

The Global Intercultural Dialogue: Finding Connections and Creating Meaning Across Cultures

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Abstract

Global intercultural dialogues are online events that provide students at women's tertiary educational institutions the opportunity to discuss the challenges they face as young women balancing school, work, and other obligations and to exchange their perspectives on a range of topics, including dating and marriage norms, the importance of women's universities, and preparing for life after graduation, among others. Institutions take turns hosting these events, which occur two or three times annually. In this paper, the authors describe their experiences with global intercultural dialogues, including hosting and preparing students to participate in events. They present student feedback and reflect on their experiences with the events.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe the authors' experiences with and roles in recent global intercultural dialogues (GIDs): regular online events that allow students at women's tertiary educational institutions around the world to communicate about challenges they face as young women balancing school, work, and other obligations and to exchange their perspectives on a range of topics, including dating and marriage norms, the importance of women's universities, and preparing for life after graduation, among others. We, the authors, have all worked with students at our respective universities to host at least one GID event and prepare students to participate in several events hosted by other institutions.

As this article discusses the authors' personal experiences, it is important to mention the positions they held at the time of the events described. Alice Yang was a professor with the Global Education Office at Saint Mary's College in the United States. Derek Matsuda was a lecturer with the Center for International Education at Ochanomizu University in Japan. Jacob Schnickel was an associate professor with the Center for Language Education and International Programs at Jissen Women's University in Japan.

In this paper, we will describe the origin of the GIDs, touching first on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education in Japan. We will then explain how we have worked with students to participate in a GID event hosted by other institutions before moving on to provide details on how we have worked with students to host a GID event. In the discussion, we will

share some feedback from students and some observations about our experiences with GID events.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of human connection and pushed the world to seek alternatives in most areas of life, including school, work, and travel. In late March 2020, the response to the pandemic in Japan moved to maximum alert, and many aspects of everyday life were suspended. In April 2020, primary and secondary educational institutions in Japan closed along with many higher education institutions. Japan is a country that values milestones, and ceremonies at schools are important events. However, during the pandemic, many young men and women became university students without matriculation ceremonies, and others concluded their studies without graduation ceremonies. It was a challenging, stressful, and frightening time. However, due to its global impact, the pandemic also unified people in some surprising ways.

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), the pandemic facilitated Japan's shift to digital and online modes of education, but it also highlighted several challenges (MEXT, 2020a). This paradigm shift forced people to change their lifestyles, and society itself was forced to adapt to the "new normal" way of life during this period. Japan had been slow to promote virtual education, but the pandemic provided a major opportunity for this education method to accelerate quickly. Many universities took a more flexible approach by reducing traditional classroom-based instruction and offering academic credit for learning opportunities held on a variety of online platforms.

With regular classes completely online, faculty at both Ochanomizu University and Jissen Women's University sought ways for students to participate in international events held online. Both schools had experience with virtual exchange and collaborative online international learning (COIL), so the basic concept was familiar. It is against the backdrop of the pandemic, at a time when human connection felt more valuable and important than ever, that we learned about a new opportunity for international engagement, the GIDs.

Origins of the GID

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on studying abroad. Almost all study-abroad programs in countries around the world had to be canceled in 2020. This new situation forced people to think differently and act accordingly. The early stage of the pandemic suddenly stopped conventional in-person travel, but advanced technology offered opportunities to continue global engagement. Even before the pandemic, virtual exchange had already grown in

popularity and become a trend in international education. Virtual communication is an effective way to provide access to global education and exchange ideas at a low cost. Women's colleges and universities are no exception to this trend.

The GID owes a debt of gratitude to NAFSA (<https://www.nafsa.org>), the largest non-profit organization for professionals in all areas of international education. It has nearly 10,000 members from over 150 countries. Due to its large and diverse membership, NAFSA allows its members to create member interest groups based on their needs and areas of expertise. Currently, NAFSA has more than 30 member interest groups, including the Women's College & University Institutional Interest Group (IIG), which was founded in 2009 by international education professionals from women's colleges and universities. The purpose of the IIG is to promote networking and the sharing of best practices and research findings. In addition, it provides opportunities for members to develop collaborations and partnerships within the context of internationalization for women's colleges and universities. The IIG leadership team led by Saint Mary's College (a U.S. women's liberal arts college in Notre Dame, Indiana) conducted a global survey on women's colleges and universities around the world in 2018 and in the process enlarged its membership. The IIG's annual Open Meeting during the NAFSA national conference attracted more women's colleges and universities from around the world and promoted international partnerships.

Most U.S. higher education institutions celebrate International Education Week (IEW) annually. This joint initiative of the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Education aims to "promote programs that prepare Americans for a global environment and attract future leaders from abroad to study, learn, and exchange experiences" (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). In order to continue global engagement and create global learning opportunities for students, the staff of the Global Education Office (a unit within the Center for Women's Intercultural Leadership) at Saint Mary's College created virtual GIDs in the fall of 2020 when they were organizing extra-curricular events to celebrate the annual IEW. Originally held once every two months, the GIDs among women's college and university students sought to promote mutual understanding and expand international partnerships.

The initial GID organizers approached the international education offices of partner institutions and invited their students to participate in the Zoom event. The faculty (or staff) coordinator of each participating institution selected a student leader. Leaders from all the participating institutions met online in advance and created GID topics for each event. The leaders were also responsible for facilitating small group discussions during the GIDs. Each institution recruited five to ten students for each event. Due to time differences, scheduling options that would be suitable for all participants were limited. A 2-hour session on Saturday

was selected as the best choice. All participants were required to write a reflection paper after the event and then share their paper with the other participants and faculty and staff coordinators.

Discussion topics included “The Impact of COVID on Students and Societies,” “Social Media Usage During the Pandemic,” “Holidays, Hobbies, and Happiness,” “Changes of Gender Roles in Our Societies,” “Dating Culture and Marriage Traditions,” “The Pros and Cons of Tourism,” “Environmentalism in Our Countries,” “The Significance of the Existence of Women’s Colleges,” “The Importance of Women in Leadership Roles,” “Career Preparation and Development,” and “Women’s Leadership,” among others. These topics reflect the social concerns of women’s college and university students. The GIDs offered opportunities for students to connect with global peers and explore diverse cultures.

Saint Mary’s College initiated the GIDs and hosted the first four events, starting in October 2020. More than 500 students from 14 institutions across 10 countries participated in the series of GID events. The subsequent GID events were hosted by other participating institutions, including Ochanomizu University in Japan, Brescia University College in Canada, Jissen Women’s University in Japan, Ewha Womans University in South Korea, and Collegio Nuovo in Italy. This practice of sharing the leadership responsibilities for organizing the GID events has become emblematic of the spirit of the event itself.

Other participating institutions include the Royal University for Women (Bahrain), China Women’s University, Shandong Women’s University (China), Lady Shri Ram College for Women (India), Universidad Femenina del Sagrado Corazón (Peru), St. Catherine University (United States), Wesleyan College (United States), and Vietnam Women’s Academy. While the students conducted group discussions, the faculty and staff coordinators also used the opportunity to exchange ideas for international partnerships and collaborations.

GIDs in Japan

In the following sections, we will describe how the GIDs were conducted at two women’s universities in Japan: Ochanomizu University and Jissen Women’s University. In both cases, participation began with an invitation from Dr. Alice Yang, who was using the network she and other educators had developed through the NAFSA Women’s College & University IIG. Though preparation for the GIDs differed at these two Japanese universities, the basic pattern was the same: recruit students, prepare for the GID event, and participate in the event. Details are now provided about the role of the GIDs in campus communities from the perspective of the authors involved in the events.

GID at Ochanomizu University

The Center for International Education at Ochanomizu University received an online exchange proposal from Saint Mary's College, a partner institution. We decided to connect online with other women's colleges in Asia to exchange views on the restricted lives of students during the pandemic.

Online classes were not well received by Japanese students at first. Further, recruiting students was extremely challenging because the GID discussion forum used English. We approached students who had been involved in the Center for International Education before COVID-19, and there seemed to be some interest among these students. At first, a group of volunteers met online about six times before the GID to practice self-introductions, presentations, and discussions in English. Although participation was limited to Japanese students, it was very effective. Students explained that it was not easy to speak with friends in English in their daily lives but that this type of opportunity made it easier for them to improve their English outside of the typical classroom environment.

The scheduled time of the GID seemed to be problematic at first. Due to the time differences between countries, students in Japan participated in the event from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. Though this seemed inconvenient at first, it proved to be beneficial: Students found it easier to participate because the GID was at a time when they did not have part-time jobs or other commitments.

The GID not only provided an opportunity for students to learn but also served to expand the network among faculty members. Ochanomizu University has strong relationships with women's colleges and universities around the world. When this university hosted the fourth GID, staff approached the Collegio Nuovo institution, with which it has a study-abroad exchange agreement, to encourage participation. We also invited Universidad Femenina del Sagrado Corazón, Peru (UNIFÉ), the only women's university in Latin America. This ensured that discussions were held in a more diverse environment with participants from various continents. Feedback from students in areas where the pandemic not only made it difficult to travel but also to secure learning opportunities reminded us of the importance of the GIDs.

GID at Jissen Women's University

At Jissen Women's University, participation in a GID event began, as mentioned, with an invitation from Dr. Yang at Saint Mary's College. Having canceled all of our study-abroad programs due to the pandemic, we gladly accepted this invitation and began contacting students who might be interested. Like Ochanomizu University, we first contacted students who had previously been involved in activities related to intercultural events at the university. After gathering a group of students, we began to prepare for the GID event.

For these GID practice sessions, students who had expressed interest in joining the next GID met with a faculty member at a scheduled time to prepare for the event by using the theme and discussion questions provided in advance by the host institution. These sessions were straightforward and basic. As students had not yet experienced a GID event, there was no experience to draw on.

As time progressed, however, students, faculty, and staff members involved in the GID events amassed experience. We continued to recruit students to participate in these events. Thus, there were students with different levels of experience working together. Students who had participated in previous events would describe their experiences to new members and offer suggestions and advice on how to make the most of the opportunity to participate in a GID.

As the GID events continued, our practice sessions became more structured, and we developed a routine. The students would check their understanding of the questions provided by the host institution. They would then have some timed practice sessions, which would (following the GID format) conclude with a summary given by a designated discussion leader. After each session, there was some form of feedback, which might include observations and suggestions from the faculty member or a self-assessment. These practice sessions seemed effective in helping students prepare to join an upcoming GID event. They also seemed to address a specific need at Jissen: an opportunity for students to develop more advanced English discussion skills. Thus, the sessions were dubbed “advanced discussion groups” (ADGs), and this group met regularly, even in the absence of a scheduled GID event.

For these ADGs, the GID became the framework, and participation in a GID event was the eventual goal. Because this newly formed group was not tied to a single GID event on a specific date, it attracted more students, including those interested in developing their English discussion skills, participating in intercultural events, and exploring a range of thought-provoking topics with their fellow Jissen students. Students who were curious about the GIDs but not ready to commit were welcome to join the sessions. This allowed them to learn about the GIDs from students who had previously participated and to work on developing their English conversation skills with a small group dedicated to this purpose.

Considering GID as a Course

The authors from both Ochanomizu and Jissen, having been invited to join early GID events, considered creating a credit-bearing course around participation in the GID process. These courses, it was thought, could include practice sessions as well as planning meetings and GID events. For several reasons, this proved infeasible.

For Ochanomizu, though offering academic credit for participating in a GID event was

considered, in the end, it was not possible to offer enough hours to do so. However, the GID was viewed as a place to practice discussions in English and prepare for online classes with overseas universities. The GID enabled the discussion of issues that were common to students from women's colleges around the world, regardless of the students' nationalities and religions. Many of the students who participated in the GIDs subsequently participated in online COIL classes with foreign universities and received academic credits for their work.

Jissen also considered creating a course around the GID. It was thought that enough course material could be created to meet the requirements of a credit-bearing course. However, because the GID was a regular event, it was important that new students could join at any time, and, more importantly, students needed to be able to participate in multiple events during their time at the university. Having a semester-long course would limit entry to new students, and it would preclude students who had already taken the course from continuing to participate.

However, in the case of both universities, GIDs became a significant opportunity for students seeking intercultural experiences.

Hosting a GID Event

Hosting GID events has been a cooperative effort. Participating institutions have taken turns hosting events, with experienced hosts sharing suggestions and offering help to first-time hosts as needed.

To create a successful GID event, the host institution has a variety of responsibilities. GID events follow a basic structure that can be divided into three main components: before, during, and after the GID. Responsibilities in these categories include managing communication with participants; managing Zoom rooms; and creating a final report, which includes a reflection paper from each participating student. Hosting an event is typically a collaborative effort that includes students, staff, and/or faculty members.

Though procedures have changed over time, a typical model for hosting a GID has emerged. Before the GID event, the host institution creates the theme and discussion questions for the upcoming GID event and then shares these with participants. The host institution manages communication with all participants, emailing important information about the upcoming GID event. This information includes the time of the event, an agenda for the event, instructions for participants based on their roles (e.g., group leaders, student participants, and faculty or staff members), and a link for the Zoom call.

During the event, the host institution has many responsibilities, including delivering the opening remarks, introducing the participating institutions, describing the theme and questions, and explaining the agenda for the event. During these opening remarks, members of the host

institution put students into Zoom breakout rooms. To make this process smoother, the host team will have prepared a roster of breakout rooms in advance. These rosters are designed so that each discussion group has participants from as many different countries as possible.

After the preliminary components of the GID event, students enter their Zoom breakout rooms to begin their discussion of the day's thematic questions. This group discussion is the heart of any GID event. It is here that students will use English (not the first language of most participants) to explore the topic, learn about other cultures, and express their views.

When the small-group discussions are complete, students have time to prepare their summaries, which typically take the form of a simple PowerPoint or Google Slides presentation. After this, all participants return to the main Zoom room, where a representative from each of the breakout sessions presents the summary of what the group discussed. This is followed by some observations from the faculty and staff members. Finally, after a few concluding comments, the host institution closes the Zoom meeting for all participants.

Discussion

In *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times* (2009), Trilling and Fadel describe what they view as skills that are essential for success and fulfillment in the modern world. We find the framework of 21st-century skills to be useful in consolidating the benefits of participation in GID events. In particular, the GID highlights the need for and, based on students' survey responses, seems to support the development of several 21st-century skills identified by Trilling and Fadel, including intercultural communication, collaboration, leadership, and digital literacy (p. xxvi). These elements are built into the design of the GID. Here are some excerpts of student feedback that illustrate their implementation or observation of these skills.

Intercultural communication

- I could actively participate in discussions with people from other countries and express opinions without fear.
- The environment was more respectful of each other's opinions than I had expected. The atmosphere was more relaxed than I had imagined.

Collaboration

- It was possible to share concerns and difficulties that only female students can understand. Also, it was easy to have a conversation without hesitation even when meeting for the first time.
- Do not try to do it alone; do not hesitate to trust the abilities of your colleagues and share

the work [of hosting a GID].

Leadership

- The moderator of the event also needs to think about how to make the event more enjoyable for the participants rather than just facilitating it.
- I found that the discussion leaders gave each person a chance to speak, and the environment was more respectful of each other's opinions than I had expected.

Digital literacy

- It was good to keep in touch (mainly by email) with people from overseas.
- If telecommuting becomes mainstream, online communication will be required. I thought that online job hunting could become more common in Japan.

There have been other benefits from the implementation of the GID at our universities. First, students who could not meet at the university during the pandemic were able to come together online, collaborate, and strengthen relationships. As mentioned previously, universities were closed during the pandemic, and events for first-year students, including entrance ceremonies and orientations, were canceled or held online. However, these online events were limited to one-way information and did not allow much interaction among students. There were some online social events within departments, but there was not much interaction across departments or grades.

When recruiting students for GID events, some senior members worked to invite and encourage junior members to participate. In addition, some highly motivated first-year students applied and participated on their own. Students from different grades and departments came together to have discussions in English and to prepare for the GID and other opportunities for international exchange. It became clear that these highly motivated students were willing to speak English with each other. They began to support one another in a variety of ways, including highlighting minor grammatical or pronunciation errors to each other, showing that they were working collaboratively. We also noticed that students who had experience participating in GID events offered encouragement and advice to students preparing for their first event. Eventually, we created opportunities for this kind of interaction by pairing experienced students with inexperienced students in the preparation sessions.

We also observed the positive changes associated with the transition from studying English to using English as a communication tool. Students came to the GID with a variety of backgrounds. Some students had studied abroad or attended international schools, and some

students had relatively high English exam scores and above-average grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Other students were looking for opportunities to develop their English proficiency or were hoping to participate in an international event at a time when conventional study abroad was not possible. Common to all students, however, was the fact that they had little opportunity to communicate in English. Thus, they often found it challenging to find the correct words in fast-moving conversations and could not immediately understand the meaning when spoken to in natural English. Although specific speaking and listening assessments were not conducted, it was clear that students' fluency in English had improved on the day of the GID, and this continued in subsequent classes and practice sessions.

The required reflection paper after the event offered insight into the students' experiences of the GID events. Many students shared that they had gained a great deal through these intercultural events. They appreciated the long-lasting intercultural friendships they made during the GIDs and believed that the mutual learning had led to more compassion and understanding for those from different cultural backgrounds. In short, the event developed the students' global intercultural competence, which has been broadly defined as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations" (Deardorff, 2006). The students' interest in exploring other cultures also increased significantly. Some expressed that they are even more eager to study abroad or visit other countries after participating in the GIDs.

Furthermore, survey results from students themselves suggests that they became more confident in their conversational skills. The GID provides an opportunity for students to improve a variety of English skills, such as listening comprehension and pronunciation of vocabulary used in current topics and everyday conversation. Recent studies have shown that Japanese students do not ask questions in class and are reluctant to speak in front of others in large classrooms (Shimizu, 2006). However, according to feedback from students, the GID style of discussion made it easier for them to express their opinions confidently to a small group of people. We close this section with two excerpts from students on the topic of confidence:

- By communicating your thoughts in English, you gain confidence.
- By actually using my English skills, I have gained confidence and am encouraged to study English in the future.

Conclusion

The GID was created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as an alternative to conventional study abroad. A supportive community of students, faculty, and staff at women's universities around the world has developed around this effort. Based on response from this community, we believe the GID will continue regardless of global health concerns. Further, we believe that the GID events have drawn on and strengthened some important skills among participating students. Some of these include intercultural communication, collaboration, leadership, and digital literacy. We hope our students will confidently apply these skills and continue to help one another understand and appreciate cultural commonalities and differences in future GID events, their careers, and communities.

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Appendix 1

Survey (English translation of survey given to students in Japanese)

For all students who participated in one or more GID events

1. What do you think are the benefits of participating in the GID?
2. How do you want to apply your experience at GID in the future?
3. What do you think are the advantages of limiting GID to female students?
4. What did you learn about other cultures?
5. What did you notice about your own culture?
6. How well and in what ways did the GID meet your pre-participation expectations?

For students with GID hosting experience

1. Tell us about what you have learned from event planning and management.
2. What were some of the difficulties in organizing the event?