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Impacts of online learning in development studies during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Due to Thailand's geographical advantage as a gateway to Southeast Asia and with developmental issues of its own, a development studies program in the country has attracted numerous international students to explore local communities. However, disruption occurred following the COVID-19 pandemic with travel restrictions, lockdown, and work and study from home measures. Most universities have swiftly blended or changed to online learning including a program of development studies in Thailand. The paper, thus, aimed to analyze the impacts of online learning for the development studies program at the present time as exacerbated by the disruption. The research design used a case study with a qualitative approach. The participants were international postgraduate students and current alumni, mainly from Asia, of a development studies program in Thailand. Research techniques included interview, focus group interview, and secondary data analysis. Findings showed that students did not prefer online learning and viewed it as ineffective, but resigned themselves to accepting it during the pandemic. Impacts of online learning in development studies were its incompatibility with objectives of development studies, a reduction in ontology in class and fieldwork, fewer chances to build social networks, and the emergence of inequality in terms of socioeconomic factors.

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Introduction

Development studies engage closely with mobility regarding learning methods such as fieldwork visits and internships in diverse local communities. Development studies also involve administration; for example, overseas travel of international students and local commuting

for registration, enrolment, grants and scholarships, exams etc. The general practice of development study programs has become difficult due to disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic. The disruption ensuing from COVID-19 included travel bans, lockdowns, and educational institution closures. To cope with the pandemic, universities promptly issued measures to move onsite for online learning to subsequent work, study from home and facilitating university administrations. The immediate reasoning behind the transition was to keep institutions running according to government policies (Obadire et al., 2020; Teräs et al., 2020). Thailand

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has also greatly been impacted by COVID-19, in which most universities switched to blended and online learning since early 2020. The pandemic situation of COVID-19 in Thailand as of July 2021 was not yet under control (Online Reporters, 2021). The approximate number of people who tested positive for COVID-19 on 11 August 2021 was over 21,038 cases in Thailand, and the total of infected cases was 816,989 (Department of Disease Control Thailand, 2021) out of a current population of approximately 66.2 million people. The governmental data on COVID-19 related figures was the estimated number excluding underreported cases in Thailand. Regarding the critical COVID-19 pandemic situation, announcements by universities in Thailand concerning changes to student learning and online learning tended to possess much validity due to the increasing number of COVID-19 cases.

A gap exists in literature on an understanding of learning in development studies in social contexts during a time of disruption. To address this lack of knowledge, the paper aimed to analyze the impacts of learning methods for the development study program in Thailand at present as exacerbated by disruption due to health risks and travel restrictions. The paper also allowed for the voices of international students to be heard and to accommodate the students' diverse expectations and backgrounds as they were greatly affected by the fast adoption to online learning and administration.

Literature Review

Thailand has become a hub for international development studies (Chulalongkorn University, 2021), as it is a gateway to Southeast Asia (Eastern Economic Corridor, 2019) with its own development issues (World Bank, 2021). Such has attracted students and professionals worldwide. Consequently, there has been a paradigm shift from the mainstream development to post-development strengths, in particular multidisciplinary, localization and local fieldwork study. Economic indicators are the foundation for mainstream development studies categorizing each country depending on economic and technological advancements. A number of countries in Asia fall into the underdeveloped or developing category representing limited development. However, numerous scholars argue that the mainstream approach is not one-size-fits-all which can be applied to other settings outside the Western world because every country has its own specific history and context (Kothari, 2019). The growth of development studies expanding from Western ideologies to multidisciplinary approach has

strengthened the importance of genealogy and first-hand experiences in communities outside the Western world. Therefore, techniques of development studies emphasize fieldwork study, participation, individual reflexivity, and critical analysis (Chambers, 2019). Additionally, development meanings have altered in accordance with trends of development. Teaching methods and curriculum are, without doubt, blended with current development trends. Meanings of development have been termed as 'improvement'; however, the interpretation of 'development' today leans towards collective learning (Pieterse, 2010). With these changing features of concepts, Asia has encouraged more scholars, professionals, and students to work and study with local communities to scrutinize complexity and solve development problems.

A number of development study programs are available in many countries in Asia. In Thailand, public universities have improved their quality and rankings to attract international students. Universities have promoted technologies for education and management to facilitate internationalization and collaboration. New digital methods, for instance, on-line lectures, on-line library, online courses as well as Learning Management System (LMS) have been applied to Higher Education (HE) institutions. The promotion of technologies and digital platforms related to education appeared before the COVID-19 pandemic as HE put forward a blended model of integrating online and traditional on-classroom learning (Obadire et al., 2020). However, the COVID-19 outbreak not only affected social and economic inequality, but also escalated digitalization (Oldekop et al., 2020). Rapid transition to online learning in development studies resulted in the disruption of course achievement. Teaching and learning processes are incomplete and limited in interaction including the cancellation of fieldwork visits and onsite internships. The relations between teachers and students occur more on the virtual platform with discussion and participation tending to be less engaged. Also, opportunities in which to establish a social network were few and brief. These unanticipated events led to many concerns by students already having received an acceptance letter from the program, those in learning process, and for those writing up the dissertation. Disruption could also affect the arrival of students due to visa and quarantine regulations: quality and compatibility between online learning and development studies objectives due to the lack of fieldwork and extra onsite activities; and graduation resulting from the difficulty and inconvenience of collecting data as planned or the hurry to fly back to the student's home country before border closure (Zhu, 2020).

The core objectives of development studies have been to find ways to lift peoples' quality of life (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). The mainstream approach to development studies in the early stages focused on economic problems leading teaching and research tying specifically with economic variables and solutions. Later, academics and experts in the field worked intensively to extend the ontology of development studies proposing that development problems were not concerned solely with economic determinants, but rather multifaceted elements including social, political, environmental, and related factors. The shift of the paradigm impacts the perspectives of governmental and non-governmental actors as well as academic scholars to reconsider curricula, learning techniques, and program administration of development studies. Therefore, it can be said that development studies stepped out from an economic mainstream approach to a multidisciplinary approach (Harriss, 2014).

Moving from the mainstream approach of prioritizing economic impacts from European and North American perspectives has shed light on development issues outside of the Western world. Kearnin Sims (2018) proposed appropriate teaching and learning methods for development studies by focusing on issues or problems rather than theories. The achievement of development goals requires strategies that can serve the needs of local communities (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development [UNRISD], 2018) and the engagement of local stakeholders to participate in agenda setting. Students should be encouraged to encounter development issues in the actual field where universities stimulate students to think critically about power relations in shaping knowledge related development, and most importantly, students learn to adapt with complexity and changeable development problems in which instructors should provide students with current lessons and up to date teaching methods (Silvey, 2002; Sims, 2018). Engagement fieldwork then becomes a tool to bridge theories and practices of development in order for learners to become familiarized with development issues and to touch on localization. Therefore, numerous development programs have their curriculum designed with courses on practicum, extra-activities especially field visits, and internships. The process of learning through fieldwork and internships, both domestically and internationally, is the integration between education and future careers, which enables students to learn to apply theories to practice in the real world for productive work and to expand development knowledge boundaries (Cooper et al., 2010; Martin & Hughes, 2009). Contributions and the value of practice in

the form of fieldwork and internships also embellishes students to participate in a development studies program as they look forward to exploring less visited areas and proposing suitable solutions. However, the sudden shift in development studies from on to off-campus and face-to-face learning to online learning has become the main, and later, the only platform of learning by universities in Thailand. As such, online learning raises questions of compatibility and quality of development studies program objectives and administration.

The main concept explored in this paper was constructivism involving a theory of pedagogy and a theory of ontology. The framework proposed that the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic causing the sudden adoption of online learning in development studies had significant impacts on learning outcomes based on the notion of constructivism. In term of pedagogy, constructivism is the fundamental learning theory adopted widely in various academic fields. Constructivism refers to a process whereby learners apply current and past knowledge to construct new ideas, in time with other human or non-human actors (Major, 2015). Constructivism aims to construct new knowledge in which knowledge derives from the experience of individual acting and interacting with others, which mean students learn best in a social context with real experiences and work together to construct knowledge (Center for Educational Innovation [CEI], 2021; Major, 2015). In addition, some important learning happens under conditions far different from school (or a traditional classroom); for instance, people develop skills as hobbies without instructors or people pick up social behaviors rather than via classroom instructions (Papert, 1993). Moving to ontology, the theory concerns the nature of reality or theory of being (Bryman, 2004). Ontology explains the existence of knowledge based on objectivism - knowledge is independent, value-free, clear and distinct, and constructivism (also referred to as constructionism) - knowledge is constructed and interpreted through social actors (Bryman, 2004). The latter, knowledge is constructed, is adapted to explicate impacts of online learning in development studies during the pandemic. The strengths of these theories relevant to learning and knowledge construction in terms of goals and means become critical parts of administering development studies as a multidisciplinary field.

Methodology

This study explored a qualitative approach to study perspectives of international students of development

studies programs in Thailand. Different geographical areas that vary with specific administrations related to the COVID-19 pandemic help to reflect the impacts of online learning on students in a more well-rounded way. A qualitative approach allows one to gain rich information on subjective issues; for instance, feelings, impacts of online learning, and perspectives. The research design was a case study involving a worldwide international student community, mainly from Asia, registered in the development studies program for postgraduates in Thailand. The research explored a qualitative approach with 21 participants, 9 males and 12 females, with the status of either students or recent alumni from Australia, China, France, Germany, Japan, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and the US. The access to participants was initially carried out by staff in a program. Later, the research reached participants through the snowballing technique where respondents further introduced their peers. All of the participants approached accepted the invitation to participate in the research. The proposed participants were contacted mostly by email but also verbally face-to-face. They were informed of the objectives of studies, contributions, and relevant ethical concerns and asked whether they wanted voluntarily to participate in the research. Once they agreed to join, questions and/or appointment followed, depending on modes of interview preferences, i.e., onsite or online interview, or self-completion of an electronic questionnaire. The criteria of participant selection were being students or alumni of development studies program in Thailand, having experience of onsite and online learning and voluntarily participating in the research. The targeted participants were clearly informed that the decision to participate or not in the research would not affect their current learning, grading or working. A group of participants shared their experiences in light of working. Most participants had had work experience before joining the programs; only 2 respondents did not have experience and only one did not identify such.

Data Collection

The data were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire. Questions focused on the working background of respondents, their opinion on learning methods (mainly including face-to-face and online classrooms), and learners' expectations. Data collection was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, participants selected to answer voluntarily either by an online interview or by self-completion of an electronic questionnaire. The procedures were as follows;

- (1) Potential research participants were identified then asked whether they would like to voluntarily participate. Most of communication and acceptance were completed by email. Participants selected a mode of response.
- (2) A research team made an appointment with each participant who opted to have an interview. Those who preferred to do the self-completion electronic questionnaire received a questionnaire with an explanation via email.
- (3) Interviews were held. There were also follow-up questions that asked respondents for some clarification if responses were unclear. For the self-completion electronic questionnaire, in case some answers were missing or unclear, an email was sent to ask for more information or explanation.
- (4) After gaining information from each individual, important issues from a questionnaire were collected and added to Focus Group Interviews. Focus group interviews with social distancing were arranged in order to elaborate on richer details. Finally, responses were grouped and prepared for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data from semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews were coded and checked for completion. Responses of each participant were categorized by similarities, differences, and the likelihood of responses; for instance, preference or non-preference of online learning, challenges that students encounter, and expectations of network. Then, integrating categories and directing into different theoretical schemes were applied (Corbin, 2015). Lastly, the researcher interpreted responses in theoretical themes supported by relevant theories and direct quotations. Secondary data were another source of data collection for analysis to crosscheck and add-on from interviews. Data collection occurred from mid-June to November 2020 after being approved by the research ethics committee. The study began in March 2020 and was completed in January 2021. The names appearing in the paper are pseudonyms to protect the respondents' identities.

Results

Findings showed that the swift change to online learning affected learning in the field of development studies according to three main categories. The first related to the main goals of the discipline, and the second concerned the pedagogy. Lastly, it influenced the opportunity to build up social networks for future

opportunities. Over half of respondents had prior experience in the field of development work. Most answers from participants showed clear goals in pursuing postgraduate programs. Careers and interests were the two major reasons for this, with the latter providing the rewarding aim of solving development challenges in their communities. These motivations and ambitions of learners are positive attitudes that are valuable to the program to produce high-quality holders of master or doctoral degrees to the development professional market. The learning environment should be highly engaging and beneficial in which students can apply their previous working experience to the classroom and course activities. However, once there was a change of plan due to COVID-19 leading to a sudden shift to online learning, this greatly affected students' demands and desires towards courses. This applied to the majority of respondents who expressed a clear view of what they wanted from the program and how they wanted it.

Half of Students Say 'Not Preferred' for Online Learning

Due to COVID-19 and the subsequent change in plans and a shift to online learning, the program had to be adjusted, postponed, and for some lessons or activities even cancelled. Online learning is not the general practice in development studies. The majority of answers from 10 participants towards online learning and teaching methods showed that it was not preferred. Participants were asked to explain why and were allowed to give more than one reason. The prime reason given by all 10 students for not preferring online classes was the lack of or brevity of interaction including discussion. Students revealed that they would not have joined the program if they had wanted an online class because there were countless courses available online. Being in the program was more than just learning in the class. Rather, it was about getting to know more friends, teachers, and forge connections. Other answers included perspectives that online learning was less effective for learning and evaluation. Reasons and examples included the situation of a thesis defence, being difficult for students to concentrate on learning, and not being compatible with course objectives. There were also issues of connection building, enthusiasm for learning, and technical problems contributing to online learning not being preferred. Findings illustrate expectations of development studies in Thailand that do not only focus on lessons or classroom learning, but also interaction, networking, and being a great motivator for going to the campus.

Only one participant had a preference of online learning because it was convenient to study from home, in which some courses, especially a writing workshop or lecture-based course, could be done online. Most importantly, it was cost-effective and saved time commuting with traffic congestion. People who live or have been to Thailand will be aware of the latter reason. Another group of answers showed nine respondents to be flexible, as they liked both onsite and online learning depending on current situations. Respondents argued that online learning was not useful at all and did not effectively convey information, resulting in many misunderstandings between the professor and students. Online learning should be adopted during serious pandemic times like COVID-19 only.

Unmet Expectations: Fieldwork and Networking Needed!

Following the rapid transition to web-based learning, respondents expressed their opinion that it obstructed the goals of studying development studies through the more normal means of lecture, face-to-face discussion, and particularly, fieldwork visits to interact and closely examine local communities. Fieldwork was by far the most anticipated aspect by development students, with 13 responses. Rationales for fieldwork visits, arranged in descending order according to participants' answers consisted of learning about new communities, improved conceptual understanding, connections and networking building, applying theory to practice, and academic minimization. Among these answers, some students hoped that they might be able to do fieldwork visits when the pandemic was under control. These answers were optimistic because as of 2021, COVID-19 infections were increasing and were substantially higher than in 2020. Another group of expected activities was any academic related activities outside the classroom. Eleven respondents looked for these kinds of activities because such provided opportunities to collaborate with other agencies, build connections, and learn from experts. Four participants expected internships for students to possibly secure future jobs. Two proposed tutor groups as an extra-activity believing it would help increase lesson understanding and class participation, while one suggested a part-time job for earning while studying.

Results concerning learning methods and expectations of students towards development studies demonstrated similarities and likelihood of answers, that students of development studies program had an inclination for fieldwork and contemplated networking for a future

career and cooperation. Demands and expectations of students towards the program in normal times can be smoothly met, yet they became challenging to manage and fulfil requirements of both core program objectives and students' presuppositions due to the unanticipated impacts of Covid-19.

Discussion

In the initial period of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 in Thailand, the number of cases testing positively daily was small, less than a hundred. A dramatic turn occurred in the year 2021 when Thailand found new and large clusters around Bangkok and border provinces that spread throughout the country. The severe number of affected cases grew sharply as of August 2021 and was not yet over owing to low vaccine supply in Thailand (Ekvittayavechnukul, 2021). Most public universities in Thailand announced their university closure and ordered modes of learning entirely online from the beginning of 2021 up until the present time (January 2022). The pandemic and subsequent universities orders impacted students of development programs markedly. In the year 2020, some development studies program courses allowed blended learning, a mix of offline and online classroom; however, gathering, including travel in groups, was not possible according to social distancing measures. Such prevented students from exploring fieldwork in Thailand and in neighboring countries also due to border crossing restrictions. Fresh graduates, enrolled students, including current students and those who had not finished their studies, and prospective students were affected by the unprecedented pandemic. The rapid switch to the subsequent online education impacted study goal achievement, knowledge construction, and networking.

Objective of Development Studies

The core development goal of development studies is to improve the life quality of people (OECD, 2018). Following this goal, development studies concerns itself with analyzing and understanding the processes of social change including economic, political and cultural, and applies different planning and management of approaches for development interventions for a just and equal world (Singh, 2010). To achieve these objectives, it requires theories that understand and are related to multifaceted developments and practices adapted from theories in specific communities for scrutinizing and intervening

complexity of development issues (Cooper et al., 2010; Martin & Hughes, 2009; Sims, 2018). As such, the two main components of study are theory and practice. When web-browsing course catalogues of development studies programs elsewhere, including in Thailand, many universities offer Development Theory and Practice courses or modules as a compulsory course, which means they are critically important for graduate qualifications and serve the core objectives of development studies.

In contrast, the better half of development studies goals and vital learning objectives are to ensure that students earn and learn from hands-on experience in local communities or areas with development problems. The results clearly demonstrate that doing fieldwork is important to students. This is because it leads to comprehensive understanding and potential solutions to development issues. Today, development studies focus on collective learning and posits that development problems engages a combination of analytical perspectives in line with the multiple dimensions of explanation, methodology, epistemology, interest articulation, imagination, and policy mobilization (Pieterse, 2010). The complexity of development studies requires trans-disciplinary approaches from different knowledge holders (Pieterse, 2010; Basile & Baud, 2019). This development paradigm has urged learners to be directly in contact with the studied communities. The production of knowledge concerns the development process and research varying according to influential actors, the development scene, the degree of recognition of knowledge in different locations, and interests of organizations (Basile & Baud, 2019). The importance of understanding development locations and actors plays an important role in attracting international students to join development studies programs in Thailand. Thailand's geographical setting is an asset and many programs advertise their courses highlighting the advantages of Thailand's location as a door to other developing countries.

The way to achieve program objectives is, simple but effective, practice in the real field. As the learning theory of cognitivism explained, the learning process comes from self-development and adaption (Bandura, 2001). In addition, constructivists support new knowledge construction from the experience of an individual interacting with others and picking up skills outside the classroom (CEI, 2021; Major, 2015; Papert, 1993). Both cognitivism and constructivism are positive for students' practice to gain real experience to obtain and construct knowledge. During the pandemic, practice in

development projects became close to legally impossible due to government measures of lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing. These all imply the geographical setting of Thailand is temporarily not an asset. On top of this, the virtual classroom does not work well as various technical devices are required i.e., computer, Internet, and camera. Numerous communities with development issues are located in remote areas with a lack of electricity, Wi-Fi, or digital devices. This confirms the unequal development between urban and rural areas, which is aggravated by the digital divide and socioeconomic factors. Regrettably, it would seem to many that online learning is not compatible with and inadequate to fulfill the objectives for the practice of development studies.

Knowledge Construction

The use of online learning is a replacement for traditional learning in times of disruption. In so doing in the field of development studies, it affects the goals and proper methods of delivering learning. Regarding the personal background of the respondents, most of them had prior working experience and their goal was clear that their study would enhance their knowledge and skill to advance in fields of (international) development. The students expected to have hands-on experience in the fieldwork to understand development issues. Apart from the goals and competency of development studies via online learning that students voiced, the great concerns of online learning also appeared as the lack of knowledge construction based on theory of being, that is, ontology. The elaboration of online learning has influenced knowledge construction as relates to pedagogy and learning outcomes. For learning methods, the ontological problem persists because of the likelihood of less discussion via technological platforms. Answers from participants identified it as affecting the extent and quality of knowledge construction. As regards digital tools and platforms for online learning, they do not yet serve the learning of development studies well.

The absence of onsite classroom has proven a drawback in power relations. Trowler (2005) pointed out that at the meso level, impacts on learning include micro-politics and organizational context. Subjectivities and power relations manifest themselves through micro-politics, while the institutional context, in its cultural and resource dimensions, appears in the organizational context where these impinge on learning (Trowler, 2005). Power-relations in the classroom cover various forms of power, i.e., making people do things they do not want to in the

changing circumstances such as online workgroups or turning on a camera in a place where people are uncomfortable. The adoption of online learning and its design might not best serve pedagogical practices well (Teräs et al., 2020), and risks encountering power domination (Trowler, 2005), privacy violations and surveillance (Oldekop et al., 2020). However, the domination of power between teacher and students is adjustable. Power relations in the online classroom can be minimized to overcome oppressions by empowering pedagogy in which the power from the teacher is transferred to the students being open to students' questions (Šribar, 2020). The degree of effectiveness of online classes varies according to the amount of interaction, the quality of the learning environment, decent online platform function, attention of students, expertise and ability of instructors (Pelz, 2010; Shenoy et al., 2020; Smith & Kaya, 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). The effective online classroom entails academic, technical, guidance, social, and organizational function (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2021).

Apart from pedagogical challenges, the learning outcomes of development studies are critical to online learning. The expansion of epistemology and ontology is required where changing knowledge can be acquired through multiple actors bringing about new research approaches (Basile & Baud, 2019). Interacting with communities directly facilitates the methodology for development studies as it allows one to scrutinize power relations and hidden agenda for development knowledge construction through the participation and individual reflexivity of communities as well as a critical perspective from researchers (Chambers, 2019). The shift from lecturing halls with more energetic discussion, extra activities and fieldwork to conducting the study space on a digital platform causes obstacles to constructing knowledge in development and subsequently influences the achievement of learning outcomes for development studies

Networking and Potential Opportunities

The design of a curriculum covers the key concept of development theory and perspective, activities, and potential networking for students to strengthen their skills and opportunities in the fields they are interested through the invitation of expert speakers, internships, NGOS and related development organization visits, and fieldwork. The curriculum plays a major role for paving the career path for students. Such a curriculum design helps create qualified graduates that can contribute to society and

consolidate a program reputation for both alumni and graduate users. Another key finding reflects students' opinion that online learning at a time of disruption reduces the opportunity of building up social relations among peers, teachers, and potential colleagues. Social network is social capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Putnam, 2000). As the majority of respondents have work experience and expect to work in the areas of development, social networks and opportunities linked to career path are vital. The suspension of networking related activities has caused students greater disappointment as this implies fewer opportunities of interdependencies with those who might be able to support their careers. Accessibility to social networks is gained from interacting, exchanging, and building trust with those in the groups, where the members in the networks benefit. To bring students together in an actual classroom and outside lecture halls is equal to helping students associate and build trust with peers, scholars as well as potential stakeholders in development fields that can be advantageous for their career path in the future. Unfortunately, online learning does not adequately provide this function. Online learning changes pedagogical and interacting practice and the nature of the constructed social world. It also ruins expectations of students towards learning, where they can interact with the professor and practitioners leading to a career path.

Finally, the change to online learning aggravates socioeconomic inequality and the digital divide. As students come from different countries, resources, capacity, and accessibility to the internet vary. Nearly half of respondents received scholarships based on their outstanding academic performances and this matches with scholarship criteria, for example, coming from ASEAN countries or more specifically from countries that face critical development problems. A number of students survive on budget scholarships. When disruption occurs, it creates problems for the students. With limited budget and internet accessibility, some students cannot afford the extra costs of state quarantine accommodation, have difficulty registering, enquiring about the program and finances as well as participating in lessons online from their home country. Although in case the program can distribute good quality online lectures or extra lessons, online learning requires more systematic support with the apparent development problems based on the socioeconomic, digital divide, and global north-south inequality challenges.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The rapid transition from traditional lecture rooms, fieldwork, and onsite internships to online learning is a new phenomenon for development studies. The pandemic reduced the geographical advantage of Southeast Asia as a hub that is suitable for taking courses of development studies due to encountering lockdowns and limited mobility. This paper fills the lack in literature for understanding of impacts on online learning in development studies at a time of disruption by hearing from students. The pandemic forced students to encounter online teaching without any chance to negotiate or study unanticipated outcomes. The paper offers new insights of international students' voices and analysis towards online learning for development studies linking with the nature of development disciplines from both changing pedagogy and fieldwork restrictions, the decrease of opportunities from social networks and the emergence of socioeconomic inequality. The findings in the time of the new normal era highlight consequences of online teaching quickly applying to development studies and serve as inputs to plan future pedagogy for development studies. Disappointments were clearly expressed in the interviews of students in or partially in the program during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online learning impacted the objective of development studies, ontological effectiveness, establishment of social networks, and increase in inequality. Interacting in real communities enables one to see, observe, examine, and develop relations to gain deep information beyond the sensory, of which an online camera can provide. Engagement is a crucial factor for people in the development studies field to tackle the complexity of development studies and to allow one to work in collaboration with other stakeholders. Engagement with the real community is key to exploring solutions of complex development problems and to collaborate with various actors leading to new research approaches (Basile & Baud, 2019). Exploration of local communities with development problems is at the core of learning development studies especially in regards to expanding to other understudied areas. Such expansion of development studies to different parts of the world enables the widespread ontological construction in light of theory, methodology, and knowledge. This enables learners to expand their studies to different locations. A number of countries in Asia have their own development paths and encounter development issues such as poverty, inequality, human rights, climate change and so on; this can be a good opportunity for them to learn from and solve such challenges.

Although online learning can fix and continue learning quickly, at the same time it creates great challenges for development studies. The need for the uptake of online learning for some disciplines including development studies during disruption such as the COVID-19 period is understandable, but it is not feasible to replace all aspects with online learning especially internships and fieldwork study. For development studies, online learning could be used interchangeably with lectures or some webinars, where lecturers are unable to travel far and explore for specific periods of time. The nature of development studies to allow students to engage and learn from local communities should be maintained to let them perceive and learn views from insiders so as to come up with sound solutions for development. However, the technologies should be regarded not only as a way to deliver information and assessment, but add on the critical function to drive successful learning, for example being more innovative and engaging (Teräs et al., 2020). This implies that online learning should not only be limited to textual files, capturing videos, web links and making it available online. Rather, online learning should provide a participatory learning environment and support collaborative knowledge construction (Teräs et al., 2020). This is to ensure all possible functions of digital learning platforms are used in partnership with the adaptation of the learning techniques of teachers while also tapping into the participation and engagement of students as best possible. Moreover, make-up classes, extra-activities and fieldwork should be provided to students later to reach the goal and knowledge construction of development studies. For those who have already graduated, opportunities for social network building such as workshops, conferences, and public lectures should be offered to affected alumni. These can be substituted for some subjects or contents of development studies at times of disruption.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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