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Experiencing less apprehension and engaging religious communication: the team-based project learning practices

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ABSTRACT

This pre-experimental study aims to explore the efficacy of the Team-based Project (TBP) as a pedagogical approach to enhancing the acquisition of religious communication skills. The TBP was incorporated into a religious education module, addressing pivotal religious inclusivity and moderation themes amongst undergraduate cohorts. Participants were 288 students who participated in a TPB program. Our attention is drawn to the students' deliberations on TPB activities during the preliminary phase and the initiation, groundwork, execution, and culmination of presenting the project via video. Two salient aspects of the educational outcomes emerged. Firstly, the TBP model proved instrumental in fostering elevated religious communication proficiencies amongst students. Secondly, there was a notable decline in communication apprehension attributable to students' religious discourse. Such outcomes are intrinsically linked to the TBP's foundational elements of collaboration and dialogue. Furthermore, this investigation underscores the advantages and challenges inherent in employing video-based technological platforms as contemporary pedagogical instruments. Within the scope of this research, we delineate the protocols requisite for the TBP's methodologies to evaluate student accomplishments through an array of formative and summative assessments.

Introduction

In initiating our exploration of the current learning model, we conducted a preliminary survey by inputting the term 'communication skills' into several prominent publisher portals spanning the last five years. Although this approach was not exhaustively systematic, it consistently indicated that the domain of communication training had been extensively researched within the broader context of general education (Gilligan et al., 2020; Newcomb et al., 2022; Son et al., 2018; Tan et al., 2021). However, empirical investigations addressing students' interview techniques and communication proficiencies within religious education courses—often called 'religious communication'—remain somewhat sparse (McClendon, 2019).

Religious communication originates from established communication events and is related to religious rituals (for example, prayer times and religious meetings), which then require interaction between individuals (Ghosh, 2018). Religion as a binding factor allows individuals to spread any information in their society (Ottuh & Jemegbe, 2020). Religious communication is basically a means of advancing religious understanding and community, both among religions and with different religions (Arens, 2011). Thus, religious communication can be defined as an effort to communicate between different religious

orientations about what is believed to be true (Ottuh & Jemegbe, 2020). The religious communication referred to in this research is horizontal because it is communication between people about all matters related to religious commitment.

In education, religious communication has an important meaning in conveying religious teachings, values, and communication aspects, especially regarding faith and ethical and moral principles (Azhari et al., 2023). Furthermore, Fer (2020) it was explained that communication and religious education are important in teaching students to understand religion in various expressions, developing awareness of religious language, and exploring the relationship between religious beliefs, which ultimately provides a sense of awareness of the importance of appreciating and respecting religious diversity and for learning, how to live together in a common society, to realize the importance of religious diversity. Religious communication and ensuing dialogues profoundly impact students, fostering a culture of respect, mutual comprehension, and the pursuit of shared insights (Schein, 1994). In environments where dialogues are both profound and purposeful, students are better positioned to emulate and internalize a genuine understanding (Scharmer, 2009).

Specifically, in higher education, proficiency in religious communication skills is paramount for students within and beyond. Regrettably, many students depart from their tertiary education without a comprehensive grasp of religious communication. This deficiency is evident in the current environment where authentic discussions and substantial communication seem to be declining resources (Isaacs, 1999). Present-day dialogues often exhibit unidirectional communication, entrenched individualistic perspectives, the staunch defense of personal viewpoints, and a mere narrative-driven approach (Schein, 1994). Unfortunately, such a communication paradigm has devolved into patterns of reticence, attributing blame, and intimidating others during interpersonal engagements (Scharmer, 2009). Hence, it becomes imperative to acquaint students with religious communication endeavors, offering them a window into the rich tapestry of diverse communities, each with its unique set of beliefs and backgrounds (Ottuh & Jemegbe, 2020).

In this context, it is incumbent upon academic institutions to proactively develop forward-looking strategies that promote a culture of communication, interaction, and collaboration among students. The fundamental abilities involving students' conduct during interviews and discussions with peers are essential aptitudes that require nurturing regardless of their academic focus (Ljunggren et al., 2022). Such initiatives are pivotal in cultivating communities characterized by open-mindedness and mutual respect (Thomas, 2010). While many pedagogical formats exist to empower students' communication proficiency (Gude et al., 2005; Makoul et al., 2007; Russell-Chapin & Sherman, 2000), pinpointing an optimal model tailored explicitly for religious communication remains an intricate endeavor. Existing literature underscores the necessity of regular practice in empowering communication proficiency within stipulated time frames (Levitt, 2002) while also factoring in an individual's adeptness at articulating ideas to peers (Rubino et al., 2023).

In religious education, it is paramount for students to cultivate the proficiency to converse on religious discussion whilst concurrently obtaining general and pertinent knowledge (Lee & Tan, 2018). A significant number of educators underscore the necessity of empowering these competencies. However, an observation has been made that religious education syllabi tend to accentuate content over developing these crucial skills (Andreassen, 2019; Lipiäinen et al., 2020). This eventually leads to the inquiry: Why is there an apparent oversight of religious communication skills in these curricula? We contend that it is imperative for academic institutions, particularly universities, to proffer avenues for students to be proficient in religious discourses and dialogues (Ubani et al., 2020). While such engagements demand a temporal commitment, The significant impact of these matters cannot be underestimated. Universities are responsible for exemplifying religious communication and dialogue in Indonesia, given its prominence in the contemporary Indonesian context.

Our foremost aspiration is to conceptualize a pedagogical framework that foregrounds students' proficiency in religious discourse as a vanguard competency in religious education, realized via a team-based project (TBP) instructional strategy. We envisage this instructional strategy seamlessly integrating into religious education syllabi, enriching character development modules. In our pursuit, we have integrated several communication strategies (Morreale et al., 2017) and incorporated advanced video creation

equipment (Hathaway et al., 2023). Such methodologies are poised to bolster student comprehension, rendering religious themes more tangible and pertinent to everyday experiences (Viinikka et al., 2019).

This exploration delineates activities tailored to empower religious communication and address prevalent apprehensions within religious education courses. The TBP encompasses activities strategically interspersed throughout the academic term, including formulating questions, orchestrating interviews, and curating video presentations. Relevant to the universal design for learning, these undertakings are meticulously designated to amplify student engagement, fostering collaborative endeavors and facilitating authentic interviews. Furthermore, these activities seamlessly weave diverse modalities of expression and the articulation of generic dialogue skills, empowering lecturers to enhance students' communicative proficiency.

Method

Participant

Data were gathered from 288 students (ages ranging from 17 to 19 years; 65% female) from a public university in Malang City, Indonesia, who enrolled in religious education courses during an odd semester in 2023. The activities described were designed for students who had attended the preliminary lectures. In this initial phase, students were instructed to compose and discuss four papers, each spanning two hours, over a four-week session. Consequently, students are immersed in the themes of inclusion within religious contexts, covering topics such as religious tolerance, gender equality, disability inclusion, and ethnicity. This eight-hour exploration laid the groundwork for their subsequent project work.

Procedure

In our endeavor to empower religious communication proficiency, we have conceptualized a project activity that encompasses four stages: introduction, preparation, execution, and reporting in the presentation of the project through a video format spanning 12 weeks. Primarily, the designated instructional approach for enhancing interviewing and communication skills relies heavily on video communication modalities (Cartney, 2006; Fukkink et al., 2011), a technique we refer to as 'team-based project' (TBP) learning.

Learners are familiarised with the essence of TBP, the characteristics of cooperative learning environments (established norms for group endeavors), the project's objectives, potential project themes, case study subjects, the assortment of project-related activities, the employed tools and equipment, and the intended outcomes at the onset of the project. Students are instructed to choose teammates from within their class, with groups spanning three to eight members. During this phase, students can confer with the lecturer about the project's blueprint, ensuring that resource-related issues are promptly identified and resolved.

In the preparatory phase, students consulted with their lecturer to undertake a preliminary survey on a mutually agreed subject. During this session, students grappled with genuine social issues. They were then allotted time to draft interview questions and engage in dialogues with the respondents. The lecturer offered feedback to enhance the quality of the questions posed. Consequently, by the end of this phase, students have devised their data collection tools and stand poised for on-field project execution.

During the implementation phase, students embarked on projects beyond the classroom confines, aligning with the collaborative planning outcomes with the lecturer. Each student was encouraged to interact with unfamiliar individuals. Interviews, spanning one to two hours, delved into themes of religious inclusivity and moderation—topics deemed intriguing yet non-controversial. Every communicative exchange and dialogue throughout the project was recorded on video. These recorded dialogues are subsequently reviewed and deliberated upon in intimate group settings, with the lecturer pinpointing areas for enhancement.

In the concluding reportage phase, students collaborated on the video project. This project should be submitted for completion by the end of the term. Not only is the video showcased in class for the lecturer's evaluation, but it should also be uploaded to a YouTube channel, inviting assessments, remarks, and commentaries from peer groups. Hence, the video presentation incorporates traditional in-person classroom settings and virtual (asynchronous) platforms.

Instrument and data collection

Several formative and summative assessments were administered to assess students' religious communication accomplishments. The form of evaluation used in this study considered the suggestions of Thornhill-Miller et al. (2023). Communication assessments were conducted with self-reported questionnaires, questionnaires completed directly by lecturers, and tasks involving exposure, such as videos.

Formative assessment activities were conducted during the pre-project process to assess understanding and basic communication skills during class discussions. Lecturers assessed the interviews based on the eleven items on the assessment form. Some modifications of the original instrument focused more on micro-skills, not only at macro and complex levels, referring to Ljunggren et al. (2022). The assessment format used for 'active listening' is derived from Levitt (2002), which was translated and modified to the training format in this study.

In addition to the religious communication and communication apprehension questionnaires for summative assessment, video presentations were also considered to assess students' communication skill attainment. The religious communication questionnaire instrument was adapted from the Religious Communication Scale (RCS) developed by Wrench, Punyanunt-Carter, and Garcia (2020), while the communication apprehension questionnaire was adapted from the Religious Communication Apprehension (RCA) Scale developed by Punyanunt-Carter et al. (2008). Last, the video presentation assessment utilized an assessment rubric developed in collaboration with the character development course lecturer. The rubric included the following criteria: video duration, type of video (documentary/campaign/short film/ video narration), suitability of topic and storyline, originality of work, video content does not contain elements of racism, violence, and pornography, conciseness and sharpness of the storyline, shooting techniques, use of language diversification, and use of language diversity. The validity and dependability of all instruments devised and used in this evaluation have been determined satisfactory by expert evaluation and pilot testing. At the end of the semester, we also solicited student feedback on their satisfaction with implementing TBP, particularly the potential reduction of content learning and the acquisition of their religious communication skills.

Data analysis

The students' formative and summative assessment scores were accumulated and adjusted to a 100-point scale. Each assessment's score was delineated using the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD). Using a simple linear regression analysis, we probed the correlation between religious communication proficiency and communication trepidation. This was done to discern the nature of their relationship and gauge the extent to which religious communication counters communication apprehension.

On the other hand, we delved into qualitative data—students' reflections—and analyzed them following the pivotal stages proposed by Bengtsson (2016): decontextualization, recontextualization, categorization, and compilation. This began with thoroughly examining the students' feedback on their satisfaction with implementing the TBP. Keywords in their reflections were highlighted with specific codes. Subsequently, the codes that were determined were meticulously examined and promptly categorized. During this phase, affirmative and adverse comments were clustered based on elements of TBP that most significantly enhanced students' religious communication proficiency. We then expressed these findings as percentages. To bolster the trustworthiness of our findings, we ascertained a Cohen's Kappa value exceeding 0.75, confirming a consensus in data coding. In presenting our findings, we prioritized the anonymity of our participants, designating the inaugural respondent as R1, and so forth.

Results

In the preliminary phase of fostering students' communicative and dialogic proficiency, students were tasked with composing and discussing papers on pivotal subjects concerning religious inclusivity and moderation. The collective average score for discussion activities of four papers, spanning three classes, stood at 96 (SD = 8.47). This suggests that students surpassed the requisite threshold before

transitioning to the project phase. Delving deeper, it was observed that students prioritized active listening, content reflection, adept probing, and adeptly initiating and concluding discussion sessions.

The primary findings of this study pertain to students' apprehension of religious communication. It was discerned that students exhibit commendable religious communication skills, reflected by an average score of 85.2 (SD = 9.94). Drawing from students' self-assessments, there was a pronounced emphasis on the sentiment, 'I believe that it is appropriate to engage in discussions about religion as necessary' (4.2/5). Conversely, they conferred lesser weight to the notion, 'When others introduce a subject, I invariably connect it to religious discussion' (3.8/5).

Furthermore, it was intriguing to note the markedly low levels of apprehension students displayed toward diverse communication, as evidenced by a mean score of 82.1 (SD= 9.84). Notably, a robust correlation was identified between religious communication and students' apprehensive tendencies in communication ($F = 1354.986$, $p = 0.000$). Subsequent analysis also illuminated that religious communication accounted for a substantial 82.6% reduction in students' communication apprehension (see Figure 1).

The assessment of learning outcomes in religious communication was further evaluated through video presentation assessments. The cumulative average score across the three classes was 83.6 (SD = 9.39), signifying that attaining religious communication learning objectives is notably commendable. In producing these videos, students predominantly met the criteria set for assessment, particularly concerning video length, filming techniques, participant roles within the video, and aesthetic considerations.

A prevailing apprehension during the execution of this TBP was the perception of a constrained focus on religious education content. A survey was administered at the end of this study to address this and seek student perspectives. Overwhelmingly, 90.3% of students expressed that the content-centric learning during the pre-project phase was sufficient, serving as a foundational platform enabling them to enhance their communication and dialogic proficiency. A selection of student reflections on content learning is presented below:

> I have a positive response to learning with TBP. This learning model combines theory and practice by providing hands-on experience in addressing real problems in a social context. Theoretical or content learning is sufficient. R14.

> The TBP model is exciting as we can explore a wide range of activities outside the classroom, and learning is not just theoretical in the classroom. During the pre-project process, we learned the content and started to practice teamwork from designing the project theme. R46

> TBP allows us to directly interact with people around us by implementing the values of religious inclusion and moderation, which is beneficial considering that not only theory can be taught in class, but action is also needed outside of class. R44

> This project serves a purpose that is aligned with religious learning. From my experience of accomplishing learning with TBP, I understand more deeply the theories I learned during the course because I put into practice the theories I learned in this social project. R73

We further sought to discern which course elements most effectively facilitated students in enhancing their religious communication proficiency and mitigating communication apprehension. Recurrent analysis of student feedback highlighted several facets of the project deemed instrumental in enhancing their proficiencies. These encompassed collaborative endeavors (65.3%), dialogic/interview engagements
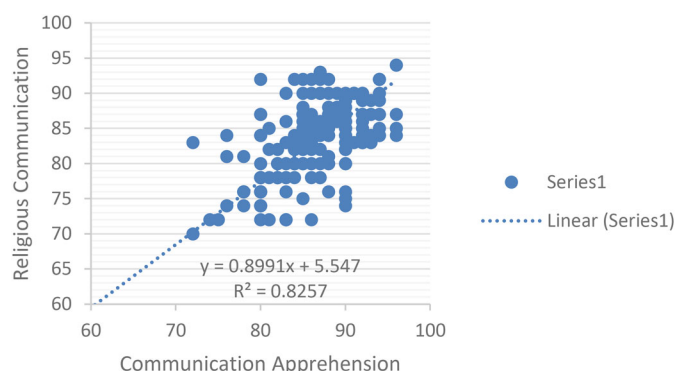

Figure 1. Relationship between religious communication and communication apprehension in TBP.

(26%), and video-based modalities (8.7%). A selection of student reflections expressing their contentment with the TBP activities is presented below:

Collaborative aspect

I found that the TBP model involves a sense of responsibility to contribute, as well as commitment and dedication to the project goals and good collaboration within the team. R3

TBP has encouraged me to work in collaborative settings, and in this project, I could work in a group to achieve a common goal. R31

This model has allowed me to develop critical and problem-solving skills while positively impacting the surrounding community. In addition, TBP also encouraged me to work collaboratively. As such, I learned how to work in a team, communicate effectively, appreciate others' perspectives, and build a deeper understanding of diversity and inclusion. R82

Dialogic aspect

TBP had a profound impact on us because we worked on this project by going directly to the field, more precisely interviewing various sources in various communities. By having a dialogue, we could practice our communication skills and, more importantly, gain insight, knowledge, and perspectives from the interviewees. R5

The social project with TBP represents an admirable and pertinent endeavor to foster understanding and awareness of the importance of religious inclusion and moderation in society. The exchange with experts acts as an avenue for us to listen to the experiences and perspectives of people from different backgrounds, thus enabling a better understanding of the issues faced by each group. R83

The interviewing scheme is effective in fostering critical-thinking proficiencies for generating solutions to a problem and providing hands-on experience with problem-solving. Based on our experiences, the dialogue format stimulates mutual comprehension between the interviewee and myself. R6

Video modality aspect

In my opinion, the TBP is a stimulating learning model. Whilst it allows for individual expression, it necessitates innovative video presentations. R27

This TBP process offers new knowledge and practical expertise, such as video production skills, which enables us to enhance our editing, photography, and scriptwriting abilities. This, in turn, produces content that is relatable and pertinent to our audience. R18

This TBP course has equipped me with the skills to analyze and comprehend the challenges associated with recording and producing videos, which necessitates creativity. The video presentations have enabled me to comprehend the vital principle of effectively communicating information, particularly concerning religious inclusiveness and moderation. R94

Discussion

This investigation aimed to understand religious education faculty's perspectives on the TBP model as a framework for integrating religious communication skills alongside teaching religious content. The study's primary outcome reveals that applying TBP in religious education courses can enhance religious communication proficiency in university students. Hence, implementing TBP can contribute towards the demanding requirement to enhance religious education practices in higher education. This finding indicates that implementing the TBP model can enable students to engage in dialogue and communication with individuals of different religions and backgrounds.

In other words, instructing students with the TBP model equips them to communicate competently within a religious context. Given the pluralistic nature of society, religious communication skills are increasingly crucial. Similar to scientific communication, religious communication requires both speaking skills and high confidence and knowledge (Laslo & Hartmann, 2023). According to the explanation provided by Wrench, Punyanunt-Carter, and Garcia (2020), discussing religious differences can only be

accomplished if one is aware of one's beliefs, which can affect one's religious communication skills. Previous research has indicated a significant correlation between religious communication and comprehension in religious recipients (Punyanunt-Carter et al., 2008). Additionally, student feedback supports this finding, demonstrating that discussing content during the pre-project phase adequately prepares students to engage in religious communication throughout the project. Such pre-discussion can give students the confidence and understanding to communicate religious concepts successfully.

High religious communication had an impact on reducing religious apprehension. Research has identified a significant connection between religious communication and willingness to communicate, as apprehension may inhibit it (Punyanunt-Carter et al., 2010). Accordingly, the impact of the TBP model learning, students' apprehension about religious communication, can be alleviated with the experience of dialogue with others from different backgrounds previously unknown to them. This finding concludes that implementing TBP facilitates successful communication about religion with any audience. This contrasts with Wrench, Punyanunt-Carter, and Garcia (2020), who claim that religious communication is most effective among individuals of the same religion and less likely to occur with those from differing religions. One of the critical learning impacts of this study is that enhanced religious communication capabilities are associated with reduced communication apprehension. This research offers a compelling resource for religious educators who need learning methods or models to equip students with essential skills to participate in a pluralistic society.

These outcomes are closely associated with the pre-project initiatives that prepare students for the project phase. This pre-project task aims to equip students with a robust foundation to master the fundamentals of interviewing skills. The series of activities emphasises developing students' ability to converse and interact with others. These findings suggest that instructors should incorporate content delivery activities with classroom discussions promoting generic dialogue abilities. When transitioning to teaching with TBP, the developmental components of commencing and concluding sessions, investigating, and attentive listening will probably increase in significance.

This explanation pertains to a potential TBP attribute as well. Lecturers and students in TBP must locate resources relevant to religious inclusion and moderation. Consequently, it is recommended that students recognize individuals or groups as educational resources that can aid the implementation of TBP. An essential characteristic of TBP is dialogue, especially about religious communication. Dialogue is recognized to exceed essential communication, allowing learners to participate in courteous, honorable conversations and engaging all spheres within each discussion (Morris, 2017). The inquiries made by students and the responses provided by speakers facilitate dialogic interactions geared toward a shared objective and are adjusted during the communicative process (Kecskés, 2014).

The study revealed a correlation between students' self-assessed abilities in communicating religious ideas and their video presentation evaluations by academic staff. This finding highlights the potential for educators to utilize technology-enhanced methods to enhance students' communicative skills. Developing these competencies would also equip students for future academic pursuits, including delivering presentations, explaining theories, and actively participating in scholarly discourse. It was encouraging to witness students acknowledging the significance of technology-integrated projects in enhancing dialogues and communication. Although communication resources may hinder participatory learning (Kotera, 2022), various technological tools, notably video modality implemented in this study, can aid in clear information transmission and enhance communication quality. Emphasizing communication within the educational realm requires substantial effort and time. However, instructors can use technology to encourage discourse, inspiring students toward valuable and productive exchanges (Davis, 2020).

The findings of this investigation align with observations within the broader educational context. Our research supports the views of Tammi and Rajala (2018), who advocate for collaboration in communication frameworks. Students were urged to reflect, engage in discourse, and understand diverse viewpoints attentively during the study. Effective communication can suffer when collaborators do not genuinely cooperate, decreasing student participation and collective outcomes (Popov et al., 2012). Collaboration, as described by Nokes-Malach, Richey, and Gadgil (2015), typically refers to peer interactions within a cohort. Therefore, this TBP could be considered a prime example of 21st-century collaborative learning in religious education.

However, this study has limitations that may affect the outcomes obtained. The data was collected from one university cohort, which may limit its generalisability. Furthermore, the lack of antecedent data impedes our ability to compare and assess the development of students' abilities. Given these constraints, future research could be enhanced by including a more diverse student population spanning multiple universities incorporating a control group. It would be informative for subsequent studies to examine the variations in religious communication abilities across institutions in distinct locales, thus capturing a broad range of backgrounds. Moreover, obtaining baseline data and considering other factors affecting religious communication would improve the accuracy of measuring student developmental paths after TBP implementation. In addition, it would be advisable to provide students with initial training that covers all aspects of fundamental discourse competencies, ensuring that religious communication outcomes exceed current standards.

Conclusion

In essence, the insights garnered from this research champion the integration of TBP as a cornerstone pedagogical strategy in religious education. This approach offers an avenue to enhance religious communication proficiency while diminishing communication apprehension. Consequently, this investigation underscores the need for pedagogical reformation in Religious Education. Such innovations should resonate with the curricular imperatives of cultivating 21st-century competencies, mainly through video modalities that align with contemporary instructional paradigms. Furthermore, academic practitioners might consider weaving TBP into their teaching approach, fostering a collaborative learning environment where students can delve into enriching dialogues centered on religious inclusivity and moderation.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare there is no Complete of Interest at this study.

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