

# Regaining Social Contact During a Pandemic: Conducting a Socially Distanced English Day Camp at a Japanese University

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Social interaction and extracurricular activities in academic institutions have drastically changed since the COVID-19 outbreak. As students have experienced an extended separation from their normal activities and friends, their educational experience has been radically altered. Nevertheless, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of community, person-to-person communication, and a sense of belonging. Upon this premise, this paper depicts favorable circumstances for a socially distanced day camp toward the end of the summer of 2021, when COVID-19 cases were on the decrease and vaccinations on the rise. The paper contends that when students are drawn together, they can be galvanized to see what they are collectively capable of accomplishing, whether in a pandemic or in the best of times. Consequently, reconnecting with other people can impart a new feeling of inclusion, self-esteem, and a higher awareness of the significance of being a part of a broader local community.

**Keywords:** Day Camp, Extracurricular Activities, Community Service, Student Inclusion

## Introduction

Recent research overwhelmingly shows a negative impact on student motivation and socialization due to isolation during a pandemic (e.g., Arslan, 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Meeter et al., 2020). However, the literature tends to overlook one of the side effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is the absence of vibrant extracurricular activities which largely vanished from campus life. Despite the rapid expansion of distance education and increased innovation in educational technologies, opportunities for club activities, interscholastic competitions, camps, social events, and more became scant, if not nonexistent. Living in a relatively isolated online learning environment, students were deprived of the immediate support of the core of their social spheres. Although technology has helped academic institutions transition to online learning and teaching methodologies have quickly developed, vital out-of-classroom interactions have been abandoned due to the pandemic, with the hope for better times to return. Despite little discussion on this issue, does the literature have much to say about how important extracurricular activities are to students' lives? How essential is it to the welfare of students?

Pre-pandemic studies have demonstrated strong links between involvement in extracurricular activities and a sense of well-being because they can facilitate positive school-related experiences – which, in turn, promote perceptions of social acceptance (e.g., Freeman et al., 2007), higher academic competence (e.g., Chang & Cohen, 2002; Kuh et al., 2008; Pittman & Richmond, 2007), and lower levels of depression (e.g., Mounts et al., 2006). When learners develop relationships and feel socially connected at school through extra activities, they are inclined to feel more positively toward academic work and other school engagements (Juvonen et al., 2012). Moreover, research supports the notion that student engagement and structures for peer-to-peer interaction outside the

classroom help raise motivation and student retention (e.g., Juvonen et al., 2012; Lau, 2003; McCarthy & Kuh, 2006; Tao et al., 2000; Zepke & Leach, 2010). However, students who do not make social connections within the school community may be less likely to succeed academically and socially (Juvonen et al., 2012; Kubala, 2000; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Such students can experience a lower level of satisfaction and a higher level of stress (Çivitci, 2015). Essentially, the literature supports the notion that involvement in the broader school community can help students succeed, whereas disengaged students tend to become more detached and discouraged. However, apart from athletics, there is an absence of writing about the sharp reduction in extracurricular and non-scholastic activities during the current pandemic. This paper does not attempt to fill in a lack of research in this area. Rather, it is an attempt to offer some ideas and solutions to help students maintain social connections which can in turn help them to progress socially and academically.

### **The Concept of Day Camp**

Day camps, as the name implies, typically involve a series of consecutive days in which students do activities during daytime hours and return home to sleep in their own homes. The kind of day camp described in the context of this paper does not refer to a rustic outdoor experience but to time spent on campus during the day filled with various educational and recreational activities in a safe and socially distanced environment. The primary aims were to reacquaint students with their peers after an extended period of online classes, create a more inclusive community for isolated international students, set up opportunities for student leadership, and reach out to needs within the local community, which will be explained later in more detail.

The idea of having a day camp was conceived after over a year and a half of emergency remote learning and suspended extracurricular activities. All on- and off-campus endeavors were prohibited, and an annual English summer camp had been canceled for the second year. Students were bemoaning the lack of enjoyable activities to do, and morale was at a new low. First-year and international students had limited chances to form friendships, and people of all sorts longed for meaningful communication with their peers. Realizing an acute need for people to connect, the author of this paper devised an alternative to the annual English camp, which included detailed measures to minimize the possibility of the spread of COVID-19. After much deliberation, the school administration approved the proposal and gave permission to proceed. An announcement was made through the university's learning management system, and students registered online through Google Forms. Once registered, students were sent more details about the day camp and the rules to maintain a safe environment.

In mid-September 2021, 14 international students and 20 Japanese students gathered for the first communal event at the university in 21 months. Attendees were required to follow specific rules. For example, students were not to come to campus if they had a fever over 37.6 degrees, if they were experiencing any COVID or flu-like symptoms, or if a member of their household was ill. Upon arrival, students and staff had their temperatures checked and recorded before being guided to a gym where they could spread out for a short orientation before heading to designated classrooms around campus. Hand sanitizers were always available and were used before and after each activity. Masks were worn at all times, and when eating lunch, students were instructed to eat alone and not in groups. If someone were to fall ill, the staff in charge were to assess the situation and

either send the student home or seek professional help. Students were reminded to maintain a safe distance throughout activities and avoid too much personal contact.

The morning schedule comprised several parallel mini-course sessions taught by six students, five full-time and three part-time teachers over two days. All sessions were instructed in a professional manner, including the students who took up the challenge to share their unique skills and know-how with their peers in English. Student instructors volunteered to teach without compensation, but any materials they needed were provided through a small budget. Three teachers opted to teach remotely, so classrooms were equipped with reliable computers, projectors, and an operator to accommodate their needs. Students could attend 55-minute mini-courses of their choice and experience something fun, new, and outside the scope of a regular university class (see Tables 1 and 2). Each mini-course was limited to 10 people to maintain physical distancing. To spread people out evenly, students indicated their first and second choices for the mini-courses on their Google Forms and were assigned to classes accordingly (see Appendix).

The afternoon activities consisted of various team activities that spread students outside and in the school gymnasium. Such activities included game shows, relays, and introductions to unfamiliar sports, such as Australian football and cricket. The main event on the first day was a shopping game designed to raise money for charity. In short, students brought unneeded or used items from home, along with ¥500. The items were used to set up four shops, with four teachers as shopkeepers, for students to browse and buy as many items as they could with their ¥500. The students bargained and haggled with the shopkeepers to lower the prices. In the end, the person who bought the most items on a ¥500 budget won a prize, and everyone went home with some interesting items. The money raised from the sales went entirely to a larger fund created in conjunction with professors from other universities, a professional baseball player, and a local church. All donations went toward buying much-needed playground equipment for an orphanage in the prefecture.

### **Reflection**

The bedrock of personal and professional development is reflective practice; it extracts meaning from experiences and transforms them into organized thoughts and strategies for the future. Reflecting on the day camp activities involved listening to the participants, noticing patterns, and reassessing them for future reference. After the day camp concluded, six students agreed to a sit-down interview, and two teachers responded to a request to provide feedback via email. The prevailing sentiments of the students and teachers could be condensed into four common themes as follows:

1. Learning from peers through mini-courses enhances personal growth and community
2. Learning to see teachers as people
3. Contributing to the community and the needs of others is fulfilling
4. Personal growth is developed through new experiences

Table 1  
*Basic Schedule for Day 1*

<b>Day 1</b>			
<b>Welcome and ice-breaking activity in the gym 10:00–10:25</b>			
<b>Mini-courses (Session 1) 10:30–11:25</b>			
Room A22a <b>Fun with Juggling!</b> (student)	Room E103 <b>Relaxation Yoga</b> via Zoom (teacher)	Room A23 <b>Wood Printing</b> (teacher)	Room A24a <b>Creating Your Own Online Business</b> (student)
<b>Mini-courses (Session 2) 11:30–12:25</b>			
Room A22a <b>The Art of Crocheting</b> (teacher)	Room A22b <b>Amabie, Kansai, and the World</b> (teacher)	Room A23 <b>Nail Manicuring</b> (student)	Outside <b>River Nature Walk</b> (and environmental study) (teacher)
<b>Lunch &amp; relaxation 12:30–13:25</b>			
<b>Service-learning activity – Raising Money for Charity / Shopping Game In the gym 13:30–15:25</b>			
<b>Afternoon recreational activities – "The Price Is Right"/ Australian Football (teacher) / Cricket (student) / Frisbee Golf Outside and in the gym 15:30–17:00</b>			
<b>Debriefing and end to Day 1 17:00</b>			

Table 2  
*Basic Schedule for Day 2*

<b>Day 2</b>			
<b>Welcome and ice-breaking activity in the gym 10:00–10:25</b>			
<b>Mini-courses (Session 1) 10:30–11:25</b>			
Room A22a <b>Real 関西弁 &amp; Culture</b> (student)	Room A22b <b>No session</b>	Room A23 <b>Dancing with the Stars!</b> (student)	Room A24a <b>Storytelling</b> via Zoom (teacher)
<b>Mini-courses (Session 2) 11:30–12:25</b>			
Room A22a <b>Roasting Coffee 101!</b> (teacher)	Gym – Level 1 <b>Anyone Can Play Drums!</b> (teacher)	Room A23 <b>No session</b>	Room A24a <b>Study in Canada!</b> via Zoom (teacher)
<b>Lunch &amp; relaxation 12:30–13:25</b>			
<b>Afternoon activities – "Are You as Smart as a 5<sup>th</sup> Grader?" / Photo Hunt Outside and in the gym 13:30–15:25</b>			
<b>Featured movie in the library forum! 15:30–17:00</b>			
<b>Debriefing and end to Day 2 17:00</b>			

### **Learning From Peers Through Mini-Courses Enhances Personal Growth and Community**

One of the most meaningful components of this type of day camp is the mini-courses because students take part in the teaching process. Encouraging them to step up and lead is not an easy task, and insecurities in their abilities to teach or speak in English can stand as barriers to making them commit. However, the effort is worth it. When learners shift from student recipients to teachers, they can gain feelings of satisfaction and status, which become powerful sources of reward and motivation. This is reflected in second-year Student A's (personal communication, September 30, 2021) reflections: "Before teaching, all I could think about was how I could get people to participate or be really into my

lesson. But I felt satisfaction after other students said they had a good time."

Peer-to-peer teaching can be beneficial for student teachers, as well as their coequals, because such interaction can result in a stronger connection to the student's level of understanding, increase critical thinking, broaden student participation, and inspire greater engagement with the subject matter (Stigmar, 2016). In a non-academic atmosphere at day camp, there is no apprehension on the part of the learners to doubt that their peer teachers are knowledgeable enough to present the content. Moreover, a deeper sense of community and inclusion can be fostered as students interact as equal partners without the usual authority of a conventional teacher. When students teach and learn as partners, they can learn to respect each other's skills and viewpoints from a fresh perspective. Fourth-year Student B (personal communication, September 30, 2021) remarked, "It was easier to communicate with student-to-student teaching because we were equals, and the student-teacher thinks more from a student's view and explains things in easy steps." Second-year Student C (personal communication, September 30, 2021) added:

The pressure is gone. Sometimes when I am talking to a teacher, I am afraid of using the wrong grammar or something, but when I talk to my peers, that pressure is gone. It's just not there. I can talk freely and ask something about any topic freely without pressure.

Participating Associate Professor A (personal communication, September 12, 2021) also stated:

"A number of students said that participating in team-based activities - particularly with students they had not previously met or spoken to, was a rewarding and fulfilling experience. Japanese and non-Japanese students alike said they felt a strong sense of community and inclusion from these mini-courses."

### **Learning to See Teachers as People**

A small number of studies support the idea that teachers who have skills and creativity in their personal and professional lives can actively transfer creative tendencies from their outside avocations or interests into their teaching practices. This includes cross-disciplinary teaching practices and real-world learning approaches. Innovative and creative teachers accomplish this by enriching their mental pools with diverse, eclectic, cross-disciplinary interests, knowledge, and experiences and fusing them together to form new combinations (Henriksen & Mishra, 2015; Mishra, Henriksen, & the Deep-Play Research Group, 2014; Popova, 2012). All teachers have diverse skill sets, talents, and attributes often unknown to the student body. Students often attend classes assuming that learning cannot be fun or relevant to the real world, much less to their personal interests. That is why another benefit of day camp mini-courses is having participating language teachers share unique talents and abilities. Such skills can include expertise in content areas in which one has a high interest or considers oneself proficient. The skills could also include experience from former careers, educational background, or a wealth of knowledge about geographical places and cultures. Sharing such abilities can strengthen engagement with students by enabling teachers to make deeper connections with students who have similar interests, as well as bring authenticity to lessons and humanize teachers in the eyes of their students, who can see that their instructors are much more than "just English teachers."

Second-year Student D (personal communication, September 30, 2021) reflected on

teachers' extra abilities when commenting about an instructor who taught a mini-course on drums, "I just want to say that we, your students, are really lucky to have you. You are making our university life more memorable. Moreover, you look cool playing drums, my cool teacher!" Second-year Student A (personal communication, September 30, 2021) further commented:

"It [seeing teacher's skills] gave me a new perspective of our teachers. Outside of class, we go to our teachers for things, but we always end up talking about school problems. This camp gave me a fresh perspective on them as people."

In the words of the late psychologist Carl Rogers (1969), "It is quite customary for teachers rather consciously to put on the mask, the role, the façade, of being a teacher and to wear this façade all day, removing it only when they have left school at night" (p. 107). These words ring true for many, and it might not be circumspect for educators to reveal their personal lives as an open book. However, when teachers allow students to see them as ordinary people with interests, talents, and lives outside the classroom, students can gain a new sense of respect for their abilities, interests, and even culture. In turn, this can heighten understanding and cultivate better student-teacher relationships. From the teacher's perspective, Part-Time Instructor B (personal communication, September 12, 2021) stated:

"I feel like the event affected my own image among students in a positive way; most of them had not met me before, but after the event, some of them were eager to tell me that they took my class and stayed longer to exchange a few words."

Associate Professor A (personal communication, September 12, 2021) added:

"I think the language teachers themselves are vital to these mini-courses as students view them in a different light from the usual classroom environment. The fact that language teachers represent different nationalities, outlooks, accents, and cultures but have English in common - also enhances their images."

### **Contributing to the Community and the Needs of Others is Fulfilling**

A compelling number of studies exist regarding the positive effects of community service and learning. Taking part in service-related activities can enhance critical thinking skills (Kraft, 2000; Ponder et al., 2011), increase social responsibility (Dharamsi et al., 2010; Hwang et al., 2019; Wray-Lake et al., 2016), improve academic outcomes (Soslau & Yost, 2007; Warren, 2012), and lead to better collaboration and communication as students work together to solve real-world problems (Crossman & Kite, 2007; Palpacuer Lee et al., 2018; Pope-Ruark et al., 2014). As educational institutions provide students with opportunities to prepare for their role as global citizens, experiential learning methods such as service-learning can effectively address contemporary issues and connect learning to real-life experiences.

Facilitating service and action-based experiences at a day camp or in a classroom gives students opportunities to actively participate in their community and discover how one individual can make a difference and raise awareness of issues within their locality. That is why a central theme of all camps at the university where this day camp occurred is local outreach and service. In normal years, overnight camps include community service activities such as hosting English-related events for children in rural areas, translating work, engaging in cultural exchanges, and cleaning historic buildings for public use. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions, travel and such service-related opportunities have been prohibited. In its place, the fundraiser mentioned above was done

for an orphanage in Hyogo Prefecture in need of playground equipment at its facility. Money from the sales, combined with teacher's donations, added up to a significant amount toward a good cause. Student E (personal communication, September 30, 2021) reflected on this by saying, "Raising money felt like we were doing something useful, more than just playing a game or competition." Part-Time Teacher B (personal communication, September 12, 2021) echoed this sentiment by stating:

"I think the game during which we raised money for the orphanage was a wonderful idea that raised the students' awareness of how important personal contribution can be, in a playful manner. The students definitely seemed to enjoy negotiating their prices for the items we had to offer, and also seemed to be aware that the event was being held for a greater cause."

### **Personal Growth is Developed Through New Experiences**

Student reflections show that communicating in English at a day camp can provide a unique medium for new experiences and personal development. For some, it was trying their hand at a new physical activity, such as dribbling a football, hitting a ball with a cricket bat, dancing, playing drums, juggling, or doing yoga. For others, it was a new mental exercise or relaxation, such as crocheting, nailmanicuring, or smelling the soothing aroma of roasting fresh coffee beans. Other personal encounters, such as being partnered with international students for a task, meeting someone from a different department or campus, or using English as the primary communication medium, are memorable new adventures. Second-year Student F (personal communication, September 30, 2021) from Nepal illustrated such sentiment by saying, "It was a new experience. It took no time becoming comfortable, making jokes, or saying what you want. With the other students, I felt instant rapport." Part-Time Instructor B (personal communication, September 12, 2021) stated:

"I also witnessed a different side of personal growth being developed when I saw students helping each other, either by showing each other the right way to do something during my mini-courses or explaining part of the task to each other using a few Japanese words besides talking in English."

Associate Professor A added:

"I think students have been quite fortunate in the quality, frequency, and diversity of new activities, extracurricular events, mini-courses, and camps. Strong motivation and desire to attend and to continue or extend these experiences in the future indicates that personal growth has no limits."

The statements above illustrate how new experiences can help create a fertile environment where students can stretch and grow. Conclusively, students' contributions as teachers or participants carry a day camp event to successfully increase confidence, motivation, and a feeling of acceptance. Consequently, self-consciousness, nervousness, language barriers, and personal insecurities can diminish as students take part in various actions where learning becomes a collective endeavor that is authentic and meaningful.

### **Conclusion**

When conducting day camp activities, adaptability can open up new experiences, solve minor problems creatively, and take the unexpected in stride. Although most activities ran smoothly and according to plan, a few mini-courses ran overtime, and some students arrived late. Relaxing the time schedule freed instructors to finish the work they started



without cutting anything off due to time constraints. Furthermore, adding small items to the program at the last minute was advantageous, such as creating new rules for a game or spontaneously giving students a chance to lob hundreds of water balloons at teachers who lined up as moving targets against a wall. Such flexibility resulted in maintaining a relaxed, "day camp" atmosphere rather than a feeling of being at school.

In retrospect, some improvements could be made for future day camps of this kind. First, maintaining social distancing was challenging, although verbal and written guidelines were clear. Undoubtedly, reasonable contact must be made between participants, but as the days wore on, students tended to cluster closer together, and some did not follow lunchtime eating precautions. If the pandemic continues and more day camps are held hereafter, concrete measures could be made to avoid excessive contact between participants. For example, sitting and eating areas could be marked, and larger classrooms could be reserved to allow for more space. A second reconsideration for future events could be to ensure an ample budget for mini-course materials. Although some classes did not require any supplies, a small budget was not quite enough to cover the rest. In the future, a better effort could be made to locate more existing materials that do not need to be purchased or slightly expand the budget for unexpected costs.

Having a day camp amid a pandemic may be somewhat controversial, but personal contact and communication between peers are of utmost importance even in the best of times. When students are isolated from each other, the nature of their educational experience radically changes. Therefore, conducting programs such as English day camps with mini-courses can promote camaraderie and give students opportunities to exercise their gifts, especially if they are involved as participants and not just as spectators. Giving students new opportunities to teach each other is also a powerful medium to create and fortify student leaders. Personal development and language acquisition can become enjoyable for all participants by learning new skills and having meaningful communication in a nonvirtual all-English environment. Students can once again attain a feeling of success, which instigates heightened motivation and a sense of belonging.

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## Appendix 1 – Google Form Content for Mini-Course Sign-ups

### Sign-up Form for Mini-Courses

Hi, everyone. Thank you for joining us! We have prepared a total of 14 mini-courses for you to try, so please select the ones that you want to experience. We will do our best to give you your first choices, but if there are too many people in one course, we might shift a few people to their second choices instead. The reasons for this are for social distancing and to help teachers know how much material to prepare for their courses.

Descriptions of each course are in the PDF sent to you via email. Please check them first!

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Student Number \_\_\_\_\_

### Saturday, September 11<sup>th</sup>

If you are not planning to attend this day, please skip to Sunday, September 12<sup>th</sup>.

Session 1 (10:30 ~ 11:25) Please select your first choice for this session.

- Fun with Juggling!
- Relaxation Yoga (via Zoom)
- Wood Printing
- Creating Your Own Online Business

Session 1 (10:30 ~ 11:25) Please select your second choice for this session.

- Fun with Juggling!
- Relaxation Yoga (via Zoom)
- Wood Printing
- Creating Your Own Online Business

Session 2 (11:30 ~ 12:25) Please select your first choice for this session.

- The Art of Crocheting
- Nail Manicuring
- River Nature Walk/Study

Session 2 (11:30 ~ 12:25) Please select your second choice for this session.

- The Art of Crocheting
- Nail Manicuring
- River Nature Walk/Study

### Sunday, September 12<sup>th</sup>

If you are not attending this day, please leave this section blank and click on the "Submit" button below.

Session 1 (10:30 ~ 11:25) Please select your first choice for this session.

- Real "関西弁" and Culture
- Dancing with the Stars!
- Storytelling (via Zoom)

Session 1 (10:30 ~ 11:25) Please select your second choice for this session.

- Real "関西弁" and Culture
- Dancing with the Stars!
- Storytelling (via Zoom)

Session 2 (11:30 ~ 12:25) Please select your first choice for this session.

Roasting and Brewing Coffee 101

Anyone Can Play Drums

Study in Canada! (via Zoom)

One more question! What kind of movie would you prefer to see on Sunday, September 12th in the CELL Forum?

Action/Superhero

Comedy

Animation (Disney, Pixar, etc.)

Science Fiction

Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_