The devil's advocate role in asynchronous online discussions: Asian region undergraduate perspectives

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Responding to the need for learning to remain engaging and productive while classrooms have moved online, a qualitative study was conducted to gain greater insight into the use of asynchronous online discussions as a replacement for their in-class counterpart. Specifically, the researchers aimed to gauge student responses to their use of the devil's advocate role and its learner-centred and potentially confrontational processes in a region where such practices might be contrary to traditional educational values. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were undertaken with fourteen students from a university study program conducted in English. Results of a thematic analysis indicate that asynchronous online discussions and the devil's advocate role can be successfully adopted amongst such students, though attention should be paid to some design considerations. This study adds to the current literature by investigating a yet understudied discussion facilitation role and its interaction with cultural values and is useful for those designing online courses in Asian region contexts.

Introduction

Current global conditions have placed an increased demand on institutions to deliver effective online learning procedures as students and teachers have been moved from their classrooms into online spaces. This unanticipated social distancing has raised concerns about interactivity, engagement, and motivation (Blackley, et al. 2021; Chiu, Lin & Lonka, 2021) as the necessity for class communication to be interactive and engaging remains vital to learning processes (Andresen, 2009; Kent, Laslo & Rafaeli, 2016).

Asynchronous online discussions (AODs) have long been considered a potential alternative to in-class discussions in which students engage with each other and course content to contribute, question and construct knowledge (Palenque & DeCosta, 2015). Despite the potential benefits of AODs for learning and critical thinking, research into this area is yet underdeveloped and inconsistent or inconclusive. The literature does conclude that AODs are only effective when they are well planned and structured (Warren, 2018). To this end, the devil's advocate role (DAR) provides a practical discussion facilitation technique.

DAR is a role in which a discussion participant puts forward a contrary position and supports it with arguments so as to make other participants think more deeply about their own opinions (Walker, 2004). Although several benefits are associated with it (Warren, 2018), further research is warranted to extend the literature on using DAR within asynchronous online discussions. Furthermore, as the function of the role operates through an antagonistic process, very little is known as to the viability of its adoption within cultures which traditionally do not see conflict as a productive element in the learning environment (Lim, Cheung & Hew, 2011).

Literature review

Since Dewey, educators have recognised the importance of providing students with activities to test new concepts themselves, and thereby make their own connections with knowledge (Palenque & DeCosta, 2015). Vygotsky expanded on this by arguing that cognitive functions are a product of interaction with others (Kent, Laslo & Rafaeli, 2016). Interactivity, therefore, is essential to teaching and learning (Kent, Laslo & Rafaeli, 2016; Zhu, 2006), though might easily be missed in the online experience.

Online discussions can provide such an interactive medium for students to read, respond to and question each other's postings (Lin, Hong & Lawrenz, 2012). In theory, they provide the equivalent function to their in-class counterpart (Palenque & DeCosta, 2015). As participants process the output of others, their own understanding becomes organised according to a shared model. This in turn makes their forthcoming output more easily understood, thereby reducing cognitive load, and increasing learning in a process of collaborative knowledge construction (Kent, Laslo & Rafaeli, 2016; Schellens & Valcke, 2005; Stein et al., 2007). For discussions to continue and to derive consensus, participants must justify their own posts and evaluate others' by summarising and integrating content knowledge (Lin, Hong & Lawrenz, 2012; Palenque & DeCosta, 2015; Zhu, 2006). In addition to knowledge construction, research has also demonstrated that engagement in this process can develop critical thinking skills (Jonassen, 2001 in Chiu, 2009). Such shared learning experiences can also increase confidence and motivation when studying online (Stein, et al., 2007).

The asynchronicity of AODs allows students time to compose their own posts and reflect on posts by others, and to this end, AODs possess increased potential for in-depth and critical argumentation and reflection (Kent, Laslo & Rafaeli, 2016; Lim, Cheung & Hew, 2011; Lin, Hong & Lawrenz, 2012; Palenque & DeCosta, 2015). The extra time also allows participants to access additional information to contribute to the discussion (Chang, Lin & Tsai, 2013; Lin, Hong & Lawrenz, 2012). Merryfield (2001) observed that participants in AODs were more willing to discuss sensitive issues than when in face-to-face settings. In online spaces, students are more likely to initiate discussions (Piburn & Middleton, in Davidson-Shivers, Muilenburg & Tanner, 2001) leading them to be more student-centric (Chang, Lin & Tsai, 2013; Kent, Laslo & Rafaeli, 2016). The text-based medium of AODs enables students to compose more complex sentences, allowing them to express deeper ideas and to be more reflective (Davidson-Shivers, Muilenburg & Tanner, 2001). It also allows students to integrate and build upon others' ideas more easily, bringing about "a higher flow of communication and inference" (Kent, Laslo & Rafaeli, 2016, p. 117). Furthermore, the textual medium acts as its own transcript which can be reviewed after the discussion is finished (Andresen, 2009).

Despite the potential of AODs for learning and critical thinking, research into this area is yet underdeveloped, inconsistent, or inconclusive. Some researchers have reported positive outcomes from AODs, including engagement and higher forms of knowledge construction (Schellens & Valcke, 2006; Zhu, 2006), and authentic language use (Chang,

Lin & Tsai, 2013, Swan & Shea, 2005 in Warren, 2018). Still others though, have reported that discussions were often composed of statements that lacked justification, explanation, or further exploration (Kent, Laslo & Rafaeli, 2016; Lim, Cheung & Hew, 2011; Warren, 2018; Wise, Saghafian & Padmanabhan, 2012), that they had not met their potential for higher knowledge construction (Lander, 2015), and that sometimes they were not engaging (Lander, 2015). As Wise, Saghafian and Padmanabhan (2012) stated, "it is clear that simply putting students together in an online discussion forum does not necessarily lead to learning" (p. 56).

The inconclusive state of current research indicates that online discussions of themselves are not enough to bring about the critical and reflective discussions required for deeper, collaborative learning. Kent, Laslo and Rafaeli (2016) advised that online discussions need to be structured for there to be a relation between interactivity and learning. On the other hand, if discussions are structured too tightly, the freedom and independence required for higher types of cognitive processing might be lost (Schellens & Valcke, 2006). Another way to encourage discussion is to provide participants with strategies that assist them in furthering their discussion past the initial phase of general statements (Schellens & Valcke, 2005). A promising strategy found in the literature is the use of effective questioning (Palenque & DeCosta, 2015) such as the use of the Socratic strategies of challenging and probing (Walker, 2004). Assigning roles to discussion participants to encourage such questioning could generate positive engagement amongst students (Warren, 2018; Wise, Saghafian & Padmanabhan, 2012). One such role found to be particularly useful (Aloni & Harrington, 2018), and that chosen for the focus of this study is the *devil's advocate role* (DAR).

The term "devil's advocate" was initially used by the Catholic Church in the 16th century to designate the position of opposition towards a candidate's potential canonisation. The idea was that if one could withstand a formal interrogation then they truly deserved to be a saint (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2020). The predecessors of DAR, however, date back to Plato's narrative accounts of Socrates confronting the views of Athenian society members. Instead of defending a particular position, Socrates would elicit a definition from his interlocutor and proceed to question their propositions with the effect being the eventual refutation of the interlocutor's original position (Giuseffi, 2021). For Aristotle, the dialectical process served to increase knowledge by arriving at a consensus through mutual acceptance of premises and justifications. Although this process often aims to dismantle an argument, "if we have subjected our opinions (and the opinions of our fellows, and of the wise) to a thorough refutative examination, we will be in a much better position to judge what is most likely true and false" (Smith, 2020).

The devil's advocate role as commonly used today is one in which a contrary position is put forward and supported with arguments to make other participants think more deeply about their own opinions. One key aspect of this role is that the devil's advocate need not actually believe the position they are advocating for it to be a successful discussion facilitation strategy. When DAR is used, it prompts other participants to "develop, defend and support" their own positions (Walker, 2004, p. 181). It can also assist in developing a learner-centred online classroom by giving participants control of the discussion (Warren,

2018). By enabling participants to enact a role that would usually be outside the norms of civil communication, such as to challenge and disagree, more critical levels of discussion can be reached (Warren, 2018). Additionally, the role allows participants to distance themselves from claims and look at them more objectively (Warren, 2018).

While DAR could be an effective tool for facilitating discussions, some precautions should be taken when adopting it in certain cultural contexts. While the authors view culture as a phenomenon created at different levels, including the possibility for new practices specific to individual groups to arise through shared experiences, it is important to note that in some cases student attitudes and perceptions are influenced by deeply rooted cultural inclinations. These attitudes and perceptions add an extra level of complexity when moving traditional learning approaches into the online environment (Olaniran, 2009). In many Asian classrooms, for example, challenge and conflict is not always deemed productive (Lim, Cheung & Hew, 2011). In such conflict-avoidance cultures, DAR may not be used willingly or correctly (Lim, Cheung & Hew, 2011; Lin, Hong & Lawrenz, 2012).

The traditional learning paradigm in Asian region classrooms involves teachers in control of the learning process and students in a passive role of knowledge recipients (Hallinger & Lu, 2013). As participants are required to advance online discussions without direction from the instructor, some students may feel too uncomfortable or lack the required communicative strategies to take on that responsibility and initiative (Morse, 2003). This has been the case in China where students have reacted with uncertainty to online discussions in which teachers were not involved (Chou & Chen, 2010; Kang & Chang, 2016; Zhang, 2013).

Additionally, these students might not be accustomed to the approaches towards critical thinking fostered by online discussions and may feel hesitant to disclose their own perspectives to others (Chiu, 2009). This may be, in part, due to the emphasis placed on the "social harmony, reverence for teachers' authority and avoidance of conflict" seen in traditional classrooms (Chiu, 2009, p. 43) and may lead such students to be unfamiliar with the role of disagreement, confounded by a language capacity in which they do not have the skills in a second language to express disagreement in socially acceptable ways (Chiu, 2009). Such students may experience negative emotions at having their posts challenged in online discussions and be too uncomfortable to challenge their peers (Chiu, 2009). This might lead Asian region students to exhibit non-confrontational communication strategies in online discussions (Chou & Chen, 2010) such as being "less critical and opinionated" (Kang & Chang, 2016, p. 787), and tending to put forward only acceptable responses so as to minimise strong debate (Zhang, 2013).

Despite these concerns, there have also been positive results from introducing these practices into such contexts. Morse (2003) reported that a strong majority of participants considered their online discussion to have considerably increased the quality of their learning. Others report that online discussions increased the engagement of students who usually did not contribute (Chiu, 2009; Kang & Chang, 2016; Zhang, 2013) and that the additional time to study others' responses was appreciated (Morse, 2003). Other students

found it easier to express their own views in AODs (Zhang, 2013). In fact, most of the literature is optimistic that Asian region students can, are willing to, and can benefit from the adoption of AODs (Morse, 2003; Zhang, 2013). Kang and Chang (2016) even asserted that the increased learner autonomy and opportunity for expression away from the traditional knowledge hierarchy was particularly welcomed by students. However, very little has been reported of participant perspectives of using DAR in these contexts. In the one instance it was reported, a participant whose position was challenged felt offended and withdrew from further participation (Lim, Cheung & Hew, 2011). It should be noted that in this instance training in the use of DAR was not provided. In this regard, it is important that students are trained to see DAR as a tactic to further discussion, and not as a move to express a definitive opinion (Lim, Cheung & Hew, 2011). It is also important that the participants have the communicative strategies required to distance themselves from the position they put forward (Warren, 2018). With proper implementation of DAR, a classroom culture could develop in which mutual exploration of differing perspectives is constructive.

Within this literature, research focusing on the introduction of DAR within the Asian region is minimal. To this end, the researchers sought to understand this issue from the perspectives of those most at stake. Thus, further research into this issue is both important and warranted.

To investigate this, the following questions were posed to guide the research process:

1. How will students respond to the use of asynchronous online discussions in place of face-to-face discussions?
2. How will students respond to the introduction of DAR in online discussions in terms of their engagement in knowledge construction and critical thinking?
3. How will students respond to the adoption of DAR in online discussions in terms of their cultural context?

Method

To gain a deeper understanding of students' perspectives of DAR as a practical and engaging activity in an online format, the researchers employed a qualitative approach consisting of a thematic analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews. The benefit of this approach is that it allows themes and concepts to emerge as meaningful data which have not been imposed by specific items on a questionnaire (Lamerichs & Te Molder, 2003). In addition, while numerous studies focus on a direct content analysis of the online discussion itself, there remains a gap in research which seeks to evaluate students' perspectives after having participated in the activity. Such qualitative data, obtained from interviews for example, is required in developing a comprehensive understanding of these activities (Charalampidi & Hammond, 2016). An internal analysis of the content of an online discussion may certainly yield results showing the efficacy of a well-designed and structured activity. This information however does not reach into the students' lived experience of the process. What is needed is an approach to gain understanding of their

experience that can inform the implementation of an engaged, student-oriented online class environment. When students are taking on potentially unfamiliar roles, there is much value in listening to their perspectives (Warren, 2018, p. 28). The researchers therefore employed the following method.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants from Khon Kaen University International College. At the time of data collection (March 2021) all courses were conducted online to comply with lockdown measures. Full-time students ranging from first to fourth year and enrolled in the Communication Arts major were emailed an invitation to participate in the present study which was held separate from their regular graded courses. Along with being informed of the study, they were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that their information would be kept confidential. The only selection criteria were being over the age of 18 and currently enrolled as students. When fourteen people had accepted the invitation, the selection process was concluded (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Among the fourteen who accepted, only one did not complete the interview process after withdrawing of their own volition. Of the remaining thirteen, there were six males and seven females between the ages of 18 and 24. Compensation for their time of 300 Thai Baht (roughly $10 US) was offered to those who completed the research procedures.

Procedure

Once the participants were established, the researchers held a real time *Zoom* meeting in which they presented DAR as a discussion strategy, and students were given some guided practice and a take-home guide sheet for using DAR (Appendix 1). Additional instruction was given in successful participation in asynchronous online discussions. After the lesson, the participants were randomly assigned to two groups of seven people each, allowing for two separate discussions to occur simultaneously using two different group threads. As groups, the participants chose from a list of topics for the first discussion (Appendix 2). The researchers had previously selected several general yet thought-provoking topics that would not require extensive prior knowledge. Within each group, half were assigned the role of "Devils" and half "Angels" and instructed to engage in an asynchronous online discussion using DAR in accordance with their assigned roles. The Angels were to initiate the discussion and the Devils were to invoke DAR to question and counter the Angels' arguments. Additional instructions included making at least one post per day, using conversational language, limiting ideas to one per comment, and responding directly to the ideas in others' posts. These discussions were held through the familiar and accessible *Facebook Messenger* application. After four days, the participants were asked to summarise or conclude their discussion, then switch roles and start a new discussion with a new topic. Four days were allotted to the second discussion as well.

Upon completion of the discussions, individual interviews of approximately 45 minutes each were conducted entirely in English via *Zoom* during which effort was made to ensure students felt comfortable in expressing their perceptions of the activity. While an

interview guide of open-ended questions was followed (Appendix 3), further questions and clarifications were made to delve deeper into student comments. The questions sought student perspectives of the experience or comparisons between this experience and prior in-class discussions. Video recordings of the interviews were made and from these, transcriptions of the interviews were prepared, and English pseudonyms indicating gender were assigned. When appropriate, minor changes were made to quotations to improve readability. The research design called for a thematic analysis of the data offering a valid interpretive approach to investigate the students' perspectives in the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2012). A preliminary exploratory analysis provided a general sense of the data before codes were assigned and aggregated. Themes were then identified based on prevalence mentioned, novelty in relation to current literature, and relevance to the research questions (Creswell, 2019).

Interpretation

Five themes relating to the research questions emerged from the interview data.

Comparative perceptions of online versus in class discussions

This theme represents the students' perceptions of the asynchronous online discussion as compared to their prior experiences of discussions in face-to-face classrooms. In the interview, students were asked to reflect on and describe their experience of the online discussion and where appropriate, were asked to compare that to similar aspects of face-to-face discussions.

Asynchronicity
This sub-theme relates to the students' perceptions of being able to post comments at times of their choosing. Many students brought up positive benefits of the additional time allowed in AODs.

> Augustus: There was one time actually that I was thinking in the evening, and I couldn't think of any points, so I decided just to sleep, and it came to my head in the next morning.

> Lilith: Face to face, I need to answer it suddenly and I don't have time to think. Online, I can edit it, I can rewrite it again.

Several students also appreciated having the time to do research. On the other hand, asynchronicity was often put forward as a possible cause for decline in discussion activity.

> Sylvia: We were all making comments at the different times we were free, and this made it difficult to discuss together.

> Gavin: We didn't have to put much effort into our discussion because we could just comment anytime and for the time being we already forgot about it.

Additionally, when asked for their suggestions on improving the activity, several students suggested that the time allowed for the discussion might be somehow condensed.

Online, textual medium
This sub-theme relates to student perceptions of the discussions being in written form. The following comments are representative of the perceived strengths of the online, textual medium, namely that it allowed for greater comprehension.

> Jeffrey: People tried to fix their grammar and vocabulary before they put the comments in and that's a good thing because it helped others to understand exactly what they are trying to say.

> Winfred: When we are doing it online, we have the time to think about what words we are going to use, but in class, if we are not ready, we have to improvise... I think improvising can cause a little bit of miscommunication.

On the other hand, a perceived weakness was the lack of visual and emotional cues, and energetic dynamics.

> Zelda: Online, we cannot see the real emotion… I mean, we can only see the alphabet in the chat, so for me, I can't think about the real emotion or the real information of others.

> Rhea: In onsite discussion, you're getting my attention because as you're speaking there's emotion or maybe you're moving your hands or your eye contact, whereas in texting, there's the words and of course the words have emotions in some ways but when you look at it from afar it's just like words, lots of words, lots more words.

Contrary to this though, Augustus saw a possible benefit of having a less emotional discussion, saying:

> Augustus: When it's online, you can't really see the expression of the opponent, so it kind of cools down a little bit. There's no emotion in the heart because sometimes when I see people debate, there's someone who starts getting angry and it gets a little bit harder face to face.

Engagement in the discussions

This theme represents the students self-perceived engagement with the activity across four sub-themes that were either asked about during the interview or rose naturally from it.

Overall enjoyment of the process and the challenge
Overall, it seemed that students enjoyed the activity. Lilith said she thought "it was fun because I like to discuss with people" and Zelda said, "it was kind of fun and it helped me to use my brain a lot." Drew mentioned that "the process of thinking how to respond was also an insightful experience for me."

Research

This sub-theme arose from responses mentioning the motivation to partake in additional research on the topic to defend a position or to better understand an opposing viewpoint.

> Dorothy: I really enjoyed talking about the topic, so I researched… and I enjoyed researching so I could know what I would reply.

> Augustus: While you expect what the answer should be, there's new answers so you have to learn from those answers, and you have to do some research and it will introduce you to a whole new world.

Engagement with others and other perspectives

In general, most students found engagement with the other participants and their perspectives to be a positive experience.

> Sylvia: I feel it was good because I could see many different opinions and views.

> Jeffrey: It wasn't just seeing others' ideas on something, but it was to see who they are. By having them expose their ideas, we can get to see their characteristics and interests.

Decline in engagement

Having noticed a marked decline in engagement in the online discussions after the first few days, students were asked to provide their perspectives on possible reasons for this. Some, as discussed above, attributed this to asynchronicity. Others, like Augustus, attributed it to social loafing and laziness: "If one person decides to not type or be less active, I think people feel like they can do that too. If one person can, then it becomes like a chain reaction". Others attributed it to the textual medium:

> Michael: It's quite boring when we have to type... it doesn't have the feeling ... and we have to think and write again, but if we can talk together, we think first and then speak. We don't have to rethink again.

> Rhea: If I'm texting, I like to think about my words more, like maybe I should change the word, maybe I should delete it, maybe I should unsend it, maybe I should send a link or something, and I'm like nah, don't say anything at all.

Productive learning outcomes

In response to questions regarding the efficacy and educational value of the DAR activity, the theme of productive learning outcomes emerged. Participants were asked about their experience using DAR and its effects on the discussion as well as what they might have learned from the process and/or the topics themselves. Three sub-themes emerged as a result in relation to productive learning outcomes. While there is some degree of overlap, the authors felt there was enough distinction to warrant acknowledgement of the following: knowledge building, critical thinking and analysis, and benefits of multiple perspectives.

Knowledge building
This sub-theme arose from responses mentioning that participants' own knowledge had increased due to engagement in the activity and in particular with other people pooling information and offering other perspectives. The outcome for many participants was a better understanding of the topics and the skilful use of DAR. For example, Daphne mentioned that while she learnt from the discussion and came to a better understanding of the topic, the process "opened her mind to something new."

> Jeffrey: By seeing these ideas from the other side and trying to follow them up we can understand what they're trying to say or what to think about the topic.

> Lilith: We got more knowledge about this topic because we had information and opinion exchange between our side and other side, and it really made us think about other people's [perspectives] and understand more too.

Critical thinking and analysis
Mentioning that DAR was good for critical thinking, Zelda stated that "it helped me to stop a little bit and think 'maybe he's right.' It helped me to listen to others and put our minds in their shoes."

> Drew: It is really useful for our thinking process because it can make me ask why and how [an opposing proposition] is going to happen.

> Augustus: It's like playing a chess game because you tend to think through future moves and then suddenly, they do something you didn't expect… and what you planned collapsed, and you have to think again.

Benefits of multiple perspectives
Perhaps the most abundant evidence to support the emergence of a sub-theme came from an almost unanimous acknowledgement of the benefits of engaging with multiple perspectives. Rhea stated that she was "pleasantly surprised that a topic could have many different perspectives," and Gavin mentioned that "other perspectives force you to think". Drew said that engaging with other perspectives was a way to make her own perspective stronger.

> Lilith: I learned more about other people's opinions that I never thought about before. Sometimes I didn't agree with their comment but when I try to think more and more, I think it's the truth.

> Jeffrey: Because seeing other people bring up their points would lead to something that I might never consider before.

Practical application of DAR and the discussions

This theme represents participants' perceptions of the practical applications of DAR in various contexts. Participants were asked how they felt in general about the overall DAR activity and whether they would be interested in doing it again. Four sub-themes emerged

from analysis of the interview transcripts in relation to the potential use of the DAR activity.

Productive and beneficial

Mostly, the students thought the activity was useful and that they gained something from it. Jeffrey said he would "love to do it again because it gets my brain moving," and Drew said, "it's really useful for our thinking process because it can make me ask, 'why and how is that going to happen?'"

Good addition to course activities

Following from most students thinking the activity was beneficial, they also responded positively when asked if they would like to do it again as a part of a regular course, with some conditions.

> Gavin: Yeah, I think that's a good activity. That's a good idea (to do it again).
>
> Drew: I think if it's related to the course material, students will be interested because if they want to fully understand what's going on in that course, they will try to figure out how to do that discussion.
>
> Sylvia: I think it would be good because this course is more like a practical class not just reading a book; we can learn from reality.

Applicability to aspects of life outside the classroom

Interestingly, a number of students raised the possibility of using DAR in their lives outside of the classroom.

> Augustus: It's good training in how to think and adapt to solve problems.
>
> Lilith: When we do group projects and work like that and when we discuss, we can use this to do the best for our work.
>
> Winfred: I think I will use this often to see the different views of every student's mindset and how they build their worldview.
>
> Daphne: I think discussion is good for every situation, like we can't just decide everything for ourselves, so we need to communicate with others, and we have to find a middle ground.

Group unity and relationship building

Another common sub-theme, and positive outcome of the activity, was that students developed stronger relationships with each other and felt more unified as a group.

> Michael: We openly discussed and listened to each other, and I think that can be the way that we can make friendships closer.
>
> Zelda: Yes (the group became closer), because I love all of their ideas.

> Lilith: At the first, when they made comments, I felt a little bit like I'm not used to it and I didn't know them... because they made strong decisions... and then I think that I'm used to the comments and then I knew them a little bit better and I felt okay and there was nothing uncomfortable and some people from first and second year, they added me on social media.

The role of culture in Asian region class discussions

To seek answers to the third research question, students were asked to reflect on their experience and how it might relate to their cultural expectations or comparative experiences in more traditional classrooms. This theme then represents the students' perspectives of how their experiences in these online discussions were affected by traditional cultural attitudes.

Conflict avoidance

While students recognised that conflict avoidance is a part of their culture, they mainly did not think it was applicable to their experiences of these discussions.

> Michael: This activity was totally different because at a Thai high school class, showing opinions strongly is a weird thing that Thai students don't do… For me, I didn't care about that... I'm ready for a fight.

> Lilith: In Thai culture, we have many things that control us not to disagree with the people that we speak to. Like sometimes, when I disagree with someone that I'm talking to, I cannot say I disagree, but with DAR I think that I can adapt it to this situation to persuade them to see another side.

Power distance

Again, while students recognised power distance as a part of their traditional values, they mostly did not believe it was relevant to their experience of these online discussions.

> Daphne: If we are in the same level, it's normal (to disagree), but if we are with a Thai teacher, it's not normal... depending on if the teacher is kind or if they fit with the culture.

> Augustus: In Thai traditions, we respect the elders and when we're debating in Thai, we don't disrespect the elders. (In this discussion), I think I did do that but after a while I thought it's okay, it shouldn't be a problem because you know who you're talking to.

> Gavin: In a typical Thai classroom, we stick with our teacher's perspective. We use the teacher's perspective to be a common ground, but in our online discussion we had to view our common ground by ourselves… I think that's a good thing.

Critical thinking

Two students explicitly mentioned the lack of critical thinking in traditional classrooms and a number commented favourably on being able to use it in the online discussions.

> Augustus: I think for Thai students, it's a new level of learning... mostly when studying in the traditional way of Thai studying, it's like only remembering things. If the teachers say something, you remember it's in a test and that's all.
>
> Jeffrey: We were taught to follow everything in the book... by doing this discussion, I think we can get the ability to think of something critically which is different from reading everything from a book.

Discussion

The results of this study provide meaningful insights into the perspectives of Asian region students using the devil's advocate role while engaging in asynchronous online discussions. The findings are discussed in relation to the research questions they answer.

Research question 1
How will students respond to the use of asynchronous online discussions in place of face-to-face discussions?

Overall, the students engaged positively with the discussions and found them enjoyable and challenging. This is encouraging for the adoption of AODs in these contexts. There are, however, some considerations to be made.

The asynchronous nature of the online discussions was one of the more contentious elements of the activity. On the one hand, supporting much of the literature, it enabled the discussion participants in various ways by allowing them more time to consider and compose their comments (Kent, Laslo & Rafaeli, 2016; Lim, Cheung & Hew, 2011; Lin, Hong & Lawrenz, 2012; Palenque & DeCosta, 2015), and to find additional information to support their arguments (Chang, Lin & Tsai, 2013; Lin, Hong & Lawrenz, 2012). Both are advantageous when the aim is deeper and more critical engagement in discussions. On the other hand, this additional time also seemed to contribute to a decline in engagement with a number of students citing it as the cause of laziness, social loafing, and being less dynamic. This issue had not been encountered in the supporting literature and warrants further investigation. Relevant here is that as these discussions were not part of a graded course, students were not incentivised by marks and might then have felt less obligation to ensure the discussions continued (Andresen, 2009). Nonetheless, optimal student engagement should be a priority when planning educational activities and it is worth considering their comments regarding the negative effects of asynchronicity. The students themselves suggested that the time for the discussions should be somehow condensed, though the best way to do this and yet still allow the time needed for considering and composing comments remains open. This issue might be resolved through additional planning and should be addressed when designing online discussion activities.

In a similar way, students could see the benefits of using text to compose their ideas, but at the same time were less enthusiastic about it as a medium, citing the lack of emotional cues and face to face dynamics as reasons for that. This concurs with previous research (Gao, Zhang & Franklin, 2013). It might be pertinent then to conclude that online

discussions should not, whenever possible, completely replace face to face discussions, but should be used in conjunction with them.

Research question 2
How will students respond to the introduction of DAR in online discussions in terms of their engagement in knowledge construction and critical thinking?

In general, student comments indicated a positive response to the use of online discussions in terms of knowledge construction and critical thinking. Several comments demonstrate that students were engaging with each other in a process of knowledge construction; including sharing individual perspectives and knowledge, engaging in information searching and sharing, and coming to new understandings and common perspectives. These findings are consistent with the current literature. In addition, this study provides original findings focusing on the application of DAR as a contributing factor to successful discussions.

There is substantial evidence to indicate that the students enjoyed engaging with others' perspectives and that DAR was used as a tool to express and respond to those varying perspectives in civil ways. Almost unanimously, the students cited the benefits of multiple perspectives along with positive feelings for it. These benefits included the sense that diversity of thought opens one's mind to other ideas, forces one to think, and strengthens one's position through the process of critical analysis. This bears witness to the inclination of individuals to participate in learning communities and democratic processes through civil debate. When such needs are fulfilled, learning activities create a more engaging and satisfying experience (Kent, Laslo & Rafaeli, 2016). That these students saw benefit in and enjoyed this aspect of the activity might be one of the most important implications of this study.

Student responses suggest they also enjoyed engaging in the opportunities for critical thinking that DAR and the online discussions provided. Evidence of critical thinking can be seen in comments about analysing, evaluating, and investigating new perspectives, with common associated feelings of fun, enjoyment and of the activity being beneficial. Research investigating the perspectives of students engaging in debates within a teacher-centred context drew similar conclusions (Alghamdi Hamdan & Aldossari, 2021). Such outcomes provide support for the successful use of DAR in online discussions in this region.

Support for the adoption of DAR as a useful tool for discussion facilitation also came in the form of students' comments regarding the potential application of DAR to other aspects of their lives. These comments included using DAR during group work, with family and friends, and when engaging with various social and political issues. This points to both the students' perception of DAR as being a useful tool and their comfort in taking on the oppositional role it requires.

Research question 3
How will students respond to the adoption of DAR in online discussions in terms of their cultural context?

Student perspectives supported the assertion that traditional Asian region classrooms do incorporate to some degree the traditional cultural values of conflict avoidance and power distance, and can lack individual, critical thought. In the discussions undertaken in this study, students welcomed the opportunity to put forth their own ideas and positions while interacting critically with one another. Their enjoyment of the online discussions and taking on the devil's advocate role provides evidence that these processes can be successfully adopted by educators. When comparing this activity to components of their traditional classrooms, they welcomed a more student-centred experience. However, an unfamiliarity with student-led discussions might have inclined students to wait for others to carry the discussion forward, suggesting that continued training in these practices is required.

Of note is that students in general did not feel that power distance and conflict avoidance were a significant part of their discussions. At most, some students were initially hesitant to do things like put forward a conflicting perspective with someone older, but these students soon felt more comfortable. In part, this was due to the instruction provided and students recognising that DAR is used to engage oppositionally with ideas rather than with people. Another possibility could be that traditional values are loosening their grip on younger generations. As such, classroom cultures are becoming increasingly fertile for the acceptance of critical debate in which DAR can be successfully adopted.

In summary, the results of this research contribute to the body of knowledge in educational practices as well as offering practical insights to educators seeking meaningful activities for their students. In addition to confirming previous findings regarding the benefits of AODs, this study uncovered the risk of providing too much time for the activity resulting in a reduction of engagement. In some cases, this ended up producing an unintentional negative feedback loop as students waited for each other to respond. The decrease in the number of responses over time was not due to a lack of interest, rather it was more the result of an unclear placement in a turn-taking process. Course designers should consider this when planning the activity by perhaps including specific time constraints, other roles, and structures (Aloni & Harrington, 2018), and some graded criteria for student involvement (Andresen, 2009). Furthermore, this study provides evidence for the positive uptake of DAR as a device to promote engagement with multiple perspectives resulting in knowledge construction and critical thinking. Student comments link this directly to both online class discussions and practical usage in other aspects of their lives. Finally, the implications of this study suggest there is an opportunity for expanded horizons in thinking and educational practices in the Asian region. Students in this study were able to recognise and enjoy the benefits of the student-centred, collaborative nature of using DAR in asynchronous online discussions. Their comments reveal that critical learning practices divergent from teacher-centred pedagogies can be readily developed.

For many students and educators who have recently been moved into online spaces, the changes have been profound and unexpected. While there is still preference for face-to-face settings, the results of this study establish that online discussions and DAR are a viable set of tools for successful knowledge construction and student engagement.

Limitations

In addition to those already discussed, some further limitations are worth consideration. Due to the recent compulsory transition from onsite to online spaces, students may have been comparing the two settings with some bias in favour of their usual face to face classrooms. This may have affected the prevailing mood in relation to the degree of online engagement. As with any skill, the effects of DAR are more pronounced with increased instruction and practice. Thus, these results may be limited in that they do not fully represent the potential benefits of the activity. Lastly, these results came from discussions that were not integrated into a graded course which could have limited the incentive to maximise participation. Future research would benefit from addressing these issues.

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Appendix 1: Take-home guidesheet for AOD participation

Online discussions are a great way to engage in knowledge construction and critical thinking.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Instructions for participation</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">• Contribute each day.
• Discussions with more comments are generally better.
• Pay attention to your thoughts & feelings regarding DAR while you are engaged in the discussion as we will ask for your perspectives in the interview.</td></tr>
<tr><th colspan="2">Communicative strategies in focus (Devil's Advocate Role)</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">When appropriate, use one of the following strategies to stimulate the discussion:</td></tr>
<tr><td>Strategy</td><td>Example</td></tr>
<tr><td>1. Ask a rhetorical question in response to a previous comment.</td><td>Sure, people may live longer, but are our lives truly better?</td></tr>
<tr><td>2. Ask a "What if?" question to present a hypothetical situation.</td><td>What if modern medicine hadn't been invented? How would the world be different?</td></tr>
<tr><td>3. Present an alternative along with a reason.</td><td>Actually, some research indicates that the largest predictor of happiness is not modern technology; it's good relationships.</td></tr>
<tr><td>2. Put forward a reasoned objection.</td><td>I don't think modern technology advances society because it can actually make problems for society. People are more overweight and more unhealthy than ever.</td></tr>
<tr><th colspan="2">General communicative strategies</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">• Comments should be 1-2 sentences long.
• Comments should be written in a conversational manner.
• Read what others have written.
• Respond to comments.
• Be respectful.
• Acknowledge other ideas by complimenting or supporting them.
• Agreeing or respectfully disagreeing with other points of view.
• Be argumentative.
• Have fun.</td></tr>
</table>

Appendix 2: List of topics for possible discussion

The following list of options was given to the students to choose from. (*) indicates chosen topics

1. Youth are responsible for preserving their country's cultural traditions.
2. Is English as a global language a positive thing?
3. Should there be limits to personal freedom?
4. Should everyone have the right to free speech, even if it's hate speech?

5. Should humans integrate artificial intelligence into their brains with chip implants?
6. Is social media beneficial for humanity?
7. If we could only save one from a fire, should we save a famous painting or a cat?*
8. Should grammar be taught in language classes?
9. All humans should be vegan.*
10. Should the internet be regulated?
11. Should zoos be banned?*
12. Would the world be a better place without humans?*
13. Should cities be designed for pedestrians and bicyclists rather than cars?

Appendix 3: Interview questions

Background/build rapport/warming up

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. What kind of subjects and activities are you interested in?
3. Do you see yourself as more outgoing or more reserved/shy? (may have an effect of DAR engagement)
4. How do you feel about all this Covid online teaching business? (draws them into the theme of DAR and AOD)
5. What do you think are the differences between face to face and asynchronous online discussions?

Engagement and future willingness

1. Can you describe your experience using DAR during the online discussions?" (try to elicit some adjectives: *fun, boring, intimidating, confusing, etc.*)
2. Can you give me an example of how it was (*fun, boring, intimidating, confusing, etc*)
3. If you could change the activity to make it more interesting, what would you do?
4. Were the DAR class and resources provided helpful to you?
5. Would you be interested in doing this activity again?
6. We noticed that engagement in the discussions started off quite strong and then dropped rather quickly about halfway through. Can you comment on this or describe your experience as far as your level of engagement throughout the process?

Efficacy/educational value

1. Can you provide some examples of how you used DAR in online discussions? How did using it affect the discussion?
2. Did the discussion process bring you to a better understanding of the topic?
3. Can you tell me something that you learnt during the discussion?
4. Critical thinking
    - Do you feel people's comments were connected? Were there times that the discussion developed for more than a few comments? Can you explain some of those connections?
    - Did questioning other people's claims give you a stronger sense of the possibilities of the directions the discussion could go?
    - By using DAR, did you feel you were able to gain a broader perspective of the topic?

5. Language use
    - Tell us your language strategies for making comments. Did you think in Thai and translate your thoughts?
    - Did you feel that having time to comment allowed you to express yourself better?
        - Or did the expanded time frame result in a loss of engagement and/or focus?
    - How would you compare the online experience to an in class discussion?
        - Were you more confident to make your claims online than you might have been during an in-class discussion?
    - Was the group's language sufficient for a discussion?
6. Communication strategies
    - Did you ever have trouble understanding someone's comment? What did you do about that?

DAR in relation to socio-cultural context

1. Can you describe your level of comfort in openly disagreeing with someone else's comment?
2. Was using DAR different from other discussion strategies that you've used in traditional Thai/Chinese classrooms? How so?
3. Did the DAR role conflict or disrupt a sense of group cohesion?
4. Do you feel that the group is closer together or further away from each other after the discussion?

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