

*Assessing Online Study Abroad: Assessing Japanese University Students'
Online Study Abroad and the Future of Study Abroad Post-Corona*

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Abstract

This study reflects on the experiences of students and instructors on the online international exchange program at a Japanese university during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a mixed methods approach incorporating both survey and interview data, I report on student and instructor perceptions and reflections of distance learning experiences of courses held online at a Japanese university and a university in Australia. In 2020, Japanese educational institutions suddenly faced the problem of adapting to distance learning to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, or face suspending classes indefinitely. Implementing effective lessons, navigating student expectations and adapting to the changes in performance while negotiating with institutions became primary concerns of instructors during this challenging time. The results of the study discuss findings concerning meeting student needs, the use of distance learning during this time including the use of in-house LMSs, active learning implementation, student reactions to online study abroad, and call for additional educational resources that can support instructors in preparing, designing, and conducting online courses. Based on these reflections and analysis, I propose future suggestions for study abroad programs that incorporate online courses on a need basis. As there is an increased number of online international training programs, online internships, remote work, and online study abroad experience can be even beneficial for students. It is now time to think beyond the form of solely physical study abroad experiences. While the online study abroad program is not a replacement of a study abroad experience, it is a crucial experience for the current generation moving forward with their academic and professional career.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Teaching Approaches, Educational Technology



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Introduction

The world has been reeling from the blow dealt by the COVID-19 pandemic, with Japanese universities constantly learning and relearning lessons from other countries and adapting to using new technologies, just like the rest of the world. Although Japan, at first, fared relatively well compared to other OECD countries, the makeshift response led to problems in the subsequent months (Suzuki, 2021). The climb to meet these challenges has been particularly steep in Japan, despite seemingly having the appropriate infrastructure and computer literacy to support this. Since then, many online platforms have aggressively sought ways to create technologies for education and started promoting them to educators worldwide, as well as those interested in learning online. As this global phenomenon continues, some higher education institutions are actively searching for ways to provide students with international education with English language online.

Experience With Online Education

2020 was a moment in time that placed educators in a pivotal position, demanding the acquisition of new skills and adapting to a new normal in online education. Online education can be an effective way of learning through many different formats, such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), online courses held with video conferencing tools such as Google Meet, Skype, or Zoom, completing learning activities online through companion sites such as khanacademy.org, or distance learning, which involves interaction between instructors and learners and opportunities for timely feedback (Tsai & Machado, 2002). Despite people and educators often conflating these terms, distance learning (遠隔授業 *enkaku jugyō*) was used to reference the adaptation of colleges and universities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as seen before, teachers and students who have had little experience with any type of learning conducted online face many challenges. According to the OECD 2019 report concerning educators' confidence in teaching students using technology, Japanese high school teachers were one of the lowest-ranked populations (OECD, 2019). Furthermore, use of technology at the university level has been inconsistent in many ways, with implementation being limited to superficial technologies such as bulletin boards for posting syllabus information, as opposed to other countries which utilize learning management systems, digital textbooks and material creation online (Funamori, 2017). These factors placed Japan and their students in a perilous position in which to meet the moment and join the world in adapting to a new educational landscape.

Instructors

As seen in the OECD report above, many teachers expressed having little experience with online education, either as a teacher or a student, so making the sudden transition to online teaching may have been more difficult than for those who have had experience with it in university or in compulsory education. In some cases, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was the first time that instructors were forced to interact with these systems (O'Donoghue, 2020), and were tasked with not only using new systems, but also adapting existing materials to a new learning technology, which some were experiencing for the first time with little support.

Students

Students also have difficulty with the sudden acceptance of technology. Not only the transition from using technology in the classroom, which itself is a shift from what is considered the norm of the classroom - usually students are not allowed to use computers in the classroom unless it is strictly part of the content of the class. Furthermore, computer usage is not normalized in high school classrooms. During lectures, using a computer to take detailed notes is not viewed as a typical practice. There is evidence that taking notes with laptops is detrimental (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014; Sana, Weston, & Cepeda, 2013), but this is not conclusive, with more recent studies challenging this assumption (Morehead, Dunlosky & Rawson, 2019). However, this is one instance of the reluctance of integrating technology that may have affected the acceptance of technology in classrooms in Japan.

Perceptions of technology in the classroom. Due to the traditional format of Japanese lessons being a one-way, lecture-based approach, and the perception of technology being an impediment to learning, partially informed by research (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014), and partially by the tendency to protect the status quo, there has been little success in implementing edtech (educational technology) into the classroom in a meaningful way. Therefore, this study focused on exploring the response of instructors and what we can learn for greater technology implementation in the future.

Method

The participants were university faculty from a Japanese university who taught at the university, junior college, and/or graduate level. A survey was first conducted with 37 participants, and a follow-up semi-structured interview was conducted with 7 participants during February and March 2021. This research interviewed both full-time tenured and non-tenured staff, as well as part-time staff: I will refer to the participants as “instructors”. The survey and interviews investigated students’ general reactions to the use of technology for distance learning, and interviews asked students’ reactions after the online study abroad experience.

Instructor Survey & Interviews

The survey was distributed in both English and Japanese. Editing was done by native speakers of both languages to ensure the accuracy and validity of the survey questions. The survey was distributed through email, and conducted on Google Forms. Follow-up interviews were conducted with volunteers in the language of their preference, and semi-structured interviews were conducted. These semi-structured interviews were transcribed and coded according to relevant themes in English or Japanese. This research focuses on the results of the qualitative interviews, with survey results giving context to the general background of the university instructors’ situation during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Coding and theme creation were conducted by the main researcher during analysis of the interview transcription.

Student Reflections

Study abroad was a crucial component of students’ education in this institution, and students were able to participate in distance learning in institutions that shared the same time zone as Japan, located in Oceania (Australia) and Southeast Asia (The Philippines). Student

reflections were collected after a period of 2-3 months of online study abroad after their *return* to normal classes as part of the study abroad program. These reflections were required to be written in English, and asked students to share their experiences and impressions of their study abroad. 59 responses were coded thematically and the main findings are shared below.

Results & Discussion

These are the most relevant results of the instructor survey (Table 1.1) which are relevant to the themes discovered in the research. The themes will be discussed below.

Table 1.1: Selected Survey Answers – Instructors

Question		Variables	N=37
Before introducing distance learning, how familiar were you with the following technology?	Skype/Zoom	Used Daily	1
		Used Frequently	8
		Used Rarely	14
		Never Used	14
	Learning Management Systems	Used Daily	8
		Used Frequently	8
		Used Rarely	14
		Never Used	7
Which aspect of technology use was the most challenging?	Learning how to use software such as ZOOM, LMS, PowerPoint	Very challenging	1
		Challenging	6
		Slightly challenging	15
		Not at all challenging	13
	How to adapt active learning activities to distance learning	Very challenging	6
		Challenging	11
		Slightly challenging	15
		Not at all challenging	4
How much additional guidance did students need?	(Less than usual) 1	1	
	2	1	
	3	15	
	4	10	
	(More than usual) 5	8	
How well did students adapt to distance learning?	(Adapted poorly) 1	1	
	2	5	
	3	5	
	4	20	
	(Adapted well) 5	4	

The results of the survey showed several informative results which were coded and organized into several categories. The surveys showed that instructors had little experience with online teaching tools, with 75% of respondents answering that they had little (14) to no experience (14) using online tools such as Zoom or Skype, and nearly 20% (7) of instructors indicating they had no experience with using LMS in their classes before the COVID-19 pandemic measures were taken. Participants have expressed doubts about using online platforms for study abroad, however, they learned a lot from their experience.

Participants also claimed that adapting active learning approaches for their students using online tools was one of the most challenging aspects of the transition to online teaching, with 45% of those surveyed answering challenging (11) or very challenging (6). Through additional questions and conversations in the qualitative interviews, additional details and common difficulties were discovered. The results of student reflections showed that although students did not have high expectations for their study abroad experience at the beginning, many students did find benefits from the experience. These themes included a lack of motivation (“Unmotivated”), a belief that this experience was inauthentic compared to the real thing (“Not the real thing”), but that there were still benefits to be had (“Making the most of it”). Select quotes are featured in Table 1.2.

Findings from these reflections suggested that online study abroad is not a substitute for students, but not that it is without merit. Students were mostly surprised by the learning they were able to accomplish, and made progress in their language abilities. However, this was not comparable to the progress they would have made if they had been able to go abroad, but this could be considered not as an adequate alternative, but as an addendum to a F2F study abroad, for follow-up experiences or even internships that could be extended into a F2F internship.

Table 1.2: Focal Student Reflections

Reflections Themes	
Unmotivated	<p>“I was suspicious of the program’s effect before it was commenced to be honest.”</p> <p>“To be honest, I had little motivation at the beginning of this program and was very sad to have replaced the planned study abroad program.”</p> <p>“At first my motivation was...not good...I thought it was not enough experience.”</p>
Not the real thing	<p>“I thought that taking a foreign class online is no different from taking a class at [our] University.”</p> <p>“...at first, I found studying abroad online to be a hassle...I thought I wouldn’t get anything if I stayed on.”</p>
Making the Most out of it	<p>“...Although it was not the same, there were many chances to be active and improve my English...”</p> <p>“ [it was] hard to communicate on Zoom...but more benefits than I thought.”</p> <p>“However, in order for this experience to be successful as a result... I started to set my own goals for the day. For example, I have to speak three times a day in class...Setting these goals has been very motivating for me.”</p>

Improving Assessment

We need to go beyond the discussion of merits and demerits, advantages and disadvantages of online study abroad. As there will always be a debate between in-person and online learning experiences, with different circumstances, it becomes necessary to give more weight to the experience students will take away from their chosen learning environments. Students should be provided with opportunities to articulate their experience of, what they learned, and how they would evaluate their performance in different mediums and environments. These evaluations should include portfolios, journals, and reflective narratives to assess study abroad experience. Currently, there are a lack of methods of assessment, reflections, and how we can translate study abroad experiences into tangible outcomes. As instructors and administrators of a study abroad program, it is important to develop a systematic way of evaluating student experience. This does not simply mean assessing students' linguistic output or uptake of specific vocabulary items. One of the ways to assess student performances more holistically is to include students' reflections on key moments experienced during the online study abroad.

Just like the physical study abroad, there are a wide range of experiences students can learn from exposure to foreign language and culture in an online learning situation. Introducing different assessment areas such as flexibility, autonomy, adaptability, and spontaneity, which are qualities that study abroad programs value. Flexibility and adaptability could be assessed by the degree to which students adapt to working with other student groups from different backgrounds, or elaborating on the challenges that they met in the online space with differences in class structure, participation, or other measures. This could be assessed through group interviews post-study abroad, reflection essays, or post-study abroad presentations and portfolio creation (Lam, Lau & Wong, 2023). Spontaneity and adaptability are measures that could be evaluated by actions taken by students when unexpected difficulties arise, such as technical issues, or cultural challenges overcome by negotiation and cooperation in a digital environment.

Furthermore, with teleworking becoming increasingly common, working and learning through online environments will be more common for study abroad program designers to incorporate into these experiences, and with these innovations, new assessments will be needed. Study abroad programs will need to adopt reflective narratives for students to create portfolios of their experiences, focusing on the use of technologies including evaluating the usability of various digital platforms in online education, and thinking about future technologies for communication. Students can create their own web-based portfolios to help build their online presence during this study abroad program, with a focus on effective and ethical online communication through websites, web-based portfolios, and thinking about future use of technologies, they can discuss how these technologies helped them, how it shaped their perspectives, and perceptions of international communication online. Although there will always be the perception that online study abroad program does not achieve what a physical study abroad experience does, if we can set goals specifically designed for online learning, we can achieve educational goals that are useful to students in the future of distance learning and telework.

Conclusion

In closing, educational institutions must now prepare for the future of online education, not only in Japan, but across the globe. As online education has suddenly been thrust into the laps

of students and teachers, it is now time to make online exchanges between institutions not just a substitute for study abroad, but a regular occurrence. Collaboration and professional development across institutions is now more possible than ever, thanks in part to the measures taken to bring distance learning to the forefront of education. While there is pressure to go back to the teaching practices during pre-COVID-19, education must embrace the new normal, and make connections locally and globally.

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