

Virtual exchange as an alternative to increase the internationalization at
the Yokohama National University
Lessons learned from the Oulu Online Collaboration program

YNU の国際化促進の新たな可能性としてのオンライン留学

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要旨

In this paper we examine the design and implementation of the Oulu Online Collaboration Program, a virtual exchange build around dialogue and critical thinking. In this participatory action research, we draw on the student's feedback and personal observations, highlighting the importance of dialogues, both cross cultural dialogues and dialogues among the Japanese students themselves, as a driver for critical reflection. Furthermore, we address common challenges we encountered such as English language proficiency, limited interaction during the classes or the need for more detailed and structured group discussions and reflection rounds. All in all, the OSCP could showcase the potential of virtual exchanges for the internationalization of higher education if the program is designed to challenge students to critically reflect and conceptualize global issues.

日本語要旨

本章では、横浜国立大学の欧州ブランチが主催した短期海外プログラム Oulu Online Collaboration Program (OSCP)の学習デザインと教育成果についての実践報告を行う。この Participatory Action Research(PAR)は、対話とクリティカルシンキングを中心に構成を行い、プログラムに参加した学生のフィードバックやアンケートをもとに分析を行った。これらを通して、異文化間の対話に加え、日本人学生同士での対話の両方が、批判的なリフレクションを推進するのにあって重要であることを明らかになった。一方で、オンライン海外研修を実施する上で、参加学生の言語能力への配慮やより円滑なディスカッションを行うための準備の必要性など、様々な課題が顕在化した。本研修の実践結果から、学生のクリティカルな視野を育成するための適切な学習目標と設計を行うことが、今後のバーチャル留学の展開やオンライン研修の新たな可能性を示唆する。

1. Introduction

Due to Covid-19 the debate in higher education is now focusing on internationalization at home which describes the strategic approach to integrate an international and intercultural dimension into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments (Beelen & Jones, 2015). This can, for example be done via virtual exchanges, guided sustained interaction by learners from different geographical locations and different cultural contexts via digital technologies such as Skype or Zoom (O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020, Jager, Nissen, Helm, Baroni & Rousset 2019). There are practices that not only due to Covid-19, will inevitably continue to grow in importance (O'Dowd, 2018).

In this paper we will discuss the design of a virtual exchange program, the Oulu Online Collaboration Program (hereafter OOCB), that has been organized as part of the collaboration between Yokohama National University (YNU) and the University of Oulu. The premise of this paper is that intercultural student interaction in virtual exchanges may not necessarily suffice for the creation of meaningful learning experiences. Thus, we believe that virtual exchanges require careful planning and implementation. We will discuss our experiences in designing, organizing and facilitating the program. We used experiential education as a guiding framework to design a program that aims at creating carefully chosen learning experiences for the students that are built on critical analysis, reflection (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002) and intercultural collaboration. Therefore, in this paper a special emphasis is put on a) how we designed the virtual exchange program based on a literature review on the benefits and challenges of virtual exchanges and b) how the students experienced participating in the OOCB.

2. The role of virtual exchanges in the internationalization of higher education

It is important to not only see virtual exchanges as a response to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Due to a variety of reasons, including student's tight academic schedules, student's financial situation (Verzella, 2018), a lack of available exchange programs, or lack of interest, only a small percentage of students are able to join study abroad programs (Helm, 2015). Thus, virtual exchanges are more accessible and equitable way that enables more students to participate in cross-cultural dialogues (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021). Previous research has shown that virtual exchanges can aid the development of students' linguistic accuracy (Belz & Kinginger, 2002), openness to different cultures (Schenker, 2013), intercultural communication skills (Guth et al., 2012; Renner, 2019) and intercultural competencies (Bassani & Buchem, 2019). Furthermore, proponents of virtual exchange program highlight its potential for participants to become more

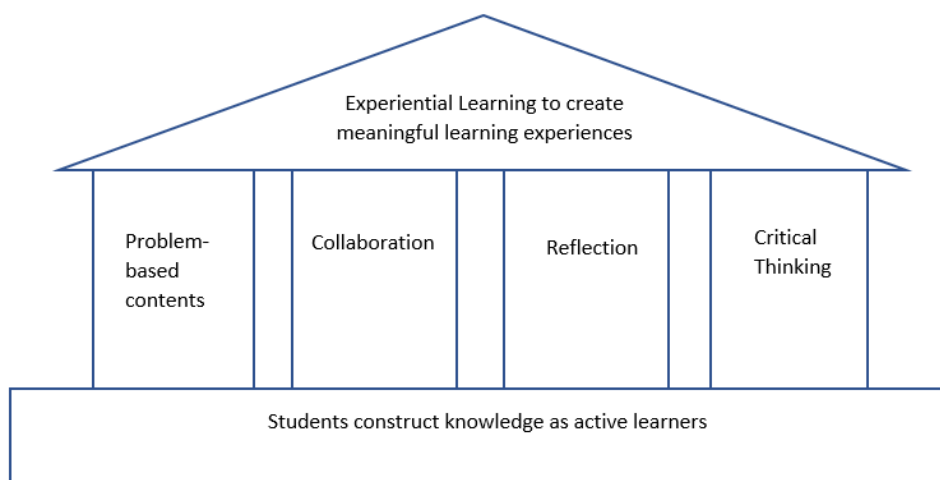
active socially responsible global citizens (Lenkaitis & Loranc-Paszylk, 2019) who critically reflect on the complexity of our interconnected world.

However, even if students participate in virtual exchange programs, the benefits are not guaranteed as it can be difficult to engage students on a deeper level (Helm, 2015). Just as on campus exchanges, sharing a classroom with international students by itself does not ensure the development of global competences (Hiller, 2010; Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002) for reasons such as a lack of opportunities for interaction, teachers who are unprepared for multicultural classrooms, superficial interaction with the international students (Sato & Hodge, 2019; Watanabe, 2016) or language and communication problems (Ishikura, 2015; Lee, 2007). Additionally, the implementation of virtual exchanges can be challenging due to factors such as limited access to technologies, a lack of teacher's digital competencies or time differences (O'Dowd, 2018). Hence, the implementation of virtual exchange program requires organizers to select a suitable approach that accommodates various opportunities for interactions as well as integration of societal macro topics into virtual exchanges.

In order to address the challenges of virtual exchanges, we decided to use experiential education as a guiding framework for the OOC. One of the core assumptions of experiential education is that experiences alone are not necessarily educational and can even be mis-educative (Dewey, 2015), if they are discouraging further learning or lead to misunderstandings. In other words, simply providing students with opportunities to participate in virtual exchange programs does not necessarily lead to meaningful learning. Instead, we use experiential education to provide students with “carefully chosen experiences supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis, are structured to require the learner to take initiative . . . through actively posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, constructing meaning, and integrating previously developed knowledge (Itin, 1999).” In the next chapter, we will give an overview of the OOC and then discuss how we followed the suggestions of Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002) by centering the program around problem-based contents, collaboration, reflection, and critical thinking (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Experiential education as guiding framework for the OCCP



3. Oulu Online Collaboration Program

The virtual exchange program was launched in March 2021 to accommodate students who lost opportunities to study abroad and to provide new learning environment that helps them to continue studying English. The program has been designed in collaboration with the YNU International Strategy Organization and the YNU European branch office. The OCCP lasted 5 days with 3 hours of daily teaching and consisted of lectures by The European Branch Office and guest lectures, group discussions and joint activities with the Finnish Alajärvi high school and university students from the University of Oulu. Students were required to visit all classes and hand in a learning diary at the end of the class. As part of the Global Plus ONE Minor program (YNU, 2021), participants received one credit and a digital SDG badge as a certificate of their participation. The program was open to all students and sufficient English proficiency was the only requirement. Ultimately, we received 20 students with different study backgrounds such as business, education or environmental information science and engineering, and different years from freshman to graduate student. Three of the students were international students from China while the rest of the students were Japanese.

3.1. Interweaving ‘critical thinking and reflection’ in the program

The major topic throughout the program was Finnish education, however since our overarching goal was to encourage critical thinking and reflection, we didn’t want to simply equip students with

knowledge about Finnish education, but rather challenge them to look at Finnish education in a holistic way by critically reflecting on the context in which education is placed. Therefore, we asked students to critically examine the complexities of our educational systems by looking at the Finnish and the Japanese contexts from different perspectives paying attention to its links with history, economy, cultural values, politics, social systems and globalization. For instance, we discussed how neoliberalism and human capital theory brought by globalization affected Finnish education or discussed how trust culture, one of the biggest characteristics of the Finnish education is promoted by the country's welfare system. The students were expected not just learn about Finland but to deepen their understanding of Japan through comparison with examples from Finland. We encouraged the students to reflect on their own context and perspectives by asking questions to work on in group discussions and reflection journal. For example, after we introduced the Finnish welfare system, we asked how trust culture can be increased in Japanese schools. This reflexivity is a key factor in global education (Bourn, 2020), and allows them to challenge the status quo and reimagine alternatives.

Additionally, we had three guest lectures (on gender, school culture and language teaching), joined a Finnish high school class and invited university students for group discussions and group works. In order to create a dialogue between Japanese students and our international guests, we encouraged the students to share their own experiences so that the students could learn from each other and are encouraged to reflect and discuss also on the Japanese context. During the school visit we, for example, included an introductory exercise in which the students' shared stories from their personal school lives. Other activities we scheduled can be found in table 1.

3.2. Intercultural collaboration and English learning

The second goal of the OOC is to enable students to participate in an intercultural collaboration while improving their English language skills and their intercultural communication skills. As intercultural communication does not only occur across nations, we promoted the program to students with various study backgrounds, cultural backgrounds and academic backgrounds and included many reflections rounds and group discussions. For example, in one exercise, students could bring in their personal expertise and background while using the OECD equity framework: "10 steps to equity in education" (*Ten Steps to Equity in Education*, 2008) to discuss problems such as access and resource allocations in education or the grouping of students based on their academic performances. On the last day, the participants had the chance to interview local students and while they could choose the topics freely, we asked them to choose a topic and prepare questions so that the discussion with the Finnish students would go smoothly. Based on their interests, the different groups discussed various topics such as multicultural education, food

education, different working cultures or music education. In all the interactions with Finnish students, it was important for us to also discuss the Japanese context in order to make the collaboration mutually beneficial and give Finnish students the opportunities to learn and ask about Japan and Japanese culture. Incorporating the interest of our Finnish guest can hopefully lead to sustainable long-term collaborations.

Table 1 Program Activities

Activities	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Group activities	Drawing exercise: your image of Finnish education	Equity in education using OECD framework	Shared class with Finnish Alajärvi High school	Happiness Report: Lessons for Japan	Interviews with Finnish students
Reflection Round Topics	Importance of context in comparative education; education exports and PISA	The effect of global trends in education in Finland and Japan		Role of teachers in Finland and Japan	
Other activities	Kahoot quiz about Finland	Guest Lecture: Gender in Finland	Guest lecture: English teaching in Finland	Guest Lecture: School culture and gifted education in Finland and Japan	Feedback round, Goodbye session with snacks and games

4. Methodology

Given the real-life context of the study, this paper is utilizing a case study research design. Case study designs excel at answering questions about the “how” and “why” in student's natural spaces such as a university class (Grauer, 2012). According to Yin (2014), the case study research methodology is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence. Consequently, this study aims to investigate how the design of the OOCF affected the experiences of students in the context of virtual exchanges.

Most of the data has been collected with a feedback survey that was sent out to the student two weeks after the students completed the OOCF program. The survey can roughly be divided into four parts (General Feedback, Pedagogy and Learning activities, Contents, Critical thinking and Global Mindedness) consisting of mostly Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. Additionally, we used the learning journal in which the students reflected on their experiences throughout the program, the contents of the classes and on their interactions with the other participants, guest lectures and guest students. In order to keep the data anonymous, the data were randomly numbered (Participant 1-12).

5. Findings

5.1. Survey results

20 students joined the class, out of which 2 dropped out due to scheduling conflicts. Of the 18 students who joined the class, 12 answered the survey. The general responses were very positive, which might be partly due to social desirability bias and the students who struggled with the program might not have answered the survey. In the survey we asked the students to rate the program with a numerical value on a scale from 0-10. On average, the students rated the OOC with a score of 9.08 and 11 students reported that their expectations have been met (1 did not have expectations).

During the program, we tried to integrate several learning activities such as group work with Finnish students and Japanese students; video materials; self-studies with provided learning materials, a Kahoot Quiz and open questions after the lectures. All activities were perceived to be at least a bit beneficial. Students especially appreciated opportunities for interaction with Finnish students and the chances to ask questions to the lectures after the class. The group activities were also helpful, but students would have liked to have more guidance and clearer instructions as well as a bit more time for discussions. The discussions with other students were the aspect about the program that students enjoyed most.

Nearly all respondents answered that the program helped them to reflect critically on their previous assumptions on education and the way they think about the role of education, as well as on the way they think about global trends and their own country. Additionally, all participants would like to join study abroad programs, meet more international students at YNU and participate in further international projects. While students who chose to join the Oulu Online Collaboration program were likely already interested in foreign countries, 10 of the participants very much agreed to the statement: "The program made me more interested in other cultures and countries" (2 agree to the statement). 10 out of the 12 respondents would like to stay in touch and are potentially interested in other activities organized by the European Branch Office and have already shared their e-mail address with us. After completing the program, 11 of students felt more comfortable speaking English and communicating with someone from a different country.

5.2. Learning Journals results

Just as the survey shows, the learning journal also revealed many students struggled with understanding the lectures and communication in English with both their peers and guest students. Their learning journals indicated that many of the students did not perceive that struggle in a

negative way since they were able to overcome their insecurities and gained more confidence to communicate in English throughout the class. Participant 2, for example felt initially disappointed with her inability to express her opinions as well as other YNU students could, but was able to overcome “her fear of failure” as she spoke more, consequently gaining a “more positive attitude towards speaking English.” Similarly, participant 7 felt that she could barely understand 50% of the classes and couldn’t articulate herself well. However, when one of the Finnish students complimented her English, telling her that he understood what she was trying to say, she realized that “being able to communicate is more important than speaking perfect English.” This realization was a common theme across most learning journals with for example participant 11 remarking that he “learned a lesson it is attitudes to try to speak regardless of mistake is of importance because people understand better than I expected even when I make grammatical mistakes”. Ultimately, this positive experience of overcoming their English language struggles made the students feel more motivated to study English.

Another common theme found in the learning journals was students’ challenging their preconceptions. Students reflected not only on the contents of the class but also on what they considered to be natural. In many cases, these reflections have been prompted by interactions with either other Japanese students, or more often, by their discussions with our Finnish guests. Those interactions, and especially questions from Finnish students about Japan, motivated participants to further think about the Japanese context and try to understand Japanese culture (participant 9). Students in general reflect a lot on their personal context. Participant 3, for example felt that being exposed to differences made her reflect on her own cultural assumptions and reconsider what she had been taking for granted. Often the reflections were based around questions we posed during the classes.

Students were quite critical in their reflections in terms of comparison between Japan to Finland. Instead of romanticizing Finland and Finnish education, they questioned what are the differences in people’s beliefs and cultural values and where do they come from, and how they can cause differences in social systems between the Japan and Finland (e.g. Participant 12). Participant 3 stresses the importance of cultural context and commented “as Finnish education and welfare system take into account its cultural values and beliefs, Japan needs to build systems suited for their cultural context to create better society” (author’s translation).

It’s worth noting that a couple of students were able to find connections with their own studies. The process “of examining prior knowledge through interaction with local teachers and students” was often perceived to be enjoyable (participant 5). When reflecting on the program, students were able to also draw on their own studies, even if they were not directly related to

education (e.g. participant 14). This helped students to not look at education in isolation, but instead discuss it as a very complex topic (participant 11).

6. Discussion

This paper discusses possible implications that arose from the students' feedback as well as our experiences designing and implementing the OOCPE which hopefully offers valuable insight to other practitioners of virtual exchange. We will focus on three main themes, the importance of intercultural communication and English proficiency, the virtual learning environment and critical thinking and reflection. During the program, we found all three themes to be important requirements for students' learning in the context of virtual exchanges.

6.1. The importance of intercultural communication and English proficiency

English was one of the biggest hurdles for many of the students, which caused difficulties to some of them during the program. Given that most students joined the class in order to improve their English, this was not necessarily perceived as negative experience, but instead seen by many as an opportunity for improvement and motivation to work harder. We were aware of such potential communication issues, especially since we had to completely rely on students' self-evaluation of their English proficiency. From our own experiences we believed that preparation could make a big difference especially when you study new things in a foreign language. We provided students with supplementary learning materials so that they were able to familiarize themselves with new terminologies and increase their background knowledge. Although some students found the learning materials helpful to grasp the major points of the classes, feedback showed that clearer instruction and guidance might have been needed to aid their deeper engagement with the contents. Students can for example be asked to bring different items to the discussion that are related to the contents of the class and can serve as a starting point and guide for the discussion.

The student's feedback highlighted the importance of intercultural communication in virtual exchanges. The experiences of being able to make themselves understood in English by local students helped many of the students to increase their confidence and motivation to study English. We found that the interactions were especially successful when students had the chance to take initiatives and freely explore their interests. Furthermore, if the students had time to prepare for the interactions, they were able to take a more active role in the discussion. Talking with international students may have been especially beneficial for some Japanese students as they sometimes felt that "when I talk with foreign people, I can talk more freely, but when I talk with Japanese people I mind if they can really understand my English" (participant 9). Due to the interdisciplinary nature

of the program, students also benefited from the discussions with their peers from YNU. These interactions not only encouraged interdisciplinary exchange, but were also very important since students had fewer opportunities to interact with their classmates due to the remote teaching at YNU during the Covid-19 pandemic.

6.2. Virtual learning environment

While we could utilize Zoom chatrooms for interactive group activities and reflection rounds, the interactions between the students and lecturers remained limited. We tried to make the OSCP as interactive as possible by using technological tools such as breakout rooms, Zoom chat, a Kahoot quiz or padlets. While breakout rooms were a great way to facilitate discussions, the other tools allowed students to express their opinions in writing. However, students did not feel comfortable explaining their choices or interrupting the class to ask questions. This may be partly explained by the virtual environment which is still relatively new to students and makes it harder for students to draw attention to them. To increase communication during the lectures, we tried to encourage students to use the Zoom chat function and, for example, did our attendance list by asking students to write something in the chat box. However, we found that students were most comfortable in a more private setting after the classes. After the second day, we offered to stay after the class so that students can approach us and ask questions in both Japanese and English. Many students appreciated this opportunity and stayed up to an hour after the classes.

6.3. Critical thinking and reflection

Throughout the program, we used Finland and Finnish education to start a critical discussion around topics such as globalization, equity or values. According to the student's reflection, there were several themes that prompted critical reflection. Firstly, the comparison between Finland and Japan and the dialogues with Finnish students encouraged many Japanese students to examine and challenge their prior knowledge and assumptions about Japan and the Japanese social system. On the other hand, many of the students admitted that they could have taken more out of the program, if they had more knowledge about social structure in Japan. This highlights the importance of facilitators of virtual exchanges to moderate, inform and guide intercultural discussions as simply being from a country does not make students experts of the country.

Additionally, we discussed the Finnish education in a holistic manner highlighting the links between education, society and global trends. This approach, resonated with the students who in their reflection rounds drew associations between common practices, social and education system and cultural values and people's way of thinking. For instance, one student wrote that a lot of

freedom given to students is supported by trust culture in Finland. Furthermore, students were able to draw new connection between the contents of the class and their own studies, which increased the interest of students to look outside of their field and join classes from different faculties. As the survey showed, after joining the class, many students wished to take part in further intercultural experiences. In the learning journal, students further elaborated on this point, expressing their wish to expose themselves to different ways of thinking and doing.

7. Lesson learned and suggestions for future virtual exchange programs

The OOCF could showcase the potential of virtual exchanges for the internationalization of higher education, highlighting that global citizenship education is less reliant on physical mobility, but rather on the ability of exchange programs to challenge students to critically reflect and conceptualize global issues. Instead of simply learning about another country, students reflected on their background and challenged their knowledge and cultural assumptions. These students' reflections echo with Itin (1999) who states that one of the successful outcomes of experiential education is showcased when individuals can challenge their preconceived knowledge and assumptions. Thus, even an online study abroad program can create meaningful experiences for Japanese students to gain critical perspectives on their context. However, as this was our first attempt of organizing a virtual exchange program, we learned there is still room for improvement. We learned from our participants experiences that the role of students' self-confidence cannot be underestimated and experience of success through interaction with local students is important for deeper engagement with the contents. As a result, we will allocate more time for interaction with local students right from the beginning of the program and provide them with more guidance, support and opportunities to reflect on the discussions. In order to continue the collaboration in the future, we believe reciprocity will be a key. In future initiatives, it is important to involve our partners into the design of the virtual exchange and give spaces and opportunities for students from both YNU and the University of Oulu to explore their interests in the program. Integrating students from the University of Oulu more into the design and goals of the program would also further increase reciprocity, shifting the focus from learning from Finnish students to learning with Finnish students, creating meaningful learning experiences for both.

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