Building Intercultural Spaces through Co-Creation: Insideness in Shared Living Spaces

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ABSTRACT
We explored the role of art in facilitating intercultural communication through a project in which undergraduate students from the United States and Japan co-created a digital collage of shared living spaces. Through the creation of personal dioramas and a collaborative collage, students shared personal stories and objects that were meaningful to their identity formation. Our research found that incorporating personal memories and cultural objects into art-making was an effective way of evoking a sense of insideness with a place and bridging cultural differences. The collage was a learning space where students negotiated differences and worked together to create a more inclusive place through vicarious insideness. This study highlights the potential for using art to facilitate intercultural communication and engage a sense of insideness in unfamiliar places among individuals from different cultures.

KEYWORDS: Intercultural Communication, Intercultural Space, Place, Insideness, Diorama, Collage

Art education is seen as playing a crucial role in facilitating intercultural understanding, global consciousness, and respect (Bianchi, 2011; Wilson, 2018; Zimmerman, 2002). In line with this, Melanie Davenport's (2003) Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education article underscores the need for an intercultural approach to art education in light of increasing global conflicts. Twenty years later, global polarization and conflict have only increased, with the rise of nationalism fueling xenophobia, racism, and discrimination. This illustrated the need for teaching understanding and tolerance, and promoting and facilitating intercultural education and communication is one of the means for achieving this goal (Zimmerman, 2002). Davenport (2003) emphasized that "intercultural differs from multicultural in its emphasis on understanding the interactions between cultural groups, rather than trying to appreciate any one culture-sharing group in isolation from others" (p. 119). The term intercultural communication is used interdisciplinarily in many fields with diverse definitions, interpretations, and perspectives (Alexander et al., 2014). It can be generally understood as "communication between people with different mindsets and ways of looking at and perceiving the world that go beyond the differences normally found among people who regard themselves as culturally similar" (Steinfatt & Millette, 2019, p. 308). By recognizing the differences and engaging in effective communication, intercultural communication can lead to greater understanding, knowledge, tolerance, and compassion among individuals from various cultural backgrounds (Cabedo-Mas et al., 2017). In order to confront global challenges, art education should provide students with the opportunity to learn to communicate interculturally and critically examine the value of differences.

With facilitating intercultural communication through art education in mind, we set out to conduct a pilot project bringing together undergraduate students currently living in the U.S. and Japan to share their place identity memories through dioramas and co-create a collage of shared living spaces virtually as a way to engage them in a spatial intercultural communication experience through art-making. We met at a virtual conference during the pandemic, a time of global unrest and travel restrictions. One of us is a U.S. higher education educator with a hybrid identity who grew up in Taiwan and studied in the U.S. Another of us is a Japanese higher education educator at a university in Japan with personal connections to and experience living in the Czech Republic. Both of us embody intercultural communication through our personal experiences of traveling across different continents and negotiating cultural differences and hybridity.

Place and Insideness

Our project centers on the ideas of place, or ibasho (居場所) in Japanese, and insideness. According to the online Japanese-English dictionary, Jisho.org, ibasho can be translated into English as "whereabouts; place; location; place where one belongs; where one fits in; place where one can be oneself" (居場所 - Jisho.org, n.d.). Lawrence-Zuniga (2017) further illuminates place as referring to "the elaborated cultural meanings people invest in or attach to a specific site or locale" (para. 1). Similarly, Ohta (2015) describes ibasho as an "environment with confirmation of identity" (p. 62), denoting a place of acceptance, self-establishment, and active communication (Abe, 2011). These definitions underscore how place or ibasho encompasses not just our physical location but also our identity, subjectivity, and social relationships. Building upon these definitions, our project further explores the concept of insideness—the extent of a person's attachment to a place that impacts their identity (Relph, 1976). The perception and interpretation of ibasho and the experience of insideness are pivotal in shaping our intercultural interactions and personal cultural identity (Janík, 2017).

In order to delve deeper into the concept of ibasho and understand the experience of insideness, we adopt the lens of humanistic geography.

This approach emphasizes the significance of human experience and meaning in shaping how people relate to locations and the settings in which they live (Seamon & Larsen, 2020). Using phenomenology as one of its philosophical foundations, humanistic geography applies phenomenology's emphasis on the subjective experiences of individuals and the ways in which our perceptions and experiences of the world shape our understanding of reality to understand the lived experiences of individuals in living spaces (Cresswell, 2008).

One of the most influential theoretical works in humanistic geography is Edward Relph's (1976) Place and Placelessness, in which he proposed the concept of insideness and outsideness. Relph argues that place is not just a physical location but also encompasses a person's emotional, cultural, and historical connections to that location. He states the importance of recognizing and valuing the significance of place in our lives and working towards creating a sense of place rooted in personal and cultural identity. Relph's concept of insideness refers to the subjective experience of being inside or belonging to a particular place. It emphasizes the importance of personal and emotional connections that individuals have with the places they inhabit and how these connections shape their sense of identity and attachment. According to Relph, a person's sense of identity with a certain location will be significantly strengthened the deeper they are inside that place (p. 49). On the contrary, outsideness refers to feeling disconnected from or estranged from a place (Relph, 1976; Seamon & Sowers, 2008). Relph further proposes seven distinctive ways of experiencing places, accentuating the different levels and categories of insideness and outsideness (p. 50). Among them, vicarious insideness resonates profoundly with our project. This mode of experiencing place through indirect methods mirrors the intimate experience of ibasho, which allows us to understand and connect with places through literature, art, or media (pp. 52-53). In our project, this vicarious insideness becomes crucial in sharing the experience of place with others.

Many art educators have worked on exploring the idea of place and space in relation to identity, community, and culture (e.g., Gradle, 2007; Gude, 2004; Lai & Ball, 2002; Paatela-Nieminen et al., 2016; Powell, 2008). Though similar to place-based art education (e.g., Bertling, 2018; Graham, 2007; Härkönen, 2018; Neves & Graham, 2018), which emphasizes the connection between people's experiences and place, our project views place/ibasho as more intimate and personal. The concept of vicarious insideness through the lens of art offers an avenue for exploring how we connect with others through places that constitute our identities.

The concepts from Relph (1976) are useful in understanding how people perceive and interact with different environments. Our personal experiences with places shape how we can connect with other people from different cultures. For example, sharing a similar experience with a place can be an important factor in developing relationships between individuals from different backgrounds. This is aligned with the place-based intercultural education approach (Härkönen, 2018; Nagi & Koehn, 2010). By understanding how personal experiences shape perception, we chose place/ibasho and insideness as the main concepts of our project, as they facilitate a better understanding of how to connect with others and build bridges between different cultures and communities.

Research Process

Our central research question in this project is: What intercultural communication experiences emerge through a communication process mediated by spatial artistic production? This question arises from our interest in exploring how shared art-making processes could foster intercultural understanding and facilitate dialogue about personal and cultural identities.

We designed two main phases for this engagement. In the first phase, all students are engaged in creating a diorama representing an important living place where they have a profound memory. Students wrote their narratives associated with the space and shared them with each other via Padlet, an online bulletin board. In this way, they can learn more about their peers and the personal and cultural identities associated with their memory and space. In the second phase, the U.S. and Japanese students were grouped together to collaboratively create a collage of shared living space virtually using Jamboard, an online whiteboard. The total duration of the project was eight weeks for the Japanese students and five weeks for the U.S. students. The difference was due to the fact that the Japanese students were in a face-to-face class that only met once a week, so they started making their dioramas three weeks earlier in class. The interaction time was three weeks for phase one and two weeks for phase two. Participating students are 12 U.S. junior-year undergraduate students in an online course in the elementary education program at a U.S. university and 4 Japanese junior-year undergraduate students in a seminar course in either the elementary or early childhood education program at a university in Japan. Each group included one Japanese member and three U.S. members. During the first phase, students interacted three to four times on Padlet. In the second phase, students were encouraged to check their Jamboard and interact every day. However, the interaction frequency differs among students.

We position this project as a pilot study to try out ideas. Our limitations include time differences that make real-time interaction impossible, language barriers and translation time that cause delays in communication, and different course delivery modes that

make instruction a challenge. However, these challenges are also opportunities to help students realize the complexity of intercultural communication.

Data were collected throughout the project from students' online interaction records, reflections, and works. We adopted an interpretative phenomenological qualitative analysis to identify emerging intercultural communication experiences, as the methodology concerns the study of lived experiences and recognizes the researcher's knowledge in interpreting the participants' experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2017). The data were dissected and interpreted based on themes related to students' experiences of places and intercultural communication. In the following, we present our analysis and findings on their emerging intercultural communication experiences.

Phase One: Creating Diorama to Tell Personal Memories of Ibasho

To facilitate students' reflection on memory and experiences with a place/ibasho and to help them learn more about other students from another country, both U.S. and Japanese students are asked to create a diorama representing a place important to their formation of identity and write a narrative about an experience with the place. After creating their diorama, they also recorded a video to introduce it. They posted their videos, photos of dioramas, and narratives on Padlet to interact and communicate with their counterparts.

Creating a diorama has been a popular method for storytelling (Dunmall, 2015; Tzou et al., 2019). Artists such as Karen Collins, Pinkie Strothers, and Curtis Talwst Santiago all use dioramas to tell stories about their communities, histories, and memories. For example, Karen Collins is best known for her African American Miniature Museum, a collection of dioramas that depict events to tell the stories of African American history and culture. Collins uses her dioramas as a way of exploring and communicating the rich history and diverse experiences of African Americans. Similarly, Pinkie Strothers recreated her childhood home, church, and other community places to explore themes of family, community, and Black history (Carver, 2021). Further, Curtis Talwst Santiago creates scenes in jewelry boxes that represent his parents' basement, catastrophic events, and history to explore memories and experiences (Curtis Talwst Santiago, n.d.; Ebert, 2022). Despite being criticized for becoming a tired school project, dioramas are regarded as a valuable arts-integrated learning experience (Marshall, 2006; Reiss & Tunnicliffe, 2011). Additionally, dioramas have been utilized as an artistic medium for examining practices and ideals in education (Hoekstra, 2019). Dioramas have become a popular medium for examining and expressing thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

In our project, dioramas are the anchors for students to tell their identity memory stories relating to a place/ibasho through art-making. They are also materials for students to experience vicarious insideness, which reflects others' identities, stories, and relationships to familiar places. We analyze how students connect with other people through their sharing of dioramas and narratives, and their interactions on the Padlet board.

The experience of making a diorama helped students embody their personal memories and identities. Most students reflected that the process enabled them to recall the details of their memories within the place/ibasho and rebuild them in a creative way. In discussing the process of making the diorama, one student expressed that she could almost hear her family during the process, and another was overwhelmed by all the memories they made in the space when creating hers. As a student said, he puts "fragmented memories of the past into pieces one by one" (M.Y., personal communication, July 2022). They used their memories to construct the insideness of the place in the diorama.

Students were able to make a connection through their dioramas, indicating common experiences from their memories. Relph (2018) identified three components to observe and describe the identity of a place, including physical components (buildings, objects, and landscape), activities, and subjective meanings and cultural interpretations (pp. 9-10). Our personal identity and experiences within a place can also be understood through these components. In analyzing students' interactions, we found students used two of these, activities and physical components, to build their connections.

Connecting through Activities: What is Snow Cream?

Commenting on a Japanese student's work focusing on a room with a window with icicles hanging down (Figure 1), a U.S. student said:

> This room makes me feel a sense of nostalgia. When I was younger my brother and I would watch out of the windows looking at the snow. It doesn't rain a lot where I'm from so snow days were special. Similar to you, I would try to take inside icicles and snow to cherish the memories. We would make snow cream a lot which was really fun. (B.M., personal communication, July 2022)

Figure 1. *Student diorama, Winter Window.*

Initially, a place with outsideness—a room from a stranger—turns into what Ralph called vicarious insideness. Through an artistic diorama, the insideness of two students' memories intersected with each other. Ralph explains that "vicarious insideness happens when we engage with a place in imagination, for instance through works or art or reading about them. It is perhaps most pronounced when the depiction of a place corresponds with our experiences of similar places" (Relph, 2018, p. 11).

This is important because this vicarious insideness is the bridge for the intercultural communication experience. Through this bridge, students connect, interact, and share memories. In responding to the U.S. student's comment, the Japanese student said:

> I want to know what "snow cream" is. Is it like a dessert with snow? Neither I nor my sister are very tall, but I think the reason I climbed up to chairs, shelves, beds, etc. and got icicles was because they were slanted as if they were piercing the room due to the influence of the wind. When we were little, we longed to touch icicles, and were looking forward to it. ... When I find icicles in winter, I remember the memories with my sister and of icicles being secretly taken into the house. This memory reminds me of many memories with my sister, makes me feel nostalgic, and makes me want to visit my parents' home. (I.M., personal communication, July 2022)

There opens up the conversation about dessert, snow day, and playing.

The activities students from both the U.S. and Japan shared created a connection for them.

Connecting through Physical Components: Is It a Window?

A Japanese student created a Japanese-style room (Figure 2) at his parent's house, which he would use to study and rest. A U.S. student commented that

> This room looks very open and inviting because of the large window. I think that is a wonderful feature. I would love the sunshine peaking in or watching the rain fall outside if I were in this room. I can relate to this room because my childhood home had a window room and it was one of my favorite rooms in the house. … I noticed that you said not many homes have traditional Japanese rooms. Why do you think this is and do you wish that would change? (S.O., personal communication, July 2022)

Figure 2. *Student diorama, Japanese-Style Room.*

The connection the U.S. student made was through physical space. The U.S. student shows her appreciation for the room and its open design, expressing her fondness for the large window. The Japanese student replied:

> This room is definitely very open. If you leave the window (called fusuma in Japanese) open, passers-by will be able to see inside the room! However, since the fusuma is made of paper instead of glass, there is basically no need to worry

> about looking inside the room. Instead, the cats I used to have often broke it. … [T]raditional Japanese rooms are difficult to maintain and may not be preferred by those seeking practicality. I think it cannot be helped to change, but I don't think it should be weeded out. (S.S., personal communication, July 2022)

What the Japanese student call fusuma, a partition or door, also has the structure of what is called shoji in Japan. The shoji, which is a thin wooden frame with washi paper pasted on it, functions as a window, a partition, and a door. Although the U.S. student did not understand the details of the flexible function of the fusuma/shoji, the Japanese student responded and explained the cultural significance of the fusuma, and the reasons why traditional Japanese rooms are becoming less common. Their interaction focuses on the physical structure of the room. The U.S. student's initial interpretation of the fusuma as a window shows their lack of familiarity with Japanese structures with multiple uses. Making connections through physical structure runs the danger of misinterpreting the cultural significance of a space.

More Commonalities Than Differences

In the process of sharing their dioramas, students surprisingly discovered that they shared more similarities than differences. Both U.S. and Japanese students found common ground in their memories and experiences related to their spaces, thus revealing shared aspects of human experience despite their cultural differences.

For instance, a U.S. student initially held the misconception that the Japanese students' work would be strikingly different from their own. However, upon seeing the Japanese students' dioramas, the student shared:

> I was shocked at how familiar their identity house looked. From the way the furniture was positioned to the story of how the student and their family would play with their pets in the room. This all reminded me of my childhood and it was very comforting. (G.J., personal communication, August 2022)

This reflection offered an interesting insight into how individuals from different cultural backgrounds can still find shared commonalities in how they experience the world. Though this observation hinted at cultural, social, or other factors potentially influencing individuals' perception and interpretation of places, the dioramas in this project ultimately highlighted the commonalities of certain human experiences.

Phase Two: Co-Creating a Shared Living Space

The second phase reflects a completely digital endeavor. Students were given the assignment to collaborate and share ideas in order to design a shared living space in which they would feel at ease spending time with other group members. Each group includes a Japanese member and three U.S. members. They used Jamboard as a communication tool (Figure 3) and the canvas to create a collage of their shared living space with the inclusion of each person's selected object.

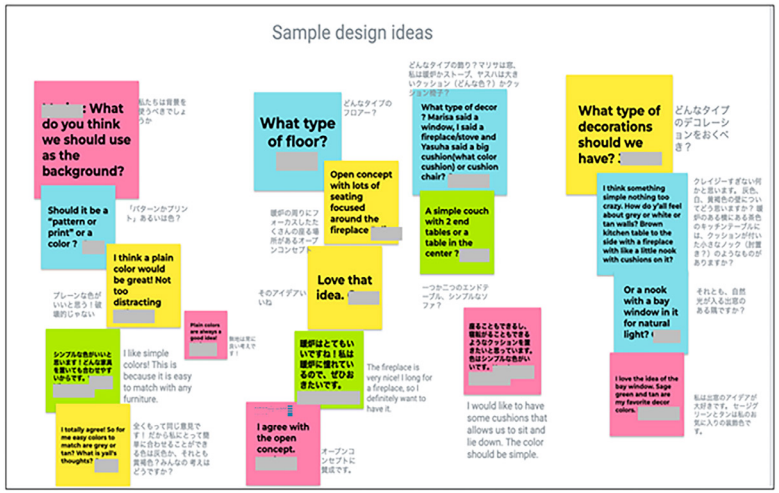

Figure 3. *A group's example of their communication on Jamboard.*

Bring Your Object to Our Space

At the beginning of phase two, students were asked to select an object from their diorama to be placed in their collaborative virtual living space. Students in groups first shared their objects and the reasons they chose them with other group members. This was a bridge step to help students generate more intense insideness feelings in the virtual living space they were going to create together (Relph, 1976). Objects are part of the construct of the places one experiences and shares personal histories (Bey, 2012). Sherry Turkle (2007) contends that the objects in our environment play a significant part in determining our thoughts and feelings and that these objects have a special capacity to evoke memories and emotions, functioning as a kind of "external memory" that can be used to reflect on the self and one's relationship to the rest of the world. In this exercise, objects provide the student with an opportunity to access those feelings in an unknown new virtual space

and create a meaningful connection between the yet-to-be-created new space with peers and their personal space and identity.

Some examples of interesting objects that were selected include a Gundam (Japanese anime) helmet by a Japanese student, a French door by a U.S. student, and a fireplace by a U.S. student. Other more common objects, including cushions, pictures, and books, are all connected to each student's place and personal identity. There were mixed feelings about the process of negotiating and placing the objects in the shared living space. Some students found it interesting, while others had difficulties or were anxious, experiencing a juncture of intercultural communication. For example, a U.S. student reflected that seeing Japanese students' objects was intriguing because these objects are not commonly seen in the U.S. (Figure 4). On the other hand, a Japanese student in the same group reflected that:

> The members of the group had designated objects that they had feelings for or could get sentimental about, whereas I chose an anime toy, and I was worried that it would be considered unserious. It was as if I was grabbing at the air, as if I were trying to get a laugh. (S.S., personal communication, August 2022)

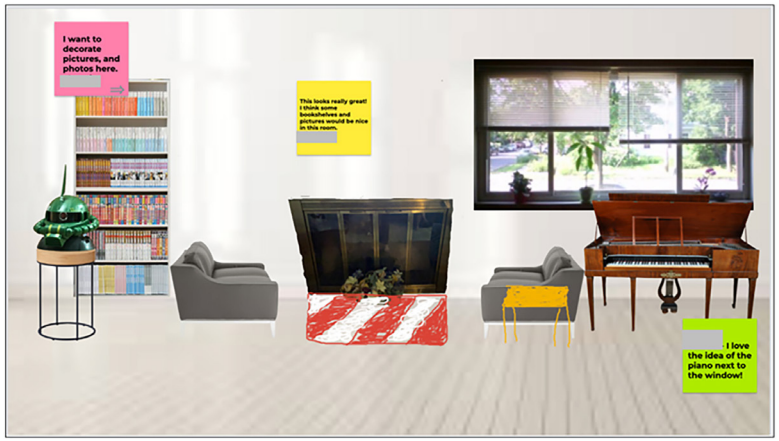

Figure 4. *A group's example of placing different objects together.*

Regardless of the different cultural perspectives on approaching the differences of objects, this process of object selection and arrangement was seen as a way to build community as it opened up a dialogue between students of different nationalities. Students learned not only about objects, space, and culture but also about different cultural communication styles. As a Japanese student reflected:

> When the idea of incorporating a fireplace came up, I thought to myself, "I would love to have a fireplace myself," but I had never actually seen a room with a fireplace, and I wasn't quite sure how it should be placed in a room. However, when the discussion was led by an American student who was good at organizing the conversation, I felt that she was good at discussing things and was stimulated by the way she spoke to members, asking them questions while expressing her own opinions. (M.Y., personal communication, August 2022)

This quote highlights the project's dual efficacy: it facilitates an understanding of cultural nuances in object selection and arrangement and also cultivates an appreciation for different communication styles. The Japanese student's reflections demonstrate how the collaborative exercise provided valuable insights into American conversational approaches. The process not only promoted the understanding of diverse cultural perspectives but also nurtured intercultural communication skills.

Collaging a Shared Space through Democratic Insideness

According to students' final summative reflection, most students were satisfied with the final space they created. They consider the process smooth. As a student reflected:

> I think the process was smooth because everyone in my group picked an item that was unique from the others, but still allowed for the room to make sense. We also worked well together in communicating ideas for what we each thought was important for the room. Luckily, we agreed on the design process of the room, and I think our room equally represented everyone's interests and ideas. (M.R., personal communication, August 2022)

The inclusion of a mix of objects is a challenge for some students, but they learn to tolerate things they do not like. A student said,

> If I had to change anything about our project, it would be some of the décor in the room. For example, our Japanese partner chose a decoration that reflected their favorite anime show. I love the idea of personalization to the room, but I am not a huge fan of anime. (J.D., personal communication, August 2022)

However, students tried to make sure everyone was well represented, and it was clear that the process involved them thinking about equal cultural representation. It is worth noting that students were not given directions for creating a space with equal cultural representation. However, this was shown in all of the group's final works, demonstrating their awareness of inclusivity. As another student said, "I tried to be very mindful of what my other group members had said they enjoy and pick pieces that would be appreciated by everyone" (L.O., personal communication, August 2022).

In one of the groups, a student came up with the idea of including everyone's favorite books on the bookcase, and this made them feel the space was more personal and special to them (Figure 5). A member reflected, "I was moved by the room full of everyone's thoughts and feelings. I was delighted and amazed at the ability to share thoughts and ideas with each other, even though we were far apart in location" (I.M., personal communication, August 2022). Her comment shows that a sense of insideness was achieved through the democratic process of co-creation.

Figure 5. *A group's example of the final collage of shared living space.*

The process was an opportunity for students to engage in vicarious insideness and deeply relate to others' personal memories through their selected objects. As students shared and discussed their objects, they began to perceive others' experiences through the lens of vicarious insideness. This process of creating a shared living space fostered a new insideness we called democratic insideness that demonstrated a shared willingness to accept and incorporate different perspectives. This was a powerful learning experience for the students and helped foster a sense of connection and understanding despite differences in cultural background and personal interests. The virtual living space became a place of learning (Ellsworth, 2005) that is dynamic and constantly evolving; this can be interpreted as an effort to construct a democratic insideness that embraces differences.

Intercultural Space

The project described in this article was a successful example of intercultural communication and collaboration. It showed how art education could be used as a tool to bring together students from different backgrounds and cultures and to help them understand and appreciate others' experiences even when there are cultural differences. Our findings showed that incorporating personal memories with a place/ibasho is a highly effective method for building a communication bridge between students from different cultural backgrounds. By tapping into their experiences and emotions surrounding a place/ibasho, students were able to create a sense of insideness and belonging in a new environment. In addition, sharing objects that are connected to students' identities proved to be an effective way to engage them in intercultural communication. This allowed students to share their memories and experiences with each other and to learn about different cultural experiences. Finally, the virtual collage became a learning space where students could negotiate differences and work together to create a more inclusive space. Through this process, students gained valuable experience in collaboration, communicating their ideas, accepting others' differences, and problem-solving.

These findings highlight the potential of art education to promote intercultural communication and foster a more inclusive and understanding global society. The process of the project created an intercultural space where students negotiated their different personal identities and the insideness and outsideness of the new shared space. By tapping into students' personal memories and experiences and providing opportunities for students to share their cultures and perspectives, art education can play a vital role in reflecting cultural diversity and changing context in our global landscape, as well as providing students with the tools to interweave space of insideness as a democratic ibasho with personal and emotional connections between different others.

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