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SDGs: Community Learning in Okayama and the Setouchi Region

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on a course called ‘Community learning in Okayama and the Setouchi region’ that took place from April to July in 2023 at Okayama University with students from Laos, Taiwan and Thailand. In the first half of the course, weekly teacher- and student-chosen readings about SDGs were discussed online in English. In the second half, the class visited three organizations in the Okayama area that foreground the promotion of SDG related activities in their business models: a garbage recycling company, a fur and leather company, and a bamboo furniture company. After each discussion lesson and each site visit students submitted a one-page reflection on what they had learned and submitted a 1,000-word report describing a problem connected to their home countries. This paper will briefly describe the course, discuss its successes and challenges, and make suggestions for the future, including ones made by participants at LD30.

Keywords: SDGs, community learning, authentic learning

I work at Okayama University in the western half of Japan. It’s a large national university with 12 faculties and several different centres. I belong to one of these centres called the Institute for Promotion of Education and Campus Life. The University has always attracted international students, especially to the agriculture and science faculties, and in recent years has really tried to focus on linking courses with the UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One example of this is an annual publication of all teacher and student projects that attempt to address one or more of the SDGs. In 2023 there were over 200 projects uploaded to the [university website](#).

During COVID-19 I was involved in the creation of a new SDGs master’s course which aimed to attract international students, particularly from emerging countries in Southeast Asia. The language of the course was English to decrease the barrier of students having to learn Japanese. The course I was to jointly teach with my colleague, Professor Miyuki Yoshikawa, was aimed at introducing students to organizations in the Okayama area that were particularly focused in their business models on achieving SDGs.

Professor Yoshikawa has a wide network of contacts in the Okayama area, and she worked extremely hard to encourage these businesses to allow us to visit them. In 2021, despite the influence of COVID-19, she continued to have face-to-face meetings with prospective partners. When she met up with various organizations, she would open up Zoom on her phone which allowed me to join in the conversations. These organizations included all kinds of businesses such as organic farmers and cafes that employed people with learning difficulties. It was a pleasure to

be able to interact with such good natured and open-hearted people who were just the kind of people you would like international students to meet.

However, when the program started in April 2022 no students signed up, probably because of the restrictions on travel and study that were caused by COVID-19. As a result, we had to delay the project for a year and Professor Yoshikawa had to apologize to the organizations that had agreed to collaborate with us. Luckily, in April 2023, three students from Taiwan, Thailand and Laos were able to join us and we could start the course. The rest of this paper will describe this example of authentic situated learning and discuss its successes and challenges, including reflections made possible by participating in LD30.

THE COURSE

READING AND DISCUSSION

Okayama University's academic year is divided into four terms of eight weeks each. In the first lesson of the first term in April 2023, Professor Yoshikawa and I met the three students face to face. Som, Nid and Ruby were all women in their 20s who clearly had a passion for social justice and an acute awareness of inequality, and so I was confident that they would make it an extremely stimulating course. After the initial introductory lesson, we then met online once a week for the next seven weeks. At that time this was the most convenient way for us to meet. The aim of these lessons was to become familiar with the SDGs that were pertinent to the businesses that we would visit later in Term 2.

Each lesson had a similar pattern. I would choose some readings or videos connected to the SDG in focus and the students would share their own links to materials that they thought were relevant. We would then discuss these [different sources](#) together. As well as choosing materials and facilitating discussion, I also tried to draw attention to critical issues related to the SDGs. As it turned out I did not need to do that very much as the students were so independently minded and critically aware anyway. After the lessons the students wrote reflections on what they had learned, and I gave comments back. The comments were a combination of feedback on their writing (mechanics, style and so on) and comments on their ideas and content.

Here is an extract from Ruby's reflection after a lesson on poverty. This exemplifies the thoughtful insights and critical awareness that Ruby revealed throughout the course.

Not only children in the poorer countries but also children in the rich and developed countries, are still facing the situation of hunger and poverty. Though some people might question if we really can increase children's learning motivation by offering free school lunches. At least we can make children come to school and sit in the classroom, not just skip school and choose to go to work or do something else. People say that education is the way to help developing countries build a better future, and I agree with it. We should let children have a high-quality education and avoid hunger and malnutrition and have a chance to change their own country's future. I think it's one of the meanings of SDGs too, to make a better world for everyone.

SITE VISITS

In Term 2, we went on three visits to businesses that Professor Yoshikawa had arranged for us to meet. One challenge of this kind of community learning is that it is quite hard for students (and teachers) to opt out of their other lessons in order to make time for a day trip. As you might imagine the students had to write letters to other teachers asking for permission to miss a lesson or have an alternative exam. A second challenge is transport. The venues were a long way from the university with little direct public transport, so we needed to go by car. Fortunately, there is a system where teachers can borrow a university car which is what we did: two teachers and three students. It was a lot of fun!

The first visit was to the [Hirabayashi Kinzoku](#) recycling company. This is a large company that has branches all over Okayama. We went to three different types of recycling business: an electrical appliance recycling facility, a community waste facility, and a scrap metal yard. At each place company workers explained in great detail how their facility worked, what its contribution to SDGs was, and then gave us a guided tour. The students were eager to make notes and ask questions of the staff, with Professor Yoshikawa acting as translator if necessary.

In Japan most people are used to sorting their garbage into different types, but Hirabayashi Kinzoku took this principle to extraordinary levels by attempting to recycle up to 95% of the materials they received. The most impressive example of this was at the scrap metal yard where tiny pieces of metal fragments were collected and stored in huge sacks ready to be sent to a smelting factory.

Here is an extract from Nid's reflection after this visit.

The waste management laws and trash recycling are two of many things I like about Japan, together with the strong sense of social awareness. In Laos, due to the absence of a specific regulatory framework or explicitly defined responsibilities for waste management, much of this waste is improperly disposed of.. Although a lot of garbage cans are provided, many people tend to take them for granted. Especially after events like festivals, plenty of trash is littered on the ground. It can be said that, with the relative lack of public responsibility and the reckless consequences of current practice, Laos needs to put in more effort and raise public awareness about waste management to achieve environmental sustainability.

This quotation is one example of how students tried hard to connect what they had learned in Japan with their own country. In this instance Laos is compared unfavorably with Japan, but this was not always the case, as the students showed how Japan could also benefit from knowledge from their countries too.

The subsequent two visits took on a similar pattern of explanation, question and answer, and a tour. In contrast to the large recycling company, the [Talabo](#) leather goods company is a family-run home business utilizing skins from boars and deer. The skins are dried in the garden and then dyed and turned into various leather products. The increasing numbers of wild animals such as deer and boar that look for food in populated areas are becoming a problem in some parts of Japan, and part of that issue is to dispose responsibly of any carcasses that have been culled to limit numbers. In response, the Talabo company tries to turn waste leather into usable products and be part of a cycle of sustainability between humans and animals.

The final site visit was to the [Teori](#) furniture company in the Mabi area of Okayama. Teori's raw material is bamboo from local forests. Although bamboo can be a terrific resource as a construction material, it grows quickly and can soon take over hillsides and become unmanageable. Teori is trying to promote sustainable uses of bamboo so that it benefits the local area, rather than it being seen as a negative weed that has to be controlled or even eradicated. On our visit to Mabi, we toured three of the company's facilities: the factory where the bamboo is processed into a wood that can be used to make furniture; a second factory where the furniture is made; and finally, the showroom where there are gorgeous examples of the high-quality products that Teori produces. Here is an extract from Som's reflection after this visit which illustrates the advantage of embedding learning in the community.

This site visit was the first time for me to visit a factory. My major is linguistics, so I have never had the opportunity to visit a factory, and I thought that visiting a factory in Japan would be a rare occurrence. However, this class was not only a study of descriptive SDGs, but also a kind of practical training, where I could go to actual places and have

concrete experiences, not only from a textbook. Also, this field trip was a chance to see a business that was designed for the community, and I hope to put my professional knowledge to use in combination with it in the future.

The final part of the course was for the students to write a short academic report which aimed to link what they had learned so far about SDGs with issues in their home countries. They produced excellent work focusing on the impacts of an increase in consumption on economics and the environment; the #MeToo movement in Taiwan; and the importance of waste separation in Thailand. All were extremely well written with many thoughtful and practical ideas about how to increase ethical and sustainable practices.

REFLECTION ON THE COURSE

Having described the course content I would now like to reflect on three areas: positive aspects; challenges; and some further thoughts that participating in LD30 prompted.

POSITIVES

I have not had many opportunities within a university context to combine in-class learning with community visits; so, on a very personal level it was extremely motivating to be part of this new course. I could be a co-learner with the students which helped develop a closer relationship with them and also allowed me to find out many new things about the area I am working in. It also seemed motivating for the students who were enthusiastic in sharing their reflections and learning about SDGs and thoroughly involved in meeting the Okayama organizations. The organizations themselves expressed that being able to meet students from other countries was very stimulating and that they hoped to create more of these opportunities in the future, and that linking with a local university was a beneficial thing to do.

CHALLENGES

Creating a new course from scratch usually involves a lot of thought and research into materials and themes. This course however involved the additional challenge of finding community-based organizations to collaborate with. Even though Professor Yoshikawa has a great network of community links, it was not easy for her to set up mutually convenient times to meet. It took a lot of groundwork for her to arrange these visits. For other teachers thinking of doing this kind of course I would not underestimate how much effort and time this kind of networking takes. In addition, Professor Yoshikawa had the unenviable task of having to let companies know that our first iteration would have to be canceled. A second challenge, as mentioned above, is good access to transport. We were able to use a university car, but if the numbers of students had been higher this would not have been possible. There is a need in organizing this kind of course to be flexible in various ways such as teaching face to face and online and having different lesson times rather than adhering to just one mode.

LD30 REFLECTION

Taking part in the LD30 conference gave me several opportunities to reflect on the course and think about it in a different way. Firstly, presenting about the course was a chance to describe formally what happened and to think about what it meant. I think that normally I would have ended the course and not thought too much about it until the next time it came around. Similarly, writing this paper has allowed me to write in a different manner to a research article, and to highlight what the students and Okayama organizations did in terms of authentic situated learning.

At LD30 I had several conversations with other participants about the course, and one key idea formed from those. That is, I had not realized how important it is for teachers to help the students to stay in touch with the businesses that they had visited, and to follow up in the future as to whether the students have managed to include their learning in any actions. If this were done, it could truly make the project a collaborative and mutually beneficial one.

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