

Professional Learning Community's Views on Accessibility during Emergency Remote Teaching

Tom GORHAM^a & Hiroaki OGATA^b

^a*Faculty of Letters, Rissho University, Japan*

Graduate School of Informatics, Kyoto University, Japan

*gorham@ris.ac.jp

Abstract: The social distancing measures that have been adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in the implementation of emergency remote teaching (ERT) practices in many educational contexts. This shift has presented several challenges, including issues of technological accessibility. A survey was conducted of members of Online Teaching Japan, a grass-roots professional learning community which was created to support teachers' transitions to ERT. This paper will report on the results of this survey that address accessibility issues.

Keywords: Emergency Remote Teaching, Technological Accessibility, Technology Enhanced Language Learning

1. Introduction

The educational changes that have been made around the world as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed problems with equitable technological accessibility (often called a “digital divide”) around the world (UNESCO, 2020; Zhong, 2020). This paper will share some results from a survey which was conducted with members of a Japan-based professional learning community. It will report on questions that asked how concerned community members were about technological accessibility issues (e.g. a lack of reliable high-bandwidth Internet, limited Internet data plans for students relying on mobile devices, or students who do not have a desktop/laptop computer).

2. Professional Learning Community in the Age of Emergency Remote Teaching

2.1 *Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT)*

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many countries to enact significant social distancing measures to prevent the further spread of the virus. Schools in Japan were affected by these measures and had to close their doors to students. Many universities in Japan announced that in addition to delaying the traditional April start of the new school year, they would also be transitioning to the delivery of their courses via the Internet.

This announcement caused distress and worry for teachers who had little to no previous experience with online teaching methodologies and technologies. Similarly, there were many schools that lacked an established plan and infrastructure for transitioning their entire student body to an online modality. Educational technology researchers have been vocal about trying to differentiate this sudden and unexpected change to online or distance education from the preferred methodical creation of a full-fledged distance education program. They stress that ERT is a temporary response to an immediate crisis and the main focus is “not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis” (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020, Emergency Remote Teaching, para. 1).

This surprising and stressful shift to ERT was not met with passive despair by teachers in Japan. Many came together to seek and offer support to one another in the form of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). One such PLC is called Online Teaching Japan. The next section will offer a brief description of the group.

2.2 PLC: Online Teaching Japan

When teachers found out that they would need to transition to ERT for the start of the 2020 school year in Japan, many were anxious and wanted to learn more about how to best serve their students under the circumstances. One Tokyo-based university teacher, David Juteau, created a private Facebook group known as Online Teaching Japan on March 29, 2020. This grew into a decentralized, grass-roots Professional Learning Community for English-speaking language teachers in Japan who wanted to learn more about how to succeed while doing ERT. By early June, the group had grown to over 1,600 members. The organic growth represented a true and urgent need for professional development; it even expanded to include non-university teachers, such as secondary teachers and language school owners, and educators from outside of Japan, too.

3. Survey

3.1 Survey Materials and Description

The authors created a survey tool using Google Forms. The survey was advertised to the Online Teaching Japan PLC in three separate posts to the group's discussion board during May 2020. This timing reflects the beginning of ERT conditions in Japan. The purpose of the survey was to gain insight into teachers' perception and use of technology during this time. 113 people responded.

It asked five broad multiple-choice Likert scale questions. Each one was followed by an optional open-ended question which allowed the survey respondents to clarify or hedge their multiple-choice answer. All of the questions and answers were written in English.

In the interest of brevity, this survey omitted demographic questions and questions specifically about teaching context. The rationale was that the level of demographic granularity that was desired by the authors was achieved by targeting individuals who could be categorized as "people who self-selected to join the Online Teaching Japan PLC at the start of the period of ERT in Japan."

3.2 Survey Results

This section will report on some of the qualitative and quantitative data results from the survey. It will highlight only replies to the first question (see figure 1), which asked participants about their level of concern about technological accessibility issues and its follow-up open-ended question.

Among the small percentage of respondents (7.1%) who were not concerned at all about accessibility issues, those who elected to share qualitative answers cited the privileged economic status of their students and the personal experience that their students have not reported any such problems.

On the other end of the spectrum, the respondents who were "very concerned about accessibility issues" voiced two common themes of technological and economic inequality. Many of them had personal experiences with students who have had difficulties accessing some course content and some try to remedy that problem by offering activities that have lower-bandwidth requirements:

- *One of my students lives in the mountains and has no reliable internet access.*
- *I worry that all of the students at my school will have equal access to the education that we are trying to provide. One of the equalizing factors about schools is that students have access to equipment that they might not otherwise have access to. Not all of the students have great internet access and at .5 gb per hour of video it can eat up a data plan very quickly even if they have the extended data plan. I try my best to offer low bandwidth alternatives to my classes.*
- *So far, I have had minimal problems with students lacking adequate high-bandwidth Internet, but that is only because my assignments rarely require high-bandwidth Internet.*

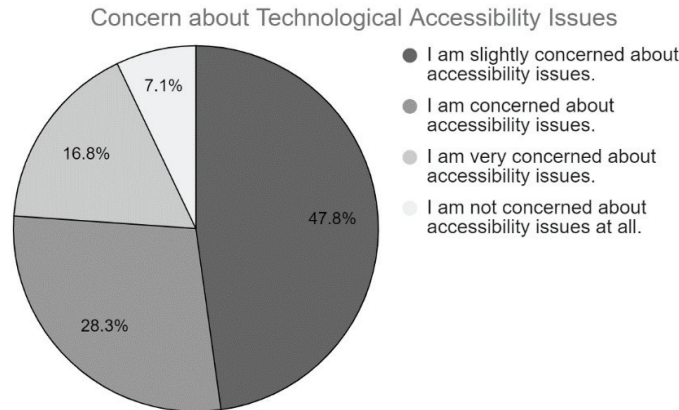


Figure 1. Survey question: How concerned are you about technological accessibility issues? (e.g. a lack of reliable high-bandwidth Internet, limited Internet data plans for students relying on mobile devices, or students who don't have a desktop/laptop computer). (n=113)

Some of the respondents who described themselves as “concerned” or “slightly concerned” about accessibility issues noted that although the majority of their students didn’t have any issues with accessibility, they did have a small number of students who did:

- *I surveyed my students about this in the first week, so I know there are only a few without a computer or unlimited WiFi.*
- *I surveyed my students and only a few reported some issues*
- *Some students don't have strong wifi*
- *95% of my students have a wifi connection at home, the rest are relying on cellular data*

4. Conclusion

This survey demonstrates that there is widespread concern about technological accessibility issues among members of the Online Teaching Japan PLC. Many responded that a minority of their students were experiencing some type of accessibility issues. As their institutions transition out of ERT practice, it is essential that they try to help those students overcome their accessibility issues.

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