

Chapter #17

PRELIMINARY STUDY ON THE EDUCATIONAL EFFECTS OF ONLINE MORAL DILEMMA DISCUSSIONS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on Japanese moral education for students in the teaching profession and empirically examined the educational effect of using online moral dilemma discussion (OMDD). As a pre-test, the participants filled up a questionnaire survey comprising the standard for public space (SPS) scales and communication skills (CS) by way of Microsoft Forms. Participants were then assigned to one of the following categories: paired OMDD, OMDD with five participants, and OMDD with five participants and a facilitator. Two Heinz dilemmas were used in OMDD as a topic of discussion. After the completion of OMDD, the post-test was carried out in the same way as the pre-test was. Accordingly, in the post-test for SPS, the score for “care for others” was significantly high, and the score for “egocentric” was significantly low. Regarding the result of multiple comparisons using the Bonferroni method, the OMDD score with five participants was determined to be higher than that of OMDD with five participants and a facilitator. Regarding CS, nonverbal, assertion, and discussion were significantly higher in the post-test. These results were discussed.

Keywords: online moral dilemma discussion, face-to-face moral dilemma discussion, facilitator.

1. INTRODUCTION

Discussion, one of several face-to-face educational activities, has various educational effects. For example, in the field of Japanese moral education, moral dilemma discussions (hereinafter referred to as “MDD”) were proposed by Kohlberg (1985). MDD participants discuss how to deal with stories in which multiple values conflict. MDD is known to enhance certain moral and versatile skills (Araki, 2014; Blat & Kohlberg, 1975; Fujisawa, 2018a; 2018b). Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2015) stated that moral education is important for every country to enable children to happily live their whole life. However, since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has engendered the expectation that educational activities will not take place face-to-face. It is difficult to conduct face-to-face moral discussions in morality classes in Japanese schools, although the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan promotes “thinking and deliberating” morality classes for Japanese public schools and in-service teachers. Even though online tools enable non-face-to-face discussions, few studies have been conducted on the educational effects of online discussions. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to clarify the educational effect of MDD using online tools (hereinafter referred to as “OMDD,” as an abbreviation for “online moral dilemma discussion”) for Japanese university students in the teaching profession who need to perform “thinking and deliberating” morality classes when they become in-service teachers, with a focus on the field of Japanese moral education.

1.1. Empirical Research on Moral Discussion

Even as Japanese moral education has adopted various discussion formats, it is for only a few teaching methods that empirical verification has been conducted and evidence has accumulated. However, a body of empirical evidence has accumulated around MDD (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975), which is derived from Kohlberg's theory as one of the methods through which students can discuss topics in moral education. Before advocating for the effect of MDD, Kohlberg theorized that morality has six stages of development. Morality develops from Stage 1 to Stage 6 along with cognitive development, and moral development is promoted by MDD (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975). Among the moral dilemma tasks used when conducting MDD, Heinz's dilemma is well known (Mr. A's wife is dying of an illness; however, according to her doctor, she may be saved if she takes a certain medicine. The medicine is sold by a pharmacist at 10 times the cost of its development. Even if Mr. A scraped up the money, he would only collect half of the price, so he negotiated with the pharmacist to check whether he could pay the rest of the amount later. However, the pharmacist replied that he could not do that because he had developed the medicine to make money. He concluded that he could not do that because pharmacists want to make money. On that day, Mr. A broke into the pharmacy to steal the medicine. What should Mr. A have done? The Defining Issues Test (DIT), developed by Rest (1979), is also used to measure stages of moral development alongside Kohlberg's theory worldwide (Bayley, 2011). After that, DIT2 was also developed.

In Japan and other countries, it has been clarified that morality develops according to the stage of moral development with aging (e.g., Sakurai, 2011). Additionally, Japanese researchers and teachers have also collaborated and spent more than 40 years comprehensively accumulating knowledge on teaching materials around moral dilemmas of interest to students, how to perform MDD depending on the age of students, and the educational effects of MDD (Araki, 2014). The interesting point concerning MDD is that it can encourage students to engage in free discussion by adopting a moral dilemma wherein multiple values conflict with each other as teaching materials. Although some issues have been noted around MDD, in general, conducting MDD not only enhances morality (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975; Araki, 2014; Oser, Althof, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2008; Oser, 2013; Lind, 2019) and business ethics (Oser & Schalafli, 2010) and influences prosocial formation (Salvador, 2019) but also activates thinking and deliberating skills (Fujisawa, 2018c). It was revealed that other social abilities related to morality (e.g., cooperation, part of general skills, and perspective-taking ability) were enhanced (Araki, 2014; Fujisawa, 2018a; Fujisawa, 2018b).

1.2. Usage of Online Tools in Japanese Public Schools

As mentioned earlier, the educational effect of face-to-face discussions using MDD (hereinafter referred to as "FMDD") has been reported on, but in present-day Japan, face-to-face discussions are restricted because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, since 2018, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan has promoted the implementation of morality classes that emphasize thinking and deliberating (e.g., Nishino, 2017). What should we do now that face-to-face discussion activities at school are restricted?

Scientific and technological advances have made it easier for us to incorporate online tools into our lifestyles in general. And with COVID-19, that trend is accelerating. Even in Japanese schools, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the schedule of the Global and Innovation Gateway for All school concept was moved ahead, and tablets were distributed to

all elementary and middle school students by the government (MEXT, 2022). The online environment of public schools was improved as a result. Therefore, conducting “thinking and deliberating” morality classes using online tools has become an option in every public school. However, many in-service teachers are currently unfamiliar with the use of online tools well in Japan. Therefore, to engage in moral discussion using online tools at school, student-teachers must gain experience in moral discussion using online tools. There is also the question as to whether discussion lessons using online tools have an educational effect.

1.3. Research on Discussions using Online Tools

Studies conducted to date in Japan have connected classrooms of different schools that offer morality classes online, but few discussion studies have been conducted wherein individual elementary and middle school students use online tools. However, the research targeting university students (Tiene, 2000) indicates that they affirm online discussion, with a preference for face-to-face discussion, and regard online discussion as supplementary to face-to-face discussion. Hedayati-Mehdiabadi, Huang, & Oh (2020) also showed that in case some conditions for online discussion are met, conducting ethical education using online discussion for university students can lead to fresh awareness. Cain & Smith (2009) compared OMDD conditions with FMDD conditions for pharmacy students. They described that participants in this study could ponder on the OMDD condition, while anonymity in OMDD tends to be critical and hinder constructive discussion. Bell & Liu (2015) conducted OMDD with college students. They conducted DIT2 before and after OMDD and clarified that DIT2 scores increased after OMDD. They state that the participants are first- to fourth-year college students and are students of the same online course. However, whether their relationship was an acquaintance and how they conducted the online discussion procedures were not clarified. From these results, online discussions can be accepted by university students in an emergency such as the present one, and for a possible context to be created for constructive discussions if the discussions are held between acquaintances.

McCarron, Olesova, & Calkins (2021) provided a holistic exploration of fostering knowledge construction in collaborative, student-led, asynchronous online discussions and also showed the limits of student-led online discussion. However, although MDD is conducted between teachers and students, discussions among students and between students and facilitators are rarely compared in MDD research. Therefore, it is meaningful to compare student-led online discussions with facilitator-led online discussions.

Given these results, Fujisawa (2022) established FMDD and OMDD for student-teachers and implemented MDD. Because of employing the SPS scale (Sugawara, Nagafusa, Sasaki, Fujisawa, & Azami, 2006; Nagafusa, Sugawara, Sasaki, Fujisawa, & Azami, 2012) and the communication skills (CS) scale before and after MDD, “public values,” within the SPS scale, were shown to be higher in OMDD than they were in FMDD. Based on these results, it may be possible to obtain almost the same educational effect in both OMDD and FMDD; however, some research questions remain. First, previous studies did not show details of OMDD procedures, such as the number of participants in the discussion and the relationships among the participants in the discussion. They further clarified the conditions under which online discussion in OMDD has an educational effect. Second, little is known about the effectiveness of online discussions, and it is meaningful to examine the reproducibility of previous studies.

1.4. The Purpose of this Research

This study aims to clarify the educational effect of OMDD by setting up multiple online discussion conditions using MDD for university students in the Japanese teaching profession and to discuss the applicability of online tools to future educational situations.

2. METHODS

Participants: Forty-six Japanese female university students were enrolled in the teaching profession course of a university for women with a scale of about 3,000. Before this experiment, this study was reviewed by the research ethics committee of the university to which the author belongs. Moreover, the experiment was conducted primarily after the participants' consent had been obtained.

Procedures: Before the implementation of OMDD, the participants were divided into one of the following conditions: OMDD with pair ($n = 18$), OMDD with five participants ($n = 14$), and OMDD with five participants and a facilitator ($n = 14$) (n indicates the number of valid responses). OMDD with five participants and OMDD with five participants and a facilitator were conducted by five participants each. All participants answered the questionnaire survey before and after OMDD. The questionnaire survey was conducted by way of Microsoft Forms. All participants conducted OMDD through Zoom from individual personal computers or tablets in private rooms after completing the online pre-test responses. Under all conditions, Heinz's dilemmas (1) and (2) were used as the discussion material. Specifically, first, instructions were provided on how to use OMDD to the entire class and then all participants responded to Heinz's dilemma (1). Next, using the breakout room function of Zoom, OMDD was carried out under each condition. Subsequently, Heinz's dilemma (2) was implemented in the same manner. These discussion procedures are similar to those conducted face-to-face by Fujisawa (2018b). Finally, as a post-test, a questionnaire survey with the same content was conducted using the same procedure as that used in the conduct of the pre-test under all conditions.

Survey contents: The questionnaire contained the following content similar to what Fujisawa (2022) used.

SPS scale (Sugawara et al., 2006; Nagafusa et al., 2012) with 25 items (five subscales): This scale aims to evaluate the standard that is given importance concerning egocentric behavior in a public space in pursuit of one's profit and freedom without concern for the impression it creates on others. Peer standards denote the importance one places on aligning with one's peers. Regional standards influence the importance given to approval from the local community. Care for others refers to the importance one places on caring about unrelated others. Public values denote a concern for public interest and fairness for society as a whole. The score for each subscale was calculated by totaling the scores for each item on the scale. Previous studies (Nagafusa et al., 2012; Fujisawa, Azami, Sugawara, Nagafusa, & Sasaki, 2006) have confirmed the reliability and relevance of the scale. The score for each subscale was calculated by summing up the item scores for each subscale. Each subscale included five items. The Cronbach's α coefficients of each subscale in this study were .76, .81, .75, .54, and .70, respectively. The five subscales correlate with the five stages of the DIT (Fujisawa et al., 2006). Responses were elicited on a five-point scale, for which "Does not describe me at all" is assigned one point and "Describes me very well" is assigned five points.

CS Scale (Ueno & Okada, 2006): This scale, which consists of four factors, namely, listening and speaking, nonverbal skills, assertion, and discussion, was also administered. Listening and speaking includes skills to listen to the other person and give an opinion to the other person. Nonverbal skills include nonverbal skills in discussion. Assertion is one of the CS to build better relationships. It refers to CS that openly conveys one's opinion while respecting the other person rather than unilaterally imposing one's own opinion or putting up with it. The discussion includes the skills needed to have the discussion. According to the manual of Ueno and Okada (2006), synthetic scores were produced for each field scale.

Scoring: Regarding the SPS scale, it was concluded that the higher the score, the higher the score of the participant's applicable behavioral standard. The relevant manual was also used to calculate each subscale score of the CS scale. High scores in each subscale indicated a high degree of the particular factor.

3. RESULTS

Before the analysis, the basic statistics for each subscale of the SPS and the CS scales were shown in Table 1 and Table 2. When the pre-test was tested for the three conditions (OMDD with five participants, OMDD with five participants and a facilitator, and OMDD with a pair), no homogeneity was shown among the conditions. Therefore, an analysis of covariance with the pre-test score as a covariate was adopted in subsequent analyses.

For the five subscales of SPS, ANCOVA was performed with the pre-test score as the covariate, the post-test score as the dependent variable, and the condition as one factor. Thus, the survey time of all subscales was significant (egocentric: $F(1,46) = 51.0$, $p < .001$, biased $\eta^2 = .6$; peer standards: $F(1,46) = 111.5$, $p < .001$, biased $\eta^2 = .7$; regional standards: $F(1,45) = 92.6$, $p < .001$, biased $\eta^2 = .7$; care for others: $F(1,46) = 99.3$, $p < .001$, biased $\eta^2 = .7$; public values: $F(1, 45) = 36.4$, $p < .001$, biased $\eta^2 = .5$). Scores were higher in pre-tests than they were in post-tests in the categories "egocentric," "peer standards," "regional standards," and "public values." Only in the category "care for others" was the score high in the post-test. Regarding the types of online discussion conditions, there was a significant difference only in the category "care for others." Regarding the results of multiple comparisons using the Bonferroni method, the OMDD score with five participants was determined to be higher than that of OMDD with five participants and a facilitator.

For the four subscales of the CS scale, ANCOVA was performed with the pre-test score as the covariate, the post-test score as the dependent variable, and the condition as one factor. As a result, it was significant for the entire survey time (listening and speaking: $F(1,46) = 17.1$, $p < .001$, biased $\eta^2 = .03$; nonverbal: $F(1,46) = 59.5$, $p < .01$, biased $\eta^2 = .6$; assertion: $F(1,44) = 39.7$, $p < .001$, biased $\eta^2 = .05$; discussion: $F(1,46) = 95.9$, $p < .001$, biased $\eta^2 = .7$). Listening and speaking scored higher in the pre-test than it did in the post-test, and for nonverbal, assertion, and discussion, they were higher in the post-test than they were in the pre-tests. There was no significant difference in the types of online discussion conditions.

4. CONCLUSION

In this study, the educational effects of OMDD were examined by setting three conditions: OMDD with five participants, OMDD with five participants and a facilitator, and OMDD with a pair. Each SPS and CS is described as follows.

As a result, this study has come to the same conclusion as Fujisawa (2018a), who conducted FMDD in terms of the categories “egocentric” and “care for others” among the SPS. However, peer standards, regional standards, and public values had lower scores in the post-test unlike what was shown in previous studies. These results suggest that implementing MDD reduces self-centered thinking regardless of whether online tools are used. In addition, the results of this study suggest that no face-to-face OMDD increases care for others. These results suggest that OMDD may have educational effects similar to FMDD for some SPS subscales. Regarding care for others, the score was higher after OMDD with the five participants than with a pair and with the five participants with the facilitator. These results differed from McCarron et al. (2021), who described the effects of student-led online discussion on other abilities. The results of this study suggest that face-to-face discussions might be more effective when it comes to things that are directly related to them, such as their peers and community.

Regarding the CS scale, there was no significant difference between OMDD conditions, as shown in Fujisawa (2022); however, in this study, the scores of nonverbal, assertion, and discussion scores increased after OMDD. From the above, it was suggested that CS might improve when performing MDD even using online tools. Conversely, the scores in listening and speaking decreased after OMDD. One possibility is that OMDD is performed online and the timing of speaking is slightly delayed compared with face-to-face communication, thereby making it difficult to communicate as smoothly as face-to-face communication. Alternatively, because OMDD is conducted online, it is possible that the audio of the discussion is not always more audible than the audio of the face-to-face discussion. Therefore, it makes sense to use some alternative features in online discussions. For example, Zoom, which was used in this study, also has the function of adding subtitles. Therefore, in some cases, adding subtitles at the time of OMDD might allow discussion participants to better understand the other participants’ talk. These results suggest that CS may be a mix of skills that can be refined face-to-face and skills that can be refined non-face-to-face (online). Therefore, it is meaningful to clarify the skills that can be nurtured by face-to-face discussions and those that can be nurtured by non-face-to-face (online) discussions and to use the discussion tools properly according to the skills that teachers want students to develop.

4.1. Future Tasks

Although face-to-face discussions are currently restricted, this study partially suggests that using online tools rather than giving up face-to-face discussions might have educational effects similar to what face-to-face discussions have. In particular, the student-teachers featured in this study also need to learn how to teach “thinking and deliberating” morality classes. Therefore, it is significant that they were able to experience moral discussion online without having to meet face-to-face. Moreover, online discussion has educational significance even after face-to-face discussion has become possible. This is because online tools can be used to conduct diverse moral discussions not only by specific persons (students in the same class or on the same campus) but also by different persons. Therefore, the use of online tools is expected to offer students with various attributes opportunities to discuss. Therefore, it will be meaningful to examine the educational effects of online moral discussion even in normal social situations in the future. Moreover, it is also meaningful to examine not only moral discussion in Zoom but also moral discussion in virtual reality, which is more natural to discuss.

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Table 1.
The basic statistics of the subscale scores of the scale for public space.

		Pre-test					Post-test				
		Egocentric	Peer standards	Regional standards	Care for others	Public values	Egocentric	Peer standards	Regional standards	Care for others	Public values
OMDD with five participants (n = 14)	M	9.9	11.8	21.6	20.9	22.2	10.6	11.2	21.2	21.9	21.8
	S										
	D	3.1	4.1	2.3	2	2	4.1	5	2.8	1.5	1.9
OMDD with five participants and a facilitator (n = 14)	M	10.4	12.6	20.1	21.1	22.2	9.9	11.4	20.1	20.5	22.4
	S										
	D	3.3	4.8	3	2.4	1.7	3.4	4.8	3.6	3.4	2.7
OMDD with pair (n = 18)	M	9.4	11.7	19.3	21.2	22.1	8.7	11.4	19.6	21.2	21.9
	S										
	D	3.1	3.9	3.1	1.9	2.8	3	3.3	3.6	2.2	2.8

Table 2.
The statistics of the subscale scores of the communication skills.

		Pre-test				Post-test			
		Listening and speaking	Non verbal	Assertion	Discussion	Listening and speaking	Non verbal	Assertion	Discussion
OMDD with five participants (n = 14)	M	1.8	2.0	12.4	3.6	1.9	2.1	13.4	3.9
	SD	0.4	0.8	2.4	0.9	0.5	0.7	2.4	1.1
OMDD with five participants and a facilitator (n = 14)	M	1.7	1.9	12.4	4.2	1.6	1.7	12.5	4.1
	SD	0.6	0.5	2.9	0.8	0.5	0.7	2.0	1.0
OMDD with pair (n = 18)	M	1.8	1.8	13.6	4.1	1.7	1.9	13.8	4.1
	SD	0.5	0.8	2.2	0.9	0.6	0.7	2.6	0.9

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