

Writing, Typing, Drawing ... And Perhaps Colouring Too!

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Background

When Malaysia implemented its first movement control order (MCO) on 18 March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Sunway University (SU) is among one of those tertiary institutions that swiftly transitioned to online teaching and learning.

Under such unprecedented, extraordinary circumstance, learners were forced to attend courses remotely. While grappling with the sudden transition to a completely unfamiliar learning environment, learners had to adjust to learning in isolation.

Learner retention in online courses is, in general, lower than those conducted face-to-face (Boston & Ice, 2011). Therefore, providing student support to overcome learning barriers and to ensure learner engagement, motivation and success while reducing the sense of isolation in online higher education is crucial (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Rotar, 2020; Muljana & Luo, 2019 as cited in Rotar, 2022).

Teaching Concerns

At SU, the Communication Skills course, which covers three broad aspects of communication as shown below, was one of the courses taught during the initial transition to online teaching and learning.

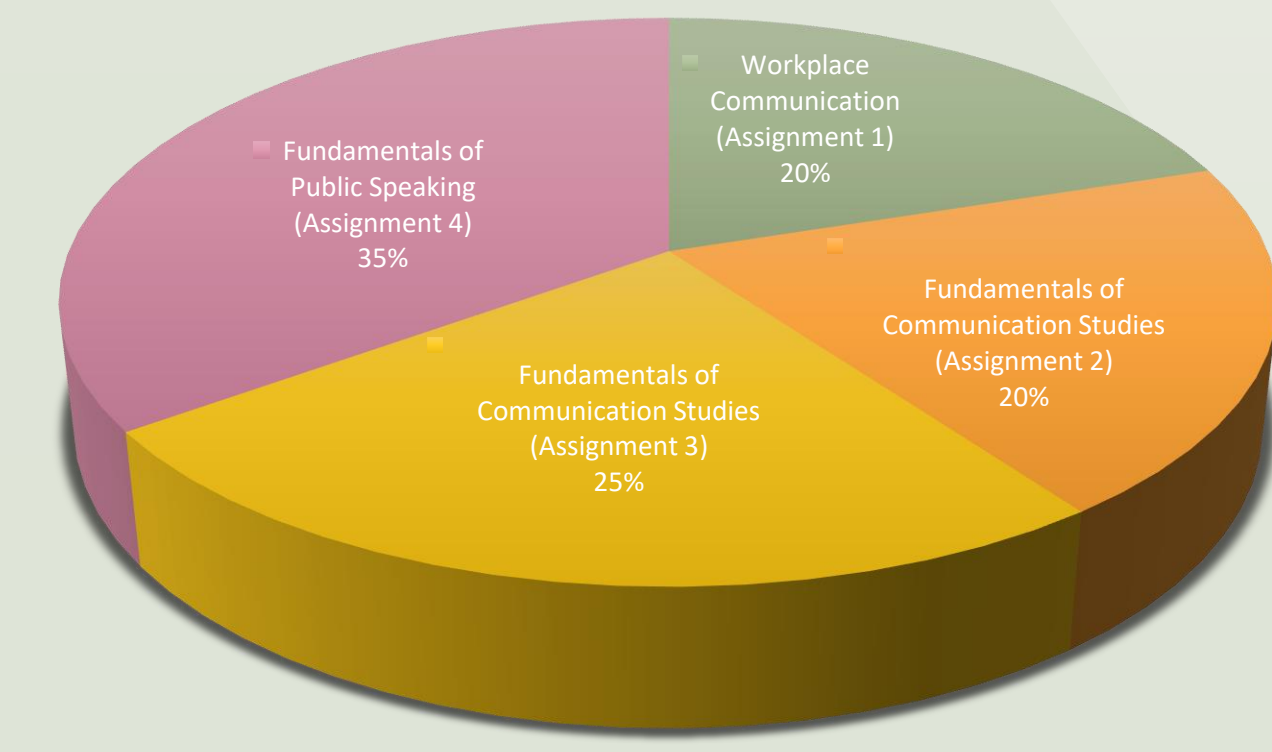


Figure 1 Communication Skills – curriculum content and distribution of assessment weightage according to course components

While two of the curriculum contents focus on developing important soft skills, Fundamentals of Communication Studies, contributing a combined assessment weightage of 45% to the final grade, deals with many communication concepts.

Students often find learning these concepts overwhelming and, at times, confusing because some concepts appear/are discussed in more than one chapter. Therefore, providing support to help learners obtain a clearer picture of what each chapter covers, prevent missing out any of the concepts discussed, and avoid confusion is pivotal.

On top of these challenges that learners must deal with even during face-to-face lessons, the hurdles of learning remotely that would demotivate learners and impede learning altogether substantiate further the need for appropriate support in learning.

Teaching Strategies Adopted

To support students' learning in this course, mind-mapping technique was adopted.

Mind Mapping Technique

The Mind Map, a concept originated in 1970 by Tony Buzan, is a graphical technique that utilises the full range of cortical skills – word, image, number, logic, rhythm, colour, and spatial awareness – in a single, uniquely powerful way (Buzan, 2017).

Mind maps can be applied in various aspects to improve learning. To support student learning in my context, they are used for overviewing the whole picture of a topic, organising and presenting details more clearly, engaging with the content, other learners and the teacher, analysing thoughts, and lastly facilitating revision and assessment.

Learning Theories

Cognitive Approach to Learning

Cognitivism helps us understand the connections between new information and concepts and the already existing knowledge, as well as the active processing and reconstructing of new information logically. This process, which maximises memory and retention capacity (Luangkrajang, 2022), supports the mind-mapping strategy employed here.

Use of Mind Maps in Teaching and Learning

Studies have shown that mind-mapping tasks integrated into the online learning environment create a sense of ownership of knowledge in learners transforming them into active learners; meanwhile the teacher plays a supportive role as a coordinator and facilitator to support learning (Buran & Filyukov, 2015; Luangkrajang, 2022).

Mind-mapping techniques also promote inclusive teaching that accounts for the different learning styles of learners in class (Buran & Filyukov, 2015). When transforming textual descriptions into visual representations, visual learners may comprehend lesson content better, logical learners may benefit from the organisation and patterns of ideas in a mind map, and social learners can learn through the interaction and collaboration with their peers while engaging in discussion as a part of the mind-mapping activities (Luangkrajang, 2022).

Implementation

Mind-mapping is one of the few learning activities selected for this course to support students' learning towards achieving two of the course Learning Outcomes (LOs). The following chart shows the learning activities designed to achieve the LOs and also the positioning of mind maps in the process.

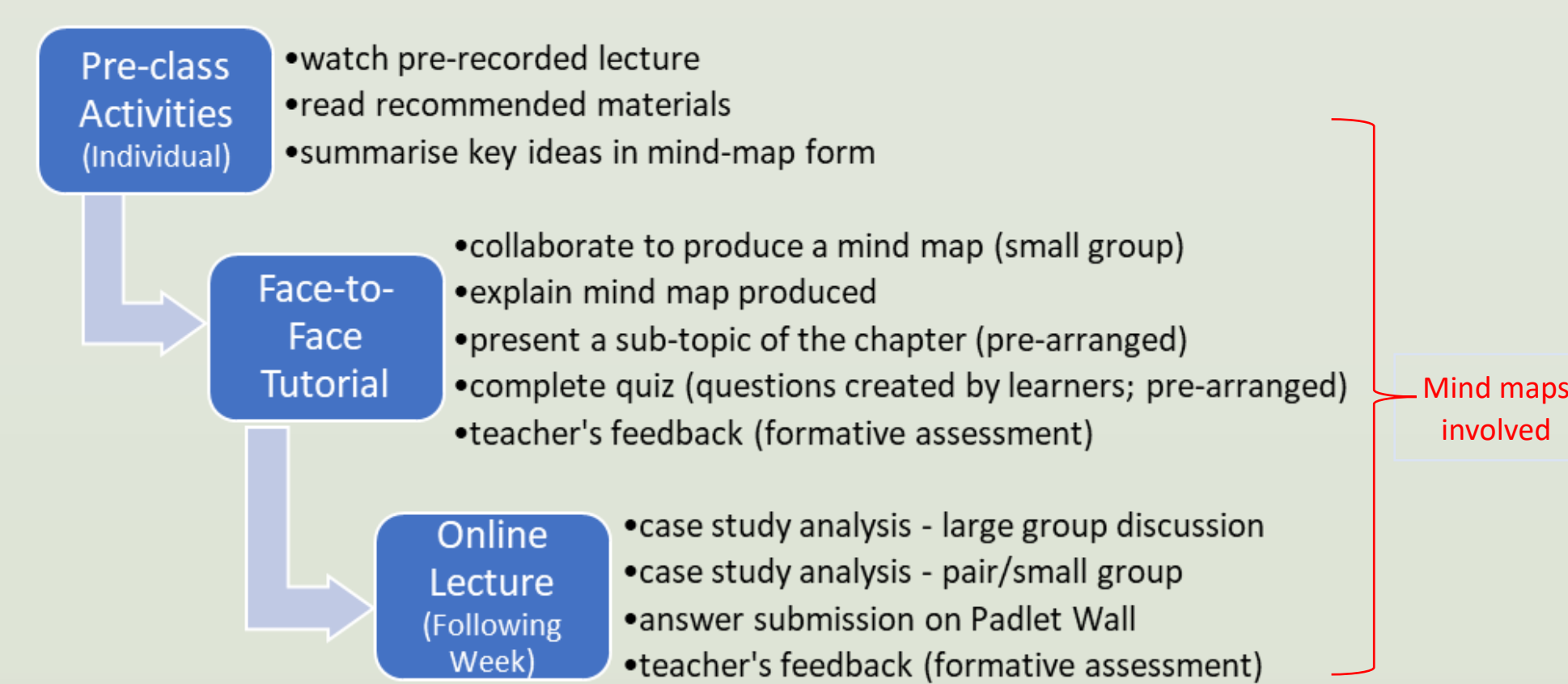


Figure 2 Learning activities to support learning and to achieve LOs (Current Practice). Teaching approaches employed during the pandemic have been adjusted to allow more active learning activities in class and to enhance engagement further. This also leads to higher engagement with mind maps compared to those days during the pandemic.

Pre-Class Activities

- Learner engages with lesson content (pre-recorded lecture and reading materials).
- Learner creates mind-map summarising all concepts of the chapter and save it in his/her folder on MS Teams.
- Students can use Word document, any online mind-map tools like mindmeister, or even paper and coloured pens to create their mind maps.

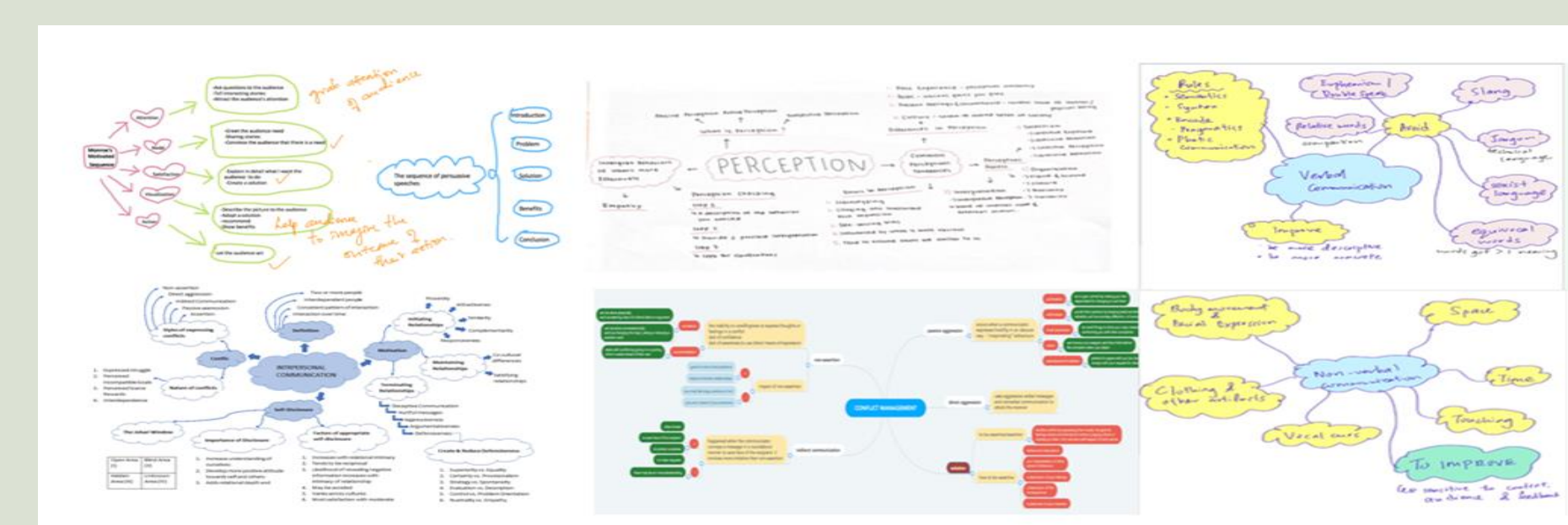


Figure 3 Collection of mind-maps from pre-class activities. Mind maps created by individual learners could be either hand-written, hand-drawn, digitally created or mixed method as shown above.

Tutorial (Face-to-Face)

Activity 1: Topic Summary

- In small groups, students refer to the given materials and/or their mind-maps, discuss, plan and prepare a summary of the topic. Groups draw their mind-maps on whiteboards around the classroom. A group representative briefly explains the mind-map to the class.

- The teacher checks if students summarise the key components correctly; shows learners how these key components are connected to enhance understanding of the topic; and clarifies any doubtful areas during and at the end of the activity. All approved mind maps will be uploaded and shared with learners from other tutorial groups.

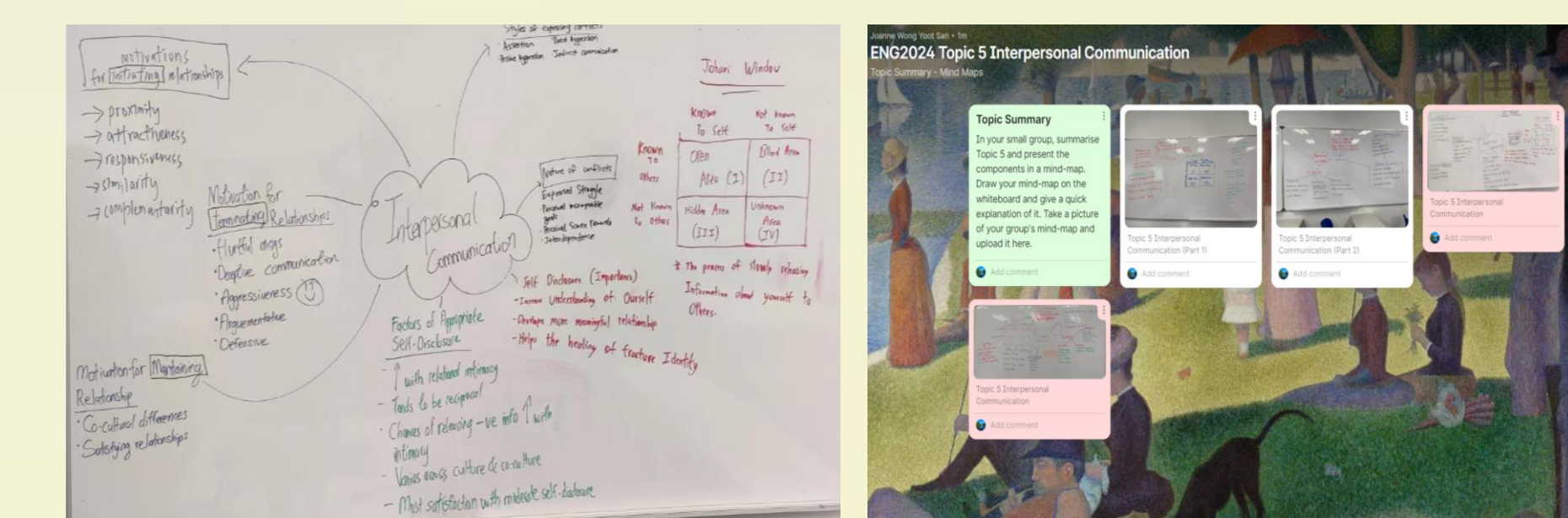


Figure 4 An example of mind map created during tutorial (left). After the teacher's feedback, each group corrects or improves its mind map, and uploads the final version to Padlet Wall as shown above (right)

Activity 2: Group Presentation

- Group responsible for the topic planned for the week presents their content.
- Group runs the quiz they have prepared after the teacher's feedback. The 10-15 questions focus on the topic presented.
- Group discusses the questions after the quiz.
- Teacher fills in learning gaps – correcting mistakes, filling in missing details, and elaborating or explaining unclear ideas.

Lecture (Online)

Case Study Analysis

- Large group discussion - discuss a sample case. Pair/Small group – practise analysing another case in breakout rooms.
- Teacher checks and gives feedback to improve the answers submitted through Padlet Wall.

Observable Findings and Impact on Learning and Students

Teacher's observation during tutorial

- Students who did the pre-class activities would lead the group discussion.
- Those who do not do/complete the pre-class activities refer to given materials to participate in the activity.
- Besides discussing and collaborating within the same group, some learners compare their mind maps with other groups and revise the content if necessary.
- Students revise and improve their mind-maps after the teacher's feedback.
- While attempting the quiz, learners refer to the mind maps drawn on the whiteboards around the class.

Teacher's observation during group discussion and coursework consultation

- Students refer to mind-maps (own or those created by groups) while completing class activities.
- Similar behaviour observed when discussing with peers and the teacher while working on assignments.

Impact on Learning and Students

There were a few occasions when learners told me that they used mind-maps to make notes in other courses and even workshops they attended. These students find mind-map helpful as it requires, the least, only keywords to show how ideas are connected. In addition, it shows all main ideas on one page that could be expanded as desired by the student himself/herself.

Conclusions

Not every learner finds this strategy helpful. Some even find it unnecessary as non-submission of mind-maps was observed on some occasions when attendance could be affected.

However, as a teacher, I find this strategy a helpful tool to detect problems like missed concepts or inaccurate content understanding, and these problems could be addressed in class immediately.

From the learner's perspective, it is observed that mind maps are used again to review the topic for practices and assignment purposes. Although not all students create their mind-maps, I strongly believe that in the process of creating one in class followed by other learning activities involving discussion and collaboration among learners would benefit many in aspects like enhanced engagement, learning of content through active learning activities, and repetition of content (from mind-mapping to briefing, group presentation, quizzes, and case study practices).

Recommendations for Practice

Summing up the results of my personal teaching experiences employing mind-mapping technique in the communication skills course, it is an effective learning strategy for theoretical learning.

Findings also show that mind-maps help improve learners' English language ability, and also develop creative, critical thinking, collaborative and organisational skills which could be applied to other subjects and learning environment (Luangkrajang, 2022).

References

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Further Information

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