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Nordic Centre Newsletter *Summer 2020*

This issue of Nordic Centre's newsletter puts the spotlight on online learning, which the circumstances of recent months have given our network quite a bit of experience with. It can be a divisive topic, with some arguing that it's more convenient than learning in physical classrooms, gives the same if not better educational outcomes, and that it is better suited for globalized education. Others emphasize that it lacks the immediacy and energy of in-person meetings, that groups and the ideas of their participants can't be engaged in the same way, and argue that online platforms can never replace physical encounters. As you can read in our interviews with a variety of teachers, researchers, and students in this issue, both views hold some sway, and there can be good reasons to explore more blended modes of learning, also when campuses open.

As you can read in the start of the issue, the majority of Nordic Centre's activities, both in education and research, have been affected by the pandemic in some way, with many postponed to next year. In the midst of such frustrating circumstances, we do have some good news, which is the addition of our new Chinese affiliate member, Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University, whom we warmly welcome to our network.

This will be my last issue as programme manager of Nordic Centre, and I can look back at five years at Fudan and in Shanghai with great fondness. It has been such a privilege to work with fantastic colleagues and students in China and the Nordics for this half decade, many of whom have become dear friends. I hope to keep working with many of you in the coming years — or to simply meet up for a coffee. Please stay in touch!

*Magnus Jorem
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About

- Nordic Centre at Fudan University is a platform for academic collaboration between the five Nordic countries and China
- If you wish to subscribe to the Nordic Centre newsletter, which is published 3-4 times yearly, please sign up for free at nordiccentre.net

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Summer courses update

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a variety of travel restrictions, we have unfortunately had to cancel our (physical) summer courses in Shanghai. Instead, we will offer an online course on Business and Innovation in China. The nominated students for Chinese Politics and Society 2020 were also offered a place in our digital course so that the class will consist of a mix this time. Business and Innovation in China 2020 will be taught by Dimitrji Slepnirov from Aalborg University. You can read the interview with Dimitrji on page 5. We will do our best to adjust the content of the course to this new format and provide the student participants with an exciting journey full of discoveries about China and what doing business and innovation here involves.

New member: Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

This spring, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) joined as one of our Chinese affiliate member universities of the network, which now counts 29 institutions in total. Founded in 2004, XJTLU is an international joint-venture university with its main campus located in Suzhou, China. As a research-led university, it carries out research in a variety of disciplines and, encourages interdisciplinary research projects in order to promote innovation. We would like to give them a warm welcome and look forward to future cooperation.

Postponed anniversary, and more...

This year marks the 25th anniversary of Nordic Centre at Fudan University, and we had planned for a big celebration in October, including a variety of research themes of interest to both Nordic and Chinese universities in our network explored in workshops. After careful deliberations on what to do in the face of the pandemic, our anniversary committee opted to postpone the whole event to next fall, rather than make it a smaller event or organize workshops. Many other activities, including our biannual conference and the autumn's Nordic Studies elective, have also unfortunately been postponed. Please keep an eye on nordiccentre.net for further updates.

Online learning goes viral: Lessons from a collective experiment

Words Magnus Jorem

For two decades, online learning has gradually gained ground in the university world. Whether as one component among many in classroom-based courses, as Learning Management Systems that facilitate off-campus interaction, as distance-learning modules in degree programs, or as Massive Open Online Courses, different types of online learning have become part of the educational fabrics of universities globally. Yet it is the rare university that has replaced in-class environments entirely. At least, that was the case until spring 2020, when universities worldwide – from Stockholm to Shanghai – engaged in a collective experiment born out of necessity: how do you keep teaching when lecture halls are a medical hazard?

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There is generally a greater risk that the class loses its sense of being in it together. [...] You have to think actively how to form a community.

Mats Cullhed,
Uppsala University

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The rapid spread of the coronavirus and ensuing policy decisions in different countries to close campuses required immediate adaptability of both teachers and students. For many, this was kind of baptism by fire, yet for others, it was a chance to employ their know-how of online learning in a new and very different context. The collective online learning experiment has therefore resulted in an abundance of new experience for universities, with lessons applicable for not just the foreseeable pandemic-shaped future, but potentially the longer term as well. Can the online tools we’ve (involuntarily) learned to employ become useful in blended post-pandemic learning environments? And to the extent that we will continue employing online learning tools, how do we ensure that students and teachers stay engaged, active, and happy? We spoke to a handful of teachers and faculty to learn from their experiences.

“This has been a very speedy conversion to online learning, and not all attempts have been successful,” says Matts Cullhed, educational developer at Uppsala University’s unit for academic teaching and learning. “After our vice chancellor took the decision on March 18, there was a scramble to get classes online. That would in any circumstance be problematic. Many teachers don’t have experience teaching online, and don’t know the pedagogical challenges and opportunities – or the technologies to use. One typical pattern is that when they depart from campus, they replicate as closely as possible the teaching methods and course structure, and just move it online. So that if they had a lecture online on campus normally, they now would use Zoom to give a lecture. Most teachers tend to think that way, but I recommend instead to take a step back, look at the course and its storyline, and then shape it from scratch in an online setting.”

Yet while shaping courses from scratch for an online setting may be the ideal, that simply wasn’t an option available in the abrupt context of the pandemic. Faced with the challenge of converting a course to an online format within weeks or even days, universities had to think fast and work long hours to optimize the experience for both



Tailored services

“Our starting point was not online courses, but they had to be transformed into ones due to this emergency,” says Idoia Olazar, Senior Advisor at BI Norwegian Business School, referring to the two two-week executive programs she was charged with running digitally in March. “There are two ways to do this: either by changing the methodology into an online format, or by replicating the same experience as in the classroom in Oslo, only online. Due to the urgency, we went with the latter.”

“ The faculty should focus on the teaching, on the topic, doing what they do best [...] You cannot allow uncertainties about technicalities.

Idoia Olazar,
BI Norwegian
Business School ”

Olazar emphasizes that she was quite skeptical about whether converting a course meant to be in-person to online would work. Yet since the program — which involved 35 students from 15 different countries — was scheduled to begin March 16, just three days after the Norwegian prime minister announced the lockdown of universities, there was no other way to go ahead. “In this scenario, you cannot change the rules of engagement or the methodology of the program. An online class designed from scratch would have to be expanded in time, perhaps extended to as long as six months, employing other tools and methodologies, rather than the intensive and interactive two-week format. And then we would also face the risk of students dropping out. One of the reasons they take the course is to learn from each other, and having dropouts would damage the collaborative learning aspect, which is key to the whole experience. So we decided to run the program in the same way as we would in Oslo: Exactly the same classes, exactly the same professors, exactly the same readings, exactly the same group exercises. Everything the same, only remotely.”

To ensure that this worked, Olazar drew on her past experience organizing online courses. “First of all, technical support is extremely important. We trained a teaching assistant to help manage the class, and had tech support ready to help with that side of things. The faculty should focus on the teaching, on the topic, doing what they do best. Different professors use different teaching methods, for example whiteboard handwriting versus powerpoint versus video, and we had to know what they preferred in advance, so that we could tailor the technical services with a dedicated team of people to manage both them and assist the students. You cannot allow uncertainty about technicalities.”

BI Norwegian Business School even had replacements ready for any technical staff in case they got sick, which fortunately didn't happen. Idoia Olazar's second piece of advice, then, is to not think of e-learning as a budget solution. “It's a bit like the thinking goes in China: If it is cheap it is not good, if it is good it is not cheap. High quality online is extremely expensive, more so than face to face. If you think online is cheaper, it is because you are doing it cheaply!”

Moreover, she stresses, one should not think of online teaching as reinventing the wheel. “Don't think that technology is everything. Follow what the professors think, and *adapt* them to an online format, with either synchronous or asynchronous components, or both. But don't change things that work. Technology is just a tool.”

Idoia Olazar and her colleagues at BI Norwegian Business School were surprised at just how well the rapid conversion to online worked — how it was received by students and teachers alike. Says Sissel Hammerstrøm, Director of International Executive Programmes at BI: “I hadn't thought that it was possible to recreate that classroom experience online, but it worked. Both the students and the professors gave excellent feedback. Idoia has worked with online courses for many years, but this was new to me, and it is actually a game-changer: Sometimes you need a crisis to realize new possibilities.”

The students in the executive program — hailing from countries like Brazil, South Africa, and Saudi Arabia — admitted to being just as skeptical initially about the rapid shift to an online format (in the Oslo time zone at that), but gave excellent feedback, and somehow adjusted to online interactions just fine. “Even after spending ten hours a day together in zoom for two weeks, they agreed to meet for an online lunch after Ramadan.”

Besides the great experiences the students had, some of the professors saw certain advantages to online teaching. “A few of them pointed out that they can actually have a proper break when they stop the camera. Actually get ten minutes off, no interruptions. And then instantly restart the class again at the touch of a button: click and all students are back in the classroom.”

Digital activation

Yet the potential advantages of online learning are not necessarily shared equally by all types of students and teachers. According to Associate Professor Dmitrij Slepnirov from Aalborg University, who runs the Innovation Management master’s degree at Sino-Danish Centre in Beijing, which also made a swift shift to digital, the Zoom classroom will elicit different responses from different personality types. “It almost seems like a paradox, but some students who were not that present in the physical classroom were actually *more* active and present in the online setting. It’s interesting how this online way activates a category of students who were not active in the physical space. It is very individual. Those who are more tech savvy and don’t mind IT did well, but then there are others who only did it because they had to. That goes not just for students, but also for teachers.”

Uppsala University’s Mats Cullhed concurs that digital learning environments can activate different kinds of students, and makes the connection to synchronous (i.e. “live”) versus asynchronous learning (like writing in message boards or pre-recorded videos). “The asynchronous learning environment provided by an Learning Management System gives students more space, and some students prosper in those environments. They might need more time to form their arguments, or prefer to choose for themselves when they wish to work. That is a good argument for blended learning, actually, because the ideal is to have both.”

Some of those asynchronous elements provide an additional online learning benefit, says Dmitrij Slepnirov, whose digital version of the Innovation Management program has featured a combination of pre-recorded sessions, other asynchronous components available on file-sharing platforms, and homework assignments, besides the synchronous teaching through live-streaming. “Another advantage of online courses is that they are partly reusable. Once time has been invested in creating the content, you can reuse at least some of it for future modules.”

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It’s interesting how the online way can activate a category of students who were not active in the physical space.

Dmitrij Slepnirov,
Aalborg University

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What, then, were the challenges for suddenly digitalization the innovation management program, which involve students from both the China and Europe? “Our teachers and students are from all over the world, and we need the tech to work. Some platforms that work well in Europe don’t work in China. Figuring out which ones work in both places is key — one should never assume that what works on one’s own computer works on the other side of the world,” says Slepnirov. “After trying out different platforms, we ended up with Zoom for livestreaming, as we found it to be the most stable for users in China, Europe, and North America. For pre-recorded components, some presentations can be done before the lecture and then uploaded on our file-sharing platform. We usually use the service Panopto, which is easy to use for this purpose in Denmark. In China, though, things took forever to download, so we switched to a different file-sharing service, Baidu Cloud, for the Chinese students.”

A sense of immediacy

Another challenge, says Dmitrij Slepnirov, is recreating the interactivity of the classroom in an online space. “How do you create something that is organic and accepted for online delivery, like breakout sessions in groups? I mean, it technically works, but it’s one of those things where innovation is still needed for online interaction to work as well. There is still a gap, still a challenge and something we are grappling with. The interactivity is a big part of what our program is about, and the technology filter creates a difficult environment for implementing it.”

Matts Cullhed makes a similar point, pointing out that all teaching methods and environment types have their strengths and weaknesses. “The strength of the campus meeting is that you get a sense of immediacy, more intimacy. You can have fantastic online courses, but there is generally a greater risk that the class loses its sense of being in it together. When you come together in a room on campus you experience physically that you are doing something together. Online makes it much easier to work in isolation, but when you work isolated and at different times, you can lose the sense of community. That is one of the main pieces of advice for teachers: You have to think actively how to form a community. It’s better for the students, and for the teachers, because if students don’t interact within the group, you instead get lots of “one on one” communication with the teacher. That is the danger with online courses.”

That sense of immediacy and community may be the most important reason why online learning won’t entirely replace actual campuses any time soon. As a Norwegian researcher admitted in a recent webinar, sometimes the best conference is the one where you hardly attend a single formal session. For him and probably many others, it is the informal, in-person interactions that give the greatest value, and that can be hard to replicate on a screen, where you never actually have eye contact.

Still, the experiences of the educators interviewed in the above shows that not only can online learning work well if one puts a lot of effort, expertise, and adaptability into organizing them — it can even help those who were quiet in the physical classroom come to the fore as the most active students. While many might be tired of working and studying from home at the moment, wishing only to meet up with fellow students or friends and colleagues, the optimal result of the collective experiment might be a future where we are more open to blended modes of learning. We now have time to start from scratch.

Q&A with Donna Hurford, PhD, Educational Consultant, Centre for Teaching and Learning, University of Southern Denmark

Words Magnus Jorem

What has been your approach to online teaching?

I have only taught one course since the lockdown in Denmark. I adapted an existing course to an online course, using Adobe Connect. I tend to include discussions and activities in face to face sessions so I used the Break Out rooms feature in the Adobe programme to facilitate group work.

What are the main platforms or online tools you use?

Zoom for webinars and meetings, Skype for Business for meetings, Adobe Connect for teaching.

How have teachers and students reacted to the transition?

There’s much variation in responses especially as the university’s expectation is that teaching continues despite the lockdown. Teachers are working very hard to adapt to teaching online, alongside working at home and often looking after and teaching children at the same time. As far as I am aware most classes are continuing online, although more are probably asynchronous than synchronous because of concerns about insufficient online capacity if all teaching became synchronous. The Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Southern Denmark, where I am a consultant provides support for teachers now faced with online teaching. We have received many queries about to switch to online teaching. The focus now is on how to manage online exams, especially online oral exams.

What advice would you give others who are designing or transitioning to online courses?

Get familiar with the online platform, allow extra time in teaching sessions as muting microphones, organizing break out rooms, sharing documents etc all adds extra time. Look for helpful videos and guidance online, most universities are providing a wide range of support and advice. Keep the slides straight forward, less is more and keep students as engaged as possible using groups work in break out rooms.

For more advice on teaching online from Donna Hurford at the University of Southern Denmark, please visit <https://sdunet.dk/en/teachonline>

Longest homestay: Q&A with Fudan students

Words Wen Liu

College students in China have experienced their longest homestay this spring due to the COVID-19 emergency. As of May, most students were still studying from home. Only the students who need to graduate this year have been allowed to return to campus gradually. In April, we talked to two Fudan students about their experience in the past few months and how they are coping with the new online learning mode. The first student is Yunjia Hong, a junior student whose major is Chinese Literature and Language. The second is Ariel Xue, who just started college life last year with a major in English.

How long have you stayed home? Any confirmed cases of COVID-19 in your city?

Hong: I'm from Shanghai and have stayed home for about 2 months. Yes, there are quite a few confirmed cases in Shanghai. We must have our temperature checked every time we enter a building.

Xue: My hometown is Qidong (a small city in Jiangsu) and it's been two and half months since I went back. There were about four confirmed cases. Although the outbreak in my city was not that serious, the government still decided to close down the city. Only natives with green healthy cards could leave their compounds. Outsiders and anyone who had been to other cities were not allowed to go to public places.

When and how were you notified about the delay of the new semester?

Hong: I was informed about the delay in early February, approximately. I don't know when to return to campus as I am still waiting for the official permit from school.

Xue: Our counsellor sent that announcement into our WeChat group. It depends on the school arrangement whether we can come back or not.

How did your department/faculty cope with the emergency and organize different online courses?

Hong: Teachers tend to upload videos every week before the class, providing materials for students' self-studying. The previous class time is used for online Q&A, usually through Wechat. Plus, there is random attendance check in the Wechat group. Additionally, through the official E-learning facilitated by the university, we find it easy to download reading materials and to submit homework online. We are informed of the teacher's comments or grade on the same platform.

Xue: I think online courses are similar to face-to-face courses. The regular time for class is still study time. I now have four professional courses: Intensive Reading, English Debate, Introduction to Writing and Introduction to English literature. Some of the professors choose to record videos before class and let students watch them in class, while others require us to watch videos before class and use class time to discuss together. Every of them has some homework. In Introduction to English literature course, we have to write a short essay every week, and get concrete scores.



What online learning platforms are used at Fudan?

Hong: E-learning/ Wechat/ Ding ding(钉钉)/(Chao xing (超星)/WeLink

Xue: Mooc, TenCent meeting, Zoom and Zhidao. They all work well for me. I think the biggest difference is that it is much harder for teachers and students to communicate. Usually, it is difficult for me to arouse interest in speaking when I'm alone at home.

Are you an efficient online learner? What are the advantages and disadvantages of online learning, especially at home?

Hong: I think it's hard to say. On one hand, I save the time used to spend on commuting, and my own study provides me with a better environment with less interference as compared to dormitory or classroom, though not as good as the library. Apart from that, I don't have to worry about the inefficiency of taking notes, for the videos can be reviewed whenever I need to. On the other hand, as eye contact, fellow students' reaction are veiled by the screen, teachers often find it hard to know how his/her lectures works on the students. Though many teachers try to solve that problem by answering questions on Wechat, when dozens of questions pumped on the screen, it is really a chaos.

Xue: I don't think I am an efficient online learner because it's easy for me to be distracted. And that is the biggest disadvantage of online learning for me. The advantage is that I can easily review or listen to those elusive part again.

What was your plan for the spring semester of 2020?

Hong: I planned to put my full heart in studying, and even applied for a project in this semester. Yet studying at home does pose a challenge for my self-discipline, let alone the obstacle in finding theoretical materials essential for my project. I wish to get access to more reading materials after coming back to school. Plus, I really don't want to encounter final exam with a listless mind the very moment I step into the campus.

Xue: My plan for the spring semester was not interrupted, but my winter holiday plan was ruined!! I really want to hang out with my friends after coming back to school.

Do you think COVID-19 will change your learning patterns in any ways?

Hong: Yes, from lecture-dependent to self-studying. I think online learning provides the students with more freedom, yet the advantages of face-to-face seminar is deprived.

Xue: Yes. Because of the doubled workload, I learned to reschedule my study time plan. I think it is the first time for online learning to be used in such a large scale, and teachers and students have started to see the benefits of it. For majors with a lot of knowledge points, like CS and engineering, they may use online teaching largely.

What advice can you give Nordic students regarding online learning while being quarantined at home?

Hong: Get a reasonable schedule. Do regular exercise, especially those stretching your legs and relaxing your cervical vertebra. Search reading materials in advance.

Xue: Use Forest [app that temporarily prevents you from using other apps on your smartphone, -ed.] when you are studying!

Innovation course online: Q&A with Demola facilitator Nancy Lai

Words Linus Ling

As the whole world bears the consequences of the the Covid-19 pandemic, schools and universities have made it possible for students to take classes at home, which helps promote the online education. Historically, there has been no moment when online learning has made up such a large percent of the educational activities. Therefore the pandemic-suffering period is seen as an opportunity for online education to be mainstay in the educational market. The innovation course with Demola is also run online this semester. We talked to course facilitator Nancy Lai and students Liu Nianhua and Qiu Jing on their opinions of online education.

Could you briefly describe how you coordinated the course this semester?

Nancy: As the coronavirus has impacted our working and studying style, we had to move everything online. In online facilitation, we globally use Demola Chat as a platform. The implementation is done over open-source software called Rocket.chat and is similar to Slack, having video call functionalities built into the system. We have implemented Demola Chat to run in our servers, so all customer data is secured, and it has integration to atlas.demola.net.

But sadly, in China, we cannot run Demola Chat without VPN, so we used DingTalk, the co-working software by Alibaba. We admitted 14 students, divided into two groups, and each group has its DingTalk channel, we also have a big joint channel in DingTalk when we have planetary sessions. But the private channel allows the group to discuss their solutions and process of this challenge in collaboration with Slush China.

We also recognized it is vital to maintain informal communication with the students. So, we have set up a WeChat group for the 14 students and Slush China experts, also with us facilitators of Demola. We can talk and share anything interesting in this WeChat group. In the first week, I invite everyone to share the craziest thing they have ever done in the WeChat group and their secret skills, also encourage them to play online games on Saturday evenings. This is sort of like ice-breaking and team-building events.

We also keep a "weekly reflection journal" for everyone, including me. The deadline is every Sunday at 9 pm. Everyone writes about their learnings/reflections of the week, plan of the next week, and something to share from their personal life. This is an excellent way to learn what has been done and how teams felt about the process. If I noticed someone writes he or she is suffered from workload or pressure, I would talk to him/her individually, to see what I can do to help.

For the past two semesters, we had the Nordic innovation practice/ Demola course with in-person meetings, including but not limited our classroom in Nordic Centre room 208, but this time you have to use all kinds of online learning tools to make the course possible during the virus period. Have you come across any difficulties?



Nancy: In the beginning, yes, like I had the first session with my VPN on, then my DingTalk was not working – they cannot hear me for some time. Later I figured out the issue and then solved the problem.

What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of online learning?

Nancy: The virtual communication is taking a lot of time in the beginning, to set up the software, to make sure everyone's facilitates are working properly, etc. But later, when everyone gets used to it, it went on quite smoothly. Another flaw of online is, except the video call sessions once a week, we rely on the written messages on DingTalk a lot, sometimes the messages are not understood correctly or timely. It is just difficult to make sure everyone is on the same page.

But there are apparent advantages too: it is convenient, and I also believe the students may enjoy it more than teachers. In essence, they are used to digital devices and online learning & entertaining. Also, it saves operation costs for us. Usually, we need to prepare the tea breaks/refreshments and a lot of print-out for the weekly session and boot camps. So maybe it is more environmentally friendly too.



Are those online learning tools/software too hard to use? Or have you experienced any surprise(speaking of good side) when you're using it?

Nancy: As I said before, VPN and DingTalk cannot be co-working at the same. The layout is a bit ugly, compared to Zoom, it has more powerful functions, maybe make it more difficult for users. Surprisingly, I think DingTalk is powerful. It allows screen sharing, online document co-editing, project management tasks tracking, sharing calendar, clock-in, and clock out, etc.

Do you think Demola would continue to use such online learning models in the future?

Nancy: Demola Global just released 27 global online challenges in response to the current Covid-19 situation (More details: <https://applications.demola.net/oneforhumanity>). When everything moves online, the location doesn't matter anymore; we actually can allow students from different time zones to participate remotely, as we tried in Shanghai project "Slush around the year" already. I personally think it will be a good format for future projects, which allows more diverse participants.

Any final reflections?

Nancy: "There will not be a back to normal. There will only be life after Covid-19." Just saw this from LinkedIn, I think it is right, we need to learn how to adapt to the changes after Covid-19 quickly, I feel there are so many changes are going on in the world now. It is time for one humanity. Together, we can go through this and create a better future.

Innovation course online: Interview with students

Liu Nianhua and Qiu Jing

Could you please introduce yourselves?

L: I'm Liu Nianhua from Sun Yat-sen University, and major in remote sensing and geographic engineering. It is mainly because I'm now in the last year of my program and I've finished most of the undergraduate work, including the thesis at an earlier time. And I found the message from the Erasmus Mundus application Wechat group. I thought that I had enough time and was quite interested in Demola so I decided to attend, and soon I would travel to Europe to continue my EM's master program.

During the course process, I've got to make many interesting friends and we've overcome many obstacles despite our difference in geographic locations. We've been striving to finish the tasks that we should. But overall, this learning process was very interesting and at the same time, meaningful.

Q: I'm Qiu Jing, a graduate student at Fudan University, major in electronics and information engineering. The reason why I wanted to apply was my participation as a volunteer when I got to know a program about urban underground development and became interested in the smart city. And then I got to know Anni, the student participant in the first Demola innovation course at Nordic Centre, from whom I got to know the concept, and applied for the program on hearing the opening of applications.

I thought everyone in the project was excellent. I could come up with many new ideas after each pitching. We have been provided with a lot of useful information and suggestions. I think participation is very rewarding.

How is the course scheduled and taught this semester?

L: This time, as usual, the courses are scheduled every Friday afternoon. Together with Nancy and Jere, we have a Ding-talk video conference, including weekly reports and reflections. Jere would talk about which stage we are currently in and share some ideas. Then we would divide into smaller groups to complete our tasks. Most of our assignments are done online. In addition to Ding-talk, we often discuss in the Wechat group and share the information.

Q: For our group, we would divide the task into smaller ones. After the meeting with Jere Wessman we would discuss more in our smaller group, arrange the plan and task assignment for example. During each stage or module, team members would be grouped accordingly and the communication between them would be more. Before each task deadline, we would post our work in the group so that everyone could know what has been done this week.

What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of online learning?

Q: Speaking of the advantages, I feel that there are fewer restrictions on time and place. Many of our discussions are recorded in the form of text or voice documents. We can refer to these when we forgot something so it's quite convenient.

L: I agree. It's very convenient when you want to look back and find a document. But it also could be a disadvantage, which is the documents piled up. We're not so familiar with the working tools like Ding-talk at the beginning and we've spent much time on it to discover which functions could be used by us.

It has many divided functions that we didn't know at first. And now it's the fifth week of the project and we have a big amount of document at hand. I have already used local folders to do the archive because the online document system is quite in a mess.

And in my group, we have more participants in different countries, Singapore, Portugal, etc. So we have to coordinate the time slot with everyone. And we actually cannot find another time slot other than Friday afternoon. This is the big challenge we are facing this spring: how to ensure everyone is on the same page. One time we discovered that we missed some parts when we're having the meeting. Information sharing is sometimes asymmetrical.

Compared to the offline working mode, it is harder to highlight the focus of our tasks and difficulties that we should overcome. The expression is very much like a flat statement, which isn't easy to bring your emotion into it.

Another question is about the language communication. Besides the Chinese participants, we also have Korean participants. And English is the language we would use when discussing the problem, thus whether you could find a proper word to clearly express yourself becomes the biggest problem. We're not native speakers so there are sometimes obstacles when communicating.

I've heard that you will write "Weekly Reflection" for the course this semester. What's your opinion about this?

Q: I think it's pretty good. This is not only sharing about your working plan next week but also your personal feelings, which allows you to know what your teammates are doing, which phase you're in. It helps everyone to understand each other better. So I found it helpful.

L: I would take a neutral attitude though. The starting point was good, as Qiu has said. But the weekly reflection document piled up and we have to move to the last page every time, which is a bit annoying. And the weekly reflection session reminds me of the "Moments" in our Wechat. Maybe it's more interactive use functions like "Likes" and "Comments" in our social media app. And we only write text in the weekly reflection part. There's a question mark on how much attention words could attract.

As a student participant, how would you like the course to be taught in the future?

Q: I think both online and offline learning have their advantages and disadvantages. If we haven't suffered the epidemic crisis this time, we in Group A are all from Fudan and don't have the geographic restrictions. In this case, we would communicate more and maybe we could have company visits also. But speaking of an online program, it doesn't have the restrictions in place, which allows students from different countries and backgrounds to participate in the same project. Such cooperation may be more inspiring. Recently Demola Global has released some projects which continue to use the online learning mode, I think it's worth trying.

L: Such global projects have obstacles but also its strength to gather students from different countries to work on the same project. As the question has mentioned, "as a student" I think it depends much on your expectations regarding the project. Some are for credits, some for international experience, some are just looking for new friends, some are willing to take the challenge. I think it's better to have offline and online courses so that students could choose according to their needs, and emphasize the international background of the project, which is not that familiar in universities now.

Any final reflections?

Q: I feel pretty good. I can accept the learning mode and it often brings small surprises as well as challenges.

L: As for me, the project has met most of my expectations. Of course, there're some difficulties in between but this is exactly what we're gonna fight for during the project.

Q&A: Shanghai-based online education businesses

Words Wen Liu

China has been implementing strict quarantine regulations since the end of January. Therefore, students at all levels have been taking online courses from home. Many company staff members have also needed to work remotely, making online tools and platforms more essential than ever. Nordic Centre talked to two professionals in the online-education private sector. Yuki Gong works as supervisor of ESL content development at Jiake Online Education Company, which offers pre-recorded courseware lessons and live classes for students up to grade 12. Charlie Zhang is a course developer for TutorABC, which offers online courses for adults and teenagers from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Japan.

What has the influence of COVID-19 been on your company's business?

Charlie : More clients have realized the value of online education. Our company has responded quickly and started to develop new courses. More investment is going into this field.

Yuki: We provide free online courses to students in Wuhan.

How did your company cope with the quarantine regulations regarding all the staff?

Yuki: I worked at home for a week but it was not efficient at all... We have been required to wear masks at work.

Charlie : I worked at home from February to March and returned home early March. We need to have our body temperatures taken before entering the office and wear masks. And we also need to keep a distance from other colleagues while having lunch. All the staff have been cooperative in taking prevention measures.

Do you think online education will develop faster in China?

Yuki: In my opinion, online education will develop in a smooth way at a slower pace.

The advantage is that the industry has a larger number of customer base and a lower cost of software development (but still with a high cost in marketing and branding).

Charlie : It's very likely. China has a great user pool and the IT industry is developing very fast. The infrastructure facilities are also very well equipped.

Can you give some advice for online learners?

Yuki: Online learning is totally a different story from traditional classrooms. It requires more interactive online learning tools/widgets because you need to catch students' attention more frequently than in a traditional classroom. It also requires more standardized products (standardized lesson plans and teaching notes, etc.) to make sure teachers can deliver the lessons successfully.

Charlie : New learners should combine online learning and offline practice, in order to maximize the knowledge outcome. Online learning definitely has a wider coverage of user groups, but at the same time students need more mental power in self-discipline without necessary guidance.