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Transitions, bridges and connections: Student reflections on the role of SNS in ERTL in 2020

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 transformed the educational spaces and lives of teachers and students worldwide. Students entering Japanese universities in 2020 were particularly affected by this, moving from high school to university during this period, and therefore facing multiple challenges. As part of a larger project exploring how the move to online learning affected them, the participants in this study were asked to reflect on their experiences of emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) in 3-minute videos they created and uploaded to the university learning management system (LMS). This paper focuses on one significant theme that proved pivotal during this transition – the use of social network systems (SNS) to bridge the move between school and university. It was found that SNS provided vital support during this time of physical distancing and contributed to student well-being. Students were able to create relationships with their peers through SNS and construct social capital in their new community while maintaining previous relationships and existing social capital.

2020年COVID-19パンデミックは、世界中の教師と学生の教育空間と生活を一変させました。2020年に日本の大学に入学した学生は特にこの影響を受け、この時期に高校から大学に移ったため、複数の課題に直面することになりました。オンライン学習への移行が彼らにどのような影響を与えたかを探る研究プロジェクトの一環として、本研究の参加者は、自分が作成して大学の学習管理システム(LMS)にアップロードした3分間の動画で、自分の経験を振り返るよう求められました。本論文では、この移行期に重要な役割を果たした1つのテーマ、つまり学校と大学の間をつなぐソーシャルネットワークシステム(SNS)の利用に焦点を当てます。SNSは、物理的に距離を置くこの時期に重要なサポートとなり、学生の幸福感に貢献していることがわかりました。学生はSNSを通じて仲間と絆を作り、以前の関係や既存のソーシャル・キャピタルを維持しながら、新しいコミュニティでソーシャル・キャピタルを構築することができました。

Keywords: ERTL, SNS, social capital, well-being, weak/strong ties

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 transformed the educational spaces and lives of teachers and students worldwide. According to UNESCO (2020) over one and a half billion students around the world were learning remotely in March 2020 due to pandemic concerns. First-year university students in Japan were particularly affected by this, moving from high school to university during this period, and facing multiple challenges such as moving away from home, restructuring their learner identity from pupil to university student, making new friends, obtaining information about their new environment, and constructing new knowledge without the usual institutional and community support in place, for example, meeting teachers, staff and peers in person and having little or no access to facilities. As part of a larger project exploring how the move to online learning affected them, the participants in this study were asked to reflect on their experiences in 3-minute videos they created and uploaded to the university learning management system (LMS). Using a qualitative approach based on grounded theory the videos were transcribed and significant themes noted and coded. The initial findings were reviewed, and subcategories created. The data was then revisited and refined. Multiple themes emerged (see in Healy, 2021a), and this paper focuses on one pivotal theme during this transition – the use of SNS to bridge the move between school and university. It was found that different types of SNS provided vital support during this time of physical distancing, with students being able to maintain previous relationships and existing social capital while also constructing new ones contributing to their well-being.

Literature review

There are relatively few formal definitions of social media, and its meaning is highly contested partially due to rapid changes in technology. McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase (2017) propose the following broad definition: “Social media are web-based services that allow individuals, communities and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build a community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible” (p. 17). The term is closely connected with SNS, defined by Boyd and Ellison (2008) as web-based services that allow users to:

1. construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system,
2. articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and
3. view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p. 211).

They emphasize the importance of SNS in creating communities that are based on existing relationships by using the term ‘network’ rather than ‘networking’, whilst providing the means to create new communities by removing offline limitations. In Japan, the term SNS is often used interchangeably with social media. SNS platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and LINE are used differently across cultures to fulfil cultural expectations regarding communication and community building (Ishii, 2017).

Alnujaidi (2017) categorizes SNS into three types: educational such as Edmodo,

professional such as LinkedIn, and social-relational which are used for social interaction, and which are the focus of this paper. LINE, Twitter, and Instagram are the most used social-relational SNS in Japan. LINE is the most popular chat app in Japan, with over 80 million monthly active users, and is used by 60% of the population of Japan (Steinberg, 2020). LINE began as a chat app and has grown into a “super app”. Super apps perform a variety of functions and are more common in East Asia than in Western contexts. In 2021, Twitter had 48 million users in Japan, with 68% of teenagers and 80% of people in their twenties using it, and Instagram had 33 million users in Japan with 69% of teenagers and 68% of people in their twenties being users (Statista, 2021).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most universities in Japan had LMS, but they were underutilized (Nakamura, 2017). However, after the pandemic began to have an impact and universities moved to online learning, LMS became the main way for teachers to deliver their courses. In some universities, including the one where this study took place, the initial period of online learning was largely asynchronous with limitations placed on the use of synchronous tools such as web conferencing software like Zoom or Webex. Bonnah (2019) noted that the digital structure of Japanese universities is centered on computers and that university LMS do not provide an adequate learning environment. He goes on to say that the cultural context of students needs to be examined more carefully as they are more focused on the use of mobile devices and SNS than more traditional methods. Kihara (2021) reinforces this view saying that there is a contrast between the digital environments of young people, with low levels of digital use in school and high levels outside school.

Arnett (2000) proposed the concept of ‘emerging adulthood’, which in terms of developed countries such as the USA and Japan spans the years from the end of high school until around 30 years of age. A period of important transitions, such as leaving school and home during which individuals gain independence and develop social and professional skills, can also be a time of great instability and stress (Casey, 2013). The changes experienced at this time are culturally dependent and affected by the social and structural or institutional contexts of young people (Hendry & Kloep, 2007), but by and large, there is an expectation that people will acquire the skills necessary to function as adults in their communities during this period.

Wenger (1998) described communities of practice (CoP) that either evolve or are created deliberately, and which can exist in physical settings or virtual forms (VCoP) (Dubé et al., 2005) when individuals collaborate online. Another type of community is a “mobile community of practice” (MCoP) (Kietzmann et al., 2013), where members communicate with one another via mobile devices, and this is particularly relevant to the creation of communities on SNS. At the heart of CoP is the sense of belonging which is created through interaction with others in actual practice. Wenger et al. (2005) also described three ways to bridge the transition between different environments: people, tools, and relationships. In terms of people, transitions involve ‘social capital’ which refers to “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 14). Social capital affects emotion and well-being.

An approach closely related to CoP is Activity Theory, a contextual approach in which

human activity and knowledge is related to collective goal-directed action undertaken by members of a community (Leont'ev, 1981). The theory describes activity systems which are found in organized contexts and include universities. Universities are complex systems with stated and unstated rules that decide the roles and responsibilities of the members and mediate the relationship between the individual and the community and the object/motive of the community (Senge, et al., 2012).

In 1973, Granovetter published his seminal paper proposing that a combination of strong ties and weak ties is needed in society. Strong ties refer to family and friends who provide emotional and mental support, whereas weak ties refer to relationships with acquaintances who can provide practical information and new ideas. Granovetter posits that weak ties are "far more likely to be bridges than are strong ties," linking otherwise unconnected small groups (Granovetter, 1983, p. 208).

Frozzi and Mazzoni (2011) broaden the concept of weak and strong ties to the use of SNS, suggesting that SNS provide support through access to information and the co-construction of weak ties. They also suggest that boundary objects, in this case, SNS support individuals to cross the bridge between different activity systems allowing the extension of knowledge and skills beyond the zone of proximal development. Individuals can achieve greater results by connecting on SNS and interacting with others than by working alone. In other words, SNS can be seen as virtual activity spaces or social environments that enable individuals to access the information necessary to cross the boundary into a new environment.

Additionally, SNS can be characterized as an important tool in maintaining and creating social capital as well as increasing bridging social capital, both relational in terms of student interactions and contextual in terms of belonging to a specific context. Social capital has also been found to correlate to well-being as measured by life satisfaction and self-esteem (Frozzi & Mazzoni, 2011). There are two main approaches to discussing well-being as described in Ross et al. (2020), subjective and objective well-being. Firstly, subjective well-being focuses on personal experiences and fulfilment and includes eudaemonic well-being which refers to experiencing personal growth and meaning in life, and hedonic well-being which includes feeling happy and satisfied with life among others. Objective well-being measures quality of life indicators, for example, access to food, income, and housing etc. Another concept is relational well-being which highlights the importance of "the dynamic interplay of personal, societal, and environmental structures and processes" (White, 2017, p. 23). Relational well-being highlights the importance of participation in our communities and the importance of our environment on our well-being.

Social capital can help communities withstand crises, finding that communities which have high social capital are better able to handle emergencies due to trust, norms, and networks (Makridis & Wu, 2021). Even if physical capital is destroyed, social capital can keep communities alive, and so it is vital that we invest in social capital and interpersonal relations "to manage negative shocks and retain levels of interconnectedness and well-being" (p. 15).

The research questions for this study are:

1. Was SNS an effective tool for supporting emerging adults during the transition between high school and university during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. Can SNS be used to maintain and increase social capital?
3. Can SNS contribute to well-being during transitions?

Method

The participants in this study are first-year students at a national university in Japan. As part of a larger project documenting changes during the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, they completed a questionnaire including demographic information which showed that they are aged between 18 and 21, and the gender ratio is 75% male, 25% female. The students were asked to make 3-minute videos in English documenting their first semester at university and online and upload them to the university LMS. While this was part of their coursework, participants understood that they would not be graded on the ideas or opinions that they expressed. Instead, all who submitted a three-minute video of themselves speaking in English would receive full credit for the assignment. Video data was chosen as it gives participants the opportunity to develop their own narratives (Cooley et al., 2014). They could choose when and where to make their videos, when to turn the camera on and off, and whether to edit or re-record their videos. Informed consent was received from all the participants, who could opt out at any time. A total of 296 videos were watched and transcribed using the software Otter.ai. The transcripts were checked manually and then analyzed using Otani's (2008) Steps Coding and Theorization (SCAT) method, a qualitative data analysis method based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Firstly, the transcribed text was explored, and significant themes were noted and coded to identify similarities and concepts. These initial groups were reviewed, and subcategories were created and titled. The subcategories were then revisited and consolidated, and the categories refined. The final step of the SCAT methodology is the development of a storyline to connect and explain the emergent themes and constructs. This study focuses on one theme, the role that SNS played during ERTL in the initial stages of the pandemic.

Results

From the data, it was found that most of the participants generally agreed that SNS played an important role in maintaining contacts, creating new ones, and constructing knowledge related to their university life and studies.

Healy (2021b) found that the most common SNS apps used by the students surveyed at this institution are LINE (99%), Twitter (83%), and Instagram (61%). Students regularly used SNS for their university lives during the initial months of the pandemic as one participant commented, "I use SNS everyday to help me with my assignments" (S102). Participants reported differentiating between apps according to their purposes, and to participate in various communities or activity spaces. LINE was mentioned by 75% of the participants as being used between friends and family, but also 42% noted its use in an educational context, most often in class groups. A representative example of this is, "If I have problem, I ask my teacher or friend on LINE" (S17). Thirty-eight percent of the students noted using Twitter for general university news, for example, "I use Twitter to keep up with university information. In my course the teacher made LINE and we all belong to it" (S11). Instagram was

generally reserved for friends as seen in this comment, “I use Instagram with my friends. And LINE for my school friends and university friends” (S24). Movement between platforms indicate changes in the relationships and interaction of the participants, for example, “I use Instagram with my friends from school. In the future I want to use Instagram with my university friends too” (S43).

Looking further at the data, five themes emerge.

New classroom communities

The participants described a wide variety of lessons during the ERTL period, from those with little or no interaction, in which, for example, participants received a PDF to read through, to more interactive styles of classes using online video call applications like Zoom or Webex. They also reported a great deal of diversity in the types of participation favored in their new academic communities. The flexibility of interaction and the different types of presentation of materials allowed students more control over their learning environments with most students commenting favorably on the use of SNS, in particular LINE, as a method of support and participation in their new learning spaces. LINE was used to ask the teacher questions, for example, “I like on-demand class, and LINE if I need to ask questions” (S135), receive information from teachers, discuss class topics in groups, receive materials, get help from other students, and make friends as can be seen in this comment: “My teacher made a LINE group, and then I made friends and made another group” (S127).

The relationship between teachers and students is vital to academic success, but also to the well-being of both. During the ERTL period, when neither teachers nor students were allowed to go to campus, this relationship had to be reviewed and reconstructed. Because Japanese students are often not familiar with email (Shrosbree, 2016), which is more formal than SNS, SNS provided a useful way to connect due to both its informality and flexibility. It provided a new activity space for teachers and students to participate and collaborate in, fulfilling some functions of the physical classroom that the university LMS was unable to provide due to its lack of flexibility. Many students discussed LINE in their videos (43%), and 35% mentioned using it for communication with their teachers, as these comments show, “My English teacher has LINE group so we can talk anytime and ask questions. It is useful and I don’t worry” (S211), and “I talk to my teacher on LINE and it is good for me because I worried not see teacher” (S76).

Extracurricular club activities

Participants reported having been unable to participate physically in club activities during the ERTL period. Fifty-five percent mentioned the lack of physical access to club activities, and 46% discussed using SNS to contact other club members. Comments included “My club can’t meet so we talk on LINE about what we do in the future” (S67). One student who joined Twitter specifically to have access to the baseball club, reported “I just want to enter the baseball club. The baseball club only have a Twitter account. I use Twitter for that” (S7). van Ommen (2015) describes the importance of extracurricular school or university clubs known as *bukatsu* in Japan, and the role that such activities play in both generating social capital and preparing students for the future work market. He reports that long-term participation in organized sports generates cultural capital that can be used for future job

hunting. Because the participants in this project were unable to take part in club activities, they may go on to suffer from not only a loss of social capital but also cultural capital in terms of future job opportunities.

Junior–senior relationships (*senpai–kōhai*)

The hierarchical system referred to as the *senpai–kōhai* system has been found to be particularly important for first-year students in junior and senior high school and university (Ono & Shouji, 2015) to bridge the transition into their new activity spaces. In this system, senior (*senpai*) members of society are viewed as holding higher status due to being more knowledgeable and experienced than junior (*kōhai*) members. In addition, *senpai* are charged with taking care of their *kohai*, supporting them, and providing opportunities for them. It is an important part of knowledge transfer, and a basis for social organization (Qie et al., 2019), providing a way for social capital to be created.

Due to the move online, the participants in this study were unable to engage in this kind of interaction and their experiences were largely unguided by their *senpai*. Like club activities, *senpai* also provide social and cultural capital, however, whilst clubs used SNS to create new spaces for the first-year members, *senpai* from their academic communities were not able to do the same thing as interaction is on a more individual level. Thirty-one percent of participants expressed distress and disappointment at being unable to interact with their *senpai* noting, “Reducing opportunities for interaction with seniors is a terrible blow” (S65). They also discussed the impact they felt it was having on their future studies, for example, “I feel sad that I cannot connect with *senpai*. How do we go forward?” (S82), and “It is difficult to communicate with teachers and seniors and so it is hard to choose future classes” (S175).

Managing SNS

For many people, it has become increasingly difficult to separate work or school life and home life especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when people were at home more (Evans et al., 2020). Seventy-eight percent of the participants stated that due to being online the divisions between school and home had blurred with school dominating their time. SNS usage also changed during this time: “I used to use Twitter for friends, but now I use it for university information and I don’t Tweet anymore” (S212), and “Before LINE was for friends, now I use it for study and so both. It means friends life and university life are overlap” (S165). Participants were also still learning how to manage the different groups they virtually participate in, trying to balance their personal and impersonal spaces as the following quote exemplifies:

You know, in LINE, I have about 200 *tomodachi* (friends). And, you know, I want to make more, personal spaces. I think if I use Instagram or Twitter, it’s gonna be more impersonal. I want to make more, you know, personal spaces too. Both of them, impersonal and also personal one. I want to protect my personal spaces, but I want to broaden my impersonal spaces too (S1).

While few students (3%) reported not using SNS in the university context, non-participation was found to have a significant effect on social and academic development, and

personal well-being. The following quote exemplifies how important a role SNS can play in the transition to university, creating a sense of belonging and a feeling of well-being:

There are some people who have friends on social media, but I was late to start social media so I don't have friends from the same university on social media. I think I was completely late to make friends, so the slower I go to college the more afraid of going to college it is, because I think that it will be difficult to make friends. I can't talk about assignments because of not having friends so I am worried about my assignments which is given in large quantities (S166).

Emerging adulthood, well-being and SNS

Part of the transition from school to university for many students is moving out of their family homes to live alone. This transition can be stressful as students need to manage a variety of everyday life tasks for the first time, without physical interaction and support from the strong ties in their community. 'Difficulty in living' is a translation of *ikizurasa*, and is a new concept that has emerged in recent years in Japan (Otsuka & Anamizu, 2019), but has not yet been recognized in Western literature. It refers to lower self-esteem, feelings of depression, and suicidal ideation or thoughts, which Joiner et al. (2009) describe as arising from 'thwarted belongingness', the state and feeling of isolation, and 'perceived burdensomeness', the view that one's own living is burdensome for others. Otsuka and Anamizu (2019) found that feelings of self-insufficiency can lead to suicidal thoughts for Japanese students regardless of their perceived burdensomeness to others. The majority of participants reported some negative feelings during the pandemic, with 93% referring to feelings of isolation and loneliness or a thwarted sense of belonging for instance, "I don't feel like a university student or anything" (S98), a perceived feeling of burdensomeness, "I don't want to say to my family how I feel. I can't tell my friends." (S168), and a sense of insufficiency, "I feel bad. I not do assignments and they are too many. I don't have talk. I don't know what to do" (S213). However, through SNS they were able to maintain virtual support to help them adapt to their new environment, for instance, "I talk to my family everyday on LINE and they help me with everything I don't know" (S169). Another participant described her friend filling this role: "Me and my friends talk about our cooking and send pictures so I can learn a lot about cook. I never cook before" (S33).

Discussion

The transition from high school to university places many demands on individuals and impacts their well-being, particularly in terms of social capital. The emerging adults in this study found that SNS provided an important method of interaction and source of support during the transition to university, for example, the use of LINE to keep in touch with their families, and in the creation of new classroom communities. These classroom communities, or CoP, provided a sense of belonging through online interaction.

The relationships that are created on SNS are usually characterized as weak ties, however, Granovetter (1983) suggests that during certain periods weak ties can play an important role by providing access to information that strong ties cannot. During the COVID-19

pandemic, the weak ties provided by SNS were vital to the students' participation in their new communities and activity spaces. One example of this is that they were able to find out information related to the university via Twitter that would have otherwise not have been easily available.

Boyd and Ellison (2008) stated that often SNS networks initially develop around existing face-to-face networks which then expand, but during the pandemic this was impossible and so communities were created solely in a virtual environment. We can see from the students' reflections that they perceived these weak ties to be transformable and as possibly forming the basis of strong ties in the future. They indicated this by imagining moving individuals from one platform to another, for example, S43 said they would like to move friends from LINE to Instagram, which they viewed as more personal.

The participants were able to make new acquaintances and start to build new networks as shown by their use of SNS in their new classroom CoP. They were also able to create new social capital through their extra-curricular activities. Making SNS a more central part of university life could provide a smoother transition for students into the university context. It could also help provide support for students who are feeling 'difficulty in living' by helping students to overcome feelings of isolation and despair.

University LMS alone may not be adequate for online learning (Bonnah, 2019), and the incorporation of SNS can provide an important way to support students and teachers in online environments. The data suggests that different platforms are presently used to fulfil different communicative and community roles, so multiple tools may be necessary. The participants in this study reported using Twitter to obtain general information about the university and using LINE in their classes. In LINE, users can create closed groups, and the interaction takes place in the form of conversations. On the other hand, Twitter is a more open platform and may be a better tool to collaborate across groups. For example, it may provide a way to connect senpai and kohai in different academic years and class groups.

Japanese students have high levels of familiarity with SNS, which are inexpensive and easy to use. These systems can provide flexible support, enhance participation and foster communities, for example in extra-curricular activities, but there is a need to be aware of how the use of SNS may change the roles of students and teachers, as the classroom is no longer the focus of communication. Both teachers and students will need to become used to their new roles in this changing environment. For everyone to benefit from the increased use of SNS, more education and training is required on their effective use.

The drawbacks of using SNS seem to be few, although there are ethical issues in terms of privacy and security. University LMS can be monitored more easily than SNS. When using SNS the boundaries between private and public spheres may become blurred and, as some participants mentioned, they had some difficulty managing this. Importantly, those students who do not participate in SNS and the communities created on them may lose out on the creation of cultural capital they allow.

Conclusion

Emerging adulthood is a period of life characterized by various transitions such as matriculating and leaving home. Difficulties surrounding these transitions were exacerbated

by the physical limitations and barriers engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic which curtailed the creation of communities of practice and the development of social capital. Through the grounded theory analysis of video data from Japanese university students, this study examined how SNS helped students to maintain contact with their prior communities whilst also enabling them to construct new ones, thereby maintaining and creating their social capital. The findings strongly suggest that universities and teachers should work to better understand how SNS can be optimally used in future to scaffold first-year students' transitions into their new activity spaces.

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