Hirao School of Management Review第12巻

Online Cultural Exchange in the Covid-19 Era: Osaka Jogakuin University / College and Birzeit University

Richard Miller[1]

Saul Takahashi[2]

【Abstract】

As the Covid-19 pandemic had the effect of restricting international travel, university programs were left to look for alternative ways to provide international access for students to participate internationally. This paper shows one program that was successfully implemented between a Japanese university and a university in Palestine and the methods of preparing, implementation and results. There are also implications for future programs through online platforms that would otherwise be impossible due to geographic, political, or safety concerns.

【Keywords】

study abroad, Palestine, online collaboration

[1] Osaka Jogakuin University
[2] Osaka Jogakuin University

Introduction

Like most universities in Japan and in the world, Osaka Jogakuin University / College (OJU/C) was forced to cancel its overseas study programmes in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Mahalakshmi & Radha, 2020). This was particularly problematic for OJU/C, given that international programmes and study abroad are integral parts of the university's curriculum. Besides semester or 'year abroad' exchange, OJU/C offered a wide range of short study opportunities, ranging from cultural exchanges at partner universities in Korea, Taiwan, Australia, and the United States, to field work opportunities at Myanmar, Thailand, and Bangladesh. All of these were held in English, as part of OJU/C's academic aim of not only having students study the English language itself, but also for them to use the language to study human rights and peace related subjects.

Necessity of Organizing Cultural Programmes Online During the Pandemic Situation

COVID-19 pandemic and its wide-ranging impacts are taking a serious toll on people's lives and environment, including the cultural world. Most educational institutions from various parts of the world have closed for extended periods of time to curb the spread of the virus (Danchikov et al., 2021). This has made it necessary for those educational institutions to organize cultural events online where participants attend from different institutions located in different parts of the world. Due to social distancing regulations and prohibitions of large gatherings, most of the people are confined to their homes. As a result, the cultural and creative sectors (CCSs) have been seriously suffering (OECD, 2020). People are gradually losing connections with live music, cinema, theatres, and dance (Council of Europe, 2020). Only the online platforms can give an opportunity for the organisers to arrange different types of cultural programmes in this difficult situation (OECD, 2020).

Isolation due to the pandemic has also become seriously challenging for students in terms of their well-being and mental health. They are missing the opportunities to interact with others and visit different places of significance. This is another factor making the organisation of online cultural programmes an urgent need (Europa Nostra, 2020). Moreover, due to travel bans across the world, it often becomes difficult for people to visit new areas. This has made international knowledge exchange and networking slowed down, making cultural programs necessary to be organized online (Europa Nostra, 2020).

The benefits of holding cultural programmes online quickly became apparent during the pandemic situation. Suddenly people from all over the world were increasingly using social networks and messengers for various purposes as social distancing became more and more necessary. The use of technology was also at least in part to reduce the psychological impact that social distancing brought (Brooks et al. 2020). Social media has become an integral component of social interaction and access to information (Danchikov et al., 2021). This can make it easier for organisers of cultural programmes to arrange new events through online platforms. Furthermore, the COVID-19 scenario has positively changed educators' attitude towards the use of social media for various purposes (Shen et al., 2020). This can also give organisers of cultural programmes more freedom to work using online media for cultural

programmes involving students. Again, due to the pandemic, people in general suffer from economic difficulties, which can make arranging and participating in online cultural programmes easier (Europa Nostra, 2020).

Challenges related to organizing cultural events online were varied as in many cases, organisers of online cultural programmes do not find efficient organising systems (Shobika et al., 2018). This creates a barrier for the successful organisation of cultural events through online platforms (Boston et al., 2009). Organizing cultural events online involving people living in different time zones also involves a major challenge (Pedaste & Kasemets, 2021). Other challenges may include lack of synergy among cross-cultural participants of online cultural programmes, unresolved conflicts among them, communications breakdowns, different holidays, etc. (Vinaja, 2003).

COVID Case Study: The Birzeit Programme (BP)

Solutions to the COVID challenge required moving quickly, and while online learning has been around since at least 1987 (Lowenthal & Moore, 2020), there was a pressing need to explore the possibility of providing comparable opportunities online due to social distancing requirements (Danchikov et al.., 2021). This solution was something which OJU/C, like most other universities, had never done (Lowenthal & Moore, 2020). This report will discuss one of the first programmes OJU/C held during the 2020 academic year, an online cultural exchange programme with its partner Birzeit University, in Palestine.

The lead organiser of this programme, Professor Saul Takahashi, had lived in Palestine for five years as a UN staff member, and teaches issues related to human rights in Palestine in his classes at OJU/C. He had negotiated a general Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between JU/C and Birzeit University in 2019, and very much hoped to conduct joint activities that would enrich the students' knowledge of Palestine. At the same time, he was conscious that physically taking students to the country would be difficult: Palestine has the general reputation in Japan of being a war torn, extremely dangerous country, and many legal guardians (and perhaps many students) would surely think twice about travelling there. Considering this reticence, the MOU between OJU/C and Birzeit did not include what was generally a standard provision on student exchange. Even supposing security related concerns could be surmounted, the cost of traveling to Palestine could also be prohibitive for many students, as a two-week programme could easily come to a total of JPY 400,000 (approximately USD 3,600) for flights and accommodation alone.

Within this context, the Covid-19 situation posed a valuable opportunity. Online discussions can never be a true substitute for travel, but given the difficulties foreseen in arranging travel to Palestine, an online programme could be an easier way to enable students to experience the country to at least some extent (Lowenthal & Moore, 2020). Holding the programme online (and not charging students fees for it) would lower the bar for participation significantly, and the online format would reassure legal guardians that students were not in danger.

This was (and remains) applicable to countries other than Palestine as well. Many faculty in OJU/C have close contacts in a range of developing countries, travel to which pose similar obstacles for most students. A successful online exchange with a Palestinian university could therfore serve as a pilot for similar programmes in other

countries, allowing students to experience at least virtually many more situations they might otherwise not have.

Programme Overview

The BP was held in March 2021, with the participation of eleven students from OJU/C and thirteen from Birzeit. There was no minimum TOEIC requirement for the OJU/C students, and participants had a wide range of scores, from 290 to 850. Most were at an advanced level, however, with nine of the eleven over 490, and six of those nine over 700. Birzeit required an English level of Cambridge B2/C1, an approximate TOEIC score of 730 – 800. Naturally all OJU/C students were female. Though this was not a requirement for Birzeit students, only one male student registered for the programme, and in the end he did not attend.

Since one of the main objectives of the BP was to enable students to visualize life in the partner institution's country, it was decided at the outset that students would be tasked with making short video clips of their surroundings, their everyday lives, particular aspects of their country's culture, and so on. The organiser was also mindful of the time difference between the two countries: Japan is seven hours ahead of Palestine in March, making it difficult to hold any more than a minimum amount of live discussion. In addition, broadband internet access is not always reliable in some areas of Palestine, which also militated against relying on live meetings using Zoom or other platforms.

The main tool of the BP was Flipgrid, a popular video recording and sharing application that has proven successful as both a live and an asynchronous pedagogical tool (Lowenthal & Moore, 2020). Flipgrid allows videoclips to be recorded on a smartphone and uploaded onto a dedicated webpage ('grid') that is open only to participants. Text and video comments can be posted in response, giving the exchange a personal atmosphere, even though it is not in real time. Flipgrid is very easy to use, and offers the possibility of adding captions, still photos, emoji, and other such effects. Videos taken with the smartphone can be uploaded onto the 'grid' with only a few clicks, and the layout of the 'grid' is intuitive, allowing participants to view all posted videos easily. Equally important is that, since it is specifically designed for educational contexts, there is strict control over who can access any *grid*. Within the context of collaborative learning, the tool has proven to be particularly effective (Saçak & Kavun, 2020).

Schedule of the BP

10-17 March: Students were asked to post a short self-introductory video using Flipgrid and were encouraged to comment on videos posted by others. Students were encouraged to be creative in their introductions, and several posted videos of their houses, their surroundings, etc.

18 March: An opening session was held via Zoom, where all participants introduced themselves briefly. Internet problems were few during this session, but they did arise for some Palestinian students, reaffirming that relying on live sessions would not be fruitful.

18-24 March: Students were then paired in groups of two or three and given two or three questions to answer through short video clips.

These questions were not of an academic nature and focused on students' everyday life and the culture of their country: e.g., favourite national dish, national dress, hometowns). A list of the questions is included in the Appendix. However, students were explicitly given a free reign to be creative, to upload videos answering additional questions that had not been included, and even to ignore the questions they had been given. As with the self-introductory videos, students were also encouraged to post comments on other clips.

All the students posted at least one videoclip, and many posted several. Some of the videos were immensely impressive, such as the Palestinian student who made three successive ten-minute clips of a walking tour of the Old City of Jerusalem, complete with a music score. Another Palestinian student made videoclips of herself cooking different Palestinian dishes, and one wearing national dress from different regions of the country. Not to be outdone, OJU/C students posted videoclips of cherry blossoms in Osaka Castle Park, family yacht outings, and traditional Japanese summer dresses. Many students were creative in decorating their videoclips, using the many features Flipgrid allows.

25 March: A closing session was held, again via Zoom. Certificates were later provided to all participants who had uploaded at least one video, and an evaluation form was also sent through Google Form.

Overall Success

Feedback on the BP was overwhelmingly positive. Students in both countries stated they felt they had made new friends, and several also said they felt they had actually visited the partner country. This indicates that the BP was effective in enabling students to visualize conditions in that country, something that the use of Flipgrid was instrumental in achieving. The ease of recording and exchanging videoclips seems to have personalised the experience, enhancing the students' ability to show their surroundings and their country in a way that would not have been possible (or would at least have been much more difficult) with the usual live online discussion format. There are some minor shortcomings to Flipgrid – mainly the inability to post video comments in response to other comments – but overall, it proved a useful tool. Several students were still posting video clips even after the programme had finished.

It should also be reiterated that the success of the BP is important precisely because it involved an exchange with Palestine. As noted above, physically travelling to Palestine poses several challenges, including the expense and concerns (justified or not) about security. The BP enabled OJU/C students to at least get a glimpse of Palestine, and to visualize the country in a more accurate way. That is surely no substitute for actually traveling there, but it is far better than nothing – and lowering the bar through holding this kind of programme online meant that more students could at least do that than might otherwise have been the case. This was one of the main goals of the BP, and it is fair to say it was achieved.

Lessons Learned

Importance of academic credit

An important lesson learned from the BP was the importance students attribute to formal academic credits. The BP was initially organized after it became clear that an annual, in person English language cultural exchange programme would not be held due to the pandemic. The cancelled programme would have involved a five-day stay in Taiwan, with students who successfully complete the programme obtaining two academic credits towards their graduation. However, time pressures meant that it was not possible to go through the formalities to make BP a credit awarding programme, and students who completed it could at the most only obtain a formal certificate.

This proved to be a stumbling block in attracting students. Eighteen students had registered for the exchange in Taiwan, all of whom were invited to the BP when the exchange was cancelled. Though nearly all of the eighteen attended an information session on the BP, suggesting at least some interest, only four registered. The bulk of the students who participated in the BP, therefore, were students who had been approached on a personal basis by the organisers or through their classes. Informal discussions with some of the students who did not register indicated that the lack of formal credits was a major factor in their decision not to participate.

Viewed from a different angle, however, it appears that the lack of credits was the primary reason for those students, as opposed to any lack of interest in exchanges with Palestinian or other Arab students. This is evidenced in part by the strong student interest in the Japan and Arab Cultures from a Gender Perspective Programme (JACGP), an OJU/C exchange programme with students from various Arab countries (including Palestine) organised after the BP and currently being held at the time of writing of this paper (September 2021). The JACGP involves a far larger time commitment than the BP had, but also awards two credits. Shortly after the BP finished, the organisers completed the process to hold the programmes (and other similar short programmes) as credit awarding classes, in the future.

Pre-session briefings

The lack of credits for the BP had other, more indirect implications. It is obvious that students who take part in a cultural exchange should already have some preliminary knowledge of the culture, history, and current situation of their partner country (Samovar et al., 2016). Such knowledge can deeply enrich their experience—and can also prevent any unwanted misunderstandings.

Palestine, in particular, is an emotive issue, and the amount of misleading (or outright false) information in the popular domain is daunting (Natarajan & Hannah, 2014). To avoid any potential gaffes, it was felt that participants should have at least some rudimentary knowledge about the Israeli occupation, and the human rights violations that Palestinians endure on a daily basis. However, the BP being a non-credit awarding course made the organisers hesitant of requiring too much pre-session study. Put simply, without the prospect of credits as a carrot, there was a sense that making the session too arduous would discourage students from participating. Eventually, the organiser held one pre-session briefing, and pointed the students to some reading material. No effort was made to test the students to ensure they had internalised the knowledge.

In the end, there was one problematic statement by a Japanese student, where she said several times in the opening session that she had "always wanted to visit Israel." The organiser apologised to his counterpart at Birzeit University afterwards, and was assured the statement was not major. In the future, however, more pre-session study should be incorporated.

Maintaining the exchange

Students from both universities indicated their strong wish to maintain the exchange, even after the programme ended. All agreed that social media was the best tool to do this, especially given the fact that physical travel would be impossible for the foreseeable future. The difficulty was choosing the right platform: Facebook remains the main social media in Palestine, but most Japanese students do not have accounts, and while Instagram is popular amongst young persons in both countries, Instagram groups do not provide the flexibility that the organisers believed necessary.

Eventually, a closed Facebook group was created, with a specific account for that purpose so that Japanese students without accounts could create postings. This effort was not so successful, however, and the group became dormant after a small number of postings. No doubt there are multiple reasons for this, but it is worth noting that Ramadan started soon after the end of the BP, creating a de facto one-month break in most activities on the Palestinian side.

On the other hand, the organizer is aware that some students remain in touch via email and social media (including Facebook and Instagram) with their Palestinian counterparts, and he also arranged for one of the Palestinians students to speak at one of his human rights classes. Some informal connections have been sustained, therefore, which may be as much as can be expected.

Conclusion

Despite some challenges, the BP was successful, in its own right and as a pilot for future Osaka Jogakuin University and College, as well as the Osaka Jogakuin Graduate School programmes. Already many of the lessons learned are being addressed in the JACGP, and will no doubt be useful for future endeavors. To reiterate, online exchanges can never be a total substitute for travel to a foreign country, especially for a young student—the learning opportunities and stimuli from physical presence is unparalleled. However, even supposing normal international travel resumes post-pandemic, the online format can facilitate at least initial access to countries to which students may otherwise not be able to go. There is a wealth of possibilities that remain untapped.

References

Boston, W., Díaz, S. R., Gibson, A. M., Ice, P., Richardson, J., & Swan, K. (2009). An exploration of the relationship between indicators of the Community of Inquiry framework and retention in online programs. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, *13*(3), 67–83. http://dx.doi.org/10.24059/olj.v13i3.1657

Brooks, S. K., Webster, R. K., Smith, L. E., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N., & Rubin, G. J. (2020). The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence. *The Lancet, 395*, 912-920.

Council of Europe. (2020). *Culture in times of Covid-19 or how we discovered we cannot live without culture and creativity. Impressions and lessons learnt from Covid-19.* Retrieved from https://rm.coe.int/culture-in-times-of-covid-19-or-how-we-discovered-we-cannot-live-witho/1680a18dc0

Danchikov, E. A., Prodanova, N. A., Kovalenko, Y. N., & Bondarenko, T. G. (2021). Using different approaches to organizing distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic: opportunities and disadvantages. *Linguistics and Culture Review*, *5*(S1), 587-595.

Europa Nostra. (2020). *COVID-19 and Beyond: Challenges and Opportunities for Cultural Heritage*. COVID-19 Consultation Paper. https://www.europanostra.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/20201014_COVID19_Consultation-Paper_EN.pdf

OECD. (2020). OECD policy responses to coronavirus (COVID-19). *Testing for COVID-19: A way to lift confinement restrictions*. OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19). https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/testing-for-covid-19-a-way-to-lift-confinement-restrictions-89756248/

Lowenthal, P.R., & Moore., R.L. (2020). Exploring student perceptions of Flipgrid in online courses. *Online Learning, 24*(4), 28-41. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v24i4.2335

Mahalakshmi, K., & Radha, R.(2020). COVID 19: A Massive Exposure Towards Web Based Learning. *Journal of Xidian University*, *14*(4), 2405-2411. https://doi.org/10.37896/jxu14.4/266.

Natarajan, V. and Hannah M. (2014) Knowledge, Access, and Resistance: A Conversation on Librarians and Archivists to Palestine. In M. Morrone (Ed.), *Informed Agitation: Library and Information Skills in Social Justice Movements and Beyond* (pp. 247-258). Library Juice Press

Pedaste, M., & Kasemets, M. (2021). Challenges in Organizing Online Conferences. *Educational Technology & Society*, *24*(1), 92-104.

Samovar, L, Roy, C. S., Porter, R., McDaniel, E. (2016) *Communication Between Cultures.* Cengage.

Saçak, B., & Kavun, N. (2020). Rethinking Flipgrid and VoiceThread in the context of online collaborative learning theory. In E. Alqurashi (Ed.), *Handbook of research on fostering student engagement with instructional technology in higher education* (pp. 211–228). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-0119-1.ch012

Shobika, G., Yogaseelan, Y., & Ramanan, M. (2018). *Online Event Organizing System for Cultural Programme.* Uva Wellassa University, Sri Lanka.

Shen, K., Yang, Y., Wang, T., Zhao, D., Jiang, Y., Jin, R., & Gao, L. (2020). Diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of 2019 novel coronavirus infection in children: experts' consensus statement. *World Journal of Pediatrics*, *16*(3), 223-231. DOI: 10.1007/s12519-020-00343-7

Vinaja, R. (2003). Major challenges in multi-cultural virtual teams. *Proceedings: Southwest Case Research Association*, *78541*(956), 341-346.

Appendix: Original Program Proposal

<div align="center">

Online Cultural Exchange:
Osaka Jogakuin University (Japan) and Birzeit University (Palestine)

</div>

Objective:

The objective of the programme is to facilitate English language exchange between students of OJU and Birzeit, focusing on introducing to each other the cultures and daily lives of their respective countries. 10 – 20 undergraduate students from each university will participate.

Due to the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic, the programme will be completely online, mainly using the educational video platform Flipgrid (https://info.flipgrid.com). The general concept is that students will make short individual video clips on particular topics, introducing various aspects of their country. Those video clips will be uploaded to the Grid made for the programme, and will be commented on by other students, through the video comment function.

Programme:

Students will be divided into groups of two (one each from the two universities) or, depending on the total number of participants, three. Each group will be assigned a number of topics from the attached list of questions, and will be expected to discuss (e.g. using email, Skype, Zoom, or any other platform they can) what they intend to make a video about. Proactivity is highly encouraged, and it is fine for the group to decide to make videos on additional topics, or any new topic that is not in the list.

Students are encouraged to be creative with their videos. A 'live streaming' type format (where the creator walks around with their phone/camera and narrates) is the best, but if that is difficult, students should at least try to show some scenery. Students should try to avoid long selfie monologues – at least show photographs, or interview other people. The maximum length of one video is ten minutes.

Students will upload their videos to a Grid (a Flipgrid page) accessible to all participating students. Students will be asked to post short video comments on videos from the partner university.

Schedule:

10 – 17 March	Students to be asked to post short (30 seconds – 1 minute) self introduction videos on Grid. Students also to be informed of pairs/groups and video topics, and asked to contact partners and discuss.
18 March (Thursday), 10.00 – 11.00 Palestine time, 17.00 – 18.00 Japan time	Live opening session (Zoom). Faculty to introduce the programme and their respective universities, and participants to introduce themselves.
By 24 March	Students to post topic videos (7 – 10 minutes) on Grid and comment on at least two other videos.
25 March (Thursday), 10.00 – 11.00 Palestine time, 17.00 – 18.00 Japan time	Live closing session (Zoom). Students to discuss what they learned and give any feedback.

Participating students will receive a certificate after completion of the programme.

Topics for videos:
Each group will be asked to produce videos on at least one topic from each category.
Personal
What is your favourite food? Show us one of your national dishes, or at least a typical dish. It can be homemade!
What is your hometown like? Show us a famous place, your home etc.
What is your favourite place? It can be in your home, a special spot, anywhere.
Who is your best friend?
Who is your hero? It can be one of your parents, a friend or a relative, a national hero, etc.
Where you go when you go out with friends?
What is your favourite music?
What is your favourite book?
What do you do on your days off?
What kind of person would you like to get married to?

University
What is a day in the life of a student at your university like? Show us your campus.
What is your favourite spot in your university?
How you get to the university (video tour)
What is your favourite subject at your university?
Who is your favourite professor at your university?
What do you want to do when you graduate from university?
Would you like to live / work abroad? If so, where?

National
Your country's national dish / drink
Your country's national dress
What does a typical wedding in your country look like?
What is the most important holiday in your country?
What about your country are you proud of?

Using Flipgrid
Flipgrid is a video sharing site that is geared towards educational settings. Students record videos (called 'responses') and upload them on a Grid, which is essentially a web page that only participants can access. They can then post video comments (called 'comments') on other students' videos.

Students do not need to become a member of Flipgrid to upload videos. They will be provided with a Flipgrid link and can access the Grid with their university emails **[might need to change this]** … Flipgrid can be used on a computer, but it is much better on a smartphone or a tablet.

Flipgrid is quite intuitive and easy to use. There are a wealth of tutorial videos on how to use the application, and some of the better ones include:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMqlEnmVA-8
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8UMkJTZRLo
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOnsDkZ9o10