Research on the Ethical Imbalance of Rising Online Live Class in Chinese Educational Institutions

Fan Jiqun[1,2,*]

[1]School of Foreign Languages, Huainan Normal University, Dongshan Road, Huainan, China
[2]School of Education, University of Perpetual Help System DALTA, Alabang-ZapoteRoad, Pamplona3, LasPiñasCity, Philippines
trainfan359@163.com
*Corresponding author

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic and wider application of information technology have enabled the fast popularity of online live class in Chinese universities, middle schools, and primary schools. However, the future development for online live class in Chinese educational institutions is not surely smooth. This paper conducts a questionnaire and follow-up interviews among teachers, students and parents in Chinese universities, middle schools, and primary schools to make a year-on-year comparison on the use of online live class in Chinese tertiary, secondary and primary education. The survey revealed online live class is probably not a voluntary choice for educational participants in Chinese schools. The follow-up interviews indicate ethical imbalances centering on interpersonal relations, health, the nature of education and role of participants might endanger the sustainable development of online live class.

Keywords: online live class, ethical imbalance, educational institutions

1. Introduction

In recent two decades, due to the boom of the internet technology, the intelligent teaching has become a new trend in China. MOOC, SPOC and Flipped Classroom are becoming widely-accepted and even recognized as a symbol of modern educational mode. The COVID-19 epidemic coupled with China's national first-class undergraduate course development has also contributed to the popular application of information technology in classroom activities.

Different from regular online education, online live class has registered some unique features and maintained an even faster growth. However, such a virtual teaching mode has also met some ethical troubles obstructing its sound development.

2. Online Live Class

2.1 Rise of Online Live Class

According to the 49th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development issued by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), by December 2021 Chinese netizens have outnumbered 1.032 billion with a year-on-year increase of 42.96 million and the internet coverage reached 73%. Among Chinese netizens, over 68.2% are online educational users, amounting to around 703million [1]. Undeniably, online live class has greatly facilitated the progress of educational technology. It has inherited advantages of modern internet-based educational mode, and , more importantly , complemented the online educational platform with the real-time interaction between teachers and students. Despite of its strength in revolutionizing the traditional class, online live class did not meet its boom until the breakout of the epidemic which once made offline face-to-face teaching impossible. After the compulsory use of online live class nationwide, now the technology become popularized in China. The second boom of the online live class technology arrived when the Ministry of Education in China introduced a guideline to ease the burden of excessive homework and off-campus tutoring for students undergoing compulsory education. All existing curriculum-based tutoring institutions will have to register as nonprofit organizations and no curriculum-based training will be allowed on weekends, national holidays or during winter and summer vacations[2]. Those restrictions on offline

training have given rise to rampant growth of online live class platforms.

Online live class, evolving from online education, features synchronous interaction between teachers and students. Different from asynchronous online education, online live class might be regarded as a replacement of traditional offline class. Besides, it has a higher demand for internet quality and more familiarity with the platform. In the past, online education used to function as a necessary complement for traditional offline class. In recent years, thanks to frequent lockdowns caused by COVID19 breakout, online live class became the only option for schools and universities at a certain time[3].

The complementary relations between the online and offline education turned alternative. However, such a replacement in some sense often turns to be compulsory not voluntary, leaving much room for possible ethical research.

2.2 Recent Research Trend on Online Live Class

According to www.cnki.com (A Chinese National academic research database), the earliest academic paper on online live class can be traced back to 2006. During a decade (from 2006 to 2015), 14 academic papers were published (Figure 1). In 2017, the number rose to 15, and has grown noticeably. It reached a climax in 2020, because in the first half of that year all the Chinese educational institutions were required to offer online courses. Later, the spread of the virus was effectively curbed in China, most of schools and universities restarted the traditional offline class and correspondingly the related academic research declined. In 2021, the academic papers collected by CNKI fell to 64, less than half of its peak in 2020. Those figures indicate that the popularity of online live class, to some extent, was stimulated by the epidemic. The rise and boom of online live class in China does not surely promise a sound development and bright future of the application of information technology in Chinese educational industry.
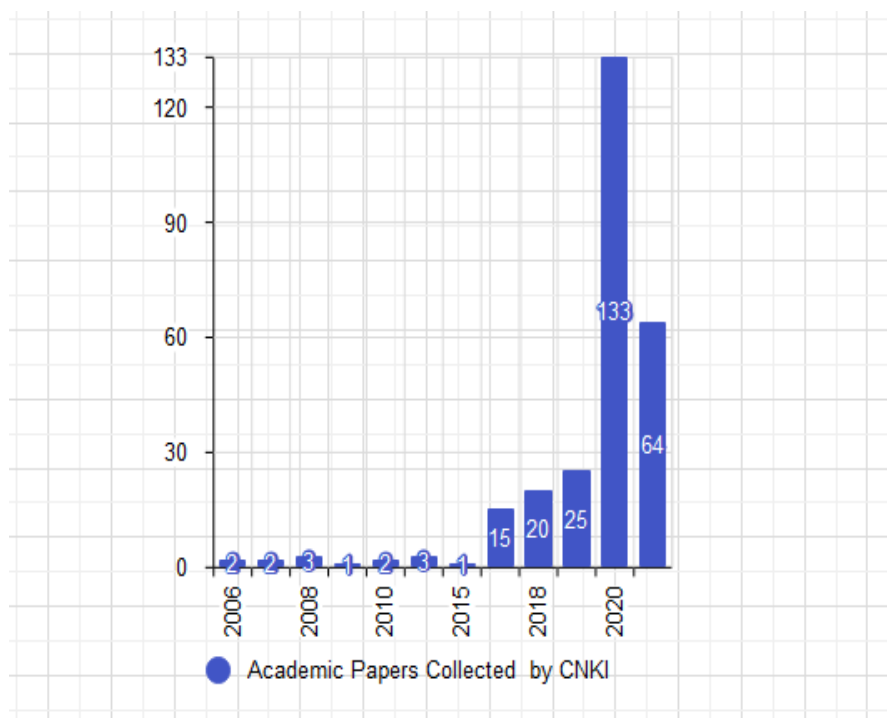

Figure 1: Academic papers collected by CNKI

2.3 Comparison among Different Online Live Class Platforms

The current online live class platforms fall into two categories. One is the public platform which features open access to the public and data-based profit-making. The other is the private platform developed and owned by individual training institutions to offer distance training nationwide to its trainees only. According to a united survey (Table 1) on the live online class platform in 2021, among top twenty platforms only six are public ones [4].

Table 1: China's Top 20 Online Educational Platform in 2021

Ranking	Platform Name	Private/Public	Note
1	Tencent Meeting	Public	Online Meeting Platform
2	Tomorrow Advancing Life	Private	K12 Online Training
3	Dingtalk	Public	Online Meeting Platform
4	Study Together	Private	K12 Online Training
5	Homework 100	Private	K12 Online Training
6	Gaotu	Private	K12 Online Training
7	POLYV	Private	K12 Online Training
8	Chinese University MOOC	Public	Online Class for University Students
9	YOUDAO Classic	Public	Online Training for All Ages
10	CC Talk	Private	Online Training for All Ages
11	New Oriental Online	Private	Online Training for All Ages
12	V. Huatu	Private	Online Training for Adults
13	FB Education	Private	Online Training for Teachers' Qualification Test
14	I-Chaoxing	Public	Online Class for University Students
15	Dui-a	Private	K12 Online Training
16	YQKJS	Private	K12 Online Training
17	NetEase Cloud Class	Public	Online Training for All Ages
18	Hujiang Online	Private	Online Training for All Ages
19	ClassIn	Private	K12 Online Training
20	Nanometer Box	Private	K12 Online Training

3. Investigations on Use of Online Live Class in Local Universities and Schools

In December 2021，a survey was conducted among five groups of educational participants covering 350 undergraduate students and 121 college teachers from two universities as well as 57 K-12 teachers , 277 K-12 students and 139 K-12 parents from seven local primary and secondary schools(K-12 hereafter refers to primary and secondary section of Chinese education, together constituting 12 years of pre-tertiary education).

The survey was focused on the participation in online live class in the first half of the year 2020 and the same period of the year 2021. The former time coincided with the outbreak of the epidemic and ensuing nationwide lockdown for almost half a year, while during the latter time the school education and after-school tutoring across the most part of the nation returned normal. All the respondents were required to fill a questionnaire and list reasons preventing them from more frequent use of online live class. After the questionnaire, some samples were selected respectively from the five groups for in-depth interview on their online live class experience. The survey revealed Tencent Meeting, Dingtalk, Tomorrow Advancing Life (TAL), I-chaoxing and Classin are top five online live class platforms used by local users. Interestingly, on campus the top four online live class platforms used by the tertiary education users are public platforms (I-chaoxing, Rain-class, Tencent Meeting and Dingtalk), while the top two in K-12 schools are Tencent Meeting and Dingtalk. Obviously, K-12 users do not have as many options as tertiary education users. According to K-12 teachers and students, no campus promotions or advertisements were made on online live class platforms. In contrast, in universities some platforms were very active. For example, for at least a decade I-chaoxing has been closely connected to the campus library and deeply involved in the virtual class development of the university. Rain-class, in past two or three years, started to engage actively with the universities and launched some promotions to popularize the use of Rain-class. The figure 2 and 3 below show the weekly length of the extracurricular online live education in the first half of the year 2020 and that of 2021 respectively. A sharp decrease can be noticed from 2020 to 2021, especially for K-12 students, K-12 teachers, and university students. The online live class here include the ones offered by school and universities for teacher-student meeting as well as those by after-school tutoring institutions which might take up the majority. Since K-12 students have a stronger demand for extracurricular training, the data changes on their side can best illustrate the recognition for online live class by the public. In the interview section, some teachers and students in both tertiary and K-12 education explained the online live class was held

mainly for teachers' teaching competition or online course development. Some of them even admitted that if conditions permitted, online live class would not be the best choice for respondents.

When it came to satisfaction with the online live class, the difference between tertiary education and K-12 education was not noticeable, while views on public online live class platforms and those private ones differ greatly, mainly on students' and parents' sides. To be specific, parents and students, especially K-12 ones, expressed stronger complaints on private online live class platforms where they voluntarily paid for online training service. The top three reasons discouraging the use of the online live class platform are health, network, and quality. In the interview section, respondents shared their different opinions on the online live class, which helped better understanding and analyses.
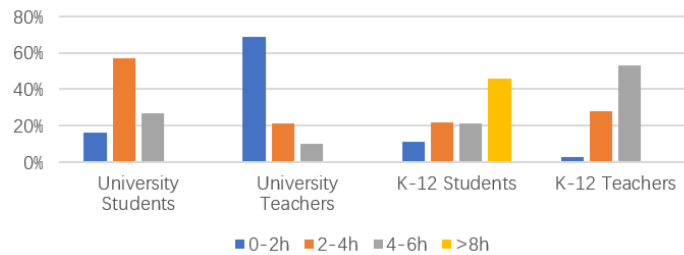

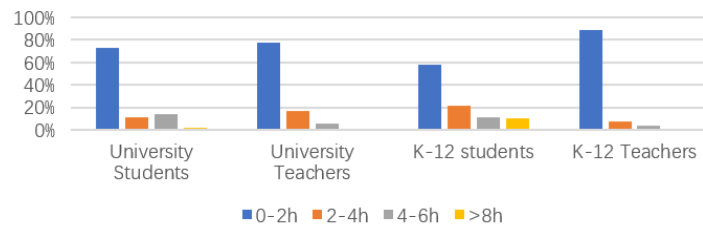*Figure 2: Weekly Length of Extracurricular Online Live Education in the First Half of 2020*

Figure 3: Weekly Length of Extracurricular Online Live Education in the First Half of 2020

4. Ethical Imbalances of Online Live Class

4.1 Educational Ethics

Educational ethics, in essence, is focused on values and morality in the process of education and attitudes towards a series of relationships among teachers, students, schools, institutions, and families. It often depicts an ideal picture of the education, teachers, students, parents, and other parties involved in education. American philosopher and educator John Dewey was among the first pioneers to put forward "educational ethics". He made contributions to its shaping as an independent discipline by linking individual progress with the good of society and emphasizing the personal morals. Since 1960s, western educational philosophers started to focus on basic values of education, the inner relations of participants, norms of ethics of educational profession, moral issues in education at various levels [5].

Since the arrival of information technology, the educational ecology has been gradually deconstructed and reconstructed. Extensive researches have been made on the ethical crises confronting educational stakeholders, the ethical alienation of IT-based education and social inequality caused by digital divide of AI education. In fact, facing the fast application of information technologies, people might get disoriented when exploring the ethical issues of modern education. The technology itself should not be the focus of the ethical study of education; instead, it can serve as a channel through which ethical analyses can be made, problems can be identified and addressed, and progress can be achieved [6].

During online teaching，teachers are expected to fulfil some tasks, namely monitoring students to follow instructions, encouraging students to experiment with online resources, leveraging the benefit of online teaching to support students' progress and assisting students to take more responsibilities [7]. Researches also showed the instructor's readiness can boost his confidence on the online teaching and the educational institutions should take concrete measures to help the teacher to get better prepared [8]. However, in some sense, obligations and ethical restrictions on the teacher side far outweigh those on other parties, leading to ethical imbalances and consequent conflicts among parties engaged. Those

ethical imbalances are hidden risks which might jeopardize the sound progress of online live class.

The ethical imbalance of online live class is largely a matter of technological ethics. It can be manifested on many fronts. To further examine the possible ethical imbalances caused by the technology, interviews were made with the previous respondents who held a negative attitude towards the application of online live class technology in Chinese educational institutions.

4.2 Possible Health Risks

According to the interview, teachers, and parents, especially those K-12 ones are more concerned about the possible health risks resulting from online live class. Among those worries, the potential hazard to eyesight ranked the first, followed by possible addiction to the online game and the cyber love. When it came to higher education side, the scenario was different. The health issue was no longer a concern. Among 55 interviewees, only 9 mentioned the possible hazards to eyesight or learning habits. Such a contrastive result is understandable: K-12 students are still minors, weaker in self-discipline and vulnerable to the net evils.

4.3 Interpersonal Relations Crisis

In the interview, the student interviewees also shared their difficulties in interpersonal communication. 91 students (both university students and K-12 students) felt isolated in an online live class. Moreover, the teacher-student interaction and communication were heavily reduced. About 29 university students admitted their repulsion when required to evaluate their teacher's performance at the end of the course. The same problems troubled teachers. Besides, for some parents of K-12 students, they could not afford much engagement in their children's online live class. The relations between parents and children or between parents and teachers turned strained. During the interview most of the interviewees called for stricter regulation in the online live class. Interestingly, 23 out of 59 parents interviewed expressed their hope that teachers could tighten their control over students in front of the screen, while 37 out of 62 middle teachers urged parents not to leave their kids studying alone. The same problem leading to demands for each other reflects the fragile teacher-parent relations.

4.4 Magnified Family Differences and Conflicts

In the interview, complaints on the efficiency and quality of the online live class were received from all sides: teachers, students, and parents. A typical example was the internet connection. Understandably, the internet quality may vary in different families due to their different network environment or terminal performance. In the interview, teachers tended to ascribe the poor internet connection to parents' irresponsibility or reluctance to cooperate, while parents, afflicted with deep remorse for the poor connection, felt being wronged and took a strong aversion to the online live class or even the teacher. The most vulnerable group is the students. They could do nothing to change the situation and started to feel oppressed by the education inequality among families. The students would blame their parents for the poor network connection or the backward computers and phones. (Especially when those students are left-behind kids whose parents are migrant workers struggling in big cities.) Therefore, objectively speaking , the online live class gave prominence to family differences which might be less visible in traditional classes.

4.5 Deconstruction of the Nature of Education

In February 2020, Dingtalk was rated 2.4, 1.4, 1.3, 1.4 in Apple app store, Huawei app market, Tencent app center and OPPO app store respectively, which might lead to the withdrawal of the software from the market [9]. Ironically, Dingtalk's poor rating resulted from its excellent performance in assisting teachers to regulate the online class. The raters, mainly K-12 students, were direct users of the service. The event reflected serious learning-weariness among Chinese youngsters as well as the deconstruction of the education itself. At the same time, students tended to show great interest in some technical programs like online games offered by some online live class platforms. Furthermore, some teacher interviewees complained that, in the online live class, the criteria of good teachers largely depend on the teacher's mastery of network-based technologies. The teachers' authority has been seriously dampened and the nature of education has been overlooked in the online live class. The online live class might shift the past student-centered education to a technology-centered one, throwing both teachers and students into a technological trap [10].

4.6 Possible Role Deviation

Another ethical crisis led by the online live class is the role deviation of parties engaged. As the teachers interviewed complained, they must act as the administer of the online class, the customer service personnel, the coordinator of the class and the recorder of the teaching activity. Besides, the online live class, especially those run by private educational institutions, lacks necessary certification for the online live class teachers. Some of the online class teachers are unqualified. At the same time, due to poor teacher-student interaction, the online live class has stimulated the market of ghost class-attender and the popularity of related truancy APPs. Teachers became operators; the platform turned to be knowledge disseminator and students were just onlookers. Such ethical imbalances were mainly caused by role dislocation between the real world and the virtual world[11].

5. Conclusions

The survey indicates that although online live class maintained a rapid growth in 2020 and, in some cases, replaced the traditional offline class, not all its users are ready to accept it after the lockdown. The complicated relations and ethical problems obstructed its fast maturity. There is still a long way to go before its replacement of the traditional offline class. However, the online live class marks a meaningful orientation for future educational innovation and development. More efforts need to be made on handling the inner relations among different sides and improving the technological support.

Acknowledgements

References

[1] CNNIC. (2022). The 49th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development. From the World Wide Web: http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/202202/t20220225_71727. htm.

[2] MOE. (2022). Guideline to Ease the Burden of Excessive Homework and Off-campus Tutoring for Students Undergoing Compulsory Education. From the World Wide Web: http: // www. moe.gov.cn/ jyb_ xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/202107/t20210724_546566.html.

[3] Mei Xinhua & Zhou Fangjun. (2021). Explorations on Universal Educational Technology Based on Live Broadcasting. J. China Modern Educational Equipment (06), 26-29.

[4] Chu Feng. (2021). Rankings of Online Live Class in 2021. J. China Internet Week (07), 14-15.

[5] Wang Zhengping. (2019). Educational Ethics: From the Perspective of Discipline Formation and Development. Journal of Shanghai Normal University (Philosophy & Social Sciences Edition) (02), 32-40.

[6] Li Tingxian. 2010. Systems and Cases of Educational Ethics, Press of Anhui Normal University. Wuhu, 1st Edition.

[7] Antoni, Badia., Consuelo, Garcia. & Julio Meneses. (2017). Approaches to teaching online: Exploring factors influencing teachers in a fully online university. J. British Journal of Educational Technology. 48, 1193-1207.

[8] Bolliger, Doris. U. & Halupa, Colleen. (2022). An Investigation of Instructors' Online Teaching Readiness. J. Tech Trends. 66, 185-195.

[9] Zhao Chenwei. & Liu Tao. (2020). Research on Reasons for Mass Extreme Reaction and Corresponding Guidance: A Case Study of Low ranking of Dingtalk Software. J. Journal of Jilin Radio and TV University (09), 18-19.

[10] Sun Tianlinzi. (2021). On the Betterment Possibility of Technology---Logical Start of AI Educational Ethics. J. Higher Education Exploration. 05, 34-38+102.

[11] Zhang Zhihua. &Ji Kai. (2021). Reflection and Response to the Artificial Intelligence Education from the Perspective of Applied Ethics. J. Journal of Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications (Social Science). 05, 1-10.