

Article

Optimizing Opportunities for Engagement and Empowerment Through International Days

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International Days

As noted on the United Nations website, "The United Nations designates specific days, weeks, years and decades as occasions to mark particular events or topics in order to promote, through awareness and action, the objectives of the Organization."¹ For a detailed explanation of the objectives, one can read through the Charter of the United Nations, signed on June 26, 1945, but suffice to say that the objectives of the UN include maintaining international peace and security, developing friendly relations among nations, and achieving international cooperation in solving international problems. One way to raise student awareness about the United Nations and its various activities and campaigns aimed at achieving its objectives is to promote some of the International Days that it recognizes.

As of January 10, 2021, there were 175 International Days on the United Nations website, with some of them sharing the same calendar date. For example, in 2020, World Book and Copyright Day, English Language Day, Spanish Language Day and International Girls in ICT Day were all celebrated on April 23rd. As International Girls in ICT Day is celebrated each year on the 4th Wednesday in April, the calendar date varies slightly each year. If we remove from consideration the 32 International Days that are designated in months outside of Chukyo's academic school year (February, March and August), this still leaves us with 143 International Days to consider introducing in our classes.

Why recognizing International Days is important

Recognizing and celebrating International Days throughout the year enables students to be more informed global citizens, noting that the issues and themes of these days are not only local, but global, and helping students recognize the need to promote them. It raises

1 All references to the United Nations International Days can be found following this link: <https://www.un.org/en/sections/observances/international-days/>

their awareness and depth of knowledge on a variety of issues while empowering them with opportunities for further engagement when so inclined. Students have often returned from study abroad programs explaining how embarrassed and naive they felt about their lack of knowledge compared to their classmates from other countries when global issues were raised.

Recognizing and celebrating International Days also helps learners grow as individuals, fuels connection, and fosters a sense of inclusion and community. Even at the university level, students are still figuring out who they are and what they care about. They can often feel disconnected from society, indifferent to world issues, and question the value or purpose of their educational experiences. The introduction of International Days enables students to realize which topics resonate strongly with them and helps them understand why they should care more about topics they previously had never contemplated, and carry their concerns into their lives after graduation. Developing their awareness and knowledge of various global issues thus empowers students with opportunities to participate in discussions and events, take action, and even broaden their horizons in terms of career choices.

Furthermore, from a linguistic point of view, the language used on the UN website and related links for promoting International Days provides a plethora of opportunities for expanding and deepening the English vocabulary of our students while providing repeated exposure to authentic English varieties as spoken and written by members of the international community.

Suggestions for the inclusion of International Days as part of lesson plans

The inclusion of International Days in a course syllabus can be as simple as acknowledging a selected number of them in the weeks in which they arise. In the past, I often waited to introduce each International Day until the actual date of its celebration. However, this situation might make students feel left out and disappointed at not having enough prior notice to be able to arrange their schedules in ways that allow them to engage in activities related to the days in meaningful ways. On the other hand, if students are given the information too far in advance, they are likely to have forgotten about the International Days and events by the time they are held.

Therefore, I have revised my lessons so that, as much as possible, I inform my students about International Days and ways they can participate at least one week in advance. I also make a point of reminding them in class on the week in which the International Day actually occurs, often engaging them in the memory retrieval process by asking them to identify and elaborate on the International Day that is taking place.

In addition to giving them time to join in events or activities that the teacher introduces,

providing information about International Days in advance enables students to find or create their own events or activities for celebrating the days. It is also important to keep in mind that some International Days have creative writing or other types of contests with deadlines well in advance of the dates on which they occur. This allows the winners of the contests to be announced and celebrated on the actual International Days for which the contests were created. For example, while the International Day of Education is celebrated in January, submissions for the 2021 writing competition were open between 29 June 2020 and 30 November 2020, with the announcement of the winners taking place on 24 January 2021. A creative writing contest, in which participants submitted their imaginary "Conversation with the Little Prince" about their confinement during lockdown, celebrated the 120th anniversary of the birth of Antoine de Saint-Exupery. In this particular case, the contest was free and open to children, adolescents and young adults under 25.

While it might be unrealistic to expect to introduce all of the International Days which fall within the academic calendar, I would like to introduce some of the International Days that I have shared with my students in the past, and ways in which these days can be celebrated while still leaving plenty of room for the contents of each course.

April

While I have recommended introducing International Days prior to the date on which they are actually celebrated, the academic calendar doesn't always make this possible. For example, the first International Day in April that I like to introduce to students is World Health Day, which is celebrated on April 7th. Even though the actual day has usually already passed before we have our first class, I like to use this International Day to get students to discuss and reflect on some of the basics regarding sleep, diet and exercise. Due to the sedentary nature of most classes, I have incorporated the 5-minute TED-Ed video, "Why sitting is bad for you" by Murat Dalkilinc². The video informs learners of negative effects of sitting too much, not only for their health, but also for their memories, which is a great way to help them understand why we take breaks during class to get up, stretch and move around. Of course, the degree to which students take the information to heart and put their newly acquired knowledge in action is largely up to them. However, imparting them with such information is a first step in empowerment, helping them decide to what degree they take measures to increase the effectiveness of their studies.

World Creativity and Innovation Day, celebrated on April 21st, World Mother Earth

2 Dalkilinc, Murat (2015). Why sitting is bad for you. TED Ed.
https://www.ted.com/talks/murat_dalkilinc_why_sitting_is_bad_for_you/transcript?language=en

Day, celebrated on April 22nd, and World Jazz Day, celebrated on April 30th, are additional International Days in April that I usually introduce to my students.

As educators, celebrating World Creativity and Innovation Day can be as simple as asking students to write their own endings to a story that the class has begun reading or asking them to write an imaginary conversation between themselves and someone who they would like to meet. In addition to providing a calendar of International Days, the United Nations also provides resources for elaborating about the International Days in class, such as the UN News article, "5 world-changing ideas: our top picks for World Creativity and Innovation Day"³. In this article, one example of innovation was the use of a drone to deliver a vaccine to a remote mountain area in Vanuatu.

Once introduced to the day, students can be prompted to reflect on their own observations of creativity and innovation before discovering some chosen by the teacher. As a follow up, students can be encouraged to research the creativity and innovation of individuals, companies and industries in which they have particular interest. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the demand for innovation that it placed on businesses, educational institutions, and organizations, it was easy to highlight and celebrate the power of creativity and innovation with timely examples. One of my favorites was social distancing hacks for preventing the spread of the coronavirus, such as the use of umbrellas and meter-long hats at schools. I also learned that some students started generating their own income from becoming YouTubers or other types of influencers on social media. In one class, a student shared that she already had over 7,000 followers on one of her social networking platforms.

On World Mother Earth Day, celebrated each year on April 22nd, a few minutes of class time can be devoted to considering students' environmental consciousness or tying the theme together with the main content of the class. The two logos in Image 1 were provided by the United Nations to remind everyone that they can take immediate action by reducing their energy consumption and by purchasing locally grown products. Students can also take a moment to consider the possible environmental consequences of the actions of fictional or non-fictional characters in their class materials.

As I start each of my classes, regardless of content, with some type of music, the question of how to celebrate World Jazz Day on April 30th is a "no-brainer".



3 United Nations (2019). "5 world-changing ideas: our top picks for World Creativity and Innovation Day", UN News. Accessed January 2021 at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/04/1036991>

I usually choose a Jazz song to play at the beginning of class and then have students talk about their musical preferences.

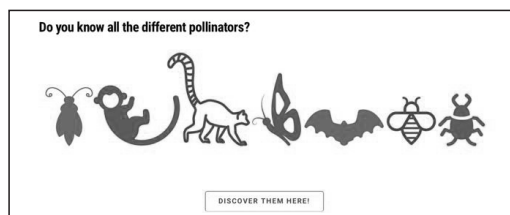
May

As of the time of writing this article, the first International Day in May is World Tuna Day, celebrated on May 2nd. This gives students a chance to consider the role tuna plays in their diets, not only for its taste, but for its various health benefits. It also helps them consider ways to ensure that tuna and other seafood consumption is done in a sustainable way. For example, they can check which restaurants sell tuna that is certified by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), a nonprofit organization that sets standards for sustainable fishing. Fortunately, some seafood restaurants in Japan are including information related to sustainability on their menus⁴.

May also hosts one of the easiest days to connect with students, International Day of Families, which is celebrated on May 15th. This allows students to examine the changing trends in family dynamics, such as smaller families and single-parent families, or families in which the biological parents are not present in the household. Acknowledging these trends can bring a sense of inclusion to students who may have felt uncomfortable with family situations sometimes considered strange or uncommon.

Novelty is also a benefit of International Days. May 20th was designated as World Bee Day in 2020. The United Nations, and in particular, its Food and Agriculture Organization, provide short videos, sometimes under one minute in duration, and other forms of informative materials that help liven up a topic without taking up a lot of class time. For this particular day, students not only get a quick glimpse into the importance of bees and other pollinators, they are also provided with simple actions they can take to help, such as growing flowering plants on their balconies and leaving small amounts of water in saucers outside to help bees through the hot summers. They are also encouraged to check their knowledge of other pollinators and the roles they play in our ecosystems. Image 2 is provided on the United Nations website as a link that can prompt further investigation by students.

The UN also sometimes provides clarifi-



4 Swinnerton, Robbie (2020). "Sincere Blue makes the vase for sustainable seafood", The Japan Times, September 19, 2020. Accessed January 2021 at: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2020/09/19/food/sincere-blue-makes-case-sustainable-seafood/>

cation as to why International Days are set on specific days or dates and why a particular theme related to that day is selected for a particular year. For example, the UN website explains that May 20th was chosen as World Bee Day because it coincides with the birthday of Anton Jansa, who is recognized for pioneering modern beekeeping techniques in Slovenia.

However, if teaching about World Bee on May 20th is not your cup of tea, you can teach about World Tea Day on May 21st, which, as the U.N. explains, is the world's most consumed beverage aside from water itself. Students may be surprised to learn about how tea production is aiding in the reduction of extreme poverty, the fight against hunger, the empowerment of women and the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, all of which are Sustainable Development Goals⁵. In a video that is only 1 minute and 30 seconds in length, students can rejoice in the fact that Shizuoka's tea-grass system is currently recognized by the Food and Agricultural Organization as one of four Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems.

June

World Bicycle Day, on June 3rd is a great way to remind students of the importance of including regular physical activity of moderate intensity. The UN website points out that infrastructure for walking and cycling is a pathway for achieving greater health equity, by providing people with a mode of transport that can reduce heart disease, stroke and other lifestyle related illnesses. With many classes being held remotely in 2020 and possibly 2021, and part-time work schedules significantly reduced, it is likely that students needed and in the future will need to be reminded of the importance of getting some exercise. I like to encourage students to discuss the need for designated bicycle lanes in Japan in order to improve safety for cyclists and pedestrians. Taking a few minutes to discuss the environmental benefits for cities and countries that promote the use of bicycles for commuting is also a worthwhile endeavor.

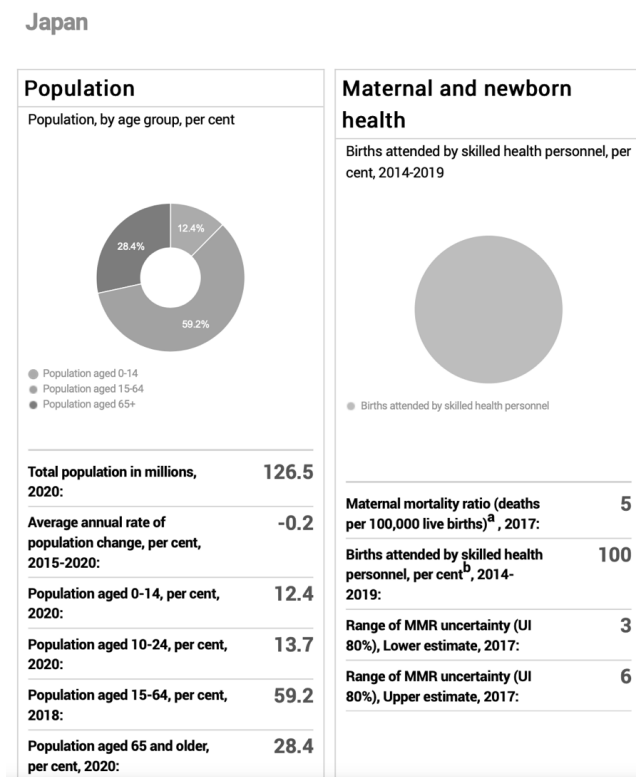
One of my favorite days to highlight in June is World Refugee Day, held annually on June 20th. In addition to the wonderful resources provided by the United Nations each year on this subject, World Refugee Film Festivals are usually held in Nagoya and elsewhere in Japan. If nothing else, the movie trailers for some of the films can be played in class or provided as links in MaNaBo or Google Classroom. Even two or three minutes of a documentary movie trailer can be a great springboard for discussions related to refugees and policies in different countries regarding asylum seekers. Students are often surprised to learn of the

5 United Nations (2015). The 17 Goals. Accessed January 2021 at: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

situations that lead people to become refugees, such as after watching the trailer of *Unsettled*, a documentary about LGBT refugees who escaped intense persecution in their home countries.

July

On July 11th, the United Nations celebrates World Population Day. While Japan struggles with its own shrinking and aging population issues, it is useful to put these problems into perspective with a comparison of population issues in other countries. One of the many useful resources provided by the United Nations regarding population is the World Population Dashboard, which allows students to browse annually updated information by country, such as fertility rates, access to family planning, and other issues related to population growth. Image 3 is a screenshot of the World Population Dashboard⁶ for Japan accessed in 2020.



6 United Nations Population Fund (2020). World Population Dashboard. Accessed January 2021 at: <https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population-dashboard>

Nelson Mandela International Day is celebrated on July 18th. The day is also a day which calls on each person to make a difference in his or her own community, stating that we each have the ability as well as the responsibility to do so. When first asked, many university students are unable to recall anything about who Nelson Mandela was or what he accomplished in his lifetime. After watching a few scenes from the film *Invictus*, many students have reported that they watched the film on their own after class.

July 30th is World Day Against Human Trafficking. For native English speakers, one mention of the expression human trafficking, and we have a pretty good idea of what that means. However, many Japanese university students have little if any understanding of the scope in which human trafficking is taking place in the world today. Yet the International Labor Office reports that one in every 200 people in the world is being forced into work and living conditions resulting from trafficking in persons⁷. Thus, marking July 30th as World Day Against Trafficking in Persons and showing a video of one or two minutes in duration illustrating a few of the ways in which victims are tricked into being trafficked can be quite an eye-opening experience. For instance, many students are interested in working in the airline industry. They might not realize that many human trafficking victims are transported via commercial aircraft, and that agencies within the United Nations have cooperated to create a free e-learning course for potentially identifying and assisting human trafficking victims on flights⁸.

September

When classes resume in September, International Day of Democracy can help students appreciate the importance of access to information. One of the links on the United Nations website for this day was a two-minute video created by UNESCO titled, "Access to Information: A Universal Right"⁹. Through this short video, students learn how the right of every citizen to have access to information helps hold governments accountable and helps reduce corruption.

7 Hodal, Kate (2019). "One in 200 people is a slave. Why?" *The Guardian*, February 25, 2019; retrieved January 18, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/feb/25/modern-slavery-trafficking-persons-one-in-200>

8 ICAO (2018). Circular 352. Guidelines for Training Cabin Crew on Identifying and Responding to Trafficking in Persons. Accessed January 2021 at: <https://www.icao.int/safety/airnavigation/OPS/CabinSafety/Documents/Cir.352.alltext.en.pdf>

9 UNESCO (2017). Access to Information... A Universal Right. Video accessed January 2021 at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=og-UNP1ZvPU>

September 18th is International Equal Pay Day. At the time this article was written, the United Nations reported that worldwide, women make only 77 cents for every dollar men earn for work of equal value¹⁰. A #Stoptherobbery-Equal pay campaign video of only 2 minutes and 30 seconds in duration does a fantastic job of demonstrating the situation¹¹. Two shoeshine stands are placed next to each other: with the one run by a man offering shoeshines for a dollar, and another one run by a woman offering shoeshines for 77 cents. As customers sit for their shoeshines, the injustice being done by paying women less for the same work is explained.

To further lighten the mood but drive home the point even more, I like to show a video of the Capuchin Monkey Fairness Experiment, in which a monkey expresses its dissatisfaction once another monkey is rewarded with a grape for the same work that the first monkey is rewarded with a cucumber¹². The first monkey's reactions, which include throwing pieces of cucumber, slamming the desk, and rattling its cage, bring comic relief to a situation that can be quite frustrating. However, it can also educate students on the importance of fairness and empower them to demand equal pay for equal work.

Two other International Days celebrated in September that are usually of high interest to students are World Tourism Day on September 27th and International Translation Day on September 30th. The UN website provides lots of useful information, such as the fact that tourism employs one in every ten people on Earth. Information related to COVID-19, such as the forecast that 100 to 120 million direct tourism jobs are at risk, and the likelihood that domestic tourism will rebound before international tourism, may help students identify and make more informed decisions about potential sources of employment or observe more closely how such industries have to adapt.

October

The International Days in October begin with International Day of Older Persons (October 1st). While population ageing is nothing new to Japan, the United Nations website reminds us that it is a global phenomenon, with implications for nearly all sections of society. Many students can relate directly to this day through their relationships with their

10 UN Women (2017). Equal pay for work of equal value. Retrieved January 2021 at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/csw61/equal-pay>

11 Un Women (2017). #Stoptherobbery - Equal Pay Campaign. Video accessed January 2021 at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUDGK_wLi1w&feature=emb_logo

12 De Waal, Frans (2011). Moral Behavior in Animals. TEDxPeachtree, November 2011. Segment accessed January 2021 at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKhAd0Tyny0>

grandparents and great-grandparents. They also are able to contribute ways in which businesses are adapting in order to cater more to the ageing population, such as at their part-time jobs.

A powerful follow-up activity has been to encourage students to interview an elderly person about some aspect of his or her life. Some students take it upon themselves to interview family members. Others have taken the opportunity and initiative to interview complete strangers, such as an elderly person who inspired one student by their commitment to swimming each day at the gym to which they both belonged. As it is projected that over the next three decades, the number of aged people in the world will more than double, and that less than 20% of older persons of retirement age are receiving a pension, there is a lot of room for contemplation on this subject.

World Mental Health Day, celebrated on October 10th, is another day which I find of considerable relevance to Japanese university students. According to the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labor, in October of 2020 alone, Japan recorded over 2,100 suicides¹³. Fortunately, there are people taking action, and students can be inspired by people like Koki Ozora, who at the age of 21, established the Japanese online counseling site, "Anata no ibasho" in March 2020¹⁴.

November

November 5th is World Tsunami Awareness Day. Perhaps not surprisingly, this day was the brainchild of Japan. The events of March 11th, 2011 are a stark reminder that while tsunamis are rare events, they do occur, and it is important in Japan and other areas at risk to be prepared.

November 19th is World Toilet Day. It celebrates toilets and reminds us that without access to them, people often have no choice but to practice open defecation, which gets out into the environment and spreads deadly chronic diseases, like cholera and intestinal worms.

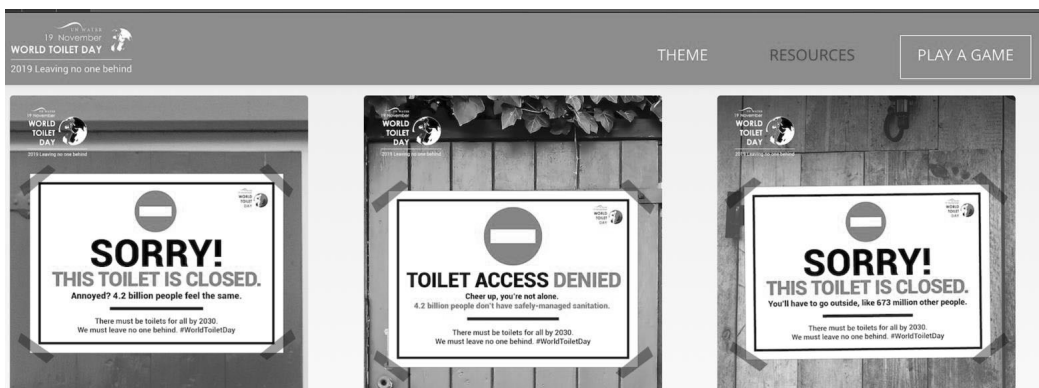
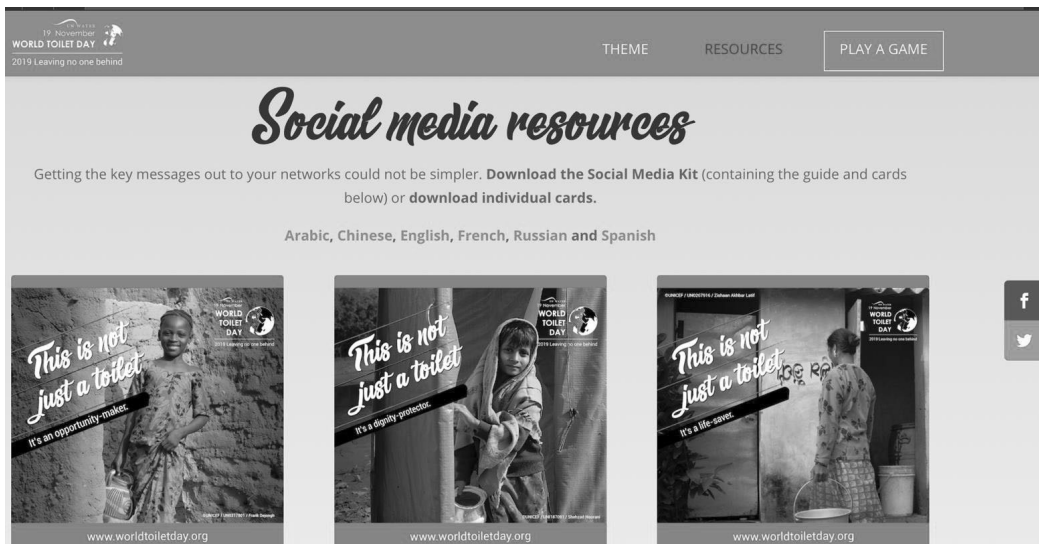
13 Wang, Selina, et al. (2020). "In Japan, more people died from suicide last month than from Covid in all of 2020. And women have been impacted most", CNN November 30, 2020. Accessed January 2021 at:

<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/28/asia/japan-suicide-women-covid-dst-intl-hnk/index.html>

14 Bhardwaj, Naina (2020). "Suicide among women surges as more people in Japan kill themselves in a single month than the total number lost to COVID-19 in 2020", Insider, December 11, 2020. Accessed January 2021 at:

<https://www.insider.com/japan-more-suicide-deaths-in-october-than-from-covid-19-in-2020>

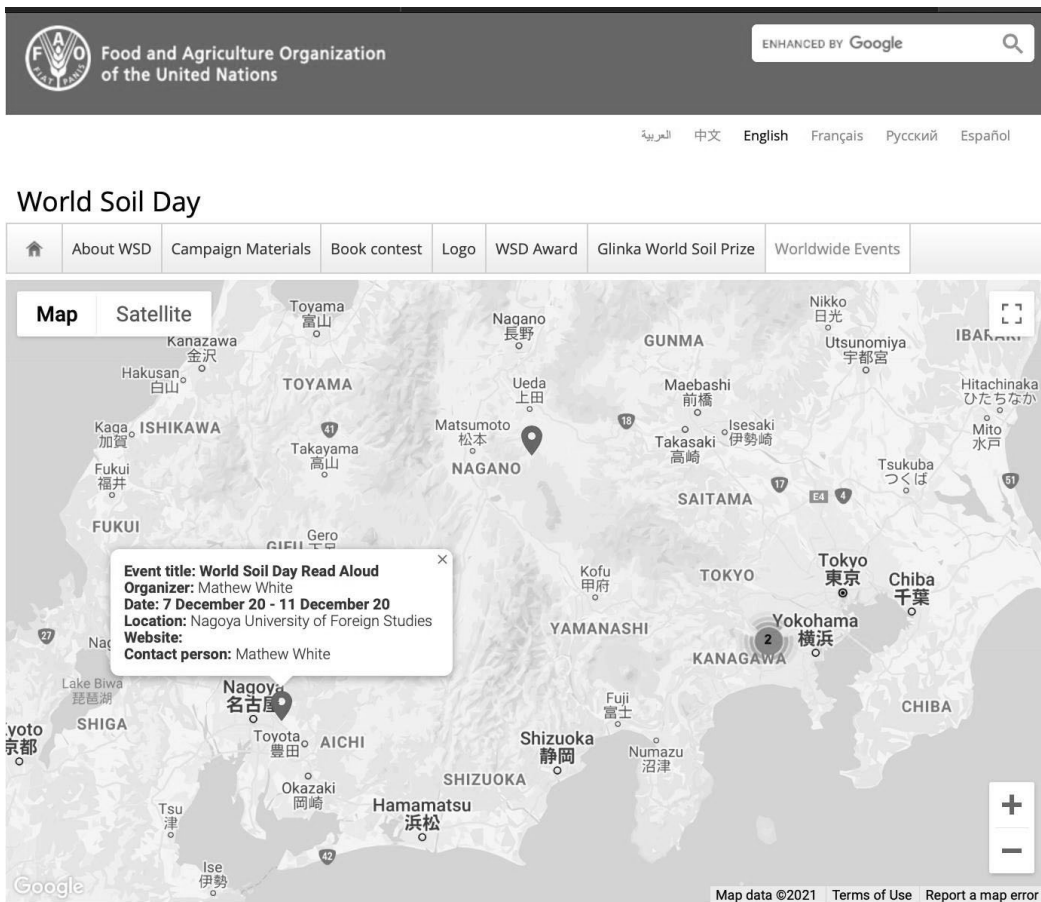
UNICEF reports that 4.2 billion people are living without access to safely managed sanitation, and that over 700 children die each day from diarrhea caused by unsafe water, sanitation and poor hygiene¹⁵. It's not all doom and gloom though. In the Success Stories we learn that in 2019 UNICEF helped 2058 villages, representing 617,400 people, become certified ODF (Open Defecation Free). Students can spread the word on their social networking sites using social media cards provided by the United Nations on the website (Image 4 and Image 5) and the hashtag #WorldToiletDay, thus promoting UN Sustainable Goal 6, which is water and sanitation for all by 2030.



15 WHO/UNICEF (2019). Joint Monitoring Programme 2019 update report: Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene. Accessed January 2021 at: https://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/publications/jmp-report-2019/en/

December

World Soil Day, celebrated on December 5th, is another International Day that can truly foster a sense of inclusion and global citizenship. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has a worldwide event map, and individuals can register their event and have it included on the map. Usually, I have students watch a short video and read aloud information provided by the United Nations. I register the events in advance so I can show my students that our event is registered with the United Nations (Image 6).



*Inclusion in the WSD events map does not represent an endorsement from the United Nations for an organization or initiative.

December 10th is Human Rights Day. As Amnesty International usually holds its annual Write for Rights campaign to coincide with this International Day, there are usually loads of materials available for teaching about human rights and human rights abuses taking place throughout the world. The students can read stories or watch videos of cases adopted by Amnesty International, identify the human rights abuses that have occurred, and then

choose whether to take action by writing e-mails, tweets or handwritten letters to authorities in different countries. In addition, they can write letters of solidarity to the victims or the surviving family members of the victims in a show of emotional support. The beauty of this is that each year Amnesty International also posts success stories, so students can see the videos of people who have had their human rights protected thanks to the actions of the previous year's students for this very special International Day.

Conclusion

Recognizing and honoring International Days throughout the academic year can do more than raise student awareness of global issues and events. It can engage them in the global community and empower them with concrete actions and examples. Let every year be one in which they can make a mark.

At the end of the 2020 academic year, Richard Morrison, a colleague with whom I collaborate and share class materials, passed on a student's comment from her self-evaluation. I'd like to end my article with an extract from her comment (included with her permission):

"I have learned a lot of things in this class. It can say that my life has changed a lot. In this semester, we studied some areas, such as human rights, environment, health and social issues, with some presentations. Thanks to this experience, I could meet SDGs, and I thought I would like to be a person who could deal with various social issues in the world and share smiles and happiness. So, as for my job hunting, (I'll be) looking for companies which are focusing with dealing with social issues with SDGs. I'd like to say "thank you" for giving us this wonderful class!!" Seika Sugiura