the Centre include: providing training/advice to academic staff to facilitate their teaching like Outcomes-based approach, e-tools application etc. in addition to her teaching role to teach research postgraduate students on the basic teaching skills. Her research interests include application of e-learning, blended learning and internationalization.*

Muhammad Hafiz - *Hafiz was a Project Officer at the Centre. He was tasked with supporting the Centre's effort in Teaching and Learning. His research interest includes innovative teaching and learning, learning and motivation and psychology of learning.*

Theresa Kwong - *Theresa's major responsibilities at the Centre include: providing expertise to academic faculty regarding pedagogical issues, teaching research postgraduate students basic teaching skills and applications of outcomes-based approach, taking charge of the evidence collection of student learning. Her research interests include academic integrity, technology enhanced learning, faculty professional development, outcomes assessment.*

Eva Wong - *with education and student learning being central to her work, her major responsibilities include the professional development of academic staff, assisting the implementation of the outcome-based approach to teaching and learning and supporting the University's e-learning endeavors, with the main focus on enhancing student learning via a holistic approach.*

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Appendix I

This survey is to collect your views on the online learning experience involving overseas counterparts. Your feedback will help us improve future offering of the course and for teaching and learning research purposes. *This is an anonymous survey, please be assured that no personal identity will be collected and only aggregated results will be reported.*

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
1. I enjoy the online course which allows me to communicate with my overseas counterparts without limitations of time and space.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. The asynchronous online discussions help me appreciate the subject topics better with the different cultural perspectives; i.e. increasing cross-cultural awareness.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. I feel a sense of competition with my overseas counterparts especially in online activities like quizzes, or graded tests; i.e. challenging.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. I become more conscious of my inputs to the online activities like discussion forums, graded tests, quizzes etc. with the presence of my overseas counterparts; i.e. a sense of self-awareness.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. The interactive online exchange of thoughts/ideas has enhanced my critical thinking skills and allowed me to give reflection of my own learning experience.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. The active online participation of my course teachers and coursemates (both local and overseas) motivate/develop my self-directed learning of the online course.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. My participation of the online learning activities has helped me in learning new knowledge of becoming a future teacher.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. Online learning with good design of interactive activities is sufficient to facilitate learning with my overseas counterparts, even without face-to-face meetings.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. Based on your online learning experience, please give suggestion(s) on how to better facilitate your interaction with your overseas counterparts with the aim of improving learning for all students involved.					

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Appendix II

Focus Group Interview Questions

Students' Perceptions of Online Intercultural (Internationalisation) Learning Experience between U1 and U2

- (i) Was this your first online learning experience with overseas counterparts?
 - If YES, please tell us which activity(ies) of this online course is/are more appealing to you from the perspective of intercultural learning?
 - If NO, how was it different from your previous one(s) from the perspective of intercultural learning and the diversity of students?
- (ii) What did you enjoy the most from this kind of online learning experience with your overseas counterparts? For example, increased your awareness of cross-cultural similarities and differences, improved your global citizenship and/or intercultural competence etc.
- (iii) Could you tell us how did your participation of online learning activity benefit your interaction with overseas counterparts on the subject matter?
- (iv) Could you identify way(s) of improving the similar online learning course design/ pedagogy to better developing your global citizenship such as arousing your interest to know more about other cultures, developing your eagerness to work with multicultural counterparts for collaboration opportunity etc. apart from the subject knowledge?
- (v) What are your challenges in achieving intercultural learning via online course learning?
What might be some options to overcome the challenges?
- (vi) What advice would you give to your fellow classmates/ friends who are taking similar online learning approach with overseas counterparts without leaving their respective universities?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH