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Promoting International Perspectives Through Self-Selected Online Texts

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Abstract

In the ongoing pandemic context, short-term study abroad opportunities remain limited for many students. As a result, there has been a need for universities to develop educational innovations for home context learning to meet institutional intercultural learning aims. The purpose of this action research paper is to outline how a small-scale e-learning innovation was designed based on characteristics of intercultural citizenship education to encourage connections with, and responsibility towards, communities beyond national borders. The innovation involved critical exploration of a student-selected social issue using online texts, and reflections and blogging on the issue from individual, local, national, and international perspectives. A qualitative content analysis of reflections in blogposts of 49 students showed that the majority expressed connections with intercultural citizenship, though a minority rejected international identifications. The paper offers a timely and systematically designed intercultural e-learning innovation, implementable in other contexts, to support intercultural learning in a context of limited study abroad.

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Abstract in Japanese

今なおパンデミック状況下において、短期留学の機会が多くの学生にとって制限されたままである。そのため、大学では、異文化間学習の目的を達成するために、自国において学習のできる教育イノベーションを開発することが求められている。このアクション・リサーチ・ペーパーの目的は、国境を越えたコミュニティとのつながりや それに対する責任を奨励すべく、異文化間の相互理解教育の特徴に基づいた小規模の e ラーニングの改革をどのように デザインしたかを概説することである。このプログラムは、学生が選択した社会問題をオンラインテキストを用いて批判的に探求し、個人、地域、国、そして国際的な観点からその問題について考察し、ブログで報告するというものであった。49 名の学生のブログ記事における考察の質的内容分析により、大多数は異文化間市民権とのつながりを表明していたが、少数派は国際的なアイデンティティを拒否していたことが示された。この論文は、限定的な学内留学という状況下で異文化学習を支援するために、他の文脈でも実施可能な、時流に合った体系的な異文化間 e ラーニングのイノベーションを提供するものである。

Keywords:

intercultural citizenship; e-learning; intercultural innovation

Background

Higher education internationalization policies commonly emphasize the development of self-awareness and awareness of diversity among others, respect, curiosity, openness, and an ability to look outwards and connect with others. The emphasis of these policies can often be linked to concepts of global/intercultural citizenship in aims for graduates to be able to act “globally”—as well as locally—in different multicultural communities at home and abroad (Aktas et al., 2015; Byram, 2008). At institutional levels, global and intercultural citizenship aims can often be found on university websites around engagement in local and international communities, including the present university setting (a mid-sized non-language major university in Japan) where internationalization aims stated on the university website include: “to gain a global perspective”; “to help students grow into human resources who can play an active role in a rapidly changing society”; and, “to develop an ability to collaborate from both local and global perspectives”. Such statements may be familiar to readers in the responses of their own institutions.

Though there is variation in how such policies are enacted in educational practices within individual institutions, in Japan they are commonly addressed through short-term study abroad (SA) participation. However, as international study opportunities remain scarce for many students (in Japan and elsewhere), it has become important for new intercultural innovations to be systematically designed in home contexts to support the practical implementation of internationalization policies. Such innovations may be effective when designed using e-learning tools, with increasing use in recent years accelerated by the pandemic (Chang & Gomes, 2022). While innovations for home-based intercultural learning may not replace SA experiences, they can help fill a learning gap within language education programmes or used in intercultural educational programmes. This paper outlines how one such e-learning innovation was systematically designed, implemented, and evaluated. The educational example described may be of interest to other teachers seeking to expand their own intercultural learning options, or supplement SA training programmes in contexts where SA participation is an option.

Intercultural Citizenship Education

Intercultural citizenship education (ICE) (Byram, 2008) outlines characteristics on which educational innovations may be developed. It is based on recognition of a need for students to “respect and value diversity” and develop “responsibility to communities at multiple levels from the local to the global” (Baker & Fang, 2021, p. 3). ICE builds on a citizenship education focus on forming identifications with local and national communities towards citizenship beyond national borders by facilitating international identifications, i.e., orientations towards and associations with international and multicultural communities. In this paper, ICE refers to the following characteristics (adapted from Byram, 2008, p. 187):

- Educational experience to cause/facilitate an intercultural citizenship experience (in any form), and critical analysis and reflection.
- Education which aims to create learning/change in the individual, in which change can be attitudinal, in self-perceptions, in relationships with individuals of different social groups. Such change may be based on the particular but can be related to the universal.

In practice, students may analyze some teacher-designed intercultural citizenship educational experience from different (local, national, international) perspectives, and reflect on any individual changes in self-perception, changes in perceptions towards others, as well as any new curiosity and critical questioning. Learning, therefore, aims to go beyond solely learning new information through activities which aim to promote engagement with perspectives from outside the classroom, build identifications with individuals beyond national communities, as well as promote some form of social action (Wagner et al., 2019). Intercultural educational experiences should, therefore, encourage critical questioning of self-perspectives and perspectives towards others in activities which connect students with other individuals (Byram, 2008). An outcome of an ICE experience is for students to “suspend their identification with national culture/way of thinking and acting to new international ways of acting,” beyond essentialism (Byram, 2017, p. xxvi). While an aim of ICE is for critical reflection to lead to some concrete community action, it may be possible for innovations to provide a foundation for action through increased identification with different levels of community.

In this way, intercultural citizenship is congruent with global citizenship education (UNESCO, 2021) in similar objectives to empower students and actively promote tolerance and inclusivity. Similarly, there is a connection with the international perspective in the 21st Century Skills (e.g., Voogt & Roblin, 2012), particularly around global awareness and engagement in global societies. All share the objective to encourage responsible citizenship in local and international communities. Such an objective is particularly relevant for systematic intercultural education, and the focus on responsibility to local, national, and international communities, linking with internationalization aims, is potentially relevant to intercultural innovation design.

Action Research

Research Procedures

Research on intercultural citizenship has tended to adopt action research based on teacher-researcher interest in developing curricula or in advocating ICE (Porto et al., 2017). This paper offers such advocacy in one educational setting with the aim to bring in a small-scale change to institutional educational practices following an action research cycle of observing, planning, acting, and reflecting (Kemmis et al., 2014). The cycle began with observations

to understand institutional SA provisions in the pandemic context as well as an investigation of policy aims by accessing selected public documents (SA promotional material and the university website). Later, a planning stage was initiated in which an ICE innovation was designed (outlined shortly). The acting stage involved implementing the innovation before the cycle concluded with an evaluation of student reflections to understand how (and if) the innovation had been educationally successful. The overall process was driven by the following question:

To what extent was an intercultural citizenship educational innovation successful at helping university students connect with international identifications?

49 Japanese university students (35 male; 14 female) worked on the innovation during winter semester 2021-2022. All were first-year students, around 19-years old, and all consented to participation in this research with anonymity guaranteed. Data comprised 49 blogpost reflections, coded in a content analysis using data-driven codes, which were linked to intercultural citizenship education. Coding was conducted using NVivo 12 by the first-named author though there was a collaborative data review with individual items looked at to link and integrate emergent codes and seek higher level meaning (Silverman, 2014). Notes were made during the coding process to record observations relating to themes in the data and suggestions about how the innovation may be adapted for future uses. On conclusion of the coding process, teacher reflections were conducted by the first-named author and later corroborated or challenged by author B.

A limitation of the methodological approach is that linear connections between the activity and intercultural citizenship are only theoretical. In addition, the analysis relies on self-reported data which may not be reliable if students provided responses based on their perceptions of teacher expectations. Nonetheless, this praxis-oriented paper did not aim to track intercultural development longitudinally; rather, it aimed to advocate ICE (Byram, 2008) for the present research context as well as to offer a potentially useful educational example for use in other contexts.

Observing

An educational “problem” was identified around limited SA and a need for a systematically designed intercultural innovation to address stated internationalization policy aims. While other intercultural learning options had been established in the setting, including an SA training programme (not

running due to the pandemic) and an intercultural awareness course, no task had been explicitly designed around ICE

Planning and Acting

The innovation involved the following stages. First, students selected a social issue to explore and investigated the issue using a self-selected online text from an international (i.e., non-local, non-national) online media source. Selected issues included immigration, multiculturalism, access to education, student mobility, work pressure, and discrimination. The articles could be selected in any language and the use of auto-translations encouraged. Students then critically evaluated their text by considering its tone, looking for representations of (national) stereotypes, and then by considering their issue from the perspective of their local and national communities. ICE experiences should connect students with other individuals (Byram, 2008). In this small-scale task, the selected texts provided the initial ICE experience.

Second, students continued reflective work by considering on any changes to their individual perceptions at this early stage by answering two questions: *Before this task, what did you think about this issue? Following this task, what do you think about this issue?*

Third, to encourage further reflection, students made two blogposts in the following stage, one in English and one in Japanese, in which they focused on their selected issues from different community perspectives. These questions linked to ICE, were key to the aims of the innovation around thinking from different perspectives and provided the data source for the later evaluation. The following guidance was provided:

- Summarize your issue.
- Why is this issue important to you as an individual?
- Why is this issue important to your local community?
- Why is this issue important to your national community?
- Why is this issue important to the international community?
- How did reading about this issue make you feel?

Finally, the blogposts were compiled and printed for display at the university and in an online space. Students analyzed and reflected on these texts as intercultural experiences and acted on that reflection by transferring

knowledge and experience locally to other students (including students not involved in the task).

Reflecting: Evaluating the Innovation

As a data overview, Table (1) firstly offers a breakdown of the analysis of the blogpost reflections findings by code are presented with excerpts from the student data (individual items within blogposts), written in English or Japanese (translations were carried out by the researchers and are identified where they appear). All presented data is anonymous, and excerpts are provided with numbers instead.

		Blogposts
1	Self-reported changes in self-perception	26
2	Expressing deeper understanding of culture	21
3	Expressing international identifications	29
4	Recognising importance of intercultural citizenship for multicultural societies	20
5	Recognising importance of future community action	11
6	Limited evidence of critical engagement	9
7	Rejecting international identifications	5

TABLE (1): CODING AROUND INTERCULTURAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Among 26 students, there were reports of changes in their own self-perceptions, interpreted from reports of new learning with changes indicated in language around becoming “surprised”. These changes tended to be linked to expressions of responsibility towards others, and recognition of differences in circumstances. One such report is reflected in Excerpt 1 (translation): “I could learn about this problem. It is important for each other to recognize each other’s situation. I thought that I could move forward from this problem by changing my understanding.”

Also, several students reconfigured their own conceptions of what may be perceived as “normal” in their own individual behavior as well as in their interpretations of broader stereotypical behavior. The process sometimes led to further expressions of surprise as students considered how they may be perceived by others in international communities. Such reconfiguration is illustrated in Excerpt 2: “What we think is normal may not be the case. I was surprised because I didn’t think that I was thinking and acting so differently.”

Within the blogposts, there was recognition among 21 students of a need to think about individuals beyond national cultural affiliations. In

interpretations of deeper understanding of culture, these students reported new ideas about relationships between individuals and cultures as fluid rather than fixed, and they reported perceptions of a rigidity in labels of national culture and identity:

Excerpt 3 (translation): In order to achieve a multicultural society, it is important to abandon rigid notions such as national culture and national identity.

Excerpt 4 (translation): I think individual harmony is possible by abandoning cultural stereotypes.

In 29 blogs, there were expressions of international identification. The task invited students to consider their issues from multiple perspectives, which appeared overall effective as there were reports of broadening perspectives on themselves and others. One such expression is represented in Excerpt 5 (translation): “There are people in the world who often interact with people from other countries. I thought it would be good to broaden the framework of my own way of thinking.”

Further, there were expressions of willingness to form international identifications as well as an interest in connecting with individuals in international and multicultural contexts, e.g., Excerpt 6: “I think it is important to connect with people in the world, not only national people.” Crucially, expressions of intercultural identifications tended to be based on recognition of the expanding multicultural make-up of many societies, including in Japan, e.g., Excerpt 7: “Nowadays, in international society, it is essential to interact with people from different countries. I felt it was necessary to deepen my understanding of different cultures.”

Regarding critical questioning, students considered their issues at different levels, and their perceptions of increasing multiculturalism in societies were prominent in 20 blogposts in the data set. There was a perception among 11 students that this kind of task was important for future actions in multicultural contexts. The two following excerpts illustrate this perception:

Excerpt 8: It is very important to know the lives and thoughts of people from other countries, and it gives me hints on how to spend my life in the future.

Excerpt 9 (translation): I felt that we have not yet been able to realize a fully multicultural society on the entire planet. In order to improve this situation and make it possible, we need to rethink what we can do and take action.

Among items coded next to “Recognising importance of future community action,” three students noted that selected social issues may not be relevant to the students’ local area and individual circumstances. Yet, such expressions were combined with recognition that individuals may learn from non-local problems to be able to engage in some activity if the situation arises locally, as represented in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 10 (translation): It may seem irrelevant since we don't face this kind of problem in our area, but by recognizing that it is a problem in other places, we can learn in case it happens here. If a small number of people raise their voices first, other people may begin to change too, and this may lead to a change in the world.

However, there was also evidence of limited critical engagement in the form of brief contributions, general comments, and direct recycling of content from their selected texts. Such limited critical engagement was evident in 9 blogposts, e.g., Excerpt 11: “I have been thinking about the difference between foreign and Japanese culture for a while.” Also, among five students, there were expressions of ethnocentric views, which were interpreted as focusing on others rather than focusing on these students and on their own self-perceptions, e.g., Excerpt 12: “I think there is a difference that Americans think of themselves first, while Japanese people consider themselves and others.”

The tendency to treat cultures as singular national entities may have indicated a lack of critical questioning or a lack of engagement. It indicated that the ICE pedagogical framework was not evident in the work of all students as a minority of them did not accept international identifications or express willingness to demonstrate responsibility to perceived non-local/national communities. Such expressions appeared based on personal preferences (Excerpt 13) or perspectives that internationalization was not relevant to local and national communities (Excerpt 14):

Excerpt 13: I felt that I didn't want to get involved. It was not interesting to me.

Excerpt 14: I think internationalization is not possible in Japan.

Teacher Reflections

Based on the student reflections and blogposts, most students expressed connections with, and responsibility towards, international communities. Thus, the data are indicative of some success in how the pedagogical framework around ICE was evident in student reflections in the blogposts. However, the lack of engagement among some students appeared to represent a rejection of international identifications and responsibility towards non-local and national communities—or perhaps a lack of interest in the activity. In terms of what can be done differently to improve the innovation, it would be useful to bring in task parameters to steer students away from simplistic national cultural comparisons and stereotypes. Instructions may also be written in a way that discourages focusing only on behavior of others and encourages inward focus on the behavior of students themselves.

The task may be seen as an effective, though small-scale, educational innovation framed by ICE for use in home context learning. It has attempted to address stated internationalization aims in the educational setting around developing “global” perspectives, aims which may be familiar to readers in their own institutional policies. Providing thoughtful intercultural learning opportunities remains particularly important even if SA opportunities are limited. The innovation outlined here may be replicated (with appropriate local adaptations) in other contexts as part of intercultural education courses, SA training, or within language-based courses, to address limited student mobility or as a potentially useful exercise for students unable to participate in international exchange programmes.

Conclusion

In this short action research paper, an educational problem around limited SA and a need to systematically develop intercultural learning opportunities for home context intercultural learning in the pandemic context was highlighted. Characteristics of ICE (Byram, 2008) helped in the design of an intercultural e-learning innovation, with learning based on connections with local, national, and international perspectives in blogging reflections around student-selected social issues. The activity elicited expressions of different (local, national, international) perspectives, and the majority of students indicated

some changes in self-perceptions, perceptions towards others, and expressions of intercultural citizenship. However, a minority of students rejected international identifications and a minority expressed ethnocentric comments.

Despite variation in learning outcomes, it is important to establish innovations such as this to foster international perspectives and find ways to challenge ethnocentrism. Given the innovation appeared to be effective overall, the paper advocates ICE as a relevant for intercultural innovation design in the absence of SA opportunities. While the innovation outlined does not offer an alternative to SA, it is an easily replicated task which may be brought into a wider curriculum in other contexts to support intercultural educational aspects of internationalization, including language education or SA training in contexts where SA has resumed. Such educational aspects of internationalization may be supported by more such small-scale, systematically designed, and easily implementable intercultural innovations.

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