

# Lean on Me Project: Creating a Sense of Belonging through a Program-Wide Music Video

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When COVID-19 transitioned all of Keiwa College's courses online in the first semester of 2020, instructors in charge of English communication classes (KEEP B and Communication Skills B) were concerned about creating a sense of belonging in the new community where the members have never met with each other. Other concerns included students not having their textbooks and not being familiar with the online tools. By planning ahead a coordinated, program-wide, three week-long project, instructors managed to suffice the first weeks of the semester while students collaboratively worked to showcase their talents such as singing, dancing, playing an instrument, writing messages, and drawing. This report includes the initiation and execution of the project to cope with an Emergency Remote Teaching period and the result of the post-project survey which leads to the discussion of the validity of the project objectives to build communities of learners even when distance learning and interaction were the primary forms of communication. Language classrooms, even online, can provide a sense of belonging, build a community of learners where diversity is celebrated.

## Background

### Covid-19 Emergency Remote Teaching

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) COVID-19 declared that the outbreak had become a worldwide pandemic. The impact of its devastation is still being felt all across the globe as of January 2021. While several sectors of society have been critically affected, it can be argued that educational institutions have been one of the most impacted. Indeed, several days after the COVID-19 announcement, over 800 million students and teachers stretching over 100+ countries were affected by sudden school closures and the promptness to

reform how educational instruction was to be given (Viner et al., 2020). Various schools and universities were already applying remote teaching and online learning before the pandemic (Toquero, 2020); however, this resulted in a situation where both students and teachers were asked to change their learning system from a face-to-face setting to a digital one. Ultimately, most institutions were not adequately prepared or trained in a quick reforming of policies and teaching methods.

The use of technology in the classroom is not something new; many classrooms were using some form of it, whether digital media, applications, IT equipment, or even a simple tape recorder. However, most of the time, it was a supplement to a lesson; this was the first time technology had to be relied on as a primary mode to teach a class (Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020). This came to be called Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) to describe a temporary shift to the online classroom (Hodges et al., 2020).

Many different online applications, software, and other digital resources became the focal point of additional research and training. This centralized collaboratively with Learning Management Systems (LMS) to effectively implement ERT. At Keiwa College, the LMS of choice is Google Classroom, one of the more popular systems for distributing classroom materials. Before Google Classroom, Keiwa College did not have an adequate online portal system in which to communicate information to students or faculty; handouts and email were the choices of communication. When it came time for hastily implementing a brand new system, there was a significant amount of confusion and a larger learning curve than anticipated. As a result, meetings and workshops were largely dedicated to streamlining teachers to an online format.

Other institutions have other LMS utilized with their communities, each with its advantages and challenges; nevertheless, its usage was greatly accelerated (Lynch, 2020). However, teachers' and students' preferences during this crisis are still unknown, and additional research is most likely warranted. The shift in teaching from face-to-face classes to virtual remote teaching can seemingly influence the overall educational system. There was a pressing need for quickly implementing a working online education system. With the inclusion of additional LMS training (ibid.), institutions were and are continuing to be able to transition to adequate ERT systems. At Keiwa College, while there were growing pains, teachers

have primarily become more comfortable with and able to navigate around using LMS systems during this time of Emergency Remote Teaching.

### **Anticipated difficulties for students**

Before the 2020 first semester was set to resume online in mid-May, A. Ooiwa, as a program coordinator, was concerned about a number of issues. She was certain that the sophomore students had experience using Google online tools to some extent, and many were familiar with Google Classroom as English instructors utilized it in the previous years. However, there was no information on how familiar the freshmen enrollees were with the necessary tools such as Gmail, Google Documents, Google Slides, Google Sheets, Google Forms, Google Classroom and Zoom. Although the duration of ERT was still uncertain at the beginning of the semester, it was apparent that students had to learn those tools quickly to resume their university studies. Skills to utilize online tools, similar to learning a foreign language vocabulary and grammar, are hard skills that are teachable and can be acquired through practice. Another concern within the program was how to utilize the students' soft skills, which are needed for communication, interaction, working with a partner or in a group, taking leadership, and maintaining one's motivation. Utilizing or nurturing students' soft skills through online classes felt quite challenging. Freshmen enrollees would not get to know each other, be able to ask questions after class, or simply meet in person. This unusual circumstance, undoubtedly, would affect how freshmen enrollees create their sense of belonging in a new academic environment as well. Knehta, Chatzikyriakidou, and McCatney (2020) explain in their report on department wide study that 'sense of belonging' has positive association with academic achievement and retention. Strayhorn (2019) defines a sense of belonging as "a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior" and that "in terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers" (p.4). Building students' sense of belonging to each other and to the academic community, without meeting each other face-to-face or being on campus seemed rather unattainable.

The challenge seemed especially concerning with the number of students with Specific Learning Differences (SpLD) and other developmental uniqueness increasing in Japanese tertiary education, and Keiwa College is no exception. This increase in the number of students with various learning differences and neurodiversity emphasizes the need for inclusion, differentiated instruction and accommodation, especially in classes where learners need to interact, collaborate and communicate with each other in a foreign language (Ooiwa and Yap, 2020). Furthermore, with or without SpLD, having been accustomed to fixed educational structures, procedures, and available support systems in middle and high school, the new and less sheltered tertiary education environment and requirement can be quite jarring for all freshmen enrollees even with the regular in-person campus life. The initial culture shock and the difficulty in adjusting to the university system will be greater online, especially for students who lack interpersonal skills.

### **Anticipated challenges for teachers**

ERT led the teachers in the English communication department to start utilizing Zoom application in meetings. As the teachers in charge of speaking and listening classes were somewhat familiar and experienced with Google tools, they volunteered to host workshops, provide assistance, and answer questions as they rose within and out of the department faculties. On the other hand, teaching fully online was something none of them had any experience. This sudden adjustment to online classes was particularly demanding to two new teachers on the team. One of the full time visiting instructors, H. Barnetson and one of the part time teachers were completely new to the program. This meant that familiarizing themselves to the new tertiary environment, learning about the system and the program, and learning about the students had to be done without being on campus, without the other teachers' guidance and assistance. Another anticipated challenge due to starting the new academic year online also emerged from the circumstance in which students would not have textbooks for weeks. Some of the textbooks chosen for the year 2020 contained extensive online practice and resources, which would have been useful; however, students could not receive their orders for weeks. Chinese students in English classes, who could not enter Japan due to the border closure, finally received their books towards the end of the semester due to

unavailable shipping at that time.

Without any online teaching experience, some even without tertiary level teaching experience, and without textbooks to use, a set of coordinated, pre-planned lessons for the first three weeks seemed like a solution to adversity.

## Project

As an alternative measure to cope with the difficulty anticipated by ERT, we adopted Project-Based Learning (hereafter PBL) approach. Gras-Velezquez (2020, p.1) explains that although PBL can be approached from multiple perspectives, educators acknowledge that the definition of PBL contains several common features, including the following:

- 1) being a process and an end product
- 2) encouraging student ownership
- 3) extending over a period of time and not being confined to one class session
- 4) integrating different skills
- 5) committing to both language and content learning
- 6) facilitating both collaborative and individual work
- 7) requiring students to take responsibility for their own learning (through gathering, processing, and reporting information)
- 8) giving students and educators new roles and responsibilities in the learning process
- 9) having an end product
- 10) concluding with a reflection of both process and the product

Coperias-Aguilar (2020) describes Project-Based Language Learning to be based on contextualized cooperative learning which is also learner-centered, with social practices that emerge as the participants collaboratively move toward shared goals and output. In addition, it should also have an impact on people outside the classroom and be incorporated into the surrounding community. Stoller and Myers (2020, p.27) specify five stages of the PBL framework as follows:

Stage 1: Preparation Cycle

Stage 2: Information Gathering Cycle

Stage 3: Information Processing Cycle

Stage 4: Information Display Cycle

Stage 5: Reflections Cycle

The following section focuses on the stages of the program-wide project.

### **Stage 1: Preparation Cycle**

The goal of this project was to (a) get to know the students while students familiarize themselves with their peers; (b) assign series of low-stake activities using online tools so that students build enough skills to handle future high-stake assignments; (c) ease the burden of teachers to plan lessons without textbooks while being accustomed to ERT. Commonly, the preparation stage involves determining the project theme, topics, final outcomes, and a plan for progressing from start to finish. According to explanation provided by Stoller and Myers (2020), the most effective projects “(a) center on themes viewed by students as relevant to their communities, studies, and lives; (b) are supported by plentiful resources, (c) arouse student curiosity, (d) motivate students, and (e) have the potential to stimulate pride among students” (pp. 25-26). Teachers in charge of listening and speaking classes met and discussed the final outcome to be a music video featuring all students, using the song “Lean On Me” written by Bill Withers. The song was more preferential among other options because of the simplicity of the vocabulary and the straightforward message which reflected the project’s goal. “ArtistsCAN” (2020) cover version of the song was selected as this charity music video created by Canadian artists is available on YouTube with subtitles. It was used both as teaching material and as a model for Keiwa’s project (see Appendix A for the lyric). Refer to table 1.1 which shows how a program-wide project meant involving eleven classes in the program with varying levels. Sophomore English course consists of four levels varying from CEFR Pre-B1 to Upper B2 levels. The freshman course has seven levels ranging from CEFR entry-level to Pre-B2. The total of eleven levels was categorized into three groups: Group A, B and C, each with adjusted scaffolding, input, and output levels.

Table 1.1 Class levels, CEFR starting level, and Project Group Category

Course	Communication Skills B			
Class	1	2	3	4
CEFR	Upper B2	Pre-B2	B1	Pre-B1
Group	A	A	B	B

Course	KEEP B						
Class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
CEFR	Pre-B2	B1	Pre-B1	2A	A1	Pre-A1	Entry
Group	A	B	B	C	C	C	C

Each group had a separate lesson plan for five class meetings. Speaking and listening classes are 90 minutes long, and we meet twice a week, therefore with an orientation day, the lesson plans covered a three-week period (see Appendix B for the actual lesson plan). Differentiated difficulty levels can be noticed with the memorization part as shown in table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Group and Activity Steps

Group	A	B	C
Step 1	Introduce the project	Introduce the project	Introduce the project
2	Learn the song	Learn the song	Learn the song
3	Learn the vocab and phrases.	Learn the vocab and phrases. (Created Quizlet set A)	Learn the vocab and phrases. (Created Quizlet set B)
4	Memorize the whole song	Memorize a part of the song	Memorize the chorus part.
5	Decide how you want to record your video	Decide how you want to record your video	Decide how you want to record your video

## Stage 2: Preparation Cycle

### Stage 3: Information Processing Cycle

PBL Stage 2 focuses on students engaging in information gathering. Stage 3 involves the cycle of scaffolding instruction, organizing information and analyzing information. For this particular project, gathering, organizing, and analyzing

information was simultaneously done. After being introduced to the project, students researched similar projects around the world where people recorded parts of the song and collaboratively produced music videos. They then discussed what they liked about the video as they gathered ideas for their own. Language activities included students studying the song by taking notes of the unfamiliar vocabulary and phrases, summarizing the main message, and sharing their understanding. Some classes produced visual images that best represent their understanding of the song's message, for example, by paraphrasing, drawing, and finding images from free stock photos. Other language-focused activities included a quiz related to the song's content (vocabulary, people, and languages since a part of the song is sung in French). The class discussion was also promoted, for example, to talk about their skills, and preferred method of memorization.

#### **Stage 4: Information Display Cycle**

Students finalize and share (i.e., display) project outcomes with the teacher during this stage. Usually, scaffolded instruction is incorporated into classroom activities in order to assist students produce the final outcomes, but with our project students consulted their peers and received advice on how to showcase their talents. The means of participation was limitless. While some students sang the whole song, some danced, played instruments, wrote messages, and had their family members and pets involved.

#### ***Music video editing and showcasing***

For this project, over 80 video files (ranging from a few seconds to 5 minutes) and an additional 100 picture files were submitted. One of the biggest challenges was finding a way to incorporate as many of them as possible. On a technical scale, this can be very daunting as there are multiple segments to creating a music video (Foote et al., 2012). This includes factors such as aligning and syncing audio and video sequences, knowledge of designated editing software and segmenting each file into the correct positions. When adding the creative component into the equation, the challenge of making the video extends exponentially; much like an artist of any position, there is a requirement of time, reflection, and constant drafts to contemplate over. For music video creation, the average time spent to produce one minute of footage is about ten hours (Bregler, 2007). This video

took well beyond 30 hours to complete. Even with the modern advancement of automated functions within editing software programs, Bregler argues that these fundamental building blocks of technical knowledge and creativity will still hold firm in the foreseeable future.

Another challenge that arose during this project was the variety of video durations that were sent. Usually, there is a standard requirement to assist the creator in producing a quality product (Suarez, 2015); however, in this case, the format and style in which students can submit their work were completely free. Many of the video files submitted were less than 12 seconds on average and heavily focused on the song's front-end. Very few submissions covered the entirety of the song, which resulted in those videos being highlighted significantly at the end. It took a considerable amount of editing and resourcefulness to blend in as many videos as possible.

A final complicated issue that was becoming evident during editing was the singing component. The project had a master music file that students could listen to and sing along to during their recordings. We anticipated that students would somewhat be in a key range close to the music arrangement; from there, our editing software would be able to modify and 'auto-tune' it so it would synchronize with everyone else. Unfortunately, the singing's key signature from the submissions was so large that the software could not reasonably modulate it to a level that would not distract viewers from watching and hearing it (Richard and Durrant, 2003), only to stop the video. Consequently, many singing video files ended up having the audio cut completely and 'lip-synced' into video files that were in tune. This is a standard method when creating collaborative music videos of any platform medium (Katz, 2004).

After completing the video, we chose to upload it onto YouTube. YouTube has a variety of different options available to enhance the experience of watching videos. One of those options we implemented was the YouTube Premiere function. This allows any video to be scheduled and automatically played at a designated time. It was highly effective as it allowed everyone to watch it together; this is similar to the 'audience effect' (Hanich, 2018) when people go to movies together and enjoy the experience more because they can share discussions and thoughts afterward. Hanich says that the more people attend cinemas together, the more conversations become available, thus creating a more considerable impact. Students

at Keiwa College watched it on their mobile phones or the TVs linked to the YouTube video when the premiere showed. There were significant discussions and chatter about it as soon as the video was finished and discussed well past the premiere date. As a result, more students seem to want to collaborate with and create future works together.

We also chose YouTube due to its ease of distribution to other sharing platforms. Our video (Phil Nguyen, 2020b) was linked through our university's social media accounts, including Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LINE, and their own YouTube channel. We also encouraged our students to send the video link from their accounts to their friends. Distributing the video onto our Google Classroom LMS system was also simple and effective as our campus uses it as the primary form of communication.

### **Stage 5: Reflections Cycle**

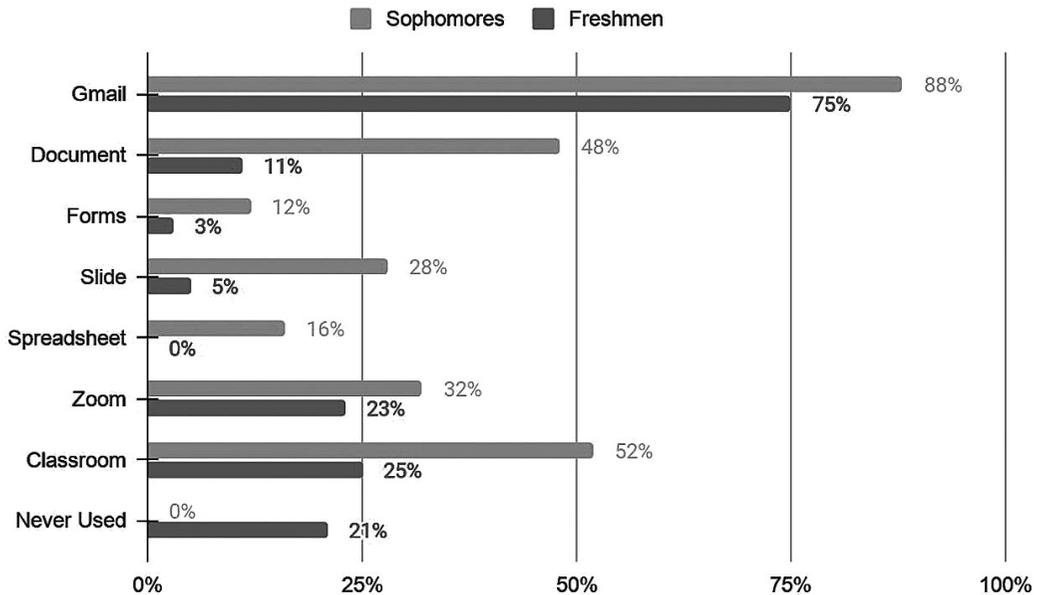
Submission of the project nor the display are not a project's conclusion. Educators of PBL "advocate for two rounds of student (and teacher) reflection to serve as the real culmination," according to Stoller and Myers (2020, p.31). They also emphasize that during this culminating stage, with teacher encouragement and modeling, students reflect on what they have learned from project engagement in terms of (a) content, language skills, and strategies and (b) process and product (Stoller and Myers, 2020, p.31). We too have conducted a post-project survey in which we asked questions based on the objectives of this project.

It must be noted here that through all stages of the project, activities and assignments were intentionally set as low-stake, meaning that the focus was not on the quality or quantity produced but rather on the participation. This project's objective was to create a sense of belonging among the students, and it was done by accepting and celebrating their uniqueness. Also, another important aspect of this project was to familiarize the students with different online tools. Appendix B, lesson plans, contains a section "Tech Skills," which indicates the tools used in each activity or assignment so that students build the skills needed. The following section reports the findings from the post-project survey, including the previous familiarity of online tools and the project's reflection.

### Post-project survey

After the students had seen the completed music video premiered on YouTube, we had students complete a post-project survey on Google Forms. 25 sophomores and 61 freshmen participated in the survey. Sophomore and first-year students showed significantly different results when asked about their previous experience in using online tools as indicated in figure 1.

Figure 1. Previous experience using online tools



Although the majority of first-year students have used Gmail prior to the semester, it is noticeable that only a quarter of them have used Google classroom, and about 10% or less were familiar with other online tools. It is alarming that 21% of the freshmen had never previously used Gmail or any other tools, although the primary means of communication depended on emails from the beginning of the semester. These numbers prove that the series of low-stake activities and assignments for the project were meaningful, in a sense that 100% of freshmen students taking English listening and speaking classes were familiarized with most of the online tools in the first few weeks.

For the open-ended question asking the students' reflection of the project, 4 out of 81 students left relatively neutral comments, 16 students did not write

any, and the rest of 61 students (75%) reported their positive reactions. Reactions were related to the experience and enjoyment in interacting with others, taking part and participating in a project, and cooperating with others. The first-year college experience, according to Ribera et al. (2017) not only sets the tone for the rest of their college career, but also serves as a critical point towards their success in higher education. High-impact practices such as participation in the music video project and having positive reactions afterwards, should positively affect the first-year students' sense of belonging.

### ***Teachers' Notes***

Additionally, notes from the teacher indicate that new teachers and some part-time teachers were not familiar with several of the online computer tools designated for remote teaching, namely Google classroom and Zoom. Therefore, they were initially met with extra challenges, but were able to adjust reasonably well to the new teaching conditions. Other experienced teachers knew such tools and therefore adapted more smoothly to the unique situation. Although being apprehensive about how students would receive the project, introductory video to the project that the instructors themselves created (Phil Nguyen, 2020a) before the semester started, also served as an effective way of showing the students who we are both individually and collectively, as a close-knit working team who are prepared to support students academically and emotionally through these challenging times. Furthermore, having a set of preplanned project-oriented lessons was very convenient and useful, considering the absence of textbooks at the time. They provided teachers with a transparent agenda and staging for the development of the project which could be adapted accordingly to suit each class. Although some of the activities did not translate so ergonomically to the Zoom platform, in turn it allowed teachers to discover the feasibility of classroom activities through an online environment, and therefore reflect, discuss and adjust the lesson plans accordingly.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this project was a valuable and effective way to encourage a sense of belonging between students and teachers, both experienced and new. It also allowed teachers to embrace a Project Based Learning approach to deal with various challenges that arose due to the global pandemic, and thus develop their

skills as instructors and adapt accordingly to the changing academic environment. Although initially challenging and daunting to both students and teachers, the inevitable transition to ERT with the introduction of key online tools used by many educational institutions now proved to be immensely helpful in substituting face-to-face classes. The nature of such a project allowed students to acclimatize to the new digital platform, and thus improve their computer literacy skills. Moreover, it allowed them to connect with each other socially and creatively and adjust to the current situation through a trial and error process, knowing they have our full, collective support.

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## Appendix A, Lyric

<p>Lean on Me by Bill Withers  Sometimes in our lives we all have pain  We all have sorrow  But if we are wise  We know that there's always tomorrow</p> <p>Lean on me, when you're not strong  And I'll be your friend  I'll help you carry on  For it won't be long  'Til I'm gonna need  Somebody to lean on</p> <p>Please swallow your pride  If I have things you need to borrow  For no one can fill those of your needs  That you won't let show</p> <p>You just call on me brother, when you need  a hand  We all need somebody to lean on  I just might have a problem that you'll  understand  We all need somebody to lean on</p>	<p>Lean on me, when you're not strong  And I'll be your friend  I'll help you carry on  For it won't be long  'Til I'm gonna need  Somebody to lean on</p> <p>You just call on me brother, when you need  a hand  We all need somebody to lean on  I just might have a problem that you'll  understand  We all need somebody to lean on</p> <p>If there is a load you have to bear  That you can't carry  I'm right up the road  I'll share your load</p> <p>If you just call me (call me)  If you need a friend (call me) call me uh  huh(call me) if you need a friend (call me)  If you ever need a friend (call me)  Call me (call me) call me (call me) call me  (Call me) call me (call me) if you need a  friend  (Call me) call me (call me) call me (call me)  call me (call me) call me (call me)</p>
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Appendix B, Lesson 1-2

Group A			
Lesson 1	Activity style	Content	Tech Skills
Introduction		T Self-Introduction	
		Make sure the students are in the right class	
		Take attendance Go over the syllabus and other information	
Assignment	Instruction	Assign an take-home activity	
		Explain the assignment e.g. Self-introduction paragraph, video, comprehension questions about our intro video etc.	Google Classroom
Checking	Pair/ Group	[Breakout] Ss check each other's comprehension of the assignment	Breakout room
	Whole class	[Class Chat] Write any questions they may have [Whole class] Answer the questions and clarify the assignment	Chat
Consultation		Tell Ss if they have any concerns or problem with the registration, stay on Zoom. Keep the students if they are in the wrong class. If they understand the assignment, let them go. Stay on zoom in case any students want to come back to ask for your help.	
Lesson 2		Content	Tech Skills
Ice-Breaking Activity			
		Assign a Tech Survey: Find out the Ss accessibilities and tech capabilities	Google forms
Activity 1	Instruction	Introduction to project #KeiwaSTRONG	
		Show YouTube videos of other projects	
		Tell Ss that we are going to work on a project with all the B classes	
Checking	Pair/ Group	[Breakout] Ss check each other's comprehension	Breakout room
	Whole Class	[Class Chat] Write any questions they may have Answer the questions and clarify the project	Chat
Assignment	Instruction	Practice "Lean On Me"	
		Make a list of unfamiliar vocab and phrases	
Consultation		Tell Ss if they have any concerns or questions, stay on Zoom. If they understand the assignment, let them go. Stay on zoom in case any students want to come back to ask for your help.	