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THE GLOBAL SOLIDARITY CRISIS

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Opportunities and Challenges of Virtual Learning for Multicultural Education

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Abstract

This paper aims to reconsider the relationship between virtual learning and multicultural education. The traditional view assumes that virtual learning is counterproductive to multicultural education. This paper shows that virtual learning also can accommodate the goals that multicultural education is going to achieve. In other words, virtual learning is compatible with the goals of multicultural education. However, despite its compatibility with multicultural education, virtual learning offers both opportunities and challenges we need to bear in mind when we are going to apply it.

Keywords: virtual learning, multicultural education, technophilosophy.

Introduction

The pandemic has proven to have changed the fabric of human life around the world. To reduce the rate of transmission, humans are suddenly forced to stay at home. It affects many sectors of life. People who originally worked in the office, once the pandemic came, had to work from home. Likewise, learning activities, which are usually carried out at schools or campuses, suddenly have to be moved to be carried out in the homes of each student. They are natural urges that force humans to adapt to new ways and new environments. In this context, we are witnessing a social change caused by the environment.

One sector that has been hardest hit by the social changes caused by this pandemic is the education sector. The school or campus must return all students and teachers to their respective homes but at the same time must continue to carry out learning activities. Communication technology provides a solution to that problem. Finally, all learning activities, from elementary to tertiary levels, are carried out online from their homes with the help of technology. For virtual face-to-face learning activities, several platforms are used, such as Zoom, Google Meet, and WebEx. For asynchronous learning, learning activities are usually carried out using platforms such as Google Classroom or messaging applications such as WhatsApp. All such learning activities are referred to as online learning.

Online learning certainly produces a different experience from offline learning. However, it has been able to help learning activities continue during the pandemic. One of the online learning models that is quite close to the offline learning model is virtual learning using videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom and so on. Although it is not exactly the same as offline learning which allows for direct touch and face to face interaction, thanks to technological developments, virtual learning in the future may also be able to provide the same

experience as offline learning. However, before that can be realized, we now need to think about the opportunities and challenges of virtual learning models, especially in the context of multicultural education.

Why does multicultural education currently need special attention? There are at least two reasons. First, multicultural education, especially in the context of Indonesian society consisting of various ethnicities, is urgently needed to reduce horizontal conflicts. Second, multicultural education is often assumed to require face-to-face meetings with people from various backgrounds, while virtual learning is carried out without involving face-to-face meetings. For these two reasons, several important questions arise: is it possible for multicultural education to be implemented through virtual learning? If possible, what are the opportunities and challenges? These two questions will be pondered on this occasion.

Virtual Learning and Multicultural Education

At first glance, virtual learning does seem counterproductive to multicultural education. Referring to Banks (1995), one dimension of multicultural education is prejudice reduction. This requires a process in which students are directly involved with other friends who come from various backgrounds. In other words, to fulfil this dimension, multicultural education requires face-to-face meetings. Virtual learning, on the other hand, makes the meeting just happens virtually. Each student does not feel direct interaction with his friends in the real world. Therefore, virtual learning can be considered unable to fulfil one of the dimensions of multicultural education.

However, is it true? Before answering this question, we need to reflect on what the opportunities and challenges of virtual learning are for multicultural education. There are at least three opportunities provided by virtual learning for the improvement of multicultural education. First, virtual learning can be more open and reach more people from diverse backgrounds than conventional learning. Conventional learning that is not mediated by virtual communication technology tends to be limited to people around the school. Schools located in area A, for example, tend to be attended only by children who do live in area A. However, through virtual communication technology that can fold the distance, virtual learning can be accessed by anyone from all over the world. Students living in the interior of Africa can be in the same class as other students living in remote areas of Java. Thus, virtual learning allows a high degree of student diversity.

Second, virtual learning allows teachers to explore richer material. Given the high level of diversity of students involved in virtual learning, the material that can be developed will also be more diverse. In conventional learning, the materials tend to only relate to local culture or perhaps national culture. However, through virtual learning, the materials studied can cover cultures from faraway places. Students will learn something that may seem foreign or even completely unthinkable. Thus, multicultural education does not only take place in a national context but also in a global context. This is very useful for reducing xenophobia.

Third, virtual learning is also more accessible to groups with disabilities or special needs than conventional learning. Diffable groups are groups that are often overlooked in education policy. Through virtual learning, they can have the same access as others to learning activities. People who cannot leave the house or need special assistance to get out of the house find it difficult when they have to follow the conventional learning process. Virtual learning gives them the same opportunity to be able to participate in learning activities without encountering difficulties. Thus, virtual learning is not only open to cultural diversity but also to the diversity of student conditions. This will help students to understand what their friends who have special conditions really want.

The three opportunities offered by virtual learning are certainly very good for the development of multicultural education. However, despite these opportunities, virtual learning also has a number of challenges (Murgatrotd, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). First, the challenge of accessibility. The main infrastructure needed by virtual learning is gadgets and internet connection. In addition to the price of gadgets which are still relatively expensive, internet connections are also not evenly distributed in all regions. Some areas are not covered by an internet connection at all. This should be the responsibility of the government to intervene in the price of gadgets for students and ensure that all areas are covered by internet connections.

Second, conduciveness during learning activities. Not all students have a special room that is supportive and conducive to participating in the virtual learning process. Some students have to take part in the virtual learning process in places that are not at all conducive and do not support an optimal learning process. This issue is a challenge for the development of virtual learning for multicultural education. The root of this problem is economic inequality. Thus, this is actually also a lawsuit against multicultural education itself: that multicultural education cannot be implemented optimally before the problem of economic inequality is first resolved. Again, this is the government's job.

Third, time zone differences. This is the natural challenge of virtual learning. It is the case that virtual learning is accessible to all students no matter where they live. However, the difference in residence causes the time zone difference. Different time zones cause different activity patterns. While in one place it is 7 am, for example, in another it can be 1 pm or it may be 1 am. Students who live in the first place can follow the lesson to the maximum because it is still fresh; while students who live in the second place cannot follow the lesson optimally because they are tired and it is time to rest. This natural challenge is difficult to overcome except by adjusting activity patterns. However, as a result, students who are forced to adjust their activities to the virtual learning schedule will be alienated from their own surroundings. When people in the surrounding environment are active and socializing, he has to take a break because when people rest, he has to take virtual learning instead.

The existence of these three opportunities and at the same time three challenges should not necessarily make us accept or reject virtual learning. Before applying it to the development

of multicultural education, we should first consider what needs to be taken for granted and what still needs further exploration. Having considered the opportunities and challenges of virtual learning for multicultural education, we will consider virtual learning in general from a philosophical point of view.

Virtual Learning from Technophilosophy's Point of View

In general, virtual learning is often considered unable to match conventional learning without the mediation of communication technology. Virtual learning is considered to only be able to provide a virtual experience that is not real at all. Such a view is based on the assumptions about the distinction between virtual and real. It's as if what's virtual isn't real. However, is it true? The techno-philosophy perspective refutes this assumption

What is technophilosophy? Philosophy of technology is a new field in philosophy proposed by David Chalmers (2022) which is different from the technophilosophy. Philosophy of technology is a branch of philosophy that seeks to answer philosophical questions about technology, such as what is the nature of technology, what is the relationship between technology and humans, and so on. Technophilosophy, in addition to trying to answer philosophical questions about technology as the philosophy of technology, also tries to answer traditional philosophical questions by using technology. For example, the question of the existence of external reality can be answered by reflecting on the latest technological developments such as computer simulation (Chalmers, 2022).

The virtual world, a world completely mediated by virtual communication technology, is not a different world from the real world. The virtual world, according to Chalmers (2022), is as real as the natural world in everyday life. It is formed by computer bits that are not illusions but do exist independently of the human mind. Chalmers talks about this in the context of virtual technologies such as video games which are completely based on bits. Virtual learning is different from video games. It is not only based on bits of information but is also based on the presence of a person at a great distance. That is, if video games are real, virtual learning is even more real. What we see virtually in virtual learning is really the same as in the real world.

Thus, encounters in virtual learning cannot be considered mere pseudo-encounters. It is also an authentic encounter as an encounter that occurs in a non-virtual world. Some people think that virtual encounters are not authentic because in virtual encounters one can pretend. However, if in a virtual encounter one can pretend, then in a non-virtual encounter one can do the same. If in a virtual encounter a person can lie, then in a non-virtual encounter he can too. Some people may also think that virtual encounters are only possible for a short time, while non-virtual encounters occur for a long time. However, it is only a matter of technological devices. In the future, there may be virtual communication technology devices that are comfortable to use for a long time. We can interact virtually with our friends, for example, for 24 hours in a

virtual environment. As in non-virtual interactions, there we can also have shared experiences with our friends to get to know each other.

Thus, along with the development of digital communication technology, multicultural education through virtual learning is something that is promising. However, we also need to keep in mind the challenges of virtual learning such as accessibility and conduciveness. These two things must be our main concern, especially the government so that the virtual learning opportunities provided for multicultural education can be realized to the fullest.

Conclusion

Virtual learning seems counterproductive to the goals of multicultural education. However, from a technological philosophy perspective, virtual learning can also accommodate multicultural education goals such as prejudice reduction because, like conventional learning, virtual learning also allows for authentic human-to-human encounters. However, regardless of whether virtual learning is counterproductive to multicultural education or not, virtual learning itself still has opportunities as well as challenges. Our next task is to anticipate the challenges well in order to maximize the opportunities.

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