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Leading a Study Abroad Program Through a Pandemic: Lessons from the Field

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Abstract

This reflective essay is written based on the author's experience as a study abroad program visiting resident director in Japan during the 2019-2020 academic year. As the resident director, the author served as the front line of communication and support for the international students on this program during an unprecedented crisis that impacted the world. The author describes the events that occurred in Japan during spring 2020, the challenges that arose as a result of the pandemic, and teaching strategies used to help students through the crisis. Based on this experience, the author makes recommendations for study abroad programs to consider as we look forward to resuming study abroad activities in a post-pandemic reality.

Abstract in Japanese

著者は、学校年度 2019～2020 年に日本国内で留学プログラム客員常勤ディレクターとして勤務した。この反射的エッセイはその経験を基に執筆されている。常駐ディレクターとしての著者の業務は、人類未経験の COVID-19 危機下における留学プログラム学生に対するコミュニケーションと支援の最前線業務であった。著者は、次の三つ、すなわち 2020 年春に日本で起こった出来事、パンデミックで生じた課題、危機下で学生を支援するために用いた教育戦略について述べる。パンデミック後の留学事業の再開を期待して、これらの経験を基に著者は留学プログラムに対する提案を行う。

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Introduction

This reflective essay is based on my experience as a study abroad program visiting resident director in Japan during the 2019-2020 academic year. This perspective is unique as I served as the front line of communication and support for the international students on this program during an unprecedented crisis that impacted the world. In this essay, I describe the events that occurred in Japan during spring 2020 and the issues and challenges that arose due to the pandemic. Based on this experience, I have recommendations for programs to consider as we look forward to resuming study abroad activities in a post-pandemic reality.

The Situation in Japan

With a total population of approximately 126 million people living in a country similar in size to California, Japan is more densely populated than the United States, particularly in urban areas like Tokyo and Osaka. Keeping the virus from spreading like wildfire through these cities would prove to be a huge challenge for the Japanese government. According to the World Bank (n.d.), Japan has a growing elderly population, with 28% of its people who are aged 65 years or older. Many were concerned that Japan had a looming crisis on its hands. Fortunately, Japan has managed to maintain control over the situation without overwhelming its healthcare system. According to the World Health Organization (n.d.), to date, Japan reported 91,431 confirmed cases and 1,650 deaths.

The Japanese government could not legally enforce a lockdown. All they could do was urge people to stay at home. And most people cooperated with the request. The general public accepted the advice of public health experts on recommended practices to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Mask wearing, hand sanitizing, and social distancing measures were quickly accepted by people as the new normal. On the nightly news, broadcasts were devoted to teaching the viewing audience about virus transmission, infection rates, “flattening the curve”, and clusters. In the community, contact tracers were put to work, clusters were identified, and designated hospitals and empty hotels were used to isolate those who tested positive for the virus and displayed mild

or no symptoms. Eventually, when the country re-opened in clearly defined phases, most people abided by the government's campaign to "Avoid the Three Cs" (closed off spaces, crowds, and close conversations) (NHK World-Japan, 2020). All this went on while people in other parts of the world were still debating whether masks were even necessary.

It was against this backdrop that I served as faculty resident director to forty university students from five countries. In the next four sub-sections, I provide an account of the events that unfolded during the Spring 2020 semester in my corner of the world in Japan.

First Hint of Trouble

News of a strange pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan first appeared on Japanese news at the end of December ("Outbreak of SARS-like Pneumonia," 2019). The host university's international center staff kept a cautious eye on the situation in China. The students were warned about the pneumonia outbreak and they were encouraged to stay in Japan during the holiday. The students reported no international travel plans as many wanted to experience the new year celebration in Japan.

By early February, Japanese news circuits focused on the Diamond Princess cruise ship that was docked in Yokohama Bay, carrying passengers and staff infected with the novel coronavirus ("Cruise Ship," 2020; Takahashi, 2020b). From that point on, COVID-19 dominated the evening news in Japan. Shortly thereafter, it became evident that the virus was now in the Japanese community (Omi & Oshitani, 2020).

Although our immediate area did not seem to be impacted, the university where I was based began to take precautionary measures. First, bottles of hand sanitizer began appearing at the entrances of buildings. Shortly after that, my classroom, a cozy room for 26 students, was changed to a large auditorium, with a capacity to hold several hundred students. Administrators took us to our new classroom and they directed my students to sit in alternating rows with a minimum of two empty seats between them. It was strange, almost nonsensical, to some of us at the time. This would be our first introduction to social distancing measures.

Conflicting Messages

As early as January, the Japanese public was told that COVID-19 was likely spread through the air (Takahashi, 2020a). We were advised to take precautions, such as wearing masks and social distancing. Masks and alcohol-

based hand sanitizers were sold out in stores across the country and city governments distributed instructions on how to sew cloth masks and make homemade hand sanitizer to local residents (“Local Governments Provide Instructions”, 2020).

Meanwhile, the news we received from our home countries suggested the virus was mainly transmitted via surface contact. Public health authorities in the west said there was no need for the general public to wear masks (Howard, 2020). The conflicting messages were disconcerting. How could we effectively protect ourselves if authorities did not agree on how the virus was transmitted? In the end, the students and I wore masks, when we could find them in stores. At the very least, it certainly would not hurt to wear them. And it would help put people around us, especially in trains and on campus, at ease.

Virus transmission was not the only point of confusion. There were questions about the seriousness of the virus. Emerging information from China suggested that older people and people with underlying health issues seemed to be a greater risk of serious complications than healthier, younger people (Team, 2020). Other news from the U.S. suggested that the virus was no deadlier than seasonal influenza (Henry & Hauck, 2020). Some students seemed to take comfort in this and felt that they did not need to worry and that everyone was probably overreacting about the dangerousness of COVID-19. As if conflicting messages were not concerning enough, I was very surprised to learn that many students were relying almost solely on word-of-mouth from friends and social media for information about the virus.

Confusing Message from Home Institutions

From early March, home universities began sending emails to students informing them of the cancellation of their study abroad programs. This sudden cancellation prompted the host institution’s international center staff to spring into action to quickly get the process in place to ensure students made necessary travel arrangements and completed the necessary documents to exit the country.

Some universities sent emails that were written in very direct language with very clear directions on what students needed to do, deadlines for when they needed to return home, and consequences for not following the order to return home. Other universities sent messages that were much less direct, leaving students confused and unsure of what to do. When I advised students to contact their universities directly for clarification, many experienced difficulty reaching their home university program staff and/or did not get clear responses

right away. The home universities were very likely overwhelmed with student questions and in many cases, the campus offices were in the process of making a quick shift from working on campus to teleworking. Eventually, students did receive answers to their inquiries; however, the wait time proved to be very stressful and anxiety-provoking for them and their families.

Borders Closing and the Frantic Race Home

Students who returned home early in the spring were fortunate because the flights home were not yet seriously impacted. These students were able to change the return date on their tickets fairly easily and they were able to return home with little problem. However, as the weeks went on, flights became fewer in number and the flights that were in operation were at full capacity. Direct routes to smaller cities were harder to find and some airlines began cancelling flights with no notice and with no ground staff to answer calls.

As students frantically followed their universities' orders to return home, one thing became glaringly obvious. Students who had resources and/or family support were much better equipped to manage the unexpected twists and turns that arose. There were unexpected travel costs as flights were cancelled with little to no advance notice, leaving students to bear the loss and re-purchase another ticket. In other cases, there were changes to departure cities and airports, leaving students to travel to another city or region in order to catch their flights, resulting in unexpected and additional domestic transportation and hotel costs. Once they arrived in their home countries, some students had to figure out a way to get to their hometowns, as many of their home countries were under strict lockdown orders, with very few public transportation options available. Students with family support were able to come up with a viable plan more quickly and were more able to navigate and access resources to help them get home. Eventually, however, the students arrived at their final destinations safely.

Study abroad program classes continued online until the end of the semester so that students could salvage their semester. And although it was not the same, we met as a group for one last time for a Zoom farewell party. It was a challenge finding a time for the event, as students were tuning in from nine different time zones. However, it was a big relief to see students safe and healthy.

There were many good lessons I learned as a result of my experiences during the spring 2020 semester. Based on these experiences, I have programmatic suggestions for programs to consider for a smoother transition to a post-pandemic study abroad experience.

Effective Study Abroad Program Pedagogy to the Rescue

The research literature suggests that certain study abroad program elements (e.g., intentional teaching, cultural mentoring, reflection) positively impact students' intercultural learning and development (Engle & Engle, 2021; Paige & Vende Berg, 2012). These program elements are a regular part of this study abroad program and were implemented from the start. During the pandemic, it became clear to me that these program elements were instrumental in helping me help students through this crisis. At its most basic level, this particular program was structured in a way that provided me with numerous opportunities for focused interaction with the students, which set the stage for building trust, rapport, and ongoing communication from the start. From a crisis management standpoint, this was important because by the time the COVID-related events reached a critical peak, I felt that students trusted me and the host institution staff and thus they were willing to listen and cooperate with our directives. Throughout the crisis, there were many opportunities to teach students critical skills that not only helped them in the moment but will likely serve them well in the future. In the next eight sub-sections, I describe some of the ways I used intentional teaching, cultural mentoring, and reflection to help students during the pandemic. I will also make recommendations for practical student care practices based on my experiences.

Intentional and Individualized Teaching

Students need faculty and host institution staff support as they navigate a new country and culture. This guidance can really influence their time abroad in a positive and meaningful way and this learning experience can extend well beyond their time in the host country. In the early stages of the pandemic, there was a lot of confusion over just about everything. Many students were unsure of what to do and they needed tools to help them make decisions. For example, in the early weeks of the pandemic, students from several universities had been given the option to return home early and they were struggling with making a decision. This was a good opportunity for me to teach students the use of a simple T-chart as a tool to help them make a decision based on their individual perceived benefits and drawbacks of staying in Japan and returning home early. Upon completing their own T-charts, students commented that when displayed visually, what initially seemed like a confusing and difficult decision suddenly became very clear to them. This example illustrates the importance of

intentional teaching and individualized instruction to help students make sense of the situation around them.

Cultural Mentoring and Reflection

From the start of the program, I taught my students to reflect on interesting/notable cultural differences they experienced in the local community, compare these experiences to that of their home countries, and to think more deeply and without judgement, about the dynamics involved behind these differences. The unprecedented nature of the pandemic initially made this exercise difficult to do. Instead, we discussed the changes we witnessed around us and the ways the local community were addressing the spread of COVID. When students returned to their home countries, many of them applied the reflection skills they learned. They reflected on what they saw in Japan during the few months of the pandemic and compared it to what they were now seeing in their home countries. Their reflections were insightful and deep. The experience of living through the pandemic in two different countries with a focused “lens” and the ability to reflect on what they were seeing made for a very rich learning experience they will not likely forget.

Administrative Considerations

From an administrative standpoint, COVID-19 has clearly brought about the urgent need for program modifications and considerations. Although study abroad programs and institutions have policies and procedures in place for addressing emergency situations, such as natural disasters, serious consideration should be made to include specific pandemic policies and procedures to prevent the spread of disease and to address the specific implications of large-scale infectious disease outbreaks in the future. In this next section, I make recommendations for programs to consider as we prepare for study abroad post-pandemic.

Student Care Contingency Plans

In the unfortunate event that a student falls ill, it is imperative for programs to have a clear plan for taking care of sick students. The plan should include: (1) clearly defined individual faculty and staff roles and responsibilities in student care; (2) way(s) to safely transport the student to the appropriate medical care facility for testing and/or treatment; and (3) alternative lodging (for ill students as well as those in close contact) for care and quarantine purposes. This plan should be very clearly communicated to students so they know exactly what to do and whom they should contact if they become ill. During the spring

semester, the on-site staff quickly developed an action for student care in the event someone contracted COVID-19. Thankfully, we did not have to implement the plan as there were no suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases among the students; however, it was very reassuring to know a plan was in place.

Operationalized Safety Guidelines for Students

Students will very likely know the basics on staying healthy and avoiding virus transmission. However, some students may be unclear on how these guidelines are applied to their everyday lives in a new environment in a new country. In teaching my students about staying safe, I tailored my instruction by using specific, local examples with which students could identify and encountered on a regular basis. For example, in discussions about the Japanese government's campaign to avoid the Three Cs, I gave students specific examples of enclosed spaces to avoid such as karaoke rooms, gyms, and izakaya (Japanese style pubs), places I knew students frequented. I encouraged students to stand near doors and sit near open windows on trains and buses, their main means of transportation. I also gave them suggestions for safer options for recreation (e.g., hiking outdoors). Students who were initially not overly concerned about contracting COVID needed reminders that they lived with host families, many of whom were older and/or with underlying health issues. Putting themselves at risk also meant putting their host family members at risk. These contextualized examples helped students make personal connections between the Japanese public service announcements and how it intersected with their everyday lives and activities which, in turn, helped them make better decisions.

During these safety guidelines discussions, I learned that many students relied on social media and word-of-mouth information about COVID-19. I took this opportunity to have discussions about ways to locate and identify reliable sources of COVID-19-related information in their main languages. We also discussed ways to verify their data sources to help them draw conclusions. I also encouraged them to visit these sources of information on a regular basis so they can be aware of what is going on in their community.

It is a good idea for faculty to carefully monitor what is happening in the student community and to directly address any immediate health and safety concerns. I found it useful to communicate regularly with students, as a whole group as well as with individuals. It was important that my communication with students was straightforward and honest. Faculty should be prepared to have ongoing discussions about health and safety as some students may need to hear

the same message many times in various ways before they internalize the information.

Care for Students with Mental Health Needs

In general, it is good practice to introduce students with mental health needs to on-site counselors at the start of the program. This gives both the students and the counselor time to get acquainted when things are calm. Establishing this rapport early on will help counselors more quickly address students' needs in the event of a crisis.

As the pandemic unfolded, the students who had already been seeing the counselor on a regular basis required extra care and support. The uncertainty, constant and drastic changes, and conflicting messages added to their already mounting anxiety and stress levels. Fortunately, the students met this counselor at the start of the program in the fall and developed a rapport through regular visits. The frequency of their visits increased as the crisis escalated. The counselor continued to see these students even after they returned home until they could reconnect with their home country support system. This counseling support was crucial in helping these students cope with the uncertainty and their sudden and abrupt return to their home countries.

COVID-19 Student Contract Agreement

Most study abroad programs have student agreements that students sign prior to arriving in the host country. These contracts detail behavioral expectations and consequences for violating the agreement. This type of agreement serves to discourage students from taking unnecessary risks and/or engaging willfully in high-risk behaviors that may jeopardize the health and safety of themselves and others. In moving forward, programs may want to consider adding an agreement to follow COVID-19 recommended precautions as outlined by the home and host institutions as a condition of program participation. Failure to comply with the agreement can result in consequences, such as dismissal from the program. Students should be made aware of this agreement prior to leaving their home countries and again upon arrival in their host countries.

Clarified Agreements with Partner Universities and Host Institutions

It is critical to have ongoing and regular communication and agreement between home and host institutions regarding university policies and

procedures in the event subsequent waves of the pandemic occur during the program. Some points of discussion and agreement might include: (1) clearly detailed care plans for students who test positive for COVID-19; (2) early notification at the institutional level in the event the home institution calls students back before the end of the program or if the host institution decides to end the local program operation; (3) an emergency fund for students who lack the financial means to cover unexpected costs due to institutional orders for a sudden return home; and (4) alternative plans for students who cannot return home right away and must remain in the host country. Although these discussions might be difficult at times, it is very important that the institutions have an open and honest conversation about these important details and the roles and responsibilities of involved parties.

Moving Forward

There is still a lot we are learning with regard to managing our lives around the existence of COVID-19 in our communities. Now that we know more about virus transmission and prevention, and with the increasing availability of vaccines in many of our communities, we can be much better prepared for keeping students safe while studying abroad.

Through my experience as a resident director during the pandemic, I strongly feel it is possible to safely resume study abroad program activities with sound policies, procedures, and plans in place so students can study abroad safely. Further, I believe now more than ever, that the program elements we know to be critical in teaching students about living abroad were key in teaching very important lessons during the pandemic. Study abroad is too valuable an experience to abandon indefinitely, and we should turn our focus to developing program structures that allow us to continue providing students with meaningful and life-changing learning experiences in a post-pandemic world.

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Dr. Linda Oshita is an Associate Specialist in the Special Education Department at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. She teaches and advises students in the special education teacher licensure program. More recently, she has become involved in study abroad programs and has a developing interest in study abroad student support, particularly for students with exceptional learning needs on study abroad programs.