

第7回 2021年度英語ライティングコンテスト

【2021年度テーマ】

The future of online communication:

The introduction of online classes and business meetings as a way to stay safe during the pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to evaluate the usefulness or otherwise of online communication from Zoom to social media. Discuss ways in which online communication technology might offer benefits or challenges to businesses or other organizations in the future.

【2021年度入賞者】

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■講評

第7回英語ライティングコンテストは、前回に引き続きコロナ禍の中での開催となりました。身近な課題を未来につなげる本テーマについて学生独自の視点からリサーチを重ね、自らの論点を述べたものが多くみられました。来年度以降のさらなる向上・発展が期待されます。

■入賞エッセイ

入賞者全3名のエッセイは、以下ページに公開しております。

第 1 位 Zhu Yunshi (朱 韻詩)

Benefits and Challenges of online education

Online communication is the way people communicate through the internet using tools such as video conferencing, instant messaging, forums, and email. Since the advent of globalization and the Internet, online communication has gradually played a greater role in people's lives. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic has made online communication essential for people working or studying from home. Many schools and students experienced online education due to campus closures. In Japan, around 90 percent of universities offered their courses online (MEXT, 2020). Online education now seems realistic as a regular option for universities in the future, for our increasing presence online. Therefore, this essay will focus on the benefits and challenges that offer to universities for online learning in the future.

Online learning could potentially help encourage students to pursue higher education (Bouchirka, 2020). This might become a potential benefit to schools for more students and more revenues due to the flexibility of online education. According to a survey in 2021 Trends in Online Education published by BestColleges (2021), students are motivated to choose online degree programs for many reasons. There is no surprise that the largest portion of the participants, 37% of student participants choose online learning because of COVID-19. However, 23% of students said it was their work and family's existing commitments that don't allow for attendance in campus-based courses, and 18% of them claimed that online learning was the only way to pursue their field of interest. In addition, Snyder, Brey & Dillow (2018) have found that there has been an increasing trend in the number of people taking online courses despite the COVID-19 situation. The percentage of students taking one or more online undergraduate classes increased from 15.6% in 2004 to 43.1% in 2016. Undergraduate students taking fully online degree programs was 3.8% in 2008 but 10.8% in 2016. The percentage of graduate students who took fully online graduate degree programs has also increased, the number was 6.1% in 2008, but 27.3% in 2016. Apparently, COVID-19 is not the only reason people choose to enroll in online courses. Online learning may give students the opportunity to pursue higher education, also may have opened pathways for institutions.

However, financial budgets for remote and online learning are widely considered as a challenge to higher education institutions. According to 2021 Trends in Online Education, an institution researching the latest trend of American universities (p. 33), 21% among those interviewees take the highest concern about the institutional finances. In the future, to fulfill the responsibility and obligation of higher education, universities are expected to have the infrastructures prepared for students not only physically on campus but also remotely in

technology. Meanwhile, those institutions are urged to deal with the overwhelming cost which is expected to be considered from accidental cost by pandemic into the necessary cost. To make sure every registered student has the facilities to allow them to take online courses and to offer the technology which can guarantee mass online education is predicted to bring financial burden to the colleges. However, the cost is necessary and vital to education providers. Providing access for every student under various circumstances of each family background is essential to education equality which is the principle that every educational institution must stick to. The challenge is, except for tuition from students or possible support from the government, how can colleges ensure the source of income?

Online education may degrade the quality of teaching and learning is considered as another concerning latent challenge. Alawamleh, Al-Twait&Al-Saht (2020) demonstrated that online education can affect communication between instructors and students in a negative way. Due to many existing problems they face when they take online classes, a significant majority of students still prefer offline classes. For example, lack of motivation, materials that are difficult to understand, inadequate communication between students and instructors, and other features of the current online learning context. According to research conducted by MEXT in 2021, regarding the drawbacks of online learning, 43.9% of the student respondents think they have few or no chances to ask questions or discuss topics together, and 42.9% of respondents say online classes are more difficult to understand than face-to-face classes. For these reasons, finding effective ways to keep improving the quality of online education is still a big challenge leaving to universities in the future.

There is no doubt that online education will bring benefits such as potentially helping encourage students to participate in higher education, yet there are still a lot of challenges including financial budgets and the quality of online higher education that need to be overcome. We simply cannot deny that the future without the Internet is unimaginable. Therefore, the rushed development of online communication since 2020 may create an opportunity and accelerate the integration of new technologies. (791 words)

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第 1 位 Takahashi Kohei (高橋 浩平)

The Benefits of Telework after the Pandemic

As online communication technologies including Zoom have made progress, it is possible for people to work from home during COVID-19. According to a survey conducted in 2020, among all eight major countries, the number of workers who used telework significantly increased and its record of urban China was up to 75% (Mori, 2021). Telework, the alternative word of remote work and telecommuting, is defined as “a way of flexible working that enables workers to get access to their labor activities from different locations by the use of information and communication technologies” (Perez et al., 2003). Although teleworking was not widely utilized before the pandemic, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled many workers all over the world to be teleworkers. Under unprecedented circumstances, one concern about the future of telework is whether teleworkers will return to their offices or continue to work from home after the pandemic abates. Some managers of organizations consider that telework will possibly last after COVID-19 while others think of it as just a temporary measure during the pandemic. Unfortunately, many of them ignore the benefits of telework itself. However, the attempts to consider the benefits of telework should be made more carefully to make the best decision of work styles after the pandemic. There are three main benefits that promote telework as follows: profitability, diversity, and work-life balance in terms of human resource management.

First of all, the possible advantage of implementing telework is to improve labor productivity. There are some studies on the influence of teleworking on productivity in a normal situation. For instance, Bloom et al. (2015) experimented with approximately 16,000 employees who worked from home in a Chinese travel agency and found that the implementation of telework increased by 13% of their performance. They argue that the improvement of its performance can be attributed to the days with fewer breaks and sicknesses and to the work environment where is quieter and more convenient for the employees. In addition, based on an experiment, Dutcher (2012) argues that telework positively affects the productivity of creative tasks but has negative implications on the productivity of tedious work. Although the performance results depend on the content of tasks, these studies imply that teleworking can contribute to the enhancement of productivity in a normal situation after the pandemic.

Second, telework has a high potential to promote diversity in workplaces regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Morgan (2004) suggests that telework can develop employment opportunities for women, the elderly, and disabled persons. In particular, telework provides opportunities for married women with a child. Kawabata and Abe (2018) examined how intra-metropolitan spatial patterns of female labor force participation were related to commuting times in Tokyo, Japan. They found that a longer commute time of married women is linked to lower participation and employment rates whereas these

connections were unrelated to women who were childless or unmarried. To put it the other way around, this result indicates that telework that lessens commute time contributes to female labor force participation. These studies show that telework probably promotes more diversified employment for those who have difficulty commuting to the office for some reason.

Last but not least, the work-life balance of employees can be improved by the implementation of telework regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ammons and Markham (2004) analyzed the data of 14 skilled white-collar teleworkers at home and concluded that telework could be regarded as the means of increasing an individual's work-life balance, based on the reason that telework reduced conflicts between work and family. As a matter of fact, work-life balance does not always increase if there is a strict condition to work.

According to the study conducted by Bailey and Kurland (2002), working longer time had a negative effect on the work-life balance of the individuals. Therefore, telework contributes to improving the work-life balance of employees unless they have to work long hours or more days. To take these studies into consideration, telework improves work-life balance unless teleworkers have to work longer hours than usual in the office.

In the end, although many managers unthoughtfully regard telework as only a short-term solution to continue work during the COVID-19 situation, telework itself has the long-term benefits of enhancing labor profitability, promoting diversity, and improving work-life

balance, all of which should be considered carefully. Of course, it is difficult to make the best decision under the current uncertain situation where no one knows when and whether the pandemic will abate. However, it is no exaggeration to say that the efforts to consider the most effective choice from the long-term perspective is deeply related to the successful future.

(769 words)

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How Computer Screens Saved Chain Gyms during the Pandemic

Chain gyms such as Anytime Fitness and Gold's Gym sell affordable membership fees for as low as 10 USD a month and typically offer a wide variety of exercise equipment that cater to different needs of clients in an ample space. However, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic rocked the gym industry in America as the government imposed strict movement restrictions at the peak of America's pandemic in March 2020. From big chains to smaller studios, fitness centres closed in compliance with the pandemic restrictions to prevent contagion spread. The Wall Street Journal reported that at the end of 2020, around 6,400 health clubs had permanently closed. This essay will discuss how chain gyms adapted to the pandemic by incorporating online communications technology to deliver their services to customers isolating at home, the results of their drastic change in operations, and implications for the future of the fitness industry. The chain gyms in America will be used as a point of reference in this essay.

Brick-and-mortar gyms have started implementing online telecommunication technology platforms like Zoom and YouTube, on top of developing fitness applications to reel in and retain customers. For example, Life Time Inc., a fitness chain with 150 physical branches in the US, launched a digital membership program in December 2020. At 15 USD per month, members can access on-demand workout videos and join live streams of exercise classes. Furthermore, health-tracking features such as calories burned and heart rate are available for members who link their iPhones to the program's smartphone application. The company also takes advantage of members participating from their own homes by offering classes that require gym equipment conveniently sold on their online store such as dumbbells or resistance bands.

Indoor stationary cycling studio "SoulCycle" took to developing and selling an exercise bike priced at 2,500 USD to be used at home in conjunction with their fitness application Equinox+, which mimics the experience of exercising at the studio by streaming live classes with instructors at the price of 39.99 USD per month. As a result, SoulCycle was still able to continue operating after a year even after having all their physical outlets closed all over America and Canada due to pandemic-related restrictions. It is clear that embracing technology and adapting business operations to fit the pandemic-stricken consumer's needs effectively prevented gyms from permanently going out of business.

However, this is not favourable for gyms where their primary source of revenue comes from members who utilise their physical branches. A survey conducted by McKinsey & Co in November 2020 showed that out of 2,204 adults who switched to online fitness programs, 68% did not plan on quitting said platform in the long run. (Davalos, 2021) One reason for the lukewarm response that gyms have received from members upon their reopening is the lingering fear of catching the Coronavirus from

other gyms goers, especially in big health clubs that are designed to fit a large number of people. (Terlep, 2021) Furthermore, the surge of home workout videos and fitness blogs from online content creators has enticed inactive gym members to cancel their memberships in favour of the convenience that on-demand content provides to fit in time for exercise into their schedules more efficiently. (Scott, 2021)

Despite this, it is undeniable that brick-and-mortar gyms provide the physical space and equipment as well as the access to direct contact with professional fitness instructors, which cannot be replicated through a digital application. The benefits of physical gyms are evident for members who do not have large personal workout spaces or the financial ability to purchase specific equipment needed for some exercises. Additionally, heavy weightlifting and other forms of exercise that require an instructor to be physically present to check on form and prevent possible injury cannot be effectively performed via a digital landscape. Gyms would most likely maintain a hybrid physical-online approach to meet the fitness needs of their clientele who wish to continue their routines at a physical gym and those who have already taken a liking to working out at home.

In conclusion, the digital approach to gym exercise, which was once thought to only happen at fitness centres, has undoubtedly contributed to fitness companies surviving the pandemic. However, it will not render physical outlets obsolete because there is a need to be at a physical location in order to do certain exercises safely. It is also worth noting that the chain gym industry has been able to coexist with other entities that threaten to upend it, such as boutique gyms and personalised CrossFit studios that have shrunk their market share. Thus, the longevity of chain gyms should not be considered a crisis even during post-pandemic so long as they remain flexible and focus on meeting the current needs of both their physical and digital members.

(799 words)

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