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A Virtual Travel Course Model with Virtual Exchange

Chien Wen Yu and Yongmei Wu

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic shut down all study abroad and international travel opportunities for the 2020–2021 academic year and forced professors and study abroad staff at Bridgewater State University to be innovative and find solutions quickly for travel course cancellations in the middle of the 2020 spring semester. Universities were facing tough questions. Should you market study abroad when travel is uncertain? What can you offer students in place of that immersive experience? Will students still be interested in a modified offering (Rose 2020)? With these questions in mind and the help of the Bridgewater State University study abroad office, two Asian Studies faculty members created an online travel course which was supplemented with subsequent virtual exchanges and intended to substitute the canceled 2020 Spring Japan Travel Course. The students who had signed up for the course were offered a new opportunity to learn about and experience Japan virtually. The online travel course design and virtual exchange implementation are important parts of the new course model and serve as the discussion topics of this article.

New Study Abroad Options

Virtual study abroad and virtual exchange were designed to fulfill the purpose of study abroad during Covid-19. The virtual travel course is a new option that recreates much of the study abroad experience, such as learning about a new culture, immersing yourself in a new language and culture, and connecting with people around the globe (Pedersen 2020). The online travel course is constructed by

professors to provide students with readings, videos, and digital media assignments. It requires students to complete blogging, papers and projects scheduled throughout the course.

Virtual Exchange (VE) offers unique educational experiences at the intersection of the digital, social, and intercultural environments. It resituates learning by creating an inclusive transnational space where the participants

move across and beyond cultural, curricular, and individual boundaries. With support available from the teachers, virtual exchange offers a safe playground for raising the students' awareness of the importance of flexibility, openness, and socio-emotional presence (Hahn 2019).

Course Design of the Online Japan Travel Course

The Covid-19 pandemic has adversely affected the BSU Study Abroad Program and the Asian Studies Program. The 2020 Spring Japan Travel Course, Japanese Culture and Tourism Management, in collaboration with Wakayama University of



Canceled 2020 Spring Japan Travel Course due to Covid-19.

Japan, was unexpectedly canceled three weeks before departure for Japan. The trip cancellation and sudden change of study abroad plan took 13 students and two faculty members of the travel course by surprise and made everyone unprepared for an immediate replacement of the travel course. Students became very anxious and frustrated, particularly those seniors who needed the three course credits to graduate. At the suggestion of the Study Abroad



*Virtual Exchange between Bridgewater State University and Wakayama University
(Author's Collection).*

Office and in consultation with department chairs of Anthropology, and Management and Marketing, an online Japan travel course was conceptualized, proposed, and listed under the two departments in the Spring 2020 semester schedule. The course was targeting the graduating seniors in anthropology, business, and global languages/literatures in need of the credits and the students who had planned a semester abroad but could no longer go forward because of the coronavirus situation in Asian countries.

The authors are two Asian Studies faculty members and were co-leaders of the Japan travel course. We brainstormed to redesign the course to turn the canceled Japan Travel Course into an online travel course. Due to modern technology, we were able to revise the course syllabus and deliver the courses via the Blackboard/Zoom virtual classroom. As a result of our initiative and arrangement, seven students signed up for the course to study traditional and modern Japanese culture and business management in the tourism industry under two course numbers, ANTH 396-BW2 Japanese Culture, and MGMT 399-BW1 Tourism Business in Japan. The two courses were scheduled to run simultaneously from March 25 to May 12, 2020, so that students

had the option to take either course, depending on their majors. Through the Blackboard and Zoom platforms, we hoped to accomplish the same course goals and learning outcomes outlined in the canceled Japan travel course through assessment of a series of homework assignments, papers, blogs, and Zoom discussions.

culture and tourism management. Through course reading materials and carefully selected video resources, we introduced the students to how tourism has become one of the leading industries in Japan in the twenty-first century, and how the Japanese government has worked positively on tourism policy, cultural heritage protection, and regional revitalization projects with the aim of making Japan a tourism-oriented nation. The course highlighted how Kyoto represents a model tourist city that incorporates both elements of traditional culture and aesthetics, and modern renovations and technology.

Throughout the course, students participated in multiple learning activities, such as attending online conferences and lectures, watching documentary videos and TV dramas, and blogging/writing personal reflections. Topics included tourism management, gastronomy tourism, regional revitalization, heritage tourism, and Japanese tourism marketing. There were

Students have gained a meaningful and fruitful experience of learning about diverse cultures from others, as well as learning about themselves, developing cultural sensitivity and global awareness.

The canceled 2020 Spring Japan travel course was going to take the students to the major tourist cities in the Kansai region of Japan: Kyoto, Osaka, and Wakayama. As we could not go to the Kansai region to experience these tourist cities in person, we used Kyoto as a case study city to learn Japanese

documentary videos related to Japanese culture and customs such as festivals, gift-giving and wrapping culture; the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, incense culture, traditional arts, and kimono culture; Japanese aesthetics, architectures, and gardens; Japanese cuisine and Kyoto's unique cooking

styles; Japanese Ryokan, communal baths and *Onsen* (hot spring); Japanese beauty care and cosmetics; Japanese popular culture such as *manga* and *Yokai* (monster) culture, etc. For course learning assessment, students were required to complete two reflection papers, three to five weekly online blogging assignments, and two online conference discussions.

The online travel course went effectively and enjoyably with an elevated level of student engagement. Students' weekly blogging assignments and their papers demonstrated their in-depth understanding of Japanese culture and business practices in tourism. The student engagement and faculty/student interaction in the online class was exceptionally active, and even beyond what was expected of an actual travel course to some extent. We were especially satisfied to have achieved the course goals and learning outcomes without personally traveling to Japan and living/eating on-site, and at a fraction of the cost of the actual Japan Travel Course.

Implementation of Virtual Exchange

The use of digital tools removes national, institutional, and curricular borders by making students meet in shared online spaces. Our virtual Japan travel course was based in Bridgewater, and though it was considered successful, we felt a lack of on-site and in-person interactions between the American and Japanese students/teachers. It was



Virtual Exchange Promotional Flyer.

agreed that a virtual exchange was needed to fill in the missing part of an interactive travel course. Wakayama University, a partner with Bridgewater State University and host institution of our travel course, was instrumental in initiating and implementing the virtual exchange. In exchange with Wakayama University, students played a significant role in introductory presentations and exchange conversations which were facilitated by faculty.

The teachers and students from Wakayama University had been planning and waiting to host our Japan trip even before the Covid-19 pandemic. They were ready to organize the virtual exchange with Bridgewater and prepared an exchange schedule

and questionnaire. They registered the virtual exchange participants on both sides before the event scheduled for Monday, November 9, 7:00 p.m. (in Bridgewater)/Tuesday, November 10, 9:00 a.m. (in Wakayama). Most of our participants were students from our Japanese culture classes, online Japan travel course, and Asian Studies Program. There were 14 participants (including teachers) from BSU and 10 participants (including teachers) from WU. Ms. Kumiko Jacobson of WU International Relations Division served as the emcee and organized the virtual exchange meeting with help of Professor Ayako Nagatomo from Wakayama University. BSU and WU students participated in the ice breaker game and made informative videos and PowerPoint presentations on both universities and cultures, followed by small breakout room conversations of personal topics and interests.

Student feedback from the virtual exchange reflected a positive impact on the online travel course. It was suggested at the first meeting to create more breakout chat rooms and longer exchange time. BSU and

Time (BSU)	Time (WU)	Agenda
7:00 p.m.	9:00 a.m.	Welcome speech from Dr. Wing-Kai To
7:05 p.m.	9:05 a.m.	Ice break (Who am I?)
7:10 p.m.	9:10 a.m.	Wakayama and Wakayama University introduction by Ms. Natsuki OWASE
7:20 p.m.	9:20 a.m.	Bridgewater and Bridgewater University introduction by BSU student
7:30 p.m.	9:30 a.m.	Self-introduction at each breakout room (Send participants into breakout room of 3-5 people)
7:40 p.m.	9:40 a.m.	Group talk (Favorite anime/manga/movies, etc.)
7:55 p.m.	9:55 a.m.	Self-introduction at each breakout room (Reset the current breakout room and create new breakout room)
8:05 p.m.	10:05 a.m.	Group talk (Hobbies, Unique things about your country/family/yourself, etc.)
8:20 p.m.	10:20 a.m.	Take a Hi-Five picture
8:25 p.m.	10:25 a.m.	Closing remarks by Prof. Ayako Nagatomo

Virtual Exchange Agenda on November 9, 2020.

WU organizers took the student suggestion to improve class communication and make necessary adjustments to increase the effectiveness of the second virtual exchange.

Conclusion

Today, new formats of virtual exchange are introduced and advocated by Bridgewater State University and other universities, such as COIL

The virtual travel course is a new option that recreates much of the study abroad experience, such as learning about a new culture, immersing yourself in a new language and culture, and connecting with people around the globe.

The purpose of the first virtual exchange event was to introduce the WU and BSU students/teachers to each other. The second virtual exchange between WU and BSU offered further student interactions and individualized conversations on Japanese tourism, culture, and lifestyles. Interesting and informative presentations made by the Japanese students on tourism and Saikazaki were the highlights of the second virtual exchange meeting. Located in the southern part of Wakayama, Saikazaki is designated as a special region of Setonaikai National Park and recognized as the best coast in the New Japanese Tourist Spots Top 100. Saikazaki is a beautiful cape that is compared to Amalfi of Italy and relevant to Cape Cod in Massachusetts, to which our American students may relate. This broadened their horizon and helped their understanding of Japanese culture/tourism and sharing of their experiences.

(Collaborative Online International Learning). Each format of virtual exchange is characteristic of the curriculum and culture of both home university and foreign exchange university. However, our virtual exchange was unique and more than just a virtual exchange or a series of virtual exchanges with a foreign university. It was embedded in the online travel course to complement the course content and achieve the same result of an actual Japan travel course. A virtual travel course without virtual exchange would not be sufficient to cover the interactive and immersive experience of the travel course.

A virtual travel course with virtual exchange cannot totally substitute an actual travel course and on-site experience. However, it has helped professors develop innovative and online teaching approaches and facilitate student online learning and collaboration across borders. Students have gained a

meaningful and fruitful experience of learning about diverse cultures from others, as well as learning about themselves, developing cultural sensitivity and global awareness. The professors have become more versatile in course designs and motivated to support collaborative projects of study abroad and the Asian Studies Program. Asian Studies faculty are planning to relaunch an actual Japan Travel Course in 2023 and continuing to expand our virtual travel course and virtual exchange models with other universities and countries. Can this model of online travel course with virtual exchange be adopted for any future online travel courses at Bridgewater State University or other institutions if the Covid-19 pandemic continues? We really hope to encourage our constant desire to collaborate and innovate.



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