

*Respond to Diversity: Study of a Japan Nonformal Learning Program's Remote Effect  
Fostering Cross-Generational, Multicultural Relationships, and Disruption of Stereotypes*

Dunya Chen, Keio University, Japan  
Jiayi Lu, Keio University, Japan  
Keiko Okawa, Keio University, Japan

The European Conference on Education 2023  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

In response to the cumulative consciousness of learners' diversity, it is vital to study the format of learning to better address the needs of learners today. Japan, where secondary education remains conventional, the study has been conducted since 2015 to examine the proposed nonformal learning program. The program, comprised of voluntary-based facilitators whose ages range from 22 to 63, is premeditated to retort learners' diversity by empowering facilitators with a high degree of autonomy to tailor each session. The learning experience of meeting dissimilar facilitators on every occasion aligns with the Eastern philosophy of "Ichigo Ichie" (一期一会), emphasizing the significance of seizing the moment and cherishing encounters with others. The program utilizes a two-stage approach, where facilitators' training is specified prior to individual sessions. With the design intention of fostering a learning environment that encourages interpersonal communication, it flattens the power dynamics among facilitators and students. This intention aligns with the Eastern philosophy of "San ren xing bi you wo shi" (三人行必有我师), highlighting the importance of learning from others through interactions regardless of hierarchical positions. In this case, the program's approach creates a novel learning experience for participants who have not yet experienced nonformal learning prior. The study found that the program facilitated incremental learning, particularly in generating learning atmospheres that inspire cross-generational and multicultural student-facilitator relational interaction. This socialization creates a remote effect that positively influences students' motivation. Participants also perceived the designed program disrupted their pre-existing stereotypes towards each other.

Keywords: Nonformal Learning, Eastern Philosophy, Empathetic Social Interaction, Two-Stage Approach, Cross-Generational, Multicultural Relationships, Disruption of Stereotypes

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Rising Trend in Welcoming International Residents**

The recent report published by the Japan Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, "Population, Population Dynamics, and Number of Households as of January 2023," highlights a significant growth in the trend of international residency within Japan (MIC, 2023). Specifically, the foreign resident count rose by 289,498 from the prior year, marking an increase for the first time in three years, despite having decreased for two consecutive years since 2021 (MIC, 2023). This trend is particularly prominent in major prefectures such as Tokyo, Aichi, and Osaka (MIC, 2023), where individuals from diverse backgrounds are increasingly visible in workplaces, residential neighborhoods, and schools. This growing international presence is not only shaping the demographic landscape but also fostering multicultural interactions. Notably, the increase in foreign residents has led to a rise in the number of international households, now reaching 1,772,890 households, indicating an increase of 15.57% from the previous year (MIC, 2023). This presents an excellent opportunity for local Japanese students to engage with peers from diverse backgrounds, contributing to a more enriched cultural exchange and understanding within their communities.

### **1.2 Increased Use of Social Media and the Internet**

With the progression of technology, Japan, like many, has also been advancing in its network infrastructure as well as hardware such as smartphone adoption (Tateno et al., 2019). In addition, data indicates that Japanese youth are dedicating more time to social media and the internet at large (Tateno et al., 2019). The inherent global reach of the digital landscape (Curran, 2012) naturally allows Japanese students to interact with people around the world. This change in context requires students to develop not only communication ability but also empathetic skills to be able to interact with people from various backgrounds.

### **1.3 Formal Learning**

In Japan, secondary education largely adheres to a formal learning structure (Davidson & Liu, 2020). This approach, despite covering a comprehensive set of topics, has its constraints. The integration of nonformal learning as a supplementary scaffolding to this formal framework is uncommon in Japan (Okano, 2015). Typically, nonformal engagements manifest as after-school and extracurricular activities, predominantly centered on sports and hobbies (Okano, 2015).

### **1.4 Limited Cultural Interactions in Current Teaching**

Although many topics have been touched upon in formal classes, students don't have any opportunities to co-work with people who have diverse cultural backgrounds in a classroom setting. Most of the interactions with "foreigners" are by chance. The NHK monthly research report in 2020 indicates that "studying together" is among the top three situations where a Japanese person gets to interact with someone from abroad (Okada, 2020). Professor Shunsuke Tanabe from Waseda University mentioned that "Youth, in particular, have less interest in going overseas or forging relationships with foreigners" (Eiraku, 2019). This signals a rather interesting and contrasting phenomenon to what seems to be a seamless global village.

## **1.5 OECD Paper on Goal for 2023 Education**

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) issued the Learning Compass 2030 discussing the global vision of learning and knowledge (OECD, 2019). The paper takes a new attitude toward a more inclusive and well-being focus on education. Within the vision, it points out in the "attitude & value" section in supporting students' navigation towards their overall well-being within the context of individual, societal, and environmental as well as their future establishment (OECD, 2019). The OECD vision stresses the interdependence among elements such as knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values (OECD, 2019). Specifically, social well-being is founded upon one's social principles and beliefs as it impacts the eminence of social contacts. It comprises one action and handles the contact, positive or negative, with others. Societal principles also mirror cultural expectations about communal well-being (OECD, 2019).

In addition, the vision further indicates the importance of soft skills in the social and emotional categories. The capabilities to interrelate and communicate with others; establish and maintain relationships, resolve differences, empathize with others' perspectives in social interactions, and further respond with positivity are key competence towards the future of overall development for the students.

## **2. Participants' Pre-existing Perceptions**

To better understand and facilitate the design of the program that would best address the opportunities within the context, further study was conducted to understand various participants' pre-existing perceptions towards other participants. Below we organize the discussion via the participating high school lecturers, the program facilitators, and the participating students.

### **2.1 High School Lecturers**

#### **2.1.1 Students' Ability to Think at a Broader Level**

Within the current formal education system, high school lecturers seldom have the opportunity to grasp students' perspectives on community and societal issues they care about. Given the substantial workload that both lecturers and students shoulder, allocating in-class time for exploration beyond the curriculum becomes challenging for lecturers, while students also find it tough to venture outside prescribed topics.

#### **2.1.2 Students' Ability to Think Critically**

Furthermore, lecturers showed concerns about students' ability of critical thinking. In formal education, curricula, assignment topics, and procedures are often predetermined. Accustomed to this structured routine, both lecturers and students follow a set teaching and learning pattern. Students seldom had the opportunity to learn through exploration, raise questions, and design solutions. Consequently, lectures are keen to find out through this program the depth of students' critical thinking on community issues and the caliber of solutions they can come up with within tight timeframes and limited sessions.

### **2.1.3 Students' Ability to Communicate with International Facilitators Clearly and Empathetically**

Last but not least, lecturers expressed curiosity about the students' capability to engage with international facilitators. Given that Japanese students learn English as a second language, there's interest in their aptitude to articulate observations, analyses, and insights both clearly and empathetically. This is particularly pertinent to discussions involving cultural and value-based topics; lecturers wonder if their students can conduct conversations involving abstract concepts in English.

## **2.2 Program Facilitators**

The program facilitators include postgraduate students as well as faculty members from the Keio University Graduate School of Media Design, volunteering their time. Before the program's implementation, the facilitators harbored several perceptions that stemmed from their concerns about engaging with Japanese high school students. Firstly, there was apprehension about understanding and effectively interacting with this demographic, given the cultural and age differences. Secondly, doubts arose regarding the level of student engagement and ensuring the seamless execution of the workshop, especially since a harmonious flow was deemed essential for learning. Lastly, facilitators were uncertain about their proficiency in stimulating students' curiosity and consistently maintaining their motivation throughout the session.

## **2.3 Students**

Before the introduction of the proposed program, high school students held certain perceptions rooted in their prior experiences and the societal norms they had observed. Firstly, a prevailing culture of conformity made many students wary of interacting with foreigners, especially in a class setting. Engaging with international facilitators might make them stand out, which was not always seen as positive. Secondly, there might be a fear of failure. Students expressed concerns about their ability to communicate seamlessly with the international facilitators, apprehensive about potential language barriers or misunderstandings. Lastly, their educational journey had predominantly been within the bounds of formal schooling. Consequently, many held the belief that learning in school is solely formal, unaware of the potential for diverse, interactive, and less conventional educational experiences.

## **3. Motivation**

The increasingly global environment in Japan and the perceptions towards each other led to the creation of the program that stems from a pressing question: How can we support both local students and foreigners in maximizing the opportunities inherent in the present context?

In this interconnected world, it's imperative that our educational framework reflects and reveres the rich tapestry of diversities that exist. By integrating diverse learning experiences, we aim to challenge traditional educational norms and broaden the horizons of all participants. Additionally, it's our belief that learning shouldn't be confined to a singular event or session. By promoting prolonged discussions and continuous learning, we seek to foster deeper understanding, mutual respect, and lasting connections between local students and foreigners.

## **4. Proposed Program**

### **4.1 Collaboration With Fujimigaoka High School**

Since 2015, a collaboration has been established between the proposed program and Fujimigaoka High School for Girls located in Tokyo, Japan. Every year, around a hundred tenth-grade students from the school benefit from this partnership, engaging in eight distinct sessions annually. These sessions are facilitated by a diverse group from the Keio University Graduate School of Media Design, consisting of postgraduate students and faculty members. Notably, these facilitators bring a wealth of international perspectives, hailing from over 15 countries with ages spanning from their 20s to their 60s. This collaboration serves as a rich tapestry of learning and cross-cultural interaction for the high school students.

### **4.2 Two Eastern Philosophies Inspiring the Proposed Program**

#### **4.2.1 "Ichigo Ichie" (一期一会)—Seizing the Moment**

The proposed program is inspired by two Eastern philosophies, one of which is "Ichigo Ichie" (一期一会). This is a Japanese idiom that translates to "once-in-a-lifetime encounter" (Yu, n.d.). It emphasizes the concept that each encounter or experience is unique and should be treasured because it will never recur in the exact same way. The learning experience of meeting dissimilar facilitators on every occasion aligns with "Ichigo Ichie" (一期一会), emphasizing the significance of seizing the moment and cherishing encounters with peers and facilitators as well as their ability to reflect on past experiences.

#### **4.2.2 "San Ren Xing Bi You Wo Shi" (三人行必有我师)—Learning Regardless of Hierarchy**

"San ren xing bi you wo shi" (三人行必有我师) is a Chinese proverb from the Analects of Confucius (Waley & others, 2012) and it translates to "There is always someone that one can learn from among a group of people." The saying emphasizes the idea that we can always learn from the people around us, regardless of their status or background, through interactions and communication. The proposed program intentionally creates a learning environment that encourages interpersonal communication between and among students and facilitators through nonformal learning which flattens the hierarchy or power position between facilitators and students. Such socialization helps with the relationship establishment that fosters students' motivation to learn by encouraging them to communicate with facilitators without hesitation while fostering students' ability to interact socially with respect and empathy.

### **4.3 Two-Stage Approach Fostering Relationship**

The proposed program is designed with a clear end goal: enabling students to engage in interactions and collaborations across diverse ethnicities and age groups. To address the various perspectives whilst reaching the intended goal, the program contains a two-stage "training the trainer" approach. Program designers host a facilitator briefing session before each actual session, wherein volunteer facilitators first immerse themselves as participants before conducting actual sessions. This immersion equips facilitators to anticipate, experience, and grasp potential challenges and questions students might encounter, thereby

allowing them to be better prepared. Additionally, facilitators can gain insights into program designers' methods of facilitation as a reference in support of non-formal learning. Particularly for those who recently joined the program, these briefing sessions help alleviate anxiety from unfamiliarity or uncertainty about the process, subsequently having the remote effect of enhancing the chances of successful facilitation and student learning. With eight sessions annually per program, these preparatory facilitator briefing sessions lay a robust foundation, ensuring smoother execution and nurturing a collaborative environment among facilitators.

#### 4.3.1 Design Generating Learning Atmosphere and Motivating Incremental Learning

With the intention to foster a learning environment that goes beyond the physical classroom, information communication technology (ICT) tools are employed. The ICT tools act as an always-on "classroom" with capabilities of supporting information sharing under various formats, such as text, pictorial, and audio-visual. As illustrated in Figure 1 (Chen et al., 2023), the proposed program aims to prolong learning through interaction among the members, these ICT tools further motivate interactions among students as well as between students and facilitators. Starting with the formal classes, the proposed program is not intended to replace but to further prolong the learning with nonformal and ICT platforms. Acts of facilitation therefore can happen outside of scheduled sessions, further motivating collaboration and fostering curiosity in students whilst they explore topics of their choice. ICT tools selected such as Padlet are chosen to generate cross-team interactions as well as student-facilitator interactions beyond the scheduled session time.

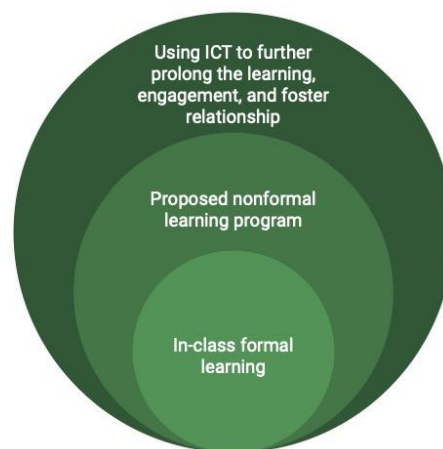


Figure 1: Structure Generating Learning Atmosphere and Motivating Incremental Learning.

#### 4.3.2 Design Reflecting the Dynamics—Empowering Facilitators and Fostering Autonomy

As shown in Figure 2, the proposed program stands out with its distinct emphasis on flexibility and customization, catering to the unique dynamics of every session. Recognizing that every class and student team can have its own rhythm, facilitators have previously undergone each session during the facilitator briefing sessions, ensuring they can best adapt to the real-time dynamics. This pre-experience coupled with the core principle of prioritizing student discussions and interactions, empowers facilitators by offering all of them autonomy. They have the discretion to adjust the time spent on each activity, ensuring it's not about just completing the intended tasks, but truly resonating with the students.

What truly sets this program apart is its commitment to flexibility and choice in both curriculum and instructional approaches. Instead of a one-size-fits-all structure, facilitators can move around, address questions, and adapt to each team's unique learning speeds. Moreover, the proposed program typically arranges three facilitators in each classroom with five to six groups, featuring a low facilitator-to-group ratio, allowing for more opportunities for discussions and relational connections between students and facilitators. Such a dynamic not only fosters mutual simulations, enhancing communication between facilitators and students but also enriches peer-to-peer interactions.

Moreover, although facilitators are given autonomy, it's within a well-defined framework. As mentioned in the previous section, the program ensures this balance by investing in "training the trainers" during the facilitator briefing session before each workshop session. All facilitators undergo discussions tailored to address the diverse learning needs of students.

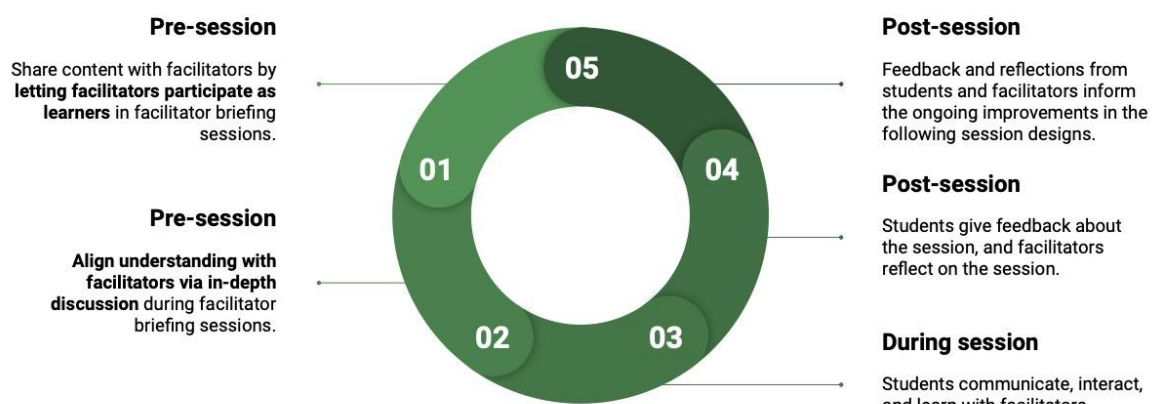


Figure 2: Implementation Cycle.

## 5. Feedback From Students and Facilitators

The impact of the program design enabled a learning environment that encourages interpersonal communication between and among students and facilitators. This interactive setting creates a remote effect that encourages relationship establishment that further positively influences students' motivation to learn. Based on various evaluation methods—including students' surveys, observations of student interactions on online platforms like Padlet, video recordings and photographs from sessions, and facilitators' reflections both before and after training and sessions, it became evident that both students and facilitators found the designed program disrupted the pre-existing stereotypes towards each other. Table 1 below presents themes and corresponding examples derived from the qualitative evaluations.

| Themes  | Student/Facilitator | Example Quotes   |
|---|---------------------|--|
| Fostering non-hierarchical relationship                               | Students            | I can't believe I had a conversation with facilitators today and it was fun to try!  |
|   | Facilitators        | When students came and say "today was fun" at the end of the session, I felt that was the highlight of my day.   |
| Fostering remote effect via facilitator briefing                      | Facilitators        | I am nervous and also excited about the next session. The roleplay in the briefing gave me the experience of the students. And the discussion also helped, now I know better how to facilitate.                          |
|   |                     | The briefing session exceeded my expectation. It releases my mental pressure by providing key tips for vitalizing communication with young students.   |
| Disturbing facilitator's pre-disposition / perceptions about students | Facilitators        | Some students were more eager to discuss about social problems than I thought.   |
|   |                     | At first, I thought high school students would care less about social problems, but I ended up amazed by the breadth of topics they chose, the depth of their research, and the creativity they show in their solutions. |
| Disturbing students' pre-disposition / perceptions about learning     | Students            | I didn't know learning can be like this. And I am happy to show our team's work.   |

Table 1: Feedback from Students and Facilitators

## 6. Conclusion

Overall, in the proposed program, both students and facilitators interacted with people from different generations and cultures. This experience not only helped them form new relationships but also challenged their pre-existing biases toward each other.

Specifically, a few elements of success were noticed. First, the willingness and commitment towards the proposed program from both facilitators and the participating school are crucial. As a culture that prefers conformity and prior best practices, commitment and trust towards the program are the foundation of its success.

The dedication of facilitators, particularly in regard to the additional hours and effort spent in pre-session facilitator briefing sessions and post-session feedback, is the key that enabled the two-stage approach as well as the remote effects. Additionally, pre-session facilitator briefing sessions gave facilitators room to discuss, learn and motivate each other, becoming an additional element that contributes to the smoothness of implementation.



The request for providing feedback also encouraged facilitators to keenly observe both the individual progress of students and the dynamics within teams. They noted aspects like students' thought processes, problem-solving skills, creativity, and their capacity for higher-level community-oriented thinking. These observations empowered facilitators to tailor sessions to each team's specific progress, leveraging the autonomy they were granted in their judgment.

Though many areas within the program remain to be further analyzed and refined, this study provides an initial case on implementing nonformal learning as additional support to existing formal learning and scaffolding students' essential skills in interacting and collaborating with others across the globe.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank the students and teachers of Fujimigaoka High School, and their fellow facilitators, for their support and participation in the program. Their contributions were crucial to the success of the program.

## References

- Chen, D. D., Lu, J., & Okawa, K. (2023). ICT-Supported Design Thinking Workshop Program: A Case Study of Encouraging Social Lean-In for High School Students in Japan. *Proceedings of the 15th International Conference on Computer Supported Education - Volume 2, CSEDU 2023*, 527–534. <https://doi.org/10.5220/0011969300003470>
- Curran, J. (2012). Reinterpreting the internet. *Misunderstanding the Internet*, 3, 33.
- Davidson, R., & Liu, Y. (2020). Reaching the world outside: Cultural representation and perceptions of global citizenship in Japanese elementary school English textbooks. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 33(1), 32–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2018.1560460>
- Eiraku, M. (2019, January 10). The changing view of foreigners in Japan. NHK WORLD-JAPAN. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/336/>
- MIC. (2023). *Population, Population Dynamics, and Number of Households based on the Basic Resident Register as of January 1, 2023*. Japan Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. [https://www.soumu.go.jp/main\\_content/000892947.pdf](https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000892947.pdf)
- OECD. (2019). An OECD Learning Framework 2030. In G. Bast, E. G. Carayannis, & D. F. J. Campbell (Eds.), *The Future of Education and Labor* (pp. 23–35). Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26068-2\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26068-2_3)
- Okada, M. (2020, August 1). *Hopes and Anxieties Concerning the Increase in International Residents*. [https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/english/research/yoron/20200801\\_5.html](https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/english/research/yoron/20200801_5.html)
- Okano, K. H. (2015). *Nonformal Education and Civil Society in Japan*. Routledge.
- Tateno, M., Teo, A. R., Ukai, W., Kanazawa, J., Katsuki, R., Kubo, H., & Kato, T. A. (2019). Internet Addiction, Smartphone Addiction, and Hikikomori Trait in Japanese Young Adult: Social Isolation and Social Network. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 10. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2019.00455>
- Waley, A. & others. (2012). *The analects of Confucius*. Routledge.
- Yu, A. C. (n.d.). *Chanoyu Ichie Shu (Collection on the Oneness of Chanoyu)—Japanese Wiki Corpus*. Retrieved August 15, 2023, from [https://www.japanesewiki.com/literature/Chanoyu Ichie Shu \(Collection on the Oneness of Chanoyu\).html](https://www.japanesewiki.com/literature/Chanoyu%20Ichie%20Shu%20(Collection%20on%20the%20Oneness%20of%20Chanoyu).html)

**Contact email:** [dchen@kmd.keio.ac.jp](mailto:dchen@kmd.keio.ac.jp)