

Developing holistic international collaboration through a year-round Japan-Philippines educational partnership

Sato, Shinichi✉

Nihon Fukushi University, Japan (satoshin@n-fukushi.ac.jp)

Semillano, Christine Evan Joy Dosayla

Silay Institute, Philippines (christineevanjoy.semillano@silayinstitute.edu.ph)

Santillan, Nanette Laquiña

Silay Institute, Philippines (nanette.santillan@silayinstitute.edu.ph)

Kimizuka, Maro

Nihon Fukushi University Affiliated High School, Japan (maro-k@n-fukushi.ac.jp)



ISSN: 2243-7703

Online ISSN: 2243-7711

OPEN ACCESS

Received: 31 January 2026

Revised: 20 February 2026

Accepted: 5 March 2026

Available Online: 9 March 2026

DOI: 10.5861/ijrse.2026.26820

Abstract

This study investigates an ongoing year-round partnership between Silay Institute in the Philippines and Nihon Fukushi University in Japan, which integrates international collaboration into regular educational activities. Unlike conventional short-term exchange programs, this initiative is built on four components: (1) bidirectional face-to-face exchanges, in which students alternately serve as hosts and visitors; (2) online collaborative activities, including mutual language practice; (3) joint participation in campus events through online platforms; and (4) continuous peer communication via asynchronous and synchronous tools. The activities address multiple dimensions, including environmental action, peace education, cultural exchange, and community engagement. Analysis of student reflection reports and faculty observations suggests that sustained year-round engagement supports the development of all three types of Community of Inquiry presence (social, cognitive, and teaching) in ways that brief, conventional one-time exchange activities are less likely to enable. Students reported meaningful shifts in their understanding of cross-cultural communication and global issues. Early signs of learner autonomy were observed, most notably in the self-initiated support provided by Filipino university students during reciprocal visits from their Japanese counterparts. Faculty observations highlighted the importance of embedding international activities within regular school life as a factor in sustaining student motivation. In addition, they pinpointed practical challenges, such as the program's dependence on individual faculty initiatives, limited integration of activities into formal curriculum structures, and the difficulty of sustaining student-to-student communication between organized events. These issues are discussed as priorities for the next phase of program development and research.

Keywords: international partnership, community of inquiry, intercultural learning, blended exchange, year-round engagement

Developing holistic international collaboration through a year-round Japan-Philippines educational partnership

1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world facing complex challenges, higher education institutions must prepare students to become global citizens capable of collaborative problem-solving across cultural boundaries. Traditional short-term exchange programs often fail to create the sustained engagement necessary for deep intercultural competence and meaningful contributions to global sustainability goals (Deardorff, 2006; Jackson, 2018). This study analyzes a year-round integrated partnership between the Silay Institute (SI) in the Philippines and Nihon Fukushi University (NFU) in Japan, which reimagines international collaboration as a comprehensive educational ecosystem rather than isolated events.

The urgency to address global sustainability challenges, as articulated in the United Nations' Education 2030 agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), requires educational approaches that foster both knowledge acquisition and the development of 21st century competencies, including critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and cultural awareness (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019; UNESCO, 2017). However, most international education programs remain structured around brief, intensive exchanges that provide limited opportunities for sustained relationship-building, continuous learning, and the iterative application of knowledge across contexts (Jackson, 2018).

This study addresses a practical need in international education practice: how to design and implement year-round collaborative partnerships that integrate in-person exchange with digital connectivity to create holistic learning experiences for sustainability education. Rather than treating international exchange as a one-time event, this partnership weaves collaboration into campus events and ongoing peer interaction throughout the academic year, gradually working toward fuller integration into the formal curriculum. Drawing on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 2000), we examine how the intentional design of social, cognitive, and teaching presence contributes to sustained, meaningful international collaboration. This study examined the pedagogical foundations, practical implementation, and preliminary outcomes of this integrated approach.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The SI–NFU partnership is grounded in the CoI framework, which posits that meaningful learning emerges from the intersection of three essential elements of presence: social, cognitive, and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000). Social presence enables learners to project themselves socially and emotionally; it builds relationships and group cohesion across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Cognitive presence involves constructing and confirming meaning through sustained reflection and discourse; it encompasses triggering events, exploration, integration, and resolution. Teaching presence comprises the design, facilitation, and direction of learning processes; it creates structures that enable productive interactions and provides appropriate guidance. In international partnerships, year-round engagement enables all three types of presence to develop more fully than brief exchanges typically would allow. The CoI framework has proven effective in analyzing international project-based learning collaborations, including multiyear World Youth Meeting (WYM) events that convene students from multiple Asian countries (Sato & Kageto, 2015). Research on the online implementation of such events highlights the importance of the strategic integration of face-to-face and online modalities, particularly in maintaining quality collaboration and informal interaction (Sato & Kageto, 2021).

The partnership also draws on social constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes that knowledge is actively constructed through social interaction and cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

International collaboration provides an ideal context for social constructivist learning, as students encounter diverse perspectives, negotiate conflicting viewpoints across boundaries, and co-construct understanding through sustained interaction. Learner-centered approaches position students as active agents rather than passive recipients, and manifest through student-driven projects and reciprocal cultural exchanges (Weimer, 2013).

Year-round partnerships address contemporary educational priorities, including global competence and 21st-century skills (collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and cultural awareness; Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019). Global competence is defined as the capacity to examine intercultural issues, appreciate diverse perspectives, engage effectively across cultures, and act toward collective well-being (Deardorff, 2006; OECD, 2018). UNESCO's Education 2030 agenda underscores the role of education in achieving the SDGs through education for sustainable development, which aims to support learners in making informed decisions regarding environmental integrity, economic viability, and social justice (UNESCO, 2017). International partnerships offer opportunities for contextual sustainability learning as students develop a grounded understanding of how challenges and responses vary across social and cultural settings (Brundiers et al., 2010).

Finally, this approach leverages technology-enhanced international collaboration, which recognizes that combining in-person encounters with digital connectivity creates richer learning experiences than either modality alone (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; O'Dowd, 2018; Rubin, 2017; Taras et al., 2013). Synchronous video conferencing enables real-time interaction, and asynchronous platforms support flexible communication (Harasim, 2017). However, effective implementation requires a thoughtful pedagogical design that strategically integrates both face-to-face and online engagement to sustain connections and enable continued collaboration between in-person visits.

3. Methodology

Research Design - This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to examine the pedagogical structure and early learning outcomes of a continuous integrated partnership between NFU and the SI. The study draws on program documentation and participant reflection reports to identify emerging patterns in how social, cognitive, and teaching presence manifest in the partnership model. Given the program's developmental nature, the current analysis is understood as a preliminary stage of a long-term research process. Future phases of the study will include structured surveys and formal interviews, enabling a more systematic assessment of learning outcomes and a more comprehensive mixed-methods approach.

Participants - The participants were university and high school students from both institutions. Filipino participants comprised students from the SI, which provides education from kindergarten to tertiary levels. The Japanese participants included students from the Faculty of Global Studies at NFU and its affiliated high school (NFUAHS). Multiple groups have participated in various program components since the establishment of the partnership in 2017, with the participant numbers varying by activity.

Data Collection and Analysis - This study used two primary data sources. The first consists of observational records maintained by faculty coordinators during in-person exchanges and online sessions during 2025, with a focus on student engagement, interaction patterns, and communication across cultural boundaries. The second consisted of written reflection reports submitted by student and teacher participants following WYM2025, including reports from students at the SI, NFUAHS, and NFU. These reports provide direct participant accounts of their learning experiences, intercultural encounters, and perceived program outcomes.

The data were interpreted using the CoI framework, with attention to social, cognitive, and teaching presence as the analytical categories. As mentioned, the analysis is exploratory in nature and aims to identify emerging patterns and generating questions for a more systematic future investigation. Structured surveys and formal interviews are currently being prepared to support a more robust analysis of the outcomes in subsequent research phases.

4. Program Context and Description

Partnership Development - The partnership between the SI in the Philippines and NFU in Japan began in 2017 with high school-level collaboration. In 2025, it evolved into a comprehensive institutional agreement. Both institutions share a commitment to holistic education and global citizenship development. The partnership emerged from the recognition that sustained collaborative relationships could enhance student learning more effectively than one-time exchanges. Faculty members from both institutions have been building a year-round system that integrates international collaboration into regular educational activities. The program emphasizes reciprocity, multiple components, and the integration of in-person and digital engagement informed by the CoI framework.

Four Integrated Components - Drawing on the CoI framework as a guiding reference, the program has been developed and refined through trial and error. The four components emerged as central to the overall design. First, bidirectional in-person exchanges allow students from both countries to take turns as hosts and visitors, giving each party the experience to play both roles. Japanese students engaged in community-based activities, historical learning, and environmental projects in the Philippines, while Filipino students participated in international events and collaborative presentations in Japan. Second, curriculum-embedded collaboration introduces international engagement into regular educational activities. Filipino students provided online English conversation practice for Japanese students, while Japanese students supported Japanese language classes at the SI through video conferencing. Third, joint participation in campus events, such as school festivals and open campus days, create shared experiences across borders, with students preparing presentations and joining each other's events online. Fourth, continuous peer communication through messaging and video conferencing helps sustain relationships and maintain engagement between in-person visits.

The development of these components was not driven by a formal top-down mandate. While our institutions share a broad partnership agreement for education and research, the actual structure of the program emerged through the hands-on initiatives of faculty members and a gradual process of mutual cooperation.

Design Rationale - This integrated design operationalizes the CoI framework while addressing the limitations of conventional exchange programs. Embedding collaboration into the regular curriculum normalizes international engagement as an ongoing practice. Throughout the year, multiple components support deeper learning and relationship development, which are essential for a robust social presence. Combining in-person encounters with digital connectivity leverages the advantages of each modality. Bidirectional exchanges ensure reciprocity and position students as cultural learners and guides. Intentional faculty design and facilitation maintain an appropriate teaching presence, enabling student agency while ensuring educational quality.

5. Results

Program Implementation Overview - The partnership has conducted three major reciprocal exchange visits to date along with online collaborative activities throughout the academic year. The program has involved university and high-school students from both institutions, with participation varying across activities depending on the nature and purpose of each component. The focus of this study is the overall design of the program and the learning experiences it enabled, rather than participant numbers by activity. Implementation has demonstrated that year-round international collaboration can be sustained within the constraints of regular institutional operations, and that embedding such collaboration into the curriculum and campus life is both feasible and educationally meaningful.

Physical Exchange Activities - WYM is an international exchange event organized and facilitated by students and educators of the Faculty of Global Studies at NFU as an integral component of the curriculum (Kageto, 2007). Held annually in August on the NFU campus, the event currently brings together approximately 300 participants from Japan and another around 10 countries, primarily from across Asia. Japanese and

international students collaborate in teams to develop and deliver presentations on themes related to sustainability and global issues. In addition to the formal presentation component, WYM provides structured and informal opportunities for intercultural exchange among participants from diverse national and educational backgrounds.

WYM serves as a shared platform for many participating institutions, and its partnership with the SI has developed into a particularly sustained and multifaceted collaboration. Rather than treating the WYM solely as an annual event, the two institutions use it as an anchor point around which a broader year-round exchange has been built, involving in-person visits, ongoing digital communication, and, more recently, a formal institutional agreement. This collaboration operates at two levels—high school and university—each with its own exchange cycle and developmental trajectory.

At the high school level, the exchange cycle has been ongoing since the partnership's 2017 establishment, except for an interruption during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to WYM, students and teachers from NFUAHS traveled to the SI in the Philippines for a preparatory visit, which focused primarily on joint rehearsal and refinement of the symposium presentation. This pre-event visit also incorporated historical learning and tree-planting activities, embedding the exchange within the broader themes of environmental awareness and shared history. Following this preparatory phase, SI students traveled to Japan to participate in WYM as a joint team with their NFUAHS counterparts and delivered their collaborative presentation to an international audience. This bidirectional cycle, in which Japanese students travel to the Philippines to prepare together and Filipino students travel to Japan to present together, reflects a deliberate commitment to shared ownership of the final work.

At the university level, the partnership entered a new phase following the signing of a formal institutional agreement between NFU and the SI. While SI university students had previously participated in the WYM in Japan, the arrangement had been only unidirectional. In September 2025, NFU university students visited the SI for the first time, undertaking a range of activities, including tree planting, historical learning, and Japanese language instruction for local students and children. Filipino students, in turn, provided English instruction to the NFU participants for a reciprocal exchange regarding the language learning dimension. Two SI university students who had participated in WYM played a particularly significant role in facilitating the visit; they accompanied the group during activities, provided English language support, and collaborated with NFU students to revise instructional slides to make the Japanese language lessons more accessible to local learners. The activity design drew on a framework established through years of high-school exchange, adapting familiar elements to the university context for the first time.

The coordinators regard this initial university visit as a trial from which future iterations are to be developed with greater flexibility. Spring recess is considered a more suitable time for subsequent visits of NFU students. Looking further ahead, university-level exchanges are envisioned as the foundation for sustained forms of international collaborative inquiry, including joint research projects and participation in international academic conferences.

Online Collaboration as a Foundation for Curriculum Integration - Online collaborative activities have formed a central and recurring dimension of the partnership throughout each year, providing a structured basis for language learning and intercultural exchange between in-person visits. Filipino students at the SI engaged in online English conversation practice with Japanese students at NFU and NFUAHS, while Japanese students supported SI students' Japanese language learning through video conferencing sessions. These activities created regular, purposeful contact between participants and gave the partnership a presence in students' routine educational lives, rather than limiting international engagement to occasional events.

A preparatory online session held in July 2025, organized via Zoom with UD Talk support, introduced students to themes of shared history and built initial interpersonal connections among participants before the onsite WYM event. This session illustrated how online collaboration can serve not only as a follow-up to

in-person visits, but also as a meaningful point of entry that prepares students for more intensive face-to-face engagement.

These online activities are organized primarily through faculty initiatives rather than formal curriculum components in the timetable. While these activities have demonstrated their value as a connective thread running throughout the year, moving toward more systematic curriculum integration remains an important goal. Embedding online collaborative activities within formal course structures in both institutions would provide students with a clearer academic framing for their participation and help ensure continuity across cohorts. Current activities, therefore, are understood as a practical foundation to inform a more formally integrated curriculum design in the program's future iterations.

Campus Event Collaboration - Campus events provided additional opportunities for international collaboration throughout the year. Students prepared joint presentations for WYM. Preparation took place both during in-person visits and ongoing online communication. Students from each institution participated remotely in campus events at the partner school, sharing performances, presentations, and cultural activities. This involvement in each other's campus lives helped the students develop a sense of connection with both institutional communities and broadened their understanding of educational cultures in different national contexts.

Beyond internal program activities, the partnership has also been shared widely through public events. On open campus days and during the annual university festival held at NFU and NFUAHS, students organized sessions in which they introduced their international collaborative learning experiences to prospective students, families, and other visitors. This outward-facing dimension serves two purposes: It contributes to the broader dissemination of international collaborative learning as an educational approach, and it creates meaningful opportunities for students to revisit and articulate their experiences. Presenting their work to a new audience encourages reflection and supports the process of making sense of what they have learned through cross-cultural engagement. Public campus events function not only as outreach activities but also as an integral part of the learning experience.

Continuous Digital Communication - Digital communication platforms sustained student contact throughout the year, functioning not merely as a supplement to in-person exchange but also as a connective thread running through the full cycle of program activities. The presence of multiple shared goals throughout the year included joint presentation preparation, remote participation in campus events, and collaborative planning for visits. These gave students concrete reasons to remain in regular contact rather than communicating only around specific events. Group messaging enabled ongoing informal exchanges in which students shared their daily experiences, photographs, cultural observations, and personal updates, while synchronous video conferencing supported more structured collaborative sessions. This combination of asynchronous and synchronous communication allowed relationships to develop gradually and continuously. This avoided the pattern identified as a common limitation of conventional short-term exchange programs: intensifying during in-person visits and fading in the intervals between them. The embedding of digital communication within the broader structure of year-round activities is regarded by the program coordinators as a key factor in sustaining student engagement and preventing the relational discontinuity that often follows one-time exchange events.

Preliminary Observations - An analysis of student reflection reports and faculty observations from WYM2025 provides initial evidence of learning outcomes across the three types of presence identified in the CoI framework. The following observations are exploratory in nature. They are intended to identify patterns for systematic future investigation.

Regarding social presence, the reflections of students from both countries reflected a sense of belonging that extended well beyond formal events. A Filipino student described the depth of connection she experienced: "I really felt like I belonged there, that I was a part of that country" (SI High School Student A, written reflection). Another noted the quality of the collaborative atmosphere: "Nobody was left behind; everyone's voice mattered"

(SI High School Student B, written reflection). A third participant highlighted the role of the host family in sustaining social presence across the program: “My host mother was always there to support me, that also made me calm down when I was about to get scared before the presentation” (SI College Student A, written reflection). Similarly, Japanese high school students reported that their initial anxiety about communicating in English gradually eased through the use of gesture and a genuine desire to connect. One student noted that being understood despite their limited language proficiency was a deeply satisfying experience (NFUAHS Student A, written reflection). The NFU student organizer who served as moderator of the panel discussion reflected that the experience confirmed for him that “learning is not just about knowledge but about connection” (NFU Student A, written reflection). Faculty observations from both institutions confirmed that host family arrangements and sustained digital contact contributed to social bonds that continued well after the formal program ended.

Regarding cognitive presence, student reports showed meaningful shifts in understanding. A Japanese participant reflected that the experience changed his view of language use: “What matters is not pursuing perfection, but the attitude of trying to connect with the other person” (NFUAHS Student B, written reflection, translated from Japanese). The NFU student organizer observed a broader shift in how participants approached communication: “Presentations are powerful because they are not about repeating information but about engaging in a dialogue that carries personal weight and authenticity” (NFU Student A, written reflection). Filipino students demonstrated growing awareness of their own capacity for global engagement. One wrote that the experience had given her “a desire to continue building bridges, not just between nations, but between hearts” (SI High School Student B, written reflection). The faculty coordinator at NFUAHS observed that students who participated in collaborative workshops showed an increased willingness to engage in public settings. Furthermore, encountering concrete sustainability issues through the SDG16 project helped students recognize that they could meaningfully contribute to global dialogue.

Regarding teaching presence, the NFUAHS faculty coordinator noted that embedding WYM as a visible intermediate goal in the regular curriculum directly contributed to student motivation and the sense that international engagement was a normal part of school life. Students who were previously reluctant to interact in public settings reported reduced apprehension after participating in collaborative workshops. The SI faculty coordinator described the online session held on July 13, organized via Zoom with UD Talk support, as a meaningful preparatory experience that introduced students to the history of Japanese soldiers in Silay and built initial connections among participants before the onsite event. The NFU student organizer noted that the symposium format created conditions in which students could experience English “as a living tool for connecting with the world, not just as a subject in school” (NFU Student A, written reflection). This comment suggests that the program design supported a shift toward more authentic language use. Both faculty coordinators observed that the balance between structured guidance and student autonomy enabled students to take genuine ownership of their work. This pattern was reflected in the quality of the final joint presentation.

A particularly encouraging development was observed during the NFU university students’ visit to the SI. Without direct instruction from the faculty of either institution, the SI students who had previously participated in the WYM decided to provide comprehensive support throughout the visit. Drawing on their own experience of being welcomed in Japan, they expressed a strong desire to reciprocate the hospitality. Their contributions went beyond logistical accompaniment; they collaborated closely with NFU students to substantially revise the instructional slides used for Japanese language lessons, offering concrete improvements informed by their own perspective as Japanese language learners. They provided cultural guidance and support during community activities. This spontaneous student-initiated facilitation represents an early but meaningful instance of learner autonomy emerging from the reciprocal structure of the partnership. It suggests that sustained engagement across multiple program cycles may gradually cultivate the program’s ultimate goal: self-directed intercultural agency.

6. Discussion

Findings - The preliminary observations reported in this study suggest that the three types of presence identified in the CoI framework developed in line with the program's design intentions, although the findings remain exploratory. Multiple mechanisms supported social presence throughout the year. In-person exchanges provided the face-to-face contact necessary to establish personal trust and emotional connections, while continuous digital communication helped maintain these relationships between visits. Student reflection indicated that this combination allowed relationships to develop gradually over time rather than remaining limited to brief periods of intensive contact. The bidirectional structure of the exchanges, in which students from both countries took turns in host and visitor roles, appeared to contribute to more balanced and reciprocal relationships than a one-directional program may yield. Faculty observations noted that students showed initiative in sustaining contact beyond formally organized activities, suggesting that the social bonds formed through the program had genuine personal meaning for the participants.

Cognitive presence was supported by the diversity of learning activities and the extended timeframe of engagement. Students encountered sustainability-related themes through environmental work, such as tree planting, historical fieldwork, language learning, and cultural exchange, each providing a different context for reflection and meaning-making. Student reports indicated that engagement with these activities prompted genuine shifts in understanding, particularly regarding the relationship between personal communication and cross-cultural connections, and the relevance of global issues to individual action. Encounters with sustainability issues in each other's local contexts, rather than in the abstract, appeared to support a more contextually grounded understanding of how global challenges manifest differently across national and cultural settings. The opportunity to revisit related themes across multiple activities over an extended period appeared to support iterative learning, which brief exchange programs typically cannot provide.

Teaching presence was reflected in the program's overall design, which created multiple structured opportunities for meaningful interaction while allowing considerable student autonomy. The faculty from both institutions observed that embedding the program within regular school activities, rather than treating it as a standalone event, helped normalize international engagement for students. The faculty identified the balance between structured guidance and student-led activities as an important factor enabling students to take ownership of their participation. These observations support the view that year-round engagement, combining in-person exchanges with sustained online communication, enables the three types of presence to develop more fully than shorter programs typically would allow. The findings are consistent with social constructivist accounts of learning, which emphasize the importance of sustained social interaction and iterative experience for developing deeper understanding. The learner-centered design of the program, in which students alternately served as cultural guides and cultural learners, reinforced this approach by positioning students as active participants in their own learning, rather than recipients of predetermined content.

Nevertheless, the program was developed through faculty initiative and ongoing trial and error, rather than through a formally planned research design. The four components of the program each emerged and evolved over time, informed by practical experience and guided by theoretical reference points, including the CoI framework. The observations reported here reflect this developmental nature. More systematic data collection is needed before stronger claims can be made regarding learning outcomes.

Challenges and Limitations - Several practical and structural challenges emerged during the program's implementation, which highlight important directions for future development. A central challenge concerns the degree to which the program depends on faculty initiative and sustained individual effort. Each activity cycle requires faculty to actively recruit and motivate student participants, organize logistics across institutional and national boundaries, and facilitate online communication between events. Digital communication among students does not arise spontaneously; without deliberate structuring by the faculty, contact between formal activities tends to diminish. This level of faculty-driven coordination, while effective in the current

developmental phase, raises questions about the long-term scalability and sustainability of the program if faculty circumstances change. Reducing this dependency through systematic structural support, including clearer institutional backing and distributed coordination responsibilities, is a priority for the next development phase.

Related to this is the challenge of curriculum integration. Thus far, the activities described of the program have been organized primarily as co-curricular or extracurricular initiatives, rather than formally embedded curriculum components at either institution. Deeper integration into formal course structures would provide students with a clearer academic framing for their participation, reduce the burden on individual faculty coordinators, and ensure continuity across student cohorts. Developing pathways toward curriculum integration while preserving the program's flexibility and authenticity is among the most significant design challenges.

Another challenge is student autonomy. While the program aspires to support self-directed intercultural engagement, the students generally require ongoing facilitation to maintain meaningful contact between formal activities, including online communication. Developing conditions in which students gradually take greater ownership of their participation, including the ability to initiate and sustain peer interactions independently, is an important focus for future iterations of the program. Simultaneously, there are early indications that sustained engagement across multiple program cycles may organically generate autonomy. During the NFU university students' visit to the SI, the Filipino students who had previously participated in WYM provided extensive self-initiated support. Examples included collaborating on the revision of Japanese language lesson materials from a learner's perspective, accompanying the group during community activities, and offering hospitality that was explicitly motivated by the desire to reciprocate what they had experienced in Japan. This behavior was not directed by faculty from either institution. It represents a promising sign that the partnership's reciprocal structure may, over time, cultivate the intercultural agency and mutual responsibility that more formally structured programs often struggle to foster.

Coordinating schedules across institutions in different countries and time zones requires sustained effort and flexibility from the faculty of both institutions. Language differences, while a source of learning, sometimes created communication difficulties, requiring additional facilitation. Financial and logistical constraints have limited the number of students who can participate in in-person exchanges, indicating that online communication will play a particularly important role in ensuring broader access to the program. As a work in progress, this study has several methodological limitations. Systematic survey and interview data collection is still being undertaken. The observations reported here are based primarily on reflection reports and faculty notes, rather than on structured instruments. The number of participants and detailed outcome measures have not yet been finalized. Thus, the long-term effects of the program on students' intercultural competence, global citizenship practices, and continued international engagement remain to be examined. A comparative study involving students from more conventional exchange programs would also help clarify the specific contribution of the year-round integrated design.

Another limitation concerns the documentation of sustained relationships beyond formal programs. While informal conversations suggest that participants maintain international connections through personal communication channels, the systematic tracking of such activities raises ethical concerns regarding privacy and student autonomy. Future research could explore participatory approaches, such as student-led documentation or opt-in sharing, to better capture the informal dimensions of intercultural relationship-building.

7. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This study explored an ongoing year-round partnership between NFU and the SI and examined its design and preliminary outcomes using the CoI framework. The program brings together four components: bidirectional in-person exchanges, online collaborative activities, joint participation in campus events, and continuous peer communication. These elements together create multiple opportunities for sustained international engagement throughout the academic year. The program was developed through faculty initiatives and ongoing trial and error

rather than through a formally planned research design. However, the experience accumulated over several years provides a practical basis for examining what year-round integrated partnerships can offer sustainability education.

Preliminary observations from student reflection reports and faculty notes suggest that sustained engagement across multiple components supports the development of social, cognitive, and teaching presence in ways that brief episodic exchanges are less likely to enable. Students from Japan and the Philippines reported meaningful shifts in their understanding of cross-cultural communication, global issues, and their capacity to engage with people from different backgrounds. Faculty observations highlighted the importance of embedding international activities within regular school life as a factor in sustaining student motivation and normalizing global engagement, rather than treating such activities as separate events. This study has clear limitations. Systematic data collection through surveys and interviews is still underway, and the observations reported here are exploratory rather than conclusive. Participant numbers and detailed outcome measures have not yet been finalized, and the long-term effects on students remain to be examined. These are priorities for the next phase of our research.

The institutions plan to continue developing the program through ongoing reflection and adjustment. Key directions include moving toward more formal curriculum integration at both institutions, expanding access to program components to a wider range of students, and conducting systematic data collection to build a stronger evidence base. Comparative research involving students from more conventional exchange programs would help clarify the specific contribution of a year-round integrated approach. In addition, exploring how this partnership model could be adapted to other institutional contexts is a longer-term goal that could contribute to broader discussions on sustainable approaches to international education.

Acknowledgments - This study was supported by JSPS KAKENHI (grant number: 22K02841). We would like to thank Editage (www.editage.jp) for English language editing. AI Use Disclosure. Claude (Anthropic, claude.ai, 2025) was used for language editing. All outputs, including fact-checking sources and validation results, were reviewed, verified, and edited by the authors. No confidential or personally identifiable data were entered into the AI tools. The authors take full responsibility for the content.

8. References

- Brundiers, K., Wiek, A., & Redman, C. L. (2010). Real-world learning opportunities in sustainability: From classroom into the real world. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 11(4), 308-324.
- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241-266.
- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3), 87-105.
- Garrison, D. R., & Kanuka, H. (2004). Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2), 95-105.
- Harasim, L. (2017). *Learning theory and online technologies* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Jackson, J. (2018). Intervening in the intercultural learning of L2 study abroad students: From research to practice. *Language Teaching*, 51(3), 365-382.
- Kageto, M. (2007). *An instructional design for international collaborative learning focusing on communication*. Retrieved February 10, 2026, from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED497429>
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- O'Dowd, R. (2018). From telecollaboration to virtual exchange: State-of-the-art and the role of UNICollaboration in moving forward. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 1, 1-23.
- OECD. (2018). Preparing our youth for an inclusive and sustainable world: The OECD PISA global competence

- framework. OECD Publishing.
- Partnership for 21st Century Learning. (2019). *Framework for 21st century learning*. Battelle for Kids.
- Rubin, J. (2017). Embedding collaborative online international learning (COIL) at higher education institutions: An evolutionary framework. *Internationalization of Higher Education*, 2, 27-44.
- Sato, S., & Kageto, M. (2015). Analysis of an international project-based learning collaboration using the Community of Inquiry framework. *International Journal for Educational Media and Technology*, 9(1), 16-24.
- Sato, S., & Kageto, M. (2021). Implementation of an online international exchange project for an official university lecture. In *International Conference on Blended Learning* (pp. 367-378). Springer International Publishing.
- Taras, V., Caprar, D. V., Rottig, D., Sarala, R. M., Zakaria, N., Zhao, F., Jiménez, A., Wankel, C., Lei, W. S., Minor, M. S., Bryła, P., Ordeñana, X., Bode, A., Schuster, A., Vaiginiene, E., Froese, F. J., Bathula, H., Yajnik, N., Baldegger, R., & Huang, V. Z. (2013). A global classroom? Evaluating the effectiveness of global virtual collaboration as a teaching tool in management education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 12(3), 414-435.
- UNESCO. (2017). Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning objectives. UNESCO Publishing.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Weimer, M. (2013). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. John Wiley & Sons.

