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Building online learning communities within a China-UK partnership programme

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This paper outlines the strategies used within an online study skills course designed to build learning communities across borders in a UK-China Transnational Education (TNE) programme. It presents the fundamental aspects of "community" which include bonding, inclusion, validation, student-centred learning, engagement and a sense of belonging. These are demonstrated through a case study of an ongoing partnership between Nottingham Trent University and the Communication University of China. This collaboration has embedded "community" principles in three key areas: dynamic use of social media, specifically WeChat; an active social programme; and online community-building through classwork activities. These are explained and evaluated using feedback from a group student interview together with survey responses. The transferrable findings help identify the core principles needed to build successful learning communities, as well as opportunities for future development.

Key Words: China, collaborative learning, online communities, university partnerships, WeChat.

1. Introduction

This article provides a case study of a one-year compulsory study skills course devised to support a suite of two-year Master of Arts (MA) programmes delivered through a UK-China partnership between Nottingham Trent University (NTU) and Communication University of China (CUC). The course is designed specifically for those Chinese students within the joint institute who have not achieved the required English language score prior to commencing postgraduate work. The 220-hour scheme equips them linguistically while also developing their academic English study skills and introducing them to UK university life and cultures, as well as supporting them in their part-time MA studies. Traditionally, the first year is taught in China and concludes with a range of assessments.[1] Successful students then progress to a second year of full time MA study in the UK with optional in-sessional provision.

Face-to-face delivery began in the years preceding the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, but the pandemic abruptly shifted the programme online. This remains largely the case at the time of writing (2022) due to ongoing travel restrictions. The lockdowns brought about by Covid-19 changed the nature of the authors' teaching practices, necessitating the rapid implementation of new strategies to cope with the altered circumstances. The tactical delivery and evaluation of three such

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[1] Summative assessment includes an academic essay as well as reading, writing, listening and speaking tests plus an academic presentation.

strategies in a single case study are the focus of this paper. In what follows, we set out how we sought to sustain a sense of community focusing on our deployment of three initiatives, namely the use of WeChat for daily communication, a virtual social programme, and synchronous online class activities. In discussing these matters, our intention is to outline the perceived benefits of fostering a "learning community", share the views of students about our community-building initiatives, and pinpoint areas for future development.

This paper is informed by literature on community and online learning, which is discussed in the following section. We also include our own reflections as two authors who taught on the programme, as well as feedback from student participants, as set out in the methodology section that follows the literature review. Specific literature that supports the three strategies described in this paper is included in Sections 4-6, which also detail what the initiatives are, how they were implemented, student feedback on their success at building elements of learning community, our interpretations of the data gathered, as well as areas to develop in the future. Our overarching aim is to measure the success of the three online strategies we implemented to build learning communities within our programme.

2. General principles informing our use of, and approaches to, developing learning communities

It is argued that successful learning communities require a collegial atmosphere and the fostering of an extensive and sustained interaction among all participants (Paige et al., 2017). Achieving these requirements needs the provision of activities conducive to a hospitable, inclusive environment that fosters a sense of validation among all community members. In their review of developing beneficial learning communities, Otto et al., (2015) concluded that having strategies in place to build collegiality, inclusivity and affirmation, results in a genuinely positive effect on the student experience and student performance. The tripartite community-building strategies implemented in this case study are addressed later. The purpose of this section is to discuss the teaching philosophy which underlaid our choices of the three initiatives.

The actions we took were rooted in pre-existing practice and what might be termed our "teachers' private theories" (Xue & Churchill, 2022). These practices and theories give rise to our belief that learning communities are groups of individuals bonded by a particular cause. Bonding requires trust and a sense of common purpose. It also needs to involve both teachers and students. This can be achieved in a formal classroom setting. However, establishing trusting, amicable relationships is more readily attained in relaxed, comfortable environments. As such, socializing through extra-curricular activities quickens and deepens the bonding process because group members can get to know each other on a more personal level (Chen, 2016; Huckle, 2017). Ensuing communal relationships can, in turn, enhance the more formal learning environment (Xue & Churchill, 2019). Sharing emotional connections with other members of a community has been shown to increase engagement, knowledge contribution and consumption (Hensley, 2021). Therefore, once trust and connection are established, it becomes possible to implement communal activities such as group writing and other types of teamwork including peer feedback. Students commenting on the writing of their peers has long been recognised as strengthening a sense of community as well as validation of each other's work (Morra & Romano, 2008; Ma, 2020). This building of communal relationships can be an especially effective means of engaging non-active learners (Ngai et al., 2019). Thus, activities that go on outside formal learning situations may complement and enhance educational programmes.

Blurring the distinction between in-class learning and extra-curricular activities is the basis for a partnership model in which students and staff co-create aspects of programmes (Singh, 2019). A corollary of this partnership model idea is the multiplication of "voices." Actively encouraging individuals to contribute knowledge and experience is beneficial to engagement (Budihal et al., 2020). It can also maintain the interest of learners because a range of voices and opinions gives

variety. Moreover, accommodating a diversity of opinions precludes having to listen to exclusively one voice (the teacher's). This is a prerequisite for student-centred learning. In addition, information is naturally chunked into manageable units for digestibility. This is especially important when participating online due to the level of concentration required when working remotely and contributing virtually (Sowell, 2017). Therefore, learning communities that champion different voices, include a variety of alternative viewpoints, and favour shorter spoken turns have a higher likelihood of maintaining interest.

Sustaining interest, together with a sense of belonging, are important for student retention (Paige et al., 2017). Both can play a determining role in whether students choose to persist with their studies (Otto et al., 2015). In addition, feeling part of one or more groups can not only give students confidence, but also helps them transition through the higher education system (Singh, 2019). As will become clear, this is a particularly important consideration for the type of two-year courses addressed in this paper, designed as they were to be taught in-person and in-situ in China for the first year before students travelled abroad in their second year.

We, in common with other providers of such courses, were compelled to radically change our mode of delivery in the wake of pandemic-related lockdowns. The impact of this has been the subject of a recent survey of providers of EAP (English for Academic Purposes), another term for the sort of foundation study skills course with which we are involved. A large-scale study of the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on public and private providers of EAP in the UK found that the move to online provision presented challenges in terms of maintaining student engagement and digestibility of information (Bruce & Stakounis, 2021). As a result, professional learning communities (PLCs) the world over have been formed as providers struggled to come to terms with the rapid move to online learning by mitigating the problems, finding and sharing solutions, and thus deriving positive outcomes from the challenges posed by SARS-CoV-2 (Alsaleh, 2021). Our publication represents a contribution to this endeavour.

Specifically, we report on our observations in relation to the level of success of three strategies we implemented to address the issues of moving online identified above. These strategies were:

1. Use of WeChat for daily communication.
2. Implementation of a virtual social programme.
3. Synchronous online class activities.

These strategies are discussed in Sections 4–6 respectively, where we first review the literature that provides the specific rationales for each of these strategies, followed by explanations of how they were implemented before finally drawing conclusions from student survey data and a group interview as to the effectiveness of the initiatives in building learning communities within the programme. Prior to moving to those sections though, we next discuss some further aspects of our methods and methodological choices.

3. Methodology

This article takes the form of a qualitative single case, a method that identifies a focal point for study and interrogates it from a variety of real-world perspectives to generate a deep, contextual account that can be shared in order to help understand other cases and inform action (Simons, 2009). In order to draw conclusions, it is first necessary to appreciate the particularities of the case. In this instance, we are concerned with a partnership between Nottingham Trent University (NTU) in the UK and the Beijing-based Communication University of China (CUC). This partnership consists of three validated MA programmes in the fields of Broadcast Journalism; Museum and Heritage Development; and Media and Globalization. Undergraduate courses are also available within the partnership, but these are excluded from this paper. The postgraduate programmes are designed to last two years, the first spent in China and the second in the UK (or online as is a current option). An additional study skills course runs in parallel to the academic

provision. Historically, the programme has been taught in-person, with visiting UK lecturers based in Beijing delivering the first year. The partnership had built a successful sense of community among staff and students through socializing and collaborating on all aspects of the programme. This fostered trust, friendships, cultural knowledge, teamworking skills and a sense of belonging to both NTU and CUC.

A case study into the impact of SARS-CoV-2 is suitable because such an approach tends to involve processes of "joint enquiry, information gathering and problem solving" (Burch et al., 2019). As such, the argument that follows features our own reflections plus the views of students. Our methodology therefore consists of a case study of which we are a part. One of the authors teaches aspects of the academic content, while the other is responsible for the study skills course. This teaching split in itself merits comment because there is a discernible schism in the university sector between the academic provision and so-called support services such as EAP (English for Academic Purposes) (Molinari, 2022). Our unusual collaboration is a manifestation of the professional learning community mentioned in the previous section (Alsaleh, 2021). The opportunity to discuss with colleagues as a means of reflecting on one's practice allows for professional development. In lockdown, many teachers and students were working remotely and in different locations, meaning that contact occurred over social media and messaging apps. This matched the online mode of teaching. Thus, our practice and our reflections form part of the same attempts to integrate mobile technologies into teaching and related tasks (Xue et al., 2021).

This paper, which can be likened to action research, originated in informal conversations as we reacted to the crisis, offered encouragement, sought solutions, evaluated the results, and strove to improve our practice (Costello, 2003). Key to action research is shaping "the world *with* others in a more desired direction" (Bradbury et al., as cited in Mertler, 2019, p. 7). We are stakeholders together with the students enrolled on the programme (Peracullo, 2022). Including the student voice aligns our methodological approach with the theory set out in the previous section. We ensured learners were heard by carrying out a qualitative group interview supplemented by individual student surveys. The purpose was to gauge students' views of the three community-building strategies discussed in this paper, namely WeChat, the social programme, and community-building class activities. More specifically, we wished to ascertain whether and how they thought these three initiatives helped to develop the core aspects of community which include bonding, inclusion, validation, student-centred learning, engagement, and a sense of belonging, as well as everyday language acquisition. The interview questions, which are listed in Figure 1, provided the basis for the interviewer to tease out more information with follow-up questions on "why" and "how." Key words that students did not understand were explained, e.g., "validation", "empowering", "bond", and "peers."

Figure 1. Questions posed during the qualitative group interview.

How, and to what extent, have WeChat / the social programme / community-building class activities:
- helped you to bond with classmates?
- enabled you to try different methods of learning?
- been useful for validation from your peers?
- been empowering?
- been interesting to engage with?
- helped you to feel connected to the class and NTU communities?
- been useful for learning?

Are there any downsides to WeChat / the social programme / community-building class activities?

Is there anything else you want to mention about what we have discussed today?

In addition to the group interview, individual surveys provided quantitative data with which to measure the extent to which each student felt they had benefitted from WeChat, the social programme and the community-building class activities in terms of the core principles of learning community under discussion in this paper. Students were asked to rate a series of statements on a scale of 1–5 (strongly agree – strongly disagree). They were also given opportunities to add commentary to support their opinions and spaces to append additional information. The statements to be rated are set out in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Student survey statements rated on a scale of 1–5 (strongly agree – strongly disagree).

WeChat has:

- helped you to build relationships with your classmates and students within NTU;
- enabled you to experience and try different learning styles;
- provided useful feedback from your peers;
- helped you to feel more empowered;
- been interesting;
- helped you to feel connected to NTU, CUC and the UK;
- helped you to acquire everyday English.

The social programme has:

- helped you to build relationships with your classmates and students within NTU;
- enabled you to experience and try different learning styles;
- provided useful feedback from your peers;
- helped you to feel more empowered;
- been interesting;
- helped you to feel connected to NTU, CUC and the UK;
- helped you to acquire everyday English.

The community building class activities have:

- helped you to build relationships with your classmates and students within NTU;
- enabled you to experience and try different learning styles;
- provided useful feedback from your peers;
- helped you to feel more empowered;
- been interesting;
- helped you to feel connected to NTU, CUC and the UK;
- helped you to acquire everyday English.

The group interview and survey were given at the end of the course in mid-June 2022. The interviews were carried out on Microsoft Teams while the survey was implemented using Microsoft Forms, two applications with which the students were very familiar. The survey attracted thirty individual responses and six students were interviewed. As already noted, the questions were posed in such a way as to gauge student perceptions of the three learning community initiatives described in this paper.

Ethical considerations were listed at the beginning of the survey and verbally outlined to students before the start of the group interview. These included ensuring privacy and confidentiality and assurance that their responses would have no bearing on their grades or the outcome of the course. In addition, representation was achieved through an equal balance of males and females in the group interview, whilst the survey was distributed to all students. Furthermore, the survey and interview were administered by an independent teacher for the purposes of impartiality. Unknown

words were explained, and results were anonymised from the outset. The aims of the survey were made explicit, and students were given the opportunity to withdraw consent to participate at any stage.

Results from the survey were automatically presented graphically within the 'Responses' tab in Microsoft Forms, meaning that no human manipulation of the data was required. None of the respondents added any qualitative responses within the comments sections of the survey, so our interpretations of the results are based purely on quantitative data. Meanwhile, the group interview was recorded, transcribed and analysed. Frequency of similar responses to questions or agreements were noted as well as individual comments which were then used to support and/or compare with findings in the survey data as discussed in later sections of this paper (4.2, 5.2, 6.2).

Prior to the pandemic, the vast majority of contact took place in person. Thus, anticipating the disruptive and deleterious impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, we wished to ascertain if, and to what extent, our three chosen strategies have helped:

1. Maintain and expand the learning communities established pre-pandemic.
2. Develop the core qualities of learning community amongst our students.
3. Enable students to develop everyday, informal English.

4. Strategy 1: Use of WeChat for daily communication

4.1. How social media help build a learning community

Community construction, whether in person or remotely, takes time and comes with no guarantee of success. This is particularly evident online. Just because there is a virtual coming together of people does not necessarily mean that there is a sense of community in terms of bonds, mutuality, trust and commonality (Nikiforos et al., 2020). That said, social media has been posited as allowing for a greater diversity and larger number of interpersonal interactions. It has, for example, been credited with facilitating peer support and increasing student empowerment amongst more confident users (Leis, 2014). Enhancing engagement and thus boosting academic performance have also been documented (Ansari & Khan, 2020). Programmes conceived for online delivery draw particular benefit from social media, as Leigh (2015) explains in research showing how Chinese learners studying internationally establish connections with their peers to build a university community at a distance.

Thus, rather than dismissed as a fad, social media can be seen as transformative when it comes to communication, including in an educational context (Hensley, 2021). It has the potential to lead not only to new ideas, but to change how users relate to knowledge itself (Schrader, 2015; Xue et al., 2021). Emergent technologies, hastened by the impact of SARS-CoV-2, have had a profound impact on the nature and meaning of learning communities (Clarke, 2021). Those adopting a hybrid or blended learning approach that combines face-to-face and online contact have been shown to be most likely to generate a sense of community (Nikiforos et al., 2020).

The above benefits of social media in the educational context were evident to us before the pandemic. UK-based staff travelling to China were quickly introduced to WeChat. Launched by Tencent in 2011, and approaching a billion active users, this app facilitates a range of user-generated content alongside individual or group messaging, voice chatting, and video calls plus picture messaging, location finders, and translation, as well as in-app functionality and payment services (McCall, 2021; Xue & Churchill, 2022). The utility of WeChat is demonstrated by Xue et al., (2021, p. 613) in their account of how it can be used to construct online communities of practice (OCoP) leading to Wengerian "mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire." A recent review of research into WeChat's educational applicability found evidence of a range of uses (Xue & Churchill, 2019). These include hosting resources, collaboration, promoting active and authentic learning, community building and support, motivation and evaluation. In setting out these findings, however, those same two reviewers observed a need for more empirical

investigations into the role of WeChat for designing and supporting learning activities, and the use of such an app in different disciplinary and regional contexts (Xue & Churchill, 2019; Xue & Churchill, 2022). This paper is in part a response to that call.

4.2. How Strategy 1 was implemented at NTU and CUC

Pre-pandemic, all year-one modules were taught in China and WeChat was used as a way of communicating away from the classroom. For example, on occasions students would invite members of staff to eat with them at a restaurant. These social gatherings constituted key bonding exercises, contributed to group cohesion, and bridged the divide between work and leisure – points all raised in the earlier literature review. WeChat made it easy to arrange these events, split bills and share images. While these may seem unconnected to learning, they were in fact instrumental in fostering relations among students, and between them and staff. Indeed, food itself was a talking point of relevance to studies – as demonstrated in the edible representation of the Rabbit God, Tu'er Ye, a moon deity peculiar to Beijing, as shown in Figure 3. Discussion of this supernatural being in the convivial atmosphere of a restaurant came after a visit to a museum where we saw a sculpture of the same figure. This consolidated work on cultural heritage carried out in the classroom (Burch et al., 2019).

Figure 3. Edible representation of the Rabbit God, Tu'er Ye, consumed communally during a staff-student restaurant visit. Image: Stuart Burch (September 30, 2018).

The trip to the museum, the settling of the restaurant bill, and the sharing of photographs and emojis were all facilitated by WeChat. The pandemic took away the physical interactions, but left the technological architecture in place to be filled with other activities (see Section 5).

WeChat's familiarity and ubiquity meant that it was the students' preferred platform for daily communication. When the programme was forced to move online, it took on a more critical communicative, administrative and pedagogical role in the absence of any face-to-face contact both before and during the course. Introductions, communication about enrolment and orientation, which had previously occurred in face-face pre-course sessions, were effectively carried out on WeChat. Use of the app progressed to instruction, modelling, sharing ideas and resources in different formats, individual Q&A and various groupwork class activities. WeChat thus grew from a casual communication device to a daily interaction and learning tool.[2] It is worth noting that, when interviewed, all the students overwhelmingly said it was their preferred method of communication. A telling comment from one student was: "Every Chinese uses WeChat." Consequently, WeChat was, and continues to be, relied upon because students favoured it from the outset – a preference that remained constant throughout the course and, indeed, in post-graduation communication.

Furthermore, some NTU–CUC learners believe that WeChat enabled them to develop relationships with classmates, their teachers and other students within NTU. During the group interview, one student remarked "*we can use [WeChat] to make friends*" and another commented on how it made them "*feel part of the class*." All this explains why WeChat has been the main channel through which teachers and students have communicated on a daily basis, not only about the programme, but also about personal matters, problems, and extracurricular interests, all of which has helped build bonds.

In addition, during the group interview some students felt that WeChat had provided an opportunity to try different learning methods. This can be understood through recourse to Fleming's (2006) VARK model of Visual (V) Auditory (A) Read/write (R) and Kinaesthetic (K) ways of learning.[3] Thus, one student mentioned, "*I tried different ways to learn*", and another referred to "*learning from images [V] and pronunciation recordings [A] of [the] teacher*." Another mentioned "*using translation and sharing writing [R]*" during collaborative written tasks. Furthermore, one student said they enjoyed sharing "*voice with the group [A]*", referring to audio clips exchanged via WeChat so as to receive feedback from peers. Using the app for class learning activities was new to students and they seemed to appreciate the experience of experimenting with different ways to learn through it.

As to WeChat being a useful validating and empowering tool, some students agreed that feedback from the group was "*very useful*", with one stating: "*I get many idea[s] not just [from] the teacher.*" The latter comment echoes a point made earlier about peer feedback providing a multiplicity of voices, which foster student-centredness and is critical to establishing validation within communities. Although two students mentioned that feedback on WeChat could make them feel "*nervous*" about making mistakes, they all agreed how important peer validation is and that they had learned a lot from each other, with two stressing their increased "*confidence.*" That said, the reference to being nervous reflects a need for further training and reassurance in giving and receiving feedback constructively.

It was no surprise that all the students said they enjoyed using WeChat. One of those interviewed emphasized that the app made communicating and learning enjoyable and engaging ("*it is fun and quick*"). Another liked its speed and ability to express ideas and emotions in picture form ("*it is quick and I send pictures for feeling*"). This underscores WeChat's serviceability when it comes to engagement. The comment about visualising feelings highlights its capacity to express emotion in different formats to help build bonds.

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[2] The WeChat data is not analysed in this paper as it falls outside the scope of the current enquiry.

[3] Our aim was to expose students to diverse forms of pedagogy as a means of inclusivity. We do not subscribe to the notion of adapting teaching strategies to suit an individual's so-called "learning style."

In terms of a sense of belonging to the university, one student said that WeChat helped them to "*connect with the CUC and NTU communities*", while another highlighted how they had "*connected with friends in the UK*." Reference was also made to learning more about Britain from friends undertaking their year abroad ("*I know UK culture from CUC friends in [the] UK*"). This comment realises a point made earlier about alumni helping students to feel connected to the university and supporting them to transition through it.

As to pedagogy, some students perceived WeChat as an effective learning tool. One remarked that "*group learning is better because of emojis, audio and sharing files*." Another referred to "*learning all the time*" and two students said that WeChat enabled them to learn new words plus "*informal English*." As to downsides of the app, the previously mentioned comment about feedback making two students "*nervous*" was repeated during the interview. In addition, the addictive nature of WeChat was raised as a point of discussion.

The survey results further support the interview data. As can be seen from Figure 4, when asked, most students either agreed or strongly agreed that WeChat helped them to build relationships (75% and 21%) and only 4% tended to agree. Although 60% strongly agreed and 15% agreed that the app had given them the opportunity to try out different learning methods (inclusion), 25% only tended to agree. This may suggest that WeChat's potential as a tool for experimenting with different learning styles should be exploited further in future work. In terms of getting validating feedback from peers via this social media app, 80% strongly agreed, 12% agreed and only 8% tended to agree. As to the question of whether it made them feel empowered, 72% strongly agreed, 12% agreed and 16% tended to agree. Although strong indicators, there seems to be some doubt about WeChat's empowerment functionality. The comment from two students who said they were sometimes on edge about group feedback on the app could be a related factor which reduces confidence, and again highlights a need for more training in peer support. Overwhelmingly, all the students agreed that they enjoyed using WeChat, which was to be expected given the preference shown for it from the outset. Similarly, most students felt that it had helped them connect with different communities (85% strongly agreed, 12% agreed, 3% tended to agree). When asked about development of everyday language skills, most students agreed that WeChat had helped (50% strongly agreed, 22% agreed) but the number of "tended to agree" was fairly high at 28%. This concurs with the writers' view that more language development activities need to be cultivated.
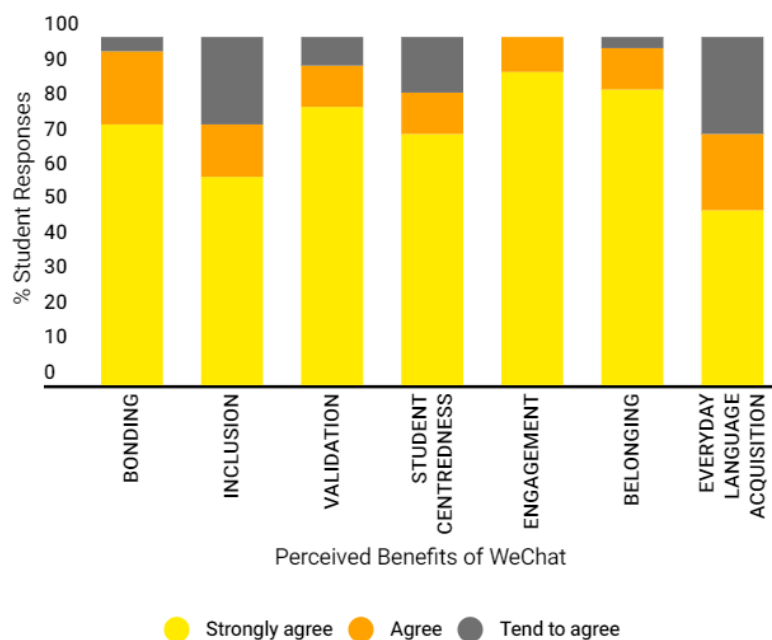

Figure 4. Survey of student attitudes towards WeChat.

Hence, a social media application like WeChat evolved from a practical tool to an essential component of the NTU–CUC programme. It guaranteed rapid and reliable communication across physical locations between teachers and students. In the latter's opinion, it has boosted the following areas critical to learning communities:

- relationship building
- connecting
- trying different learning styles
- gaining useful feedback from peers
- being empowered
- maintaining interest
- developing everyday language skills.

However, areas where there was a slight doubt include using WeChat to experience different learning styles as well as being empowered by the app and its use for everyday language acquisition. These issues will, therefore, be developed further within the programme.

All these findings aside, however, using WeChat does not dispense with the use of official university email accounts. This was still used for formal correspondence, such as conveying assignment grades and summative feedback. This ensured that members of staff that had never taught in China could still communicate with students and were not placed under any obligation to use Chinese social media.

5. Strategy 2: Implementation of a virtual social programme

5.1. How virtual social programmes help build a learning community

Pre-pandemic, in-person social activities were a regular feature of the NTU–CUC programme because they helped to develop communities, relationships, knowledge of UK academic culture and proficiency in everyday English. When the programme went online during lockdown, a virtual social programme was implemented for students, and it continues to exist and evolve.

Extra-curricular activities within international foundation programmes have been promoted as being useful for building the sense of community needed in successful Transnational Education (TNE) partnerships. Developing trust and friendship within international educational programmes is seen as vital to cross cultural collaborations (Chen, 2016). A feeling of trust and rapport are possibly more difficult to achieve within a class setting because of time constraints, the level of formality, and because lessons tend to be focused on a defined set of learning objectives. Building relationships requires time and a more relaxed environment for students and teachers to get to know each other in, as has been repeatedly emphasised, non-threatening spaces (Smith et al., 2004; Chen, 2016; Huckle, 2017). Furthermore, as mentioned previously, bonding is an essential ingredient of a community (Smith et al., 2004; Otto et al., 2015). Hence, creating social opportunities for students and teachers to get to know each other is necessary in order to deepen the ties within communities and ensure students feel included and validated amongst their peers.

Furthermore, in terms of language development, socializing away from a class setting enables the acquisition of informal and everyday language. On a practical level, this interactivity is essential for the staff and students within a TNE community. It also helps students to learn the target language and connect with the destination university and cultures (Duff, 2017). The aforementioned work of Bruce and Stakounis (2021) is relevant here. Their report highlights teacher concerns that students are more reluctant to speak online and do not progress in their spoken English as readily as they would if attending face-to-face classes.

5.2. How Strategy 2 was implemented at NTU and CUC

Our own experiences confirm the above concerns. Thus, soon into the start of term, a need for more opportunities to speak became evident. This is why socializing is so important. It builds confidence that can then be used in the more formal setting of the classroom. Each active engagement helps the individual feel a sense of belonging to the group as well as being a valued member of the course and a part of the university. This latter point is important in order to enrich the student experience and to aid retention. In so doing, it helps students transition through the education system and be prepared for coming to the UK in their second year. Research has shown that understanding UK academia and everyday cultures can also be facilitated by alumni or students in years above (Smith, 2021). This led us to seek out opportunities for learners to socialize with staff and students from NTU. It was in this context that the concept of Sunday Socials came into being.

This ongoing weekly initiative was set up in order to establish a social programme on the NTU–CUC online course. Its aim is to build community and improve everyday English acquisition. Held via Microsoft Teams, the social get-togethers are scheduled for an hour every week at a set, mutually convenient time. All students are invited. Discussion can involve the whole group or small breakout gatherings depending on the numbers attending and the topics discussed. Attendance is always optional, and the issues talked about are predetermined by students so as to facilitate learner empowerment and maximize engagement. The events are informal in order to relax students and encourage them to talk in a non-threatening, inclusive environment. This approach enables staff and students to get to know each other on a personal level and build communities in which they can feel included and validated. In addition, CUC year 2 students in the UK and alumni who have completed their studies have attended the socials and offered invaluable advice about studying in the UK. This is precisely the type of activity that helps students transition through the higher education system. Furthermore, international students at NTU from a variety of countries have also joined the group for cross-cultural exchanges. As well as Sunday Socials, students are offered an hour every week entirely devoted to speaking English. Along with developing everyday language abilities, this is also intended to build their confidence and strengthen the NTU–CUC learning community.

In addition, a programme of cross-cultural social events has been set up with NTU's Global Lounge. This is a team within the university devoted to creating global opportunities to connect students from around the world. Every two weeks, games and cultural events are hosted online. Competitions include, for example, Bingo, Gartic, and TypeRacer. These are all games that students can play online, and which are fast, fun and that generate conversation at the same time. The sessions are run by Global Lounge volunteers who are international students within the university, which is itself an example of student-driven, active learning. Cultural activities within the programme centre on festivals from around the globe. These are introduced by the volunteers as a prelude to group discussion and interaction. In addition, events have been led by CUC students who are in the UK for their second year. They provide face-face and online showcases of Chinese festivals.

As a consequence of all these activities, the Global Lounge collaboration has succeeded in connecting CUC students with their NTU counterparts by:

- diversifying and consolidating the bonds within their communities;
- giving them a sense of inclusion and validation;
- empowering them through leading activities and choosing topics;
- engaging them in informal, fun and inclusive events;
- strengthening their sense of belonging to the university communities;
- providing them with more opportunities to practice informal conversational English.

All participants who were interviewed about the Sunday Socials and Global Lounge initiatives felt that the social events had had a range of positive outcomes. These included deepening bonds within the programme communities ("*I feel part of the NTU and CUC learning communities*"; "*I can connect with more friends*"); making them feel included within NTU culture ("*I feel confident to be in different groups*"; "*I try different activities*"); fostering a sense of peer validation ("*I learn more from friends*"; "*I get lots of different ideas*"); giving them exposure to UK and international cultures ("*I know more about other cultures*"; "*I enjoy to learn about all the cultures*"); helping their spoken English, and boosting their confidence ("*I have learnt more about informal English and developed my confidence*"; "*I can practice my oral English and daily conversation which has made me more confident*"). The only problem mentioned by one student was finding the time in a jam-packed academic timetable to attend the socials.

Similar views are expressed in the data gathered from the survey (see Figure 5). Every student either agreed or strongly agreed that the socials helped them to build relationships. Of these, 78% and 17% respectively strongly agreed and agreed that the programme helped them to try different learning methods (inclusion), with only 5% tending to agree. A similar pattern is repeated when it comes to peer validation (75% and 20% strongly agreed and agreed, while only 5% tended to agree). In terms of feeling empowered, 75% strongly agreed, 5% agreed and 20% tended to agree. Although a positive response, it does cast some doubt on how empowered students felt as a result of the social events. As to engagement, 78% strongly agreed that they enjoyed the virtual events, 17% agreed and 5% tended to agree. When asked about feeling connected to different communities, 60% strongly agreed, 35% agreed and 5% tended to agree. In relation to developing everyday language ability, 90% agreed strongly, with the remaining 10% evenly split between agreeing or tending to agree that the virtual socials had helped to develop informal language skills.
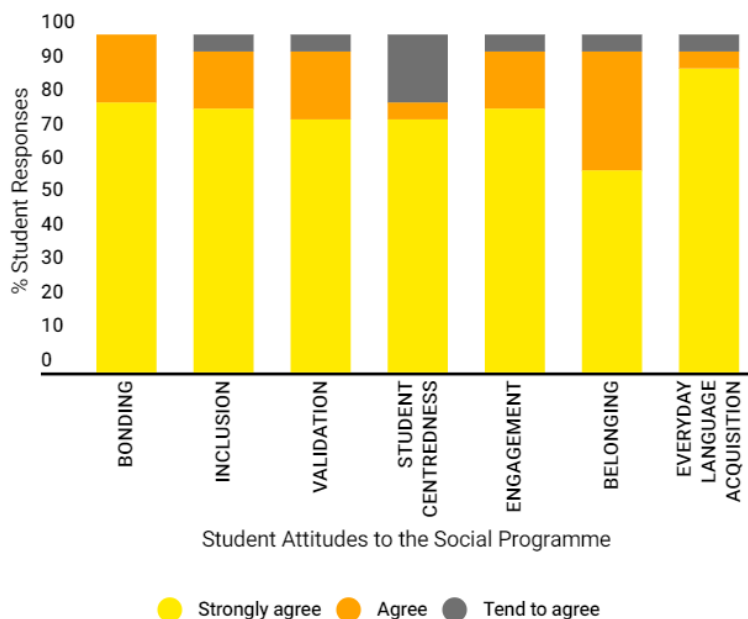

Figure 5. Survey of student attitudes towards the social programme.

Thus, offering regular virtual (and some face-to-face) social events has, according to the students, aided the following:

- relationship building
- experiencing different types of learning activity
- gaining validation from peers
- empowerment
- maintaining interest
- connecting

- developing everyday language skills.

As already noted, the only reservation mentioned by one student regards finding time to attend. Another possible area that needs to be developed is building students' sense of empowerment through the socials.

6. Strategy 3: Synchronous online class activities

6.1. How synchronous online class activities help build a learning community

As well as using WeChat and a social programme to build learning communities, activities to foster a team approach to classwork have been incorporated within the synchronous online class sessions. This team approach was used because collaborative presentations and group writing have the potential to be student focused and motivational. When it comes to the latter, collaborative writing can develop the linguistic skills of learners as well as boost engagement and motivation because participants are working and interacting with peers toward a common goal (Ma, 2020). In their aforementioned survey of teachers' experiences of teaching online during the pandemic, Bruce and Stakounis (2021) found a significant number use group writing on shared documents because it allows students to collaborate, which teachers found helped engagement. Hence, group writing fulfils the philosophy of a learning community that is collaborative, student-centred, and more likely to maintain engagement online.

As mentioned previously, building relationships is a cornerstone of learning communities. One means of strengthening bonds within virtual classes is written collaboration and groupwork. Group writing and cooperative activities in synchronous online sessions gives teams the space to learn about each other whilst working together towards a shared objective. Furthermore, peer review of group writing, when incorporated into activities, exercises the process of inclusivity and validation from peers, which has been promoted as being motivational within learning communities (Ma, 2020). Hence, collaborative writing, activities and peer review afford a range of positive effects because they create spaces for bonding, as well as feelings of inclusion through a common learning experience.

Students can learn from each other when carrying out team writing, group tasks and conducting peer review. As stated at the outset, within any group or community there are a range of voices and therefore broader knowledge than an environment that is teacher-centred (Budihal et al., 2020). This means that working as a team allows learners to tap into a pool of information and skills about English and other topics, which can help their language development (Xu, 2022) and expand their subject knowledge. Consequently, community writing, group activities and peer feedback can aid language and skills proficiency, as well as subject-specific knowledge.

Furthermore, students are more likely to value peer feedback when they have had training and the group is collegiate. Feedback training is very important in order to equip students with appropriate language and a positive mindset. This guidance also needs to be supported with a class situation that is collaborative, interactive and deemed safe to minimize any resulting negativity (Morra & Romano, 2008). In addition, communities can help non-active learners because the validation of the community is crucial for establishing the importance of desirable behaviours (Ngai et al., 2019). Hence, responses from fellow classmates are what can motivate an individual to become an active learner and make them feel part of a learning community.

6.2. How Strategy 3 was implemented at NTU and CUC

Collaborative writing has been used on the programme to develop learning communities. During synchronous online classes, Microsoft Word was accessed using SharePoint. This facilitated group writing because it allows students to work together on one document. Moreover, the teacher can see each group's work when they are in breakout rooms and monitor progress; student groups can access other groups' work and learn from it; and feedback can be given in real-time. Students were given training in appropriate linguistic register and positive mindsets. The benefits of peer

review in terms of validation have been described earlier in this paper. Once a group completed a piece of writing on the course, it was peer-reviewed by another team. This included correcting errors for language practice using Microsoft's Track Changes at the same time as rating task achievement using Microsoft Word's Comment function, while also giving an emoji response to indicate a general impression of the work. Rating using emojis has been incorporated because it is the norm within social media communities, is fun, and can be motivational (Vanttinen-Newton, 2020). Hence, team writing and peer feedback were used in class with the intention of developing bonding, inclusion, validation, empowerment, sustaining interest, engendering a sense of belonging, as well as developing language skills.

Furthermore, one example of collaborating on a group task to maintain the sense of community and peer support was students working in study groups for their assessed individual presentations. If tasks are to be both engaging and meaningful, they need to be investigative, allow students to work autonomously from the teacher, and have a final product (Thomas, 2000). This output took the form of an individually assessed research presentation. In preparation, students collaborated in groups on a given subject area related to their particular MA programme. One such topic was "social media" and an associated theme such as "social media and fake news", about which an argument might be developed, for example, "fake news can be identified through education." The project work was mostly done asynchronously in mini communities. Working in groups enabled students to share and discuss research, get feedback from each other, ask questions, and rate each other's presentations at various stages of development. This way of working was designed to harness and develop the qualities of community at the heart of this paper.

During the group interview, some students mentioned building relationships through the community activities, that is, "*getting to know each other*" and becoming "*closer*" through "*different ways to learn*." Two students mentioned enjoying giving and receiving feedback. It is interesting that the students who had mentioned feeling "*nervous*" about peer feedback on WeChat and within the socials, did not raise this as an issue in relation to the community-building class activities. Perhaps this is because the former two are more informal and spontaneous whilst the latter is more formal and structured. In addition, one student mentioned feeling "*stronger*" and more "*confident*" within a team, a point on which the others concurred. Similarly, they all agreed that working as a group, sharing ideas and workloads was more "*efficient and interesting*" than "*working on [one's] own.*" This, in turn, made them feel more connected and less isolated than, as they put it: "*lonely working.*" Furthermore, two students said that their language ability has improved: "*I know more informal English*" from the community-building activities because "*… we talk*" and no negative comments were given.

When surveyed about these community-building activities in class (see Figure 6), 100% of students agreed that they had helped them to bond with peers. Furthermore, 90% strongly agreed, 5% agreed and 5% tended to agree that they had helped them to experience different learning styles. In terms of feedback, 100% felt they had had useful validation through the activities. When responding to the statement about being empowered, 80% strongly agreed, whilst only 20% tended to agree. This links with previous data about WeChat and the social programme where a small number of students were unsure as to the confidence-building properties of the initiatives, an area which should be built on in future. In addition, 95% found the activities engaging and 5% tended to believe this. As to feeling a sense of belonging to a community, 50% strongly agreed and 40% agreed that the class activities had enabled this, whilst 10% tended to agree. In terms of language, 100% felt that the community building activities had developed their everyday language skills.

Thus, incorporating groupwork writing, peer feedback and study group work into class sessions is, according to students, beneficial in ways that support the core aspects of a learning community weaved through this paper, namely bonding, inclusivity, validation, empowerment, engagement, and having a sense of belonging, in addition to facilitating the acquisition of everyday language

skills. Areas possibly requiring more investment on the course include empowerment through the community class activities.
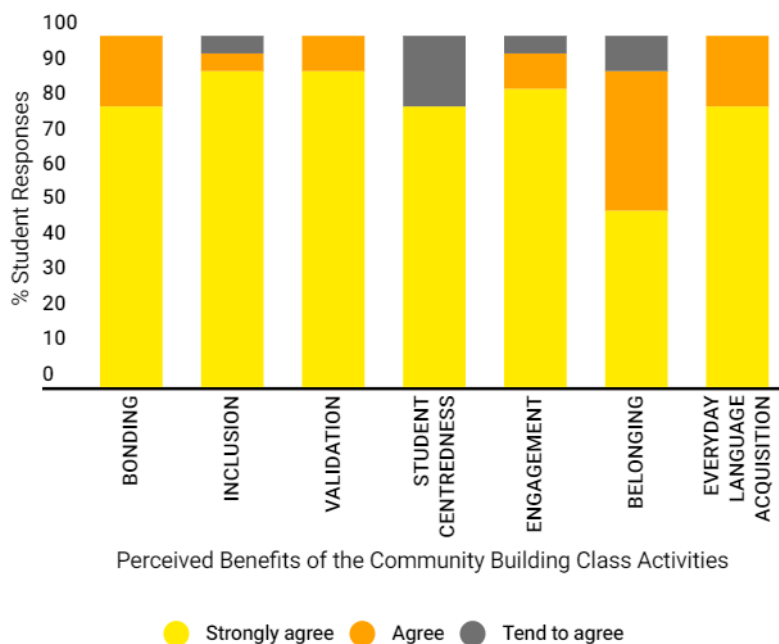

Figure 6. Survey of student attitudes towards the community building class activities.

7. Conclusion

While face-to-face teaching has resumed in the UK, travel restrictions mean that currently (2022), it remains impossible for NTU UK-based lecturers to go to China. How we have dealt with this has been the focus of our paper. Learning communities existed before Covid-19, but lockdowns and online learning presaged a weakening or, perhaps, a dissolution of existing learning communities. It was feared that, without immediate countermeasures, the social programme that had assisted in building a sense of togetherness would have disappeared.

This paper has discussed the steps we took to maintain and develop learning communities within an international UK-China TNE programme that has been forced online. This was achieved in three ways. First, the pedagogic deployment of the Chinese social media app, WeChat. Second, the implementation of a virtual (and in-person) social programme connecting teachers, students and alumni across borders. Third, the incorporation of group writing and project work within online classes.

The strategies outlined above have been a rapid response to an acute challenge posed by the pandemic. The remedies set out here all find their roots in initiatives developed for in-person experiences and continue to evolve within a virtual context. Thus, in a positive sense, SARS-CoV-2 has tested the resilience of the programme and allowed for continual innovation. The lessons learned are invaluable to our practice irrespective of whether the future marks a return to face-to-face teaching, continued online provision, or a hybrid of the two. Our reflections and student feedback show that being part of a successful online community can build relationships, create an inclusive learning environment, give peer validation, empower and thereby develop confidence, maintain interest, and create a feeling of belonging, in addition to facilitating the acquisition of everyday language skills.

So, to return to the three challenges set out earlier:

1. The learning community has survived the shift from face-to-face to online, and further widened its net to reach more staff and students at NTU in the UK.
2. The core qualities of learning community have been developed in students' eyes.
3. Confidence in everyday, informal English has improved according to students.

In terms of future work, the student views derived from the group interview and survey have highlighted the need to further develop WeChat as a tool to give and receive feedback. This includes training to make all students confident when using the app for this purpose. Furthermore, work needs to be done on diversifying the learning approaches to suit and empower all students. Moreover, additional activities could be included to help students' everyday language acquisition. As a response to WeChat being addictive, turning phones off for periods (in and away from class) could alleviate this. Empowerment, or a lack thereof, was also noted amongst a few students in relation to the socials and class activities, and therefore attention will be given to this. Being able to attend the socials has been problematic for some students. One solution could be to build the social programme into the compulsory timetable. Finally, it is acknowledged that the data gathered has been from the perspective of students only. Future investigations in this area should include evidence from other stakeholders and objective measuring tools to give a more holistic set of perspectives on the impact of learning communities.

Acknowledgements

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