Study-abroad in a small-scale Japanese setting: Options for understanding

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International students provide an essential contribution to any university campus. When the scale of a university is small (2,000-3,000 students) and the number of international students is also small, pressures on resources may make it difficult to gather information about the benefits provided by international students. This paper suggests three complementary approaches to understanding more about the experiences that international students have at a campus with low numbers of international students and the contributions that they make. These research approaches may afford a high standard of evidence for decision-making and allocating appropriate resources, as well as realising the potential for domestic students and their educational experience.

This research note was prompted by the author's experience in joining Osaka Otani University as a new member of the community. As a non-Japanese citizen, the author has been involved in the international programs and language programs on campus for the first time. The number of international students on campus currently numbers less than 10, which might be considered a small number for most research purposes. However, there is much that might be explored in order to create further value for all involved, or more clearly identify where value is already being added to the community. The approaches proposed here build on the author's experiences in the field of language assessment, and are presented tentatively as possible ways to understand the campus environment before implementing any actions for change. It is intended to be exploratory, and may address processes that are already in progress unknown to the author.

The banner headlines for international programs are certainly appealing. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website stresses the importance of international students studying in Japan by saying that exchange programs "have the potential to further international friendship and mutual understandings, internationalise Japanese higher education institutions, revitalize industries and regions, and provide education for younger people of developing countries of the world" (MOFA, n.d.). Certainly, Japan is facing some long-term problems that such friendships could help with. Recently, newspapers report forecasts of a 6,000,000 shortfall in workers for 2030 (e.g. Kamei, 2018), and a body of people who have an understanding of Japanese language and culture would be an asset. Furthermore, even for Japanese people who never travel overseas, many (perhaps most) businesses have an international element in their supply chain. Finally, with the growing population of the planet, issues such as COVID and climate change necessitate an understanding of the world at large from multiple perspectives. In general terms, having international students on a campus helps to work towards understanding of such issues, and helps to create a brighter picture of the future.

Even though study abroad experience is often presented as "transformative", the benefits are often framed as "generic" (Nerlich, 2021, p.168). The desired benefits described above are mid- to long-term. In the short-term, there are costs as well as benefits. To create a positive experience, issues such as student visa requirements or the need to support students with the daily process of adjustment require both experienced staff and a concomitant financial commitment for a university. Experience with higher levels of immigration in other areas, such as the UK (McGhee, 2006), suggests that there may also be adjustment issues with domestic students, who potentially could experience the presence of international students as something new and unwelcome, particularly if they have to change their behaviour to accommodate international students.

Dealing with such issues requires several kinds of resources and information. Recent management processes often rely on some kind of action cycle, such as the "Plan, Do, Check, Act/Adjust" cycle. While such tools may be useful for addressing some issues, supporting international students may require a system capable of creating a broader understanding of circumstances, rather than addressing specific problems. After outlining some of the issues specific for gathering information, this paper discusses grounded theory and participatory research as context-specific approaches to gathering information and forming an understanding. It then introduces personal construct theory as a possible paradigm that may be particularly relevant to creating an understanding where international student numbers are low and large-scale resources are limited.

The challenge

A body of lore and practice has built up around international travel, and the problems that particular types of traveller (such as students) are likely to face. This lore has built up from a variety of different travel purposes, such as business or study, and has come from a variety of different countries and context, such as Europe, Asia, Australasia or

North America. The result is a kind of salad of ideas that may make finding relevant research necessary for a specific setting like a small-scale program in a Japanese university particularly challenging. This section presents two well-known tenets of travel to illustrate how general knowledge in the field may fail in a specific setting.

One of the earliest specific treatises on culture shock is Lysgaand's study of Norwegian students visiting the US (1955). In addition to work from Oberg (1960)—a work that chiefly mentions missionaries—there developed a four stage model of culture shock. This model is often repeated and re-interpreted on websites aimed at supporting travellers even today, and a search online reveals several websites with the intention of training teachers of Japanese as a Foreign Language using this model. The four phases of cultural adjustment given are: a honeymoon phase; a rejection or hostility phase; a re-appraisal or adjustment phase; a stabilisation phase. By itself, this adjustment model is called a "u-curve model," though it is often paired with a similar process for re-entry to the traveller's original community, where it is known as a "w-curve model". It tells people to expect some discomfort and, importantly, tells them that it is a temporary thing that the traveller can overcome. However, recent reviews of the literature on culture shock suggest that it was found to have little empirical backing as far back as the 1980s (Furnham, 2019). Some sojourners may never experience a strong rejection phase, while others may have strong physical reactions in a matter of days, moving straight to the rejection phase. More recent approaches to culture shock tend to be "based on the affective, behavioural and cognitive (ABC) aspects of shock and adaptation" (Zhou et al., 2008, p.63). Even these approaches would need to be calibrated to suit the needs of specific students, however.

Another key element of adjusting to a new environment is managing expectations. Hofstede (2003), a European researcher with a largely European team, produced four scales through which to compare national cultures. These scales allow travellers to predict what areas might require extra effort to adjust to. Much of the research was presented in the 1980s, and it has contributed to a large industry used by companies moving staff into different national markets (Piller, 2017). Based on the relative position of each country on the scales, travellers may begin to model their expectations in comparison to that of a country they will visit. Accordingly, an American traveller may perceive Japan as quite hierarchical, whereas a Chinese visitor may perceive it as more open and free ('Compare countries', n.d.). Because the scale had been created by Europeans, however, some perspectives were missing. Further investigation by Asian researchers allowed for the development of two further scales, making the system more robust (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). The origin of the research and researchers limited the applicability of the original scales.

As illustrated here, some research may lack robust empirical backing, even though it is often used, while other research developed in one context may need adapting to be relevant in another. When dealing with a small setting, research needs to be evaluated for relevance to the setting. For example, when trying to explicitly teach about intercultural competence on campus, many models are available (see Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, for an overview). Many general assessment tools, such as the Intercultural Development Inventory or measurements of Cultural Intelligence Quotients require some form of payment. The extent to which they may be relevant to those studying in Japan or the more general domestic student population of a university needs careful consideration. Money spent on such tools may mean less money elsewhere, though it may also represent an investment in the quality of education.

Large-scale instruments may be useful for funding applications and for getting research published, but are generally impractical in small-scale settings. Indeed, small-scale settings are less likely to produce a statistically normal population, making each year particularly unique in terms of a student body. While this may be considered a disadvantage in some respects, recent literature suggests that heterogeneity, either in terms of moderating variables or in terms of treatment, is becoming increasingly important in research (Netz, 2021).

From this perspective, getting to know a small population in-depth may well yield benefit to the academic community in addition to any advantage that knowing a home population may bring managerially. While some research paradigms treat people as similar, other traditions treat people as essentially different. The challenge remains in finding paradigms and approaches that allows useful research and information gathering to understand small communities at any given research site.

Using grounded theory

Given the heterogenous nature of a small population, rather than starting from pre-conceived formal knowledge from literature, a more observation-based “blank-slate” approach may offer some benefits. Grounded theory aims to do just that. Developed in the field of health by Glaser and Strauss (1967), it offers a series of processes to form “theories” about a particular phenomenon or issue that are “grounded” in data from the setting. It is based on becoming familiar with an environment and the actors in it while reserving judgement on the received wisdom until data shows such wisdom to be relevant. The processes used have been developed and adapted over the years that followed, particularly by the "second generation" of researchers—the students of Glaser and Strauss (Morse et al., 2016)—who went on to apply the methodology in different fields and different kinds of setting.

An elegantly simple example of grounded theory is provided by Mellon (1986), a teacher in a university who discovered through her writing program that students' response to the library was largely one of fear. Her investigations, performed through a series of writing exercises, found that students felt their library skills were inadequate (particularly when compared to others), and this was something shameful that needed to be hidden. Based on these findings, Mellon developed a theory of "library anxiety" (p.160). The researcher was able to discuss the problems with the library staff, who incorporated findings in presentations and personal interactions with students. It also allowed librarians to include this information when evaluating their own practices and informing management processes.

It is to be hoped that such a research process could be used to address issues that concern international students. The process for grounded theory is outlined below in its simplest form, based on the work of Bryant (2017), Bryant and Charmaz (2007), and Charmaz (2014), as well as on the experience of the researcher (Grogan, 2021). However, it bears remembering that the process described is an "edited highlights" version of the research process. Undertaking such research is time-consuming and demanding.

The first stage of grounded theory is to gather rich data. This means observing the setting with an open mind to locate questions and phenomena based in the context. Data can be obtained through observation or interview, as well as in writing exercises or diaries. Other information from the context may also be relevant, such as webpages, reports, or other documents. While grounded theory is generally regarded as a qualitative approach, the interpretation of quantitative data, particularly by participants, may also be relevant. Doing grounded theory involves trying to understand participants' world view without the researcher trying to impose their own, a task that may be particularly challenging when working in an intercultural environment. Initial data collection involves attending to views and actions from participants, and making notes accordingly, while looking for areas of broader theoretical or practical interest.

After each data collection session, researchers typically write memos about what they have observed, as well as recording their reactions to these data. They get to know the data in great detail by transcribing interviews and attending to texts line-by-line or word-by-word. Following this, the data are reviewed and labels are given to anything of interest.

This process is known as coding, and is generally done atheoretically at first. It is an iterative process, performed after every data collection session, and can be quite time-consuming.

After several sessions, patterns begin to appear in the memos and the codes. This allows the coding process to become more focused, as patterns and categories begin to form. The iterative memo-writing may help to define phenomena which have been vague up to this point. The data can then be reviewed to see if similar instances occur, helping to understand not just the phenomenon itself, but also some of its consequences or implications (Charmaz, 2014). Subsequent interviews may then begin to home in on this and related phenomenon in order to explore it, with the aim of developing a direction for further inquiry.

Up to this point, most interviews and data collection will have placed primacy on the perspective of the participant. Once a theoretical direction is established, the interviewer may take a more prominent role in directing the interview towards the subject of the tentative theory. In particular, the researcher begins "theoretical sampling." This means sampling people, texts, or episodes with the aim of "developing categories or theory, not to sample . . . randomly selected populations or to sample representative distributions of a particular population" (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p.611). Put simply, the researcher seeks out samples that will help to develop the theory further, perhaps by providing examples or counter-examples of the phenomenon, allowing the assessment of the theoretical adequacy. This will continue until "very little new information or additional properties are forthcoming" (Hadley, 2017, p.36). This is known as reaching saturation.

Once the phenomenon has been described in formal or adequate terms, it is useful to discuss the findings with the community of participants who helped to create it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.314; Seale, 1999). A member check not only gives an extra level of credibility, but also keeps the participants who have contributed to the research involved in the research process. The result may then be presented in an appropriate forum to inform practice and further academic understanding.

The use of grounded theory is prevalent in health, and has been used for furthering intercultural communication in that field. Rothlind et al. (2018) examined health care consultations in Sweden with 15 resident staff and 30 Arabic- or Somali-speaking patients. A specific goal of the health service is "patient-centeredness" (p.2). The research was able to create a theory relating to how the doctor-patient interview was shaped by unspoken ideals of health and care. While intra-cultural encounters could rely on a shared understanding of consultation processes and norms, intercultural encounters could result in dissatisfaction for both parties as norms were breached but not directly addressed. The research highlighted the need for interventions for both parties in the short term, with the aim of improving long-term satisfaction. While this example is taken from the field of medicine, it demonstrates how effective intercultural research can be done using grounded theory, with a small number of participants that is only slightly larger than the number of international students on campus.

Grounded theory is effective, but time consuming to conduct. The number of authors is often limited, and sharing data can be problematic. This can be overcome through shared coding and replication, similar to a content analysis process (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2016), but this requires extensive planning. One method of overcoming this potential limitation is to recruit the participants in their own research, an idea that is explored in the section that follows.

Using participatory approaches

One of the strengths of grounded theory is that it attempts to incorporate the perspective of the community served by the research. It is grounded in the experience of that community. However, the filter of the researcher's community membership still exists. For example, a linguist researching language classroom teachers' practices may not be a language teacher themselves, and may therefore fail to notice something, particularly if the participant is unable to articulate it clearly or feels they have a limited stake in the research.

Within the teaching world, there has been a move towards various forms of research done by the practitioner (the teacher) rather than an academic researcher from outside of the setting. These approaches include action research and exploratory practice (Mann & Walsh, 2017). Such efforts have also involved students as members of the research community, rather than simply being participants (Hanks, 2017). For the context of the international or domestic student, this approach offers value inasmuch as however hard a faculty or staff member tries, they will never have the primacy of experience of being a non-Japanese student in their own setting. It therefore makes sense to include international students in gathering data and identifying issues as partners in research or evaluation processes.

From an ethical viewpoint, while community members often participate in research, their contribution may be attributed to a pseudonym, depriving them of recognition, or it may go unattributed as researchers claim ownership as collectors of the data (Hanks, 2017). Including international students as potential named collaborators (while also allowing them to decline being named) helps to address this issue in a potentially more equitable manner. In addition, providing a chance to reflect on and report their experiences provides opportunities to participate in academic conferences or other events, as well as to publish their findings formally (in a journal) or informally (through a blog or through social media). Such affordances may help to raise the profile not just of the participating student but also the university itself.

While formal research may tend to favour hypothesis testing or answering formally stated questions, participatory approaches tend to be more reflexive. Rather than aiming to solve particular problems, the priority may be understanding a situation and creating a sense of agency: “EP downplays the goal of explicitly working for (social, political, classroom) change, arguing that attempting change without understanding is a lost cause” (Hanks, 2017, pp.4-5). This sense of agency may be transformative, as it returns a locus of control to the students, perhaps helping to meliorate some of the stressors in new environment, as well as raising awareness of both cognitive and meta-cognitive processes involved in fitting in with their environment (Borg, 2015; Zhou et al., 2008).

Beyond supporting students through culture shock, international students may also experience difficulties in daily life. Besides any academic achievement, an active approach to research of their own surroundings enables students to solve their own problems. Some of the understanding obtained may result in a shift in awareness or attitude that makes life easier for them, such as identifying differences in communicative styles or underlying differences in manners or customs. Others issues may have a darker side, such as issues of discrimination. Such issues may be reported online (‘Housing Discrimination Against Foreigners in Japan’, 2017; Wallin, 2017), although the most recent research from the Japanese Ministry of Justice seems to be from 2017 (MoJ, 2017). However, a localized understanding of students’ experience of such issues may be beneficial.

Using personal construct theory

As is suggested by the name, Personal Construct Theory treats every person as unique. It is built on the “fundamental postulate” that “a person’s processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events” (Kelly, 1992, p.32). More simply put, although the world is “real,” we all create a model of the world in our heads, and use this model to navigate the real world. This modelling process is based on our personal experience, and as a result, each person’s model is unique. For our purposes, however, an international students (and those interacting with them) may find that the models they have built are based on experiences that do not apply to the current setting. The difficulties that may result from this are more commonly known as “culture shock.”

Kelly’s idea of “constructs” differs from that of a “concept,” in that it is bi-polar. This means that each person in a particular time or place is using a construct with a particular opposite. Whereas a concept like “sweet” could just mean something close to a dictionary definition, and may simply range from “not sweet” to “extremely sweet,” a person’s construct of “sweet” is defined by an opposite such as “salty,” “savoury,” or “sour.” The same individual may use different opposites depending on the context (drinks or food), and opposites may change over time.

A reseacher can elicit these constructs with a tool called the repertory grid. In this technique, a participant can compare a small sample (e.g. “friends” or “food”), and come up with ways they are all alike or different. For example, members of a friendship group might be categorized by a participant as “people who like big groups” or “people who prefer being alone or with a single person.” Participant can sort the list of “friends” using a simple yes or no, or a Likert scale. The sample can be compared with reference to a central theme (such as asking about ways a “friend” helps participants cope with life in Japan).

The utility of the repertory grid lies in comparing grids either over time or between participants. For example, the grid technique is often used over time with trainee teachers. Participants may be asked to compare themselves with teachers they admire, teachers they did not like from their past, and the teacher that they would like to become in the future (Sendan & Roberts, 1998). It has been used to identify and measure different types of learner engagement in young learners (Boye et al., 2021), showing a strong overlap between affect, behaviour, and cognitive elements of engagement. A modified form has been used by Kramsch (1983) to create a classroom project interpreting how different roles (film star, police officer) are interpreted by students from different language backgrounds in an effort to deepen understanding of cultural differences. Although it is usually delivered through a researcher, modified forms have been used in group activities in teacher training, with pairs of participants recording grids for each other and using a guided interpretation as a group activity.

Before mentioning other types of possible research, it should be noted that personal construct theory is powerful. Following up on some of the constructs, particularly on opposites that may be considered negative can result in strong feelings surfacing. Once these feelings arise, they cannot simply be ignored (Walker & Crittenden, 2011, p.80). For that reason, experience with guiding interviews in qualitative research or other professional capacities is preferred when conducting these activities.

Pope and Denicolo (1993) suggest a range of alternative activities that can be used from a personal construct theory perspective, such as biographies, stimulated recalls, and self narrative autoethnography. While these are aimed at developing teachers, they should be transferrable to some kind of research with regard to the international or domestic student experience with regard to intercultural experience. Of particular note is a comment that the “techniques may be used singly but are particularly valuable when used in combination to produce a range of perspectives on a problem space” (p.540). The use of differing techniques for the same topic or issue then creates a kind of triangulation, allowing differing perspectives. This is more likely to reveal pertinent perspectives and forms of evidence for research of decision-making.

While techniques often use interviews, illustrative techniques may also work. Diagrams and pictures form a part of some of the techniques used by Pope and Denicolo (2016). Within second language research, several researchers have made use of illustration, particularly with younger learners. Xiao and Carless (2013) asked high school students to illustrate their reaction to assessment and followed up with interviews. Such an approach also offers potential when exploring areas that may be powerful yet difficult to verbalize.

This introduction to personal construct theory is necessarily short. A practical introduction to the repertory grid technique can be found in Jankowicz (2004), while a broader introduction to personal construct psychology in education can be found in Denicolo, Long, and Bradley-Cole (2016).

Discussion and concluding remarks

Recent years have seen many challenges to the presence of international students on smaller-scale campuses. JASSO (2021) reported a drop of almost 10% in international undergraduate numbers throughout universities in Japan for the year 2021. The number of Japanese students going overseas also continues to drop. While COVID restrictions are reduced, they are still present in many places. At the time of writing (Fall, 2022), students are experiencing inflation and the effect of a weak yen. Although overseas travel restrictions have recently been eased, sustained consideration is needed to raise numbers of overseas students on campus. This remains an important source of direct exposure to international experience. Indeed, while large cities in Japan may be cosmopolitan, for some students, this may be their only possible source of interaction with non-Japanese people.

Most university departments, including some at Osaka Otani University, make reference to some form of international or cultural learning in their diploma policy. The contributions that can be made by overseas students are substantial, but may be difficult to enumerate in the short term. A sustained series of activities using grounded theory, participatory approaches, and personal construct theory, as well as additional approaches that recognise the heterogeneity of the setting, may help to identify the contributions of international students, as well as the specific benefits that they themselves may accrue from study at a smaller scale university. Such findings may ultimately help to create a broader understanding of the international community in Japan. The methods discussed here are merely a tentative proposal, but also a statement of intent to create the best situation possible for all involved.

In addition to academic understanding, practical benefits and a body of understanding can be gleaned from these research activities, informing appropriate allocation of resources like money, time, space, and staff. Such information will be more open, as more people are involved in its transparent collection. Be it the creation of new activities or support systems, or even the decision to cut back on some activities, the decisions will be evidence-led. Good quality evidence will also assist with general recruitment, as the clearer short-term understandings are used to build the longer-term goals aspired to by MOFA such as long-term friendships and an international outlook materialise on campus.

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