

RE/CONNECT Virtual Exchange and Art Exhibition: A Framework for Creative and Meaningful International Exchange During COVID-19 Restrictions

William Hall, Kyoto Saga University of Arts, Japan

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

One of the consequences of COVID-19 for Japanese art university students has been a narrowing of the educational experience. Many study abroad programs have yet to be resumed and international exchange opportunities dramatically decreased. The risks to student well-being and need for a new direction in post-COVID education have been recognized. One positive outcome was an accelerated familiarity with remote communication tools. While presenting challenges, opportunities were also revealed for meaningful international exchange, unrestricted by the pandemic. This paper explores the benefits of international online visual art projects using the case study of RE/CONNECT, an online exchange and art exhibition between UK and Japanese art university students. Now in its third consecutive year and with over 60 participants, the project aims to (1) utilize online communication tools for meaningful international exchange despite travel restrictions, and (2) encourage students to explore art creation to help process feelings related to the ongoing pandemic. Through regular video conferences, students share pandemic experiences and create an artistic brief. This is then used as a springboard from which they create individual artworks and accompanying descriptions. Finally, the works are introduced by the artists at a virtual opening party and displayed online in a public exhibition. Through this three-stage process (*exchange, create, exhibit*), it is hoped that students can benefit from rich and meaningful learning experiences, providing a framework for international exchange projects in other disciplines in the post-COVID educational landscape.

Keywords: Art, Education, Virtual, Exchange, International, COVID-19

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching consequences on all aspects of society, not least in the area of higher education. For Japanese art university students, one of the prominent outcomes of the crisis was a narrowing of their educational experience. With many study abroad programs still yet to be resumed, and international exchange opportunities dramatically reduced, students have found themselves confined within the boundaries of their own institutions, unable to interact internationally and engage in cross-cultural learning. Amidst these challenges, the recognition of the risks posed to student well-being and the pressing need for a new direction in post-COVID education have emerged (Komiya, 2022).

One positive outcome of the pandemic-imposed limitations was the accelerated familiarity with remote communication tools (Marcus et al., 2022). As physical travel and face-to-face interactions were restricted, students and educators were compelled to embrace digital platforms and virtual spaces to bridge the gaps that had been created. While presenting considerable challenges (Morgan, 2022), this shift to remote communication also revealed a host of opportunities for meaningful international exchange, unrestricted by the physical barriers and limitations of the pandemic. This paper explores the benefits of international online visual art projects as a means to address such limitations faced by Japanese art university students and to foster a rich and diverse educational experience. Now in its third consecutive year and featuring over 60 participants, the case study of RE/CONNECT (previously DIS/CONNECT), an online exchange and art exhibition that brings together art students from the United Kingdom and Japan, is examined.

The RE/CONNECT project seeks to utilize online communication tools as a means for meaningful international exchange by leveraging video conferencing technology. Students are provided with a platform to share their experiences of the pandemic and engage in cultural dialogue and explore art creation as a method to process and express their feelings related to the ongoing global health crisis. Through the creation of individual artworks based on an artistic brief developed during the exchange, students are encouraged to channel their ideas and experiences into a tangible form of expression. Ultimately, the culmination of the project results in a virtual opening party and a public exhibition of the artworks online. This three-stage process of *exchange*, *create*, and *exhibit* provides participating students with a framework for rich and meaningful learning experiences. Through immersion in cross-cultural exchange centered around art creation and sharing their ideas and artworks with an audience outside of their immediate environment, students can overcome the limitations imposed by the pandemic.

This paper explores the impact of international online visual art projects on student learning experiences, discussing the benefits of cross-cultural understanding, the development of creative and critical thinking skills, and the emotional and psychological benefits of using art as a medium for processing difficult feelings. Finally, the potential for such projects to be adapted and implemented in other academic disciplines is suggested, providing a framework for meaningful international exchange in the post-COVID educational landscape.

Background and Motivation

The rapid development of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 coincided with the start of the Japanese academic year. Entire cohorts of university students found themselves taking classes online, many doing so from their apartments or homes due to strict campus no-

entry policies. Social interaction was dramatically reduced as clubs and other extracurricular activities were suspended. International students who had recently arrived in Japan were also faced with very limited social contact. Separated from their families and yet to create social networks, isolation became a pressing concern and the risk to student well-being was very real. The situation was complicated by strict government policy and uncertainty about the ever-changing nature of the pandemic, adding to the sense of anxiety and powerlessness (Chishima & Liu, 2021).

Simultaneously, however, an unprecedented digitalization of higher education was rapidly unfolding (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021). The sudden move to online classes required that the adoption of remote communication tools such as Google Meets, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams, was not only necessary but also urgent. The learning curve was steep and often stressful (Mohd Basar et al., 2021). In retrospect, the value and efficacy of virtual classes as an educational panacea are debatable, hinging greatly on the content and nature of the class in question. Nevertheless, within a matter of weeks, universities had learned how to effectively use such technology to teach classes, assign projects, and hold discussions and presentations. This revealed an opportunity to connect students around the world quickly, conveniently, and at little cost, despite the restrictions on international travel.

The idea of creating an online art and international exchange project was conceived during the chaos of the early stages of the pandemic and was driven by two primary goals. Firstly, the project aimed to utilize the potential of recently adopted online communication platforms to foster meaningful international exchange, particularly in light of sudden travel restrictions. By leveraging these educational tools, students around the globe could be offered virtual cultural exchange opportunities as an alternative to international travel where they could share their experiences of the pandemic.

Secondly, the project aimed to encourage students to explore art creation as a powerful medium for processing and expressing their feelings related to the ongoing global health crisis. The project recognized that art has a unique ability to transcend language barriers and communicate emotions and ideas effectively. By encouraging students to channel their experiences and reflections into their artworks, RE/CONNECT provides them with an outlet for self-expression and a means to cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Methods

The idea for the project was formulated in the spring of 2020 with promotion and recruitment of students taking place from June to July. Online meetings were held throughout August and the exhibition was launched in September. Using the project name “DIS/CONNECT” (changed to “RE/CONNECT” in 2022), the first year of the project involved two private universities in Japan: a liberal arts college in Miyazaki and an art university in Kyoto. Despite both universities being Japanese, the project attracted a diversity of local and international students (some of whom were stuck temporarily in their home countries) from a total of eight countries. In its second year, the project was partnered by an additional art university in the United Kingdom with a total of twenty-four students, and, in 2022, with the further addition of a private art university in Kyoto, twenty-three students joined. Considering the possible isolation of students during the long summer break, with no structured class schedule or activities to attend, the projects were held between August and September. In each year so far, the project has followed the three-stage process: exchange, create, and exhibit, with each

stage playing a vital role in providing students with a comprehensive and enriching learning experience.

Stage 1: Exchange

The exchange stage of the project consists of regular online group meetings between participating students and organizing faculty. In each year of the project, four ninety-minute meetings were held. In the first meeting, participants have a chance to introduce themselves and their artwork, as well as share their personal experiences and insights regarding the pandemic, how it has affected their lives, their artistic practices, and their perspectives on the world. These exchanges aim to foster cross-cultural understanding, empathy, and appreciation for different perspectives, creating a sense of global interconnectedness while the world portrayed by the media was increasingly fragmented and isolated (Mach et al., 2021). The project aims and requirements were then outlined by the organizing faculty. Finally, participants collaboratively develop an artistic brief from which they will create individual artworks. Reflecting the fluctuating nature of the pandemic itself, as well as the diversity of the participants, the themes of the project varied slightly throughout the years. The focus of the first year was how our lives had been affected by COVID, how we stay in contact with those important to us, and what we had learned about ourselves. A similar theme was followed in the second year, yet simplified to three words: “distance, connection, isolation”. However, by the final year, participants decided upon the idea of “the new normal” as a topic to explore. This organic restructuring was echoed in the changing of the name from DIS/CONNECT to RE/CONNECT after the second year. The latter seeming appropriate for the more optimistic stage of the pandemic in 2022.

Stage 2: Create

Building upon the exchange stage, students create their original artworks based on the brief and reflect on their personal experiences and interpretations of the pandemic. The artistic brief serves as a springboard, providing a thematic framework to explore ideas and emotions, with the development of these ideas being shared in regular exchange meetings. Finding a suitable balance between providing a structure upon which ideas can build and allowing enough autonomy so as to not constrict any original creative thought was crucial to the success of the project. Participants were encouraged to work in whatever media they liked, the only constraint was that the final submission must be a digital image of their artwork. Due to the diverse artistic backgrounds of the members, the submissions included a broad range of media including digital illustration, drawing, manga, animation, and video.

The artworks are accompanied by a short descriptive text by the artist which provides viewers with insights into the inspiration and concept behind the work. This not only enhances the viewer's understanding and appreciation by providing context, but also encourages the artists themselves to furthermore articulate and reflect upon their ideas, developing a deeper understanding of the complex and nuanced connection between creative choices, feelings, and personal experiences.

Stage 3: Exhibit

Many face-to-face events were postponed during the early stages of the pandemic, and students were denied the particular kind of festive social contact experienced in large groups such as concerts and opening parties. For this reason, the culminating stage of the project was

the introduction of the works by the artists at a virtual opening party and their subsequent display in an online public exhibition. The opening serves as a celebratory event where artists can present their works to a broader audience and provides a platform for them to express their ideas and receive feedback from others. Furthermore, by encouraging participants to articulate ideas by engaging in critical discussions about their artwork, this stage of the project is a chance to improve public speaking and presentation skills. Opportunities to share ideas with people outside of one's regular environment were understandably limited due to the pandemic. Ultimately, this shared experience was aimed to help students gain confidence in their abilities and reinforce a sense of validation and accomplishment. The public exhibition was hosted on the free social networking platforms Tumbler and Instagram. Through the sharing and tagging of the participants, the exhibition effectively promoted itself and was able to reach a far wider audience than a physical gallery exhibition could. The potential of online visual arts projects to create an impact beyond the individual student participants themselves became apparent.

Discussion

Impact on Student Learning Experiences

International online visual art projects such as RE/CONNECT have the potential to deeply influence students' learning experiences, enhance their cross-cultural understanding, cultivate their creative and critical thinking skills, and enable them to derive emotional and psychological benefits through using art as a medium for processing pandemic-related feelings.

Through the opportunity to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, students can broaden their horizons and develop a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives. This cross-cultural exchange encourages students to challenge their preconceptions and develop a more nuanced understanding of the world around them. Direct contact with an internationally diverse community was especially pertinent during the pandemic as media portrayals of the situation in other countries could be confirmed or challenged via first-hand reports from those countries.

Art students specifically can benefit from this engagement in cross-cultural communication by noticing the similarities and differences between their own creative ideas and those of others outside of their environment. Through this process, they can gain a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of art and culture, promoting the development of creative and critical thinking skills. During the *create* stage, students are encouraged to explore new ideas and experiment with unfamiliar artistic devices. This process of creative problem-solving enhances their ability to approach challenges from different angles and develop innovative solutions. They learn to embrace ambiguity and take risks. Furthermore, art creation and interpretation require students to think critically about their own artistic choices as they engage in discussions and critiques, helping to develop their analytical skills and learn to articulate their perspectives and opinions.

The use of art as a medium for processing pandemic-related feelings provides students with valuable emotional and psychological benefits (Hilton, 2020). Art enables students to communicate and process complex emotions that may be difficult to express through conventional means of communication. The act of creating art allows students to externalize their inner experiences and give form to abstract thoughts and emotions. This process of self-

expression can provide students with a sense of agency and empowerment (Kapitan, 2014). Sharing their artwork in online meetings also facilitates a sense of connection and solidarity among participants. This communal aspect of artistic expression fosters a supportive and inclusive environment, where students can feel heard, seen, and validated.

Comparison with Face-to-face International Exchange

As mentioned previously, the online exchange project was initiated under the restrictions of the pandemic. Specifically, the inability to travel internationally, and at certain periods the requirement to remain at home and take classes online. From its conception, the RE/CONNECT project was intended to be a temporary alternative to face-to-face international exchange, utilizing the accelerated familiarity with communication technology to provide a substitute for the duration of the pandemic. As such, the limitations of virtual exchange in contrast to face-to-face programs were understood. The level of cultural immersion and hands-on experiential learning experienced by physically living abroad and interacting daily with locals is arguably impossible to replicate through virtual exchange.

However, while face-to-face international exchange programs afford a distinct advantage in terms of the depth of experience they provide, online programs present notable benefits in the form of flexibility, accessibility, and cost-effectiveness. Face-to-face exchange programs mostly require several years of planning by universities on either side of the exchange and are generally the result of established partnerships. Such partnerships require ongoing management, time, and effort on behalf of the university administration before participating students have even considered applying. The application procedure itself takes considerable diligence, including the submission of multiple forms, certificates, and often an interview process to check for suitability. Students wishing to join an international exchange program will need to start planning several months in advance. Taking part in an online exchange program, however, is as simple as signing up during the recruitment period. There are no interviews or lengthy applications to submit, and because the program does not conflict with the regular university schedule, there is minimal impact on their regular studies, work, or social lives. The financial aspect constitutes a significant factor contributing to the appeal of online programs. Face-to-face exchange programs entail substantial expenses associated with travel, accommodation, and often additional educational costs, rendering such programs unviable for many students. Conversely, online programs are essentially cost-free for participants, with the sole financial obligation being the subscription fee for communication software, which is typically borne by the institution.

Ultimately, both face-to-face and online international exchange programs possess their own inherent merits, and the choice between the two is contingent upon individual circumstances and objectives.

Feedback and Survey Results

Survey results of Japanese art university students (N = 7) in the 2022 project showed that few participants had previous international exchange experience (< 20%). When asked which part of the project they found enjoyable, the most common response was “sharing artworks with international students,” followed by “expressing ideas in English”, and “communicating with international students.” Interestingly, the most challenging aspects of the project were in equal measures “expressing ideas in English”, and “communicating with international students.” The fact that participants simultaneously found these aspects both enjoyable and

challenging is a testament to the satisfaction gained from the project, requiring effort, problem-solving, and skill development. The sense of accomplishment achieved from overcoming these challenges potentially added to the depth of the experience. Regarding how participants benefited from the project, the most common response (> 50%) was “I became more confident in communicating with others.” Clearly, the social aspect of the project was valuable to students, most of whom had experienced reduced communicative opportunities in their daily lives.

Possibly the most valuable student feedback came in the form of free comments. One student remarked “It was very meaningful to interact with British students and teachers...(and) to feel the difference in trends between British and Japanese art,” suggesting that cross-cultural exchanges using the medium of art have real potential. Another student commented, “It was my first time to participate in an overseas exchange, so I was nervous because I couldn’t speak English and the students I met looked more mature than I had imagined.” While excessive or overwhelming nervousness can hinder learning, research suggests that reasonable levels of nervousness can be an indication of a valuable learning experience. The phenomenon known as “flashbulb memories” (Conway, 1994) indicates that experiences that cause surprise, shock, or nervousness, can result in long-lasting and vivid memories. The fact that the student was aware of such heightened emotions suggests that even though the exchange was held online, it felt *real* enough to trigger feelings normally associated with more direct forms of stimulation.

Conclusions

Through virtual communication tools and platforms, students can engage in cross-cultural discussions, share experiences, and develop a deeper understanding of different perspectives. Online international exchange projects structured similarly to RE/CONNECT can provide a framework for meaningful learning experiences in various disciplines. Although the focus of the project detailed above is visual art, the underlying principles and methodologies could be adapted and applied to other academic disciplines within the humanities or sciences alike to create similar learning experiences.

The digital landscape opens up possibilities for global collaboration, offering a solution to the logistical and financial constraints associated with conventional study abroad programs. By utilizing virtual platforms, students can engage in cross-cultural exchanges without the need for physical travel. This not only reduces costs but also eliminates barriers such as visa restrictions and time constraints, enabling a wider range of students to participate.

The RE/CONNECT project was a response to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, yet even as international travel becomes regulatorily feasible again, new concerns such as escalations in the Russo-Ukrainian War, increased cost of international flights, unfavorable currency exchange rates, and the cost-of-living crisis, have created a climate of instability in which face-to-face exchange programs remain impossible or undesirable for many. Such problems can be overcome through online platforms, allowing students to connect with peers from different countries and institutions conveniently and at little to no cost.

While it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of online exchanges, lacking the richness and immediacy of face-to-face interactions, they have great potential as a temporary substitute or supplement which can be utilized when and if necessary.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all participants from Miyazaki International College, Kyoto University of the Arts, Kyoto Saga University of Arts, and Norwich University of the Arts for their dedication to the project and inspirational artwork. The project would not have been possible without the initial idea and organizational support from Eric Luong in the first two years, and the subsequent support of Rob Nicol from 2021.

Appendix

Samples of student artwork and descriptive texts



Sample 1: Satomi Toma, “RECONNECT – after the Corona disaster”, stop-motion animation, 2022. I expressed the idea of reconnection between humans as organisms after experiencing the Corona disaster. When wearing a mask began to be recommended due to Corona, I often saw videos that visualized airborne droplets to make clear the risk of infection. When I saw it, I felt dirty, but at the same time, I thought that these droplets are also a part of humans. I felt I was a human organism. There is no one who doesn't spray these droplets. It's the same thing even if Corona disappears. By visualizing the droplets in the Corona disaster, we realized their presence and recognized our physiological phenomenon and appearance as organisms. As Corona gradually calms down, we are slowly starting to take off our masks. But whether Corona is here or not, we are still creatures oblivious to our own dirt. I find it absurd, but at the same time, I love such human creatures.



Sample 2: Mei Mukai, “Storm”, animation, 2021. The outbreak is like a storm. Sometimes rough, sometimes gentle, sometimes vicious enough to flip the world upside down. But we should keep our composure until it passes.



Sample 3: Aya Fukunaga, “Family”, photograph, 2020. Ever since the coronavirus spread, my chances of seeing my grandfather have drastically decreased. He lives in a nursing home. This picture shows my hand and his hand. Every time I meet him, I hold hands at the end. Because of this pandemic, the time I meet him is limited. This picture shows how deep the connection between me and my grandfather is.

References

- Amankwah-Amoah, J., Khan, Z., Wood, G., & Knight, G. (2021). Covid-19 and digitalization: The great acceleration. *Journal of Business Research*, *136*, 602–611.
- Chishima, Y., & Liu, I.-T. H.-C. (2021). Mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan: Applying topic modeling in daily life descriptions. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, *21*(1), 180–199.
- Conway, M. (1994). *Flashbulb Memories*. London.
- Hilton, D. (2020). Art therapy and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic - public mental health and emotional well-being. *Mathews Journal of Psychiatry & Mental Health*, *6*(1).
- Kapitan, L. (2014). Empowerment in art therapy: Whose point of view and determination? *Art Therapy*, *31*(1), 2–3.
- Komiya, N. (2022). A study of Japanese university students influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and their awareness with their one's Own face. *International Journal of Cognitive Research in Science, Engineering and Education (IJCRSEE)*, *10*(2), 17–26.
- Mach, K. J., Salas Reyes, R., Pentz, B., Taylor, J., Costa, C. A., Cruz, S. G., Thomas, K. E., Arnott, J. C., Donald, R., Jagannathan, K., Kirchhoff, C. J., Rosella, L. C., & Klenk, N. (2021). News media coverage of COVID-19 Public Health and policy information. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *8*(1).
- Marcus, J. S., Petropoulos, G., & Aloisi, A. (2022). Covid-19 and the accelerated shift to technology-enabled work from home. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.
- Mohd Basar, Z., Mansor, A. N., Jamaludin, K. A., & Alias, B. S. (2021). The effectiveness and challenges of online learning for secondary school students – A case study. *Asian Journal of University Education*, *17*(3), 119.
- Morgan, H. (2022). Alleviating the challenges with remote learning during a pandemic. *Education Sciences*, *12*(2), 109.