

Online Study Abroad: Fostering Intercultural Awareness in the COVID-19 era

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Abstract: When a mandatory study abroad program met closed borders due to a pandemic, our institution had very few options to overcome the situation. This paper explains some of the challenges our institution faced in adapting our study abroad program during the COVID-19 pandemic, including adjustments that, even in these challenging circumstances, allow students to fulfill most requirements while attending online classes on campus. The authors' experiences with facilitating online exchanges with two universities abroad provide a case study describing elements of the curriculum and facilitation that we found fostered positive outcomes for development of cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords: study abroad, cultural exchange, technology in education

Introduction

Miyazaki International College (MIC) was founded, according to the 2021 bulletin (Student Bulletin 2021), for the purpose of cultivating truly international students. When the college started its operations in 1994, it was the first liberal arts institution in Japan to use English as the main medium of instruction, among many other features in its curriculum that made it unique at the time. One of these features is the mandatory study abroad program that is implemented in the School of International Liberal Arts, where all students take part in the program during the second semester of the second year. With 14 credits issued for courses and activities done in one of 15 institutions spread out over five English-speaking countries (Study Abroad), the whole program can be considered a success in promoting cultural understanding and boosting student's English language abilities.

Although the program was unique at the time and successful in itself, the purpose of this paper is not to brag about the qualities of study abroad as an item in the curriculum,

but to showcase the strengths of an integrated online study abroad program that was devised primarily to fulfill a curriculum necessity that had become impracticable due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is worth mentioning that, although general information was drawn from the year 2020 until 2022, spanning from when the COVID-19 pandemic started until the pandemic level began decreasing, the authors' experiences described here are specific to the year 2021 when we both had the opportunity to work together with instructors from Sonoma State University and California State University San Marcos.

Study abroad before COVID-19

The study abroad program serves as an important component in our curriculum for cultural understanding and also to boost the English language skills of our students. There is enough anecdotal evidence that students returning from the study abroad program become “different people” – words uttered by instructors themselves. Students usually leave Japan with a shy and inward personality, very uncertain of their own language skills. Often they return very confident and, in many cases, with different hair color and clothing styles (Occhi 2016). Longitudinal research could possibly establish what such changes have positive impacts in the future lives of the students, but for now, it is safe to say that the MIC Community has a shared understanding that when students become juniors (Crescini, 2018) they are capable of handling classes in English.

As for development of students' broader cross-cultural understanding, being able to stay abroad for at least four months gives students opportunities to practice their language and learn more about the place where they are staying. The study programs at our partner institutions typically include local trips and opportunities for short-term research about the local culture. Furthermore, students stay with a host family which makes the immersion even greater as students share day-to-day experiences with local families and live the culture from inside. Of course, there are inevitable culture clashes and perhaps interpersonal conflicts, but we see these experiences as a necessary part of the growth process of our students.

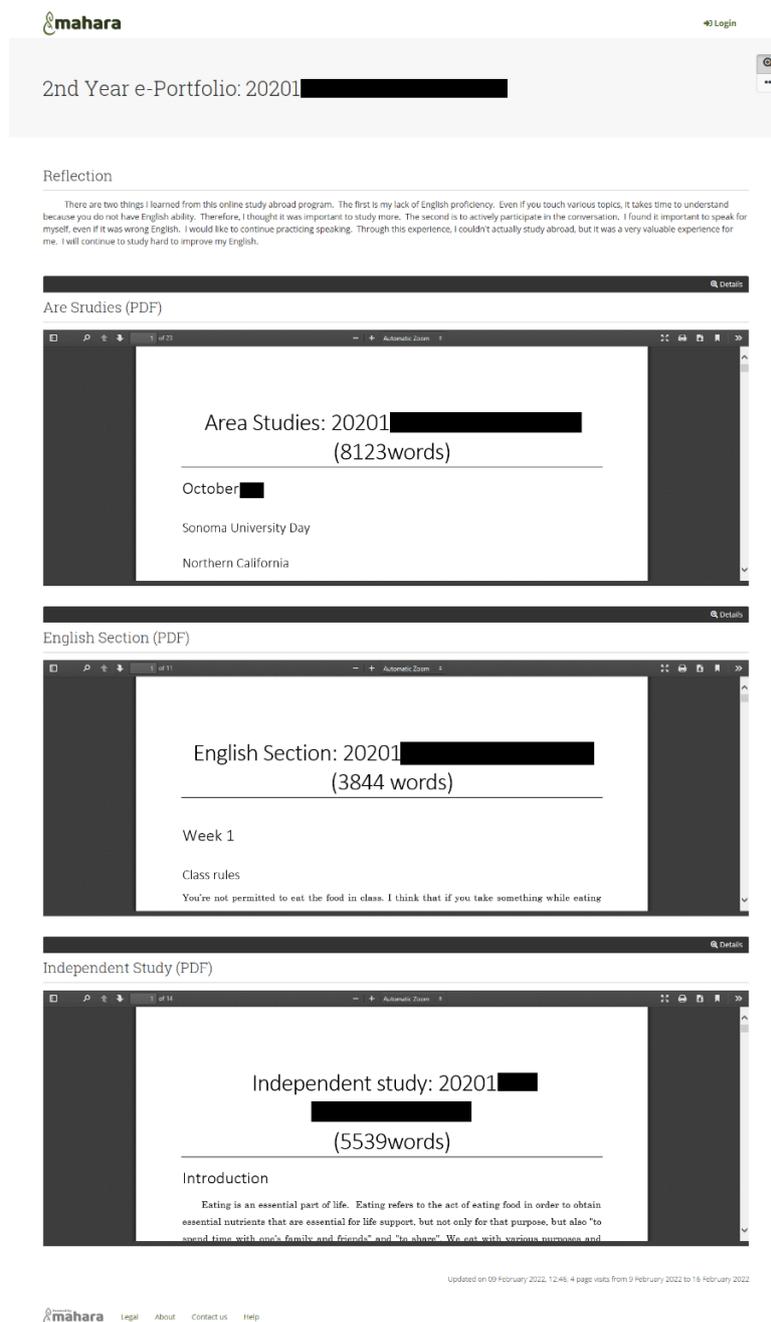


Figure 1 - A Mahara page developed by a second year student in 2021: A reflection paragraph followed by the portfolio files.

Regarding evidence of learning outcomes, all students are required to submit three portfolios upon their return to Japan. The program currently requires a portfolio for English (six credits), area studies (six credits) and independent study (two credits). For the English portfolio, students need to write a portfolio with a minimum of 3750 words.

They use essays and short paragraphs that they have submitted as homework in the English language classes they are attending. The area studies portfolio is the biggest one and students are required to record most of their experiences while abroad. This is a personal essay with no requirement to abide by academic writing styles, so disciplined students are able to write all the 7500 words without any problems. In contrast, the independent study portfolio component requires 3750 words, written in the academic style of a research paper. Students choose their topics from within the area where they are and conduct research in order to gather information about it. Usually, regular visits to the abroad institution's library and consultations with the on-site advisor are necessary. All three portfolios are submitted in Moodle, our learning management system (LMS), and through a secret URL in our online portfolio system, Mahara (Figure 1).

Study abroad during COVID-19

Given this historical context of MIC's study abroad program, we will next discuss the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students and their development along with necessary adjustments to the curriculum. For the administration, it became clear that makeup classes would have to be created for all students. Up until now, even though the study abroad program has always been mandatory for graduation, every year a few students who cannot travel for various reasons had to stay on-campus. For those students, make up classes on-campus had been created. However, online exchange had not been an integral part of those courses.

The situation in 2020 was drastic as universities in the US were closing doors (Foresman, 2020) and much overseas travel was prohibited (Kawano, 2020). Instead of a few who could not travel, we suddenly had more than a hundred students whose onsite study abroad semester had to be facilitated, and creating ad hoc classes as done previously would not suffice.

In response to the COVID-19 impact on study abroad, some of our partner universities contacted our study abroad coordinator proposing online classes. Eventually we were able to secure online classes with five institutions.

The evolution of the online program

As mentioned before, our study abroad program has three components: English,

Independent Study and Area Studies. For the English and Independent Study credits, we were able to assign instructors on the MIC campus to facilitate these courses. The online component of the program, which was facilitated by the abroad institutions and coached by our instructors, was the Area Studies classes which are specifically designed to promote intercultural awareness. What follows is an explanation of what happened as our students took online classes with our partner institutions.

In 2020 our institution was initially hesitant to move classes to remote online format, so we decided to require students to come to campus even though the classes were offered online. The policy we created necessitated that all students should come equipped with computers and headsets, but we soon learned that this was problematic. Many students did not have their own devices. Students were in one classroom just like a normal lesson and it didn't take long for the room to become very noisy. Also, with too many students in one classroom our old Wi-Fi access points did not handle the traffic well and connections started dropping out. Besides technical difficulties, the noise in the room made it difficult not only for our students on-campus to understand what was being said, but also for remote instructors to understand our students' answers.

In 2021, we decided to allow students to attend remote classes from home, and in rare cases, when Wi-Fi connection or a computer were not available, students were asked to come to campus and use our infrastructure. This decision was made not because of technical problems (the Wi-Fi had been updated campus-wide months before the beginning of the 2021 study abroad program), but because since the beginning of the pandemic some students' motivation was clearly low. Our understanding was that if online classes were conducted in a less strict fashion, students would have time enough to wake up and get ready for the afternoon classes. In actuality, many students found it difficult to get out of their beds, attended online classes remotely, and just did not come to campus at all. In other words, even though we aimed at providing better access to students, it backfired. Anecdotally, we learned that among the minority of students who would come to campus to take online classes, most of them did so because 1) they could use our institution's stable Internet connection and/or 2) they entered in study mode once they arrived on campus compared to their attitude while at home.

In 2022 we considered previous experiences and implemented some small changes.

This time, students were required to come to campus to take classes just like in 2020, but the difference was that students were able to check with the classroom teacher on campus and then move to another room. This way we ensured that students were psychologically ready to study and avoided trouble with crowded and noisy classrooms.

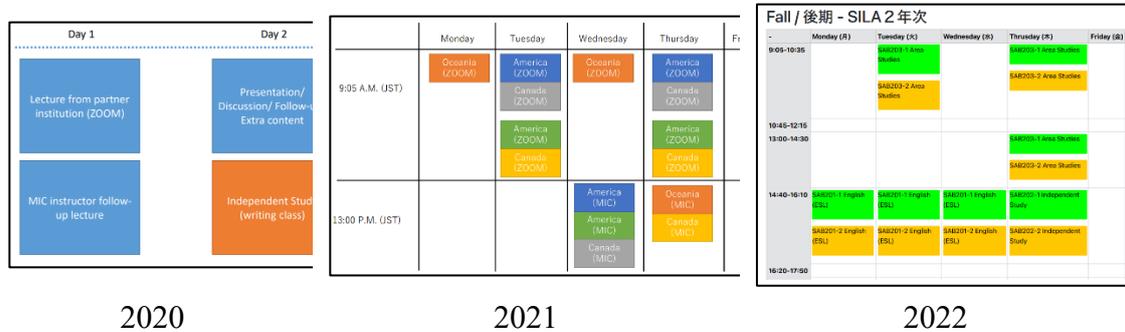


Figure 20 - The evolution of our online Study Abroad Program can also be seen in the evolution of the scheduling.

With the exception of institutions located in Oceania, all institutions were in distant time zones requiring us to avoid classes on Mondays. This can be clearly seen in the 2021 schedule (Figure 2). Away institutions had to hold classes at unusual hours to allow for the Japan Standard Time zone; we are grateful for their efforts in accommodating our schedule despite the time differences. The good news in 2022 was that because of the reopening of borders and institutions, we were able to send half of our cohort to institutions abroad. We hope this will be the new norm.

Talking about culture – online

Recreating the study abroad experience on campus was not feasible so we had to start from the point of view that the experience in itself would be different. Students who stay in Japan can always learn about other countries by reading books or searching on the Internet, but this is far from ideal in helping them gain understanding of how people in a certain place actually think or behave. Research had previously found that short-term exchanges have had some merit in increasing cross-cultural understanding (but without the greater demands of the study abroad curriculum) (Dunn & Occhi 2003a, 2003b).



Figure 21 -A slide from Sonoma State University instructor showing the list of topics to be covered in the semester

Because we have a long history of working with our current partners abroad, they were all aware of the objectives of our curriculum and also knew very well the skill levels and the challenges of our students. They had witnessed the development of cross-cultural understanding and were committed to helping foster that regardless of the impossibility of actual travel.

Partner institutions were asked to come up with a list of topics that were culturally relevant to their location and also particularly interesting to our students. In the case of Sonoma State University, course creators were able to think of 15 sessions that covered things specific to the location where the university as well as general topics more intrinsic to American culture (Figure 3). Overall, the wide range of topics created a boilerplate where students had enough space to find things they were interested in to pursue for Independent Study projects.

Additionally, Sonoma State University's instructors were aware of the importance of thinking about complex global problems and made sure to start the lessons with 'small talk' to introduce the lesson topics. Although our on-campus students were not very active at the beginning of the lessons, these introductory conversations played an important role in encouraging our students to feel more comfortable speaking. One of the reasons we firmly believe this happened is because students from Sonoma State University were volunteering to engage in discussions with our students. Having students from the abroad institution created a different atmosphere to the online class and motivated our students not only to attend the online sessions but also to ask questions so they could know a little

bit more about the volunteers.

California State University San Marcos also created a very similar program with the additional benefit that the explanations were done from their point of view. This combination of approaches created one of the biggest advantages in the whole program because when students actually go abroad, they enter one university and participate in all activities set by that single university. In the case of our students participating in the online study abroad program, they were able to attend two universities at the same time. This not only expanded the variety of topics discussed in the lessons but also helped students to see differences in behavior and thinking. Engaging in discussions with American professors and student volunteers in two different universities actually showed our students how different people can be even though they are in the same country and even the same state. Furthermore, the expansion of online resources provided to students in the abroad universities such as free exercise classes provided opportunities for our students to share even in some small way the experience of remote campus life with peers abroad.

Final Thoughts

It is very difficult to know what is coming next for study abroad at MIC. By the time of this paper's writing, One of us has been asked by the administration to keep at least two groups on campus, just like in 2022, while the other is getting ready to check the portfolios of 90 students. It might be too early to make assumptions but, with COVID-19 or without it, we found key components that we believe enhanced the student experience in our online Study Abroad Program. This recipe for success can be easily replicated if need be. We saw that the most important components for success in our terms included the ability of students to engage with students from abroad institutions, and in doing so, the creation of a scenario that allows students to see by themselves differences in behavior. In our case, the latter was achieved by engaging students with two different universities. We all hope that we will be wearing no masks very soon, but if it does not happen soon, at least we have made steps in developing a more solid online program that is better able to foster interaction, international awareness, and understanding.

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