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**Field: International Exchange, Communication**

## **The Chat Room: Aoyama Gakuin's Answer to Global English and Communicative Competence**

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Every educational institution has its own strengths and assets. Aoyama Gakuin University has maintained its reputation for quality English education as well as its Christian foundation. Two other notable characteristics of Aoyama Gakuin is its emphasis on internationalization and that it provides education for kindergarten, primary school, junior high school senior high school, women's junior college, university and graduate school. With such notable features, it was only natural that the Chat Room was conceived as a way to promote Global English and Communicative Competence at Aoyama Gakuin.

The Chat Room, located in the center of Aoyama Campus, is a facility for every Aoyama Gakuin student. It is a facility aiming to provide:

1. The opportunity to learn about other cultures as well as to become aware of their own.
2. A context outside the classroom where students can experiment with their English communication skills.
3. A gathering spot for Aoyama Gakuin students of all age groups.

Throughout the day the Chat Room is staffed by Chat Leaders, who are exchange students of various nationalities and backgrounds. The Chat Room is divided into three chat groups according to English proficiency levels, and students are free to join any level to chat in English. Each day a theme is designated as the topic of the chat sessions, but there is very little structure and formality to each chat session. Each chat session differs according to the kind of

participants and to which direction each conversation leads. For students of younger age groups (junior high school and primary school), the chat leaders do story-telling, play games and sing songs play as ways to facilitate cultural exchange and communication in English.

The opportunity to learn about other cultures and customs while becoming more aware of their own is a mutual experience for the Japanese students and chat leaders. Moreover, students learn that English is not only a medium of communication for native speakers of English, but it is also an indispensable tool in reaching out to people of all nationalities.

Because the Chat Room is not in a classroom setting and there is no official evaluation (such as tests and grades), students are relieved from the fear of making mistakes. They can take risks when they try to convey their thoughts and opinions through the chat sessions.

In this presentation, it is the author's intention to introduce the Chat Room at Aoyama Gakuin which commemorated its grand opening in April of 2008. The author will discuss its inception, experimental stage, current operations, selection and training of the exchange students as well as the successes and learning experiences of this new facility.

It is the hope of every Aoyama Gakuin staff that other educational institutions can model the Chat Room and with certain degrees of modifications, adapt it to meet its own needs.