

# Online Global Experiences: International Collaboration During a Pandemic

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**Abstract:** *Global experiences are offered by universities internationally and provide university students with myriad educational and intercultural skills. When international travel and traditional global experiences were paused during the COVID-19 pandemic, universities needed to find new ways to provide students with global experiences that could be undertaken from home. This article reports on the collaborative online global experiences undertaken between university staff and students from Melbourne, Australia and Kochi, Japan. It offers reflections from the authors who played key facilitator roles in each context using Kolb's Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984) as a theoretical model for reflective practice. The 'Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad' (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2020) are used as a principled model for our reflections on the online global experiences. The discussion focuses on online techniques with English language learners and highlights the transformational learning that can be achieved through online global experiences. The article concludes with implications and applications for future global experiences.*

**Keywords:** global experiences, study abroad, ESL, EFL, teacher education, online learning

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## Introduction

Global experiences, or education abroad programs, are offered to students by universities around the world. A common aim of these programs is to develop global skills, intercultural knowledge and language learning. These global experiences are often claimed to be *transformative* (Kiely, 2005); experiences which change individuals' ways of looking at and interpreting the world (Mezirow, 1997) and are often cited as the major outcome of a study abroad experience (Doerr, 2018).

To inform good practice for post-secondary education abroad, the 'Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad' (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2020) (herein referred to as the Standards) were created by an international forum of experts. Within the Standards, education abroad is

defined as “education, including, but not limited to, enrolment in courses, experiential learning, internships, service learning, and other learning activities, which occurs outside the participant’s home country, the country in which they are enrolled as a student, or the country in which they are employed as personnel” (p.12). While this definition clearly stipulates experiences *outside* participants’ home countries, restrictions on international travel during the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically paused physical travel for ‘education abroad’, and newly conceived programs are now needed to connect students online through ‘global’ interactions. The Standards are thus considered as a way of informing an innovative extension of an international bilateral Australia-Japan partnership that facilitated online global experiences during the pandemic. This article discusses the resulting experiential learning from the online global experiences in relation to the Standards.

The Standards identify ‘student learning and development’ as outcomes of education abroad and define it as “... the changes that result when students are exposed to new experiences, concepts, information, and ideas. The knowledge, understanding, and personal growth are generated, in this context, from interactions with higher education learning environments” (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2020, p. 21). This highlights changes and personal growth as key factors in education abroad. These were features identified by our own study of physical international global experiences (Wilks-Smith & Lingley, 2020) and were discussed in relation to the concept of ‘transformative learning’. This article now explores whether ‘personal growth’ and ‘transformative learning’ can likewise occur for online global experiences and, if so, how they are manifested. The Standards are used in this article as a tool to discuss and reflect on a unique Australia-Japan online global experience program.

## Literature Review

A wide range of benefits are attributed to global experiences. They are claimed to be a “value added” experience where students develop holistically and globally (Braskamp, 2009). They develop a growth in students’ intercultural competence (Salisbury, An, & Pascarella, 2013), increase students’ intercultural maturity and intercultural sensitivity, and are influential to students’ attitudes, intercultural skills, and learning (Braskamp, 2009). Students themselves perceive personal growth and intercultural development as key benefits of global experiences (Cheng, 2016).

Importantly, many successful global experiences include cooperation and support from a university abroad. This cooperation has been shown to be associated with increases in students’ intercultural and global competencies (Stebleton, Soria, & Cherney, 2013). “High value programs” are strongly associated with university course credit (Interis, Rezek, Bloom, & Campbell, 2018) where programs are connected to coursework and are “an integral part of a larger learning experience” (Donnelly-Smith, 2009, p.1). Programs led by university faculty provide mentoring and support to students during the program (Wilks-Smith & Lingley, 2020). Programs that are structured, include reflection, and involve working or studying with host-country participants are particularly beneficial (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). Each of these program features could equally be present in physical and online programs so it is considered worthwhile to explore the benefits of online global experiences.

Findings from our in-country global experiences (Wilks-Smith & Lingley, 2020) showed university student growth in personal learning and development. This related to students navigating themselves in an unfamiliar context and culture, especially with regards to social interactions in a new cultural environment. Students reflected on experiences that changed the way they think

about something and reconstructed their new knowledge to shape their future practice. These provided concrete examples of their “transformative” learning.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the impacts of online global experiences on students’ learning are also becoming more readily understood. Online programs have been found to provide intercultural exchange that can develop “intercultural competence and global skills” (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2021a). These international youth exchange intercultural programs “... have a meaningful immediate impact on the development of global competence...” (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2021b, p.1). Even after five-week programs, an impact on global competence was evident through more positive views of peers from other cultures, the ability to withhold judgements of others, and increased cross-cultural communication skills (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2021b).

Despite “Zoom fatigue”, time zone differences and Wi-Fi connection quality being challenges for online global experiences, “...the use of digital technologies also opens up new opportunities”, including “supporting diversity and inclusion” and “affordability” (Weinmann, Neilsen & Star, 2021, p.1). Similarly, the AFS Intercultural Programs found that online programs are “...breaking down financial barriers to intercultural exchange opportunities for students from underrepresented communities” (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2021a, p.1). This is a considerable benefit that is being realised from online experiences during the pandemic.

This brief literature review identifies global experiences as “transformative” experiences (Kiely, 2005) that change the way individuals’ look at and interpret the world (Mezirow, 1997). Previous research has shown a wide range of benefits to participating students. Our own previous physical global experiences and research based on these experiences, identified various ways that the experiences were transformative (Wilks-Smith & Lingley, 2020). We wondered then if the online global experiences could also be transformative for participating students, and if so, in what ways. The ‘Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad’ (2020) provide a foundation from which to support our reflections and discussion.

## Reflective Practice

Using ‘reflective practice’ (Finlay, 2008), the key facilitators-authors from each context reported on their teaching practice and reflected on the experience. Reflective practice is “... the process of learning through and from experience towards gaining new insights of self and/or practice” (Finlay, 2008, p.1) and was used in this study to critically evaluate the online global experiences in order to gain new understandings and improve future practice.

This study used Kolb’s Learning Cycle (1984) as a model for teacher-facilitator reflective practice. Reflection centered around the four stages in Kolb’s cycle: *concrete experience*, *reflective observation*, *abstract conceptualisation*, and *active experimentation*. The first stage, *concrete experience*, involved the online global experiences and a factual account of the experiences. *Reflective observation* involved reflecting on the experiences and making sense of what happened including analysing practice in terms of what went well, what needed further development, and what did not work out as planned. The Standards were then drawn upon to make links between what was done, what is known, and what needs to be learned. *Abstract conceptualisation* involved modifying ideas and devising new approaches including what will be kept, what will be developed, and what will be done differently. The final stage, *active experimentation*, focused on the next steps for improving the online practice, future teaching-learning situations, and new experiences that

could be implemented into practice. Throughout this process, professional discussions between the key facilitators in each context strengthened the depth of reflection with informal feedback from participating students contributing towards the reflection process.

## Description of Online Global Experiences

An existing partnership between RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia and Kochi University in Kochi, Japan was utilised to develop an online collaboration to provide global experiences for students from home whilst meeting the unique learning needs for the two respective groups of students. For the Australian students who were all studying to become teachers, focus was on providing authentic teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) experiences. For the Japanese students, aiming to improve English language and intercultural skills within an international studies degree, focus was on providing authentic opportunities to use English. This uniquely structured collaboration enabled learning objectives from each side to be met.

Australian students from RMIT University who were enrolled in TESOL courses in 2020 and 2021 were invited to participate in the online global experience program. Participation was an optional aspect of their courses. Eleven students participated. Japanese students from Kochi University enrolled in English courses throughout 2020 and 2021, across a range of year levels and with varying proficiency levels, were invited to participate, also as an outside-of-class optional activity. Eighteen students participated. Participation fluctuated each week and across the two years but approximately half of the students participated for the entire two years.

The online global experiences consisted of weekly one-hour online sessions using Collaborate Ultra. The sessions commenced with participants meeting online together and usually involved free conversation warm-up activities facilitated by the pre-service TESOL teachers until all participants were present. 'Break-out groups' were then utilised to pair students, Australian with Japanese, for increased talk-time. Initially these were opportunities to get to know each other and familiarise Australian pre-service teachers with the English language proficiency of the Japanese students. The sessions included both planned two-way interview style questions and free conversation. Thereafter, a combination of unstructured and semi-structured sessions were developed collaboratively that addressed students' language needs and areas of interest, and involved a combination of whole group, small group and pair work. The sessions included topic discussions where topics and focus questions were prepared by both Australian and Japanese students, reflecting their interests and their curiosity in each other's lives and cultures. Current world events such as the 'Black Lives Matter' movement were discussed among students and information about public actions and the media coverage in Japan and Australia was shared. The 'COVID-19 pandemic' was of course central in all our lives and the impacts and differing regulations in each location were of interest to students and also stimulated interesting discussions. Online quizzes and games were also prepared collaboratively that suited the online modality and were tailored to the interests and language levels of the Japanese students. Examples included a quiz game (students raced to answer questions), three hints game (give three hints and students try to guess the word), two truths and a lie game (tell students three things and they need to guess which two are the truth and which is a lie), and the taboo game (describe something without using the taboo word and the taboo word needs to be guessed). Japanese students also took an active role in the planning

for session content, including preparing discussion topics and questions, which included some purposeful pre-learning of required topic-specific vocabulary in English.

Where possible, students had their video and audio turned on throughout the sessions and utilised showing each other physical things online that visually supported their communication, such as maps, objects and images, and even what their immediate surroundings looked like. Students also regularly shared their screens to show digital images or information that supported their oral communication. For example, when an Australian student mentioned the birds that could be heard in the background, they showed digital images of the birds to the Japanese students. When a Japanese student talked about one of their favourite local foods, they showed the Australian students a digital image of the prepared dishes. These sorts of flexible, visual ways to support communication online were used naturally by students when it was timely for them.

This section provided a factual account of the online global experiences that reports on the first stage of Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984), *concrete experience*.

## Reflections

The second stage of Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984), reflective observation involved the teacher-facilitators reflecting on the experiences and making sense of what happened including analysing practice in terms of what went well, what needs further development, and what did not work as planned. The Standards are then drawn upon to make links between the online global experiences and those designed for physical global experiences. This comparison will identify if and how the Standards can be met for online global experiences.

The online global experiences provided university students from the Australian and Japanese contexts opportunities to engage with each other and learn with and from each other online. Most notably, the experiences provided authentic online communication and collaboration opportunities between Australian and Japanese participants. Japanese students had a need to communicate in English and a desire to make their meaning understood, whilst Australian students had authentic opportunities to practice teaching English. Student-centred learning was at the heart of the program with students from both contexts taking an active role in scheduling sessions, creating content and shaping the experiences for themselves.

On commencement of the program in early 2020, university lecturers from both sides played a large role in planning and facilitating the program. The scheduling of the online sessions was determined by the lecturers, planning was undertaken within courses to prepare students for the interactions and align with the desired outcomes for each cohort of participants. One of the greatest developments in the program that was realised over time, and was not intended at the outset, was that students would gradually take over the ownership and control of the program as a student-directed initiative. Student-leaders from each context naturally emerged and suggested content and format styles they wanted in the program. Noticeably, when the sessions became more student-led, the formality of the sessions changed, and this had a positive impact on students' participation and confidence. The pre-service teachers trialled their own ideas about what might work and, in the process, learned a lot about interacting cross-culturally as well as about teaching generally, and TESOL teaching specifically. Japanese students who were all studying English came to the program with varying levels of oral competency and confidence. The most noticeable change over time was in Japanese students' confidence in their English abilities. This was largely made

possible by the comfortable, informal atmosphere that was created by the students, and the focus of the sessions being a social connection rather than a formal, lecturer-led class.

Despite the informality, considerable learning was achieved by all participants. Pre-service teachers regularly discussed teaching pedagogy with each other and their university lecturer prior to and following the online sessions. They were able to connect theoretical learnings from their courses with practical experiences they had with their Japanese collaborators. They were able to trial a wide range of online teaching strategies and discuss the benefits and challenges of each. They were able to design teaching activities and communicative tasks for the Japanese students, tailored for the needs they had identified. They also identified areas of professional growth such as improving the clarity of their language to support second language (L2) communication, their use of strategies such as paraphrasing, and providing examples to students to reinforce meaning. The lecturer from Japan, who has worked regularly with Japanese learners of English was able to offer suggestions and support pre-service teacher reflection and growth. One particular suggestion that was often referred to related to negotiating meaning with the Japanese students. Meaning negotiation is highly communicative and let the Australian students know what was and was not working in their use of English and their overall communication. It was also understood that Japanese students may be more proficient speaking about familiar topics and some content areas than others, and that there may be gaps in their understanding of culturally-specific content, topic-specific vocabulary, and differences in life experiences.

Students also learned about cross-cultural differences, beyond language, during these experiences. Many times, even when students had a word for something, their partner may not have known what the word means. This happened many times with both Australian and Japanese students. Japanese students needed to more explicitly describe Japanese food items that were not understood by Australian students, for example, they needed to explain what 'takoyaki' is. Place names were another aspect of learning, with Australian students often not realising that a word used by the Japanese students was a place name and also didn't have an understanding of where the place is. Traditional activities such as Kochi's 'yosakoi' dance was viewed in the background one week during an online session when a Japanese participant was online on campus when dance practice was being held. Likewise, Australian students needed to provide explanation and more information on things that were not understood by their Japanese communication partners, for example the activity of 'wake boarding'.

The regular use of Australian-Japanese student pairings maximised talk time for all participants. It also enabled pre-service teachers to discover the best strategies for their partners and tailor their teaching especially for them, subsequently supporting them to reach individual educational outcomes for each partner. This growth contributed to the ongoing engagement and participation of students. One Japanese student commented that they achieved the highest grade in their class for their English presentation and credited their achievement to their development of English in the weekly online collaborations. Similarly, Australian students said that they continued to be involved in the program because of the observable development in their teaching skills and the increased confidence that they felt.

One of the greatest challenges of the program was the inconsistency in who attended and the often uneven numbers of participants from each context. Despite this, the regular use of student pairings and frequent rotating of conversation pairs provided a range of language models, including gender and accent differences. This flexible use of pairings helped to overcome inconsistencies in

who attended. Additionally, it provided authentic challenges that teachers face daily that need to be creatively and quickly overcome. One of the Australian students remarked that responding to these sorts of differing teaching situations contributed towards their growth as a teacher.

Another feature of the student-led sessions was students' creation of their own topics and focus questions for discussions. These student-led topics were then naturally high interest, age appropriate, and engaging for everyone. The focus was on interest-based discussions rather than the grammatical form of English. There were also a lot of incidental interesting conversations that emerged naturally during the sessions. For example, one week, students discussed why the session times changed because of "daylight savings" in Melbourne as it was an unfamiliar concept for the Japanese students. Another week, typhoon alarms sounded on Japanese students' mobile phones during the session and warning messages were shared from students' phones. Some Australian students did not know what a typhoon is and asked about what the Japanese students needed to do. Each of these experiences elicited unplanned, timely, authentic communication content that generated discussion, explanation and stretched the capabilities of each communicator much as like what would happen during in-person intercultural experiences.

Compared with previous physical global experiences conducted between the universities that involved between two and four students on each trip, the online global experiences were open to any number of students wishing to participate and consisted of twenty-nine participants throughout 2020 and 2021. The online modality was free for participants, so removed any barriers relating to students' capacity to pay for international travel and accommodation while abroad. Participation included rural and remote students as well as urban students which further diversified participation. Additionally, students with families or care-giving commitments that would not have considered international travel, were able to become involved. This diversity of participants added to the diversity of life experiences that were shared in the online collaborations. Traditional international travel for physical global experiences usually privileges some whilst excluding others, whereas online experiences were shown to be more accessible and equitable for all.

A final reflection relates to the friendships and social connections that were developed between students. The experience resulted in authentic bilateral Australia-Japan friendships being formed and fostered as well as friendships between participants from the same contexts, including from different year levels or course groups. At the end of the program many students exchanged their contact information with each other to enable ongoing communication using various social media platforms. This willingness to continue beyond the life of the program speaks to the value it had for those participating.

Many of these reflections relate closely to the 'Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad' (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2020). Despite being intended for physical international global experiences, key features of the Standards were realised in the online global experiences. For example, in the Standards, 'Student learning and development' is defined as "... the changes that result when students are exposed to new experiences, concepts, information, and ideas. The knowledge, understanding, and personal growth are generated, in this context, from interactions with higher education learning environments" (p. 21), and these were evident in the online program. The reflections section reported on various examples where students from each context were exposed to numerous new experiences, such as interacting cross-culturally, negotiating meaning, and for Japanese students, working in their second language. New concepts and information were also developed, such as learning about daylight savings in Melbourne, typhoon warning systems

and the emergency action required in Japan, and building cultural reference knowledge of places, food, and cultural activities. New ideas were developed through the program including the development of Australian pre-service teachers' teaching skills and their ability to interact cross-culturally with speakers of additional languages. These practical experiences supported Australian students to trial new teaching ideas and strategies and continue to refine and consider the benefits and challenges of each. Participants from each context contributed new ideas for program content, discussion topics, questions, and communicative activities. Academic and professional growth was evident through the development of Australian students' teaching skills, and Japanese students' development of their English competency and confidence in communicating online. Growth in student-leadership and responsibility within the student-centred learning environment was also evident. Personal growth included development of interpersonal skills, improved cross-cultural and L2 interactional capabilities, and learning about new perspectives. The experience culminated in the organic extension of international social connections and friendships. Overall, the changes that resulted from new experiences, concepts, information, and ideas in the online global experience program, contributed to participants' personal, academic, and professional growth, and as such, can rightfully be considered as transformative learning.

## Implications and applications for practice

This section addresses the final two stages of Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984), *abstract conceptualisation* and *active experimentation*. *Abstract conceptualisation* involved modifying ideas and devising new approaches including what will be kept, what will be developed, and what will be done differently. The final stage, *active experimentation*, focused on the next steps for practice, applications for future teaching-learning situations, and new experiences that could be implemented into practice.

The online collaborations provided engaging global experiences for the participating university students from both locations, and as the previous section described, there were numerous educational and social benefits for everyone involved. Despite this, there were also challenges. One of these was the time difference between Australia and Japan. On commencement of the program, we were only one hour apart, but when daylight savings commenced in Melbourne, it became a two-hour difference. Even though the time difference was not significant, the difference of another hour meant that students who may have had availability in their timetable on commencement of the program may have had another class scheduled at the new time after daylight savings. Further compounding the scheduling were issues around each university operating their academic semesters at different times, having different peak times of the year, such as exam periods, different holiday breaks, as well as different times for classes within the daily timetable.

Another challenge related to access to the online program. Being online, the program relied on a stable internet connection which was problematic at times for some students. Although the involvement of rural and remote students was a benefit of the online program, internet connection was problematic for some students joining from more remote locations.

Although initially the ongoing use of the same Australian-Japanese pairs was planned for, there were inconsistencies in who attended, so adjustments were needed to create flexible pairs or small groups as necessary. This removed the opportunity for pre-service teachers to reliably be able to plan for the sequential, continued language development of their English learning partners. It did,

however, provide experiences for both Australian and Japanese students to have a wider range of communicators that varied in gender, background, location, life experiences, accents and language abilities. Early in the program, attendance was seen as a problem to overcome, however, after the mixed pair and grouping experiences, the wide range of communication partners was seen as a benefit of the program, and one that would be valuable continuing into the future.

It is important to highlight that the participants in the program were not simply Australian and Japanese students as two discrete binary groups. Students varied in backgrounds, life experiences, gender, home locations (urban, rural, remote), economic situations, had a range of accents, teaching skills and English language skills, and varied in confidence. The contributions each made to the program provided a valuable diversity of experiences and perspectives.

An unexpected development during the program was the emergence of student-leaders in both contexts. These were the regular attendees who were instrumental in the development of the program. Over time, they arranged the days and times according to student timetables and availability, suggested program content and structure that better reflected student interests, and very much made the program 'by students for students' and fostered a greater sense of program ownership by students. Affirming the benefit of the experiences, students themselves requested to continue the first stage of the program in the following year. This suggests student-perceived benefits and holds promise for an ongoing collaboration into the future.

With the potential of a paradigm shift towards more online learning into the future, as well as ongoing international travel restrictions due to the pandemic, the benefits of online global experiences could continue to be harnessed and built upon. As a result of our experiences and learning from this program, future global experiences will continue to include online programs.

## Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic caused physical international global experiences to halt in early 2020 so universities explored new innovative approaches to offer global experiences for students from home. This article described the collaborative online global experiences that were carried out between staff and students from an international university partnership across Australia and Japan. This new mode of collaborating for global experiences was developed to address the challenges of the pandemic which ended international travel and traditional physical student global experiences. Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984) was used as a model for reflective practice, whilst the 'Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad' (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2020) were used as a principled model for our reflections on the online global experiences. Collaborating online was shown to provide a mode of global experiences that offers an effective online learning model optimising global teaching and learning experiences actionable from home. A range of benefits were identified spanning themes including personal learning, cultural learning, intercultural communication, and language learning and development. Strategies for effective online pedagogy were also identified that enhance students' learning experiences. An additional benefit of online experiences is that participation by greater numbers of students, and an increased diversity of students is enabled, without cost. As such, even when physical international global experiences can recommence, the benefits that can be obtained from online global experiences are worthwhile continuing to embrace.

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