Abstract

This paper illustrates the importance of emerging modalities of Virtual Exchange/ Collaborative Online International Learning (VE/COIL) in international higher education. It references VE/COIL programs conducted between the United States and Japan by Kansai University’s Institute for Innovative Global Education in 2020 and 2021, building on a qualitative study of student interviews and psychometric evaluation tools. Assessing the impact of these programs on student learning outcomes, particularly under the COVID-19 pandemic during which traditional in-person student mobility was halted all over the world, is crucial to the future of international education, especially with the return to traditional mobility programs. Findings suggest that upon completion of such programs, students demonstrated heightened skills in self-awareness, intercultural communication, and global resonance. While remote modalities of learning were necessitated across all academic levels at the start of the pandemic, this paper argues that they should be maintained in the post-pandemic world to purposefully target specific pedagogical aims in international curricula rather than as a temporary rapid response to halted mobility programs. Essential elements to ensuring the success of VE/COIL programs are assessing students’ transformative growth, building an international community for VE/COIL exchange through grassroots efforts, and positioning VE/COIL as a viable means to address issues of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in international higher education, for which JET alumni are uniquely positioned to orchestrate.
Virtual Exchange for All: Building on U.S.-Japan Relations to Further Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in International Higher Education

Background of Japan-U.S. Student Exchange

In April 2020, like many countries all over the world, Japan closed its borders to international travelers in an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19. Nearly two years later, international travel remains challenging—or impossible—putting an unfortunate end to aspirations of studying abroad for many. However, in the midst of this crisis, Virtual Exchange/Collaborative Online International Learning (VE/COIL) has gained an overdue spotlight.

As the name suggests, the pedagogical foundation of COIL is collaborative learning. This multifaceted approach uses technology to bring together faculty and students at two or more geographically distant institutions to carry out collaborative projects. While the concept of COIL itself is not novel in Japan, it truly became a buzzword in higher education institutions in 2018 with the “Inter-University Exchange Project” (I-UEP), a bilateral proposal of the U.S. American Council on Education (ACE) and Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology’s (MEXT). This scalable and affordable method was viewed as a means to revitalize waning student exchange under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Task Force on Strengthening Grassroots Japan-U.S. Ties (2018).¹

Despite a steady increase in the number of inbound international students to Japan since the 1990s,² the number of Japanese students studying abroad (to the United States in particular) has been on the decline.³ To illustrate the disparity, the number of inbound international students in 2019⁴ was nearly three times that of outbound Japanese students.⁵ Expertshave cited cost, a lack of confidence in language ability, concerns for health and safety, and worrythat time spent abroad

⁴ 312,214 as of May 1, 2019; JASSO, “Result of an Annual Survey of International Students in Japan 2019.”
would negatively impact job hunting prospects, as top contributing factors.\(^6\)

The start of the pandemic in early 2020 further exacerbated this decline, as students were either unable to traverse borders or emergently called home from abroad. The Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) reported an overall 10.4 percent drop in inbound international students as of May 2020, and a 2021 report by the Japan Association of Overseas Studies (JAOS) indicated that the drop in some countries was as much as 112 percent.\(^7\) This is to say nothing of the further decline that has yet to be reported as the pandemic crisis continues, compounded by travel bans and visa-related issues.\(^8\)

**Opening Up Japan to the World through VE/COIL**

It is against this backdrop that the field of international education has experienced a sort of renaissance, with the turn toward virtual education becoming the norm rather than the exception. Based on the findings of a qualitative study of the impact of VE/COIL programs conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic at Kansai University (KU), where students were unable to pursue international experiences in person, they sought them out online, demonstrating that interest in study abroad has not waned as the aforementioned surveys might suggest, even in the midst of a pandemic.

As a burgeoning hub for VE/COIL in Asia, KU is at the forefront of the movement to promote Japan-U.S. online exchange at the grassroots level in higher education. Offering COIL as part of its internationalization curriculum since 2014, KU was well equipped to handle the switch to remote learning necessitated by the pandemic. While students had already been taking online courses prior to participating in VE/COIL, all program applicants expressed a desire to pursue a “study abroad” experience, either as a result of being unable to go abroad or having their international experiences disrupted when they were called home in early 2020. These circumstances shed light on the value of these innovative programs, which are the product of bilateral agreements that interest not only higher education institutions but also the governments of the countries in which they are located.

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VE/COIL programs have ultimately proven effective in terms of cost, equity, and access, as well as being highly suited to serving both the domestic and international student populations. Evidence of this can be seen in the near doubling of KU students and quadrupling of overseas students enrolling in VE/COIL courses between 2018 and 2021. These enrollment numbers highlight VE/COIL’s potential to revitalize Japan-U.S. student exchange by becoming the “next new normal” in international education, as they allow for cross-cultural exchanges in ways that are more accessible than physically relocating to another country. The details are briefly outlined in what follows, and the results of student assessment should support the assertion that VE/COIL be integrated as a permanent fixture in the internationalization curriculum at higher education institutions, even after the return to in-person study abroad. Further, they should serve as a model for new ways in which VE/COIL can contribute to grassroots efforts to promote accessible and equitable Japan-U.S. student exchange.

**Addressing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

Arguably the most fundamental building block to the success of VE/COIL is accessibility, which is fittingly echoed in the JET mantra, “every situation is different.” Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is a spectrum with a host of meanings that can vary by location, discipline, and a number of other variables. It is imperative to address DEI in a way that serves student growth and development. This holds especially true in access to education, and in particular, the highly-privileged realm of higher education in terms of affording students intercultural encounters and international experiences. By lowering the hurdle and making international education more equitable and accessible for all, VE/COIL can address issues of economic and curricular constraints that have been cited in the past as insurmountable obstacles to many students seeking international experiences through traditional in-person mobility programs.

In an effort to welcome overseas students unable to travel to Japan under the pandemic, KU opened a selection of English-mediated courses to remote participation from students affiliated with its partner institutions free of charge in 2020 as the new Kansai University-Engaged/Exchange Online Learning (KU-EOL) program. Over 300 students applied in the first year alone. Similarly,
KU and University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP)’s UMAP-COIL Joint Program saw a marked increase in interest in 2020-2021. The inaugural program combined VE/COIL lectures with Sustainable Development Goals-related field study activities conducted on- and off-board the Peace Boat over 13 weeks. Despite the promotional reach of the UMAP consortium (composed of over 230 institutions across 23 countries and territories), the 2019 program attracted only 16 students who were able to participate thanks to scholarships. By comparison, in 2020 and 2021 the fully-remote format of the program allowed it to be run on a complimentary basis, which resulted in over 282 student applications from 66 institutions in 14 countries and regions, including countries facing difficult internal political affairs.¹¹

Further, KU COIL Plus mobility programs planned under the MEXT I-UEP agreement were redesigned to include innovative practices such as peer-run conversation hours and networking opportunities.¹² Previously, these programs were integrated into pre-existing courses during the academic semester, combining VE/COIL with a field study overseas. In 2020-2021, they were offered as stand-alone two-week intensive programs open to all KU students and took place during semester breaks. While the timeline presented an obstacle to participation from U.S.-based students, for students enrolled at KU, it was a rare opportunity to participate in a study abroad experience without disruption to their job-hunting efforts, as they were able to schedule interviews around joining in live Zoom sessions.¹³

Assessing Transformative Growth

In addition to addressing issues of potential barriers to job hunting as well as cost, health, and safety, the positive impact of these innovative programs can be seen in the evidence of students’ transformative growth, which reveals that efforts to integrate VE/COIL have been highly successful.
A qualitative study of students’ English proficiency test scores in combination with pre- and post-program assessments demonstrated their value in developing students’ practical language skills, digital competency, self and cultural awareness, intercultural communication skills, and global resonance with near-unanimous improvement in scores in all programs in 2021.

While VE/COIL can be viewed as a method to achieve this growth, test scores are often more important to administrators and policymakers. However, they should not be viewed as the sole measure of success. Forming connections with peers and building a virtual community can extend well into the future of the students, faculty, institutions, and by proxy the countries to which they are tied. In a 2021 UMAP-COIL post-program interview, students reported that despite facing logistical challenges—time differences and language barriers—overall they felt more interconnected, showed an increased awareness of cultural biases, and felt the program equipped them with the tools and confidence to communicate in a multicultural setting.

Building on Community Ties

Often forgotten, the ultimate goal of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program is not to simply teach English, but to forge connections that will have a lasting impact on Japan-U.S. relations. While VE/COIL remains largely the domain of higher education institutions, given its grassroots nature (building peer networks at both faculty and student levels), which is mirrored in the mission of the JET Program, these two complementary modes of education could build upon the existing framework of the JET Alumni Association (JETAA) to promote VE/COIL practice, not only at the tertiary but also the secondary education level.

For example, in 2019 and 2021, local high school students were invited to preview a “study abroad” experience through VE/COIL. This practice lends itself to adaptation in the JET classroom, where the potential to connect Japanese high school students with their international peers is currently either scarce or nonexistent, and in which the JET Assistant Language Teacher is their primary (or sole) point of interaction with native English speakers. Demonstrated in the

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14 According to the Beliefs, Events and Values Inventory (BEVI) assessment, given to students prior to the start and at the culmination of each VE/COIL program at Kansai University, “global resonance” is part of a scale of measurements designed to assess students’ investment in learning about different languages, cultures, and individuals and their desire to seek out global experiences. (BEVI - Beliefs, Events, and Values Inventory, “BEVI Scales,” accessed December 1, 2021, https://thebevi.com/about/scales/.)

15 Student test scores are reported directly to Kansai University and are not published.

aforementioned COIL. Plus programs, allowing students to interact in a more casual peer-to-peer environment may alleviate the anxiety they feel when using their second language skills in front of their instructors as well as provide added motivation to apply what they have learned in a “real-world” setting. Post-program surveys indicated that this peer-to-peer interaction was a highlight of the program and a catalyst in boosting students’ confidence to participate in live lectures. If seen as a first step rather than a leap into an international experience, integrating VE/COIL into the high school English classroom may also increase Japanese students’ motivation to study abroad in person in the future.

Incorporating VE/COIL in the high school classroom is an untapped resource in the burgeoning field of VE/COIL education in Japan, and one to which JETs (both current and former) are well-positioned to contribute on both ends of the collaboration. With JET alumni located all over the world and in countless sectors (especially those related to academics and business), the possibilities for current and former JETs to connect with colleagues and provide VE/COIL experiences for their students in Japan and the United States by forging a virtual community are myriad. Creating a sustainable virtual community for VE/COIL exchange is one way for these programs to continue to take root and blossom in the midst of a return to in-person mobility programs, a task which JET alumni are uniquely positioned to orchestrate given their connection to Japan.

**VE/COIL as the “Next New Normal” in International Education**

In a post-pandemic world likely to be characterized by global virtual collaboration, VE/COIL programs should arguably be integrated into the curriculum for the foreseeable future. While initially VE/COIL was widely adopted during the pandemic as an alternative to in-person study abroad, we now need to move into the next phase in which such programs are offered in conjunction with in-person study abroad to cater to the different needs of the wider student demographic we are hoping to reach—those who may not have had an international experience otherwise.

The value of VE/COIL education is evident in its positive impact, regardless of type or duration. It can serve as a potential motivator for students to improve not only their practical language and intercultural communication skills, but also provide the international experiences they are clearly seeking. As the return to in-person study abroad poses the danger of relegating this innovative educational modality to a rapid response to the pandemic, framing and assessing its impact is crucial to making it an integral part of international education. Rather than perpetuating
the narrative of one mode of education being better than another and risking students losing out on experiences that can be afforded equitably through VE/COIL, the JET community can serve an important role in supporting and disseminating its practice at the secondary and tertiary levels by making use of its vast alumni network.
About the JETs on Japan Forum

The JETs on Japan Forum is a partnership between USJETAA and Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) that features selected articles of JET alumni perspectives on U.S.-Japan relations. The series aims to elevate the awareness and visibility of JET alumni working across diverse sectors and provides a platform for JET alumni to contribute to deeper understanding of U.S.-Japan relations from their fields. The articles serve as a resource to the wider JET alumni and U.S.-Japan communities on how alumni of this exchange program are continuing to serve as informal ambassadors in U.S.-Japan relations.

Author Biography

Michele holds a master's degree in Japanese Language and Culture from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her research areas of interest are transculturation and the internationalization of universities and vocational schools in Japan. She has worked as a freelance translator, a Japanese-language textbook editor in Boston, and an English teacher in Shiga Prefecture with the JET Program from 2010 to 2013. Currently, she promotes the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Initiative at Kansai University’s Institute for Innovative Global Education, facilitating U.S.-Japan relations between higher education institutions.