

## **2006-788: SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S.A. FACULTY ON TEACHING LIBERAL EDUCATION COURSES IN JAPAN.**

**John Krupczak, Hope College**

Associate Professor of Engineering.

**James Heisler, Hope College**

Professor of Economics.

**Thomas Ludwig, Hope College**

Professor of Psychology.

**Roger Nemeth, Hope College**

Professor of Sociology.

**James Piers, Hope College**

Professor of Sociology and Social Work.

**Neal Sobania, Pacific Lutheran University**

Executive Director of the Wang Center at Pacific Lutheran University. Formerly Professor of History and Director of International Education at Hope College.

# **Some Recommendations for U.S.A. Faculty on Teaching Liberal Education Courses in Japan**

## **Abstract**

This work presents a summary of practical information for faculty from United States institutions of higher education planning on teaching liberal education courses in Japan. These recommendations are based on the experience of the authors in teaching sociology, history, economics, psychology, and general education classes, at both a US liberal arts college and at a medium sized comprehensive university in Tokyo, Japan. For faculty participating in an exchange program, a key element is successful adaptation of existing familiar course materials for use in a different institution and culture. We have found that a major theme in successfully negotiating this change is shifting from a process-oriented approach favored in the US, to one emphasizing the specific learning goals and assessment methods of a particular course. In the experience reported here, Japanese students were accustomed to taking responsibility for their own learning process, therefore requiring the course instructor to define learning objectives and the specific nature of evaluation process. Other recommendations focus on adapting to the differing features of student schedules and pre-college preparation in the two countries. Guidelines are prepared as a distillation of some recent experience for the benefit US faculty participating in US-Japanese exchange programs.

## **Background**

The goal of this paper is to convey information from recent experiences by US faculty teaching in Japan. This work represents a summary of recent experiences and is not intended as an exhaustive review of Japanese higher education. More comprehensive overviews of Japanese higher education have been prepared by Benjamin<sup>1</sup>, Becker<sup>2</sup>, and Hayes<sup>3</sup>. The National Research Council has examined the similarities, differences, and trends in how the US and Japan educate and train engineers<sup>4</sup>.

To provide a background, the major features of the Japanese educational system are reviewed. The educational systems of the United States and Japan have a similar structure<sup>2-4</sup>. This is in part because the current Japanese system was strongly influenced by the US occupation government after World War II. In Japan, education is compulsory until age 15. The Elementary grades are for ages 6-11. This is followed by junior high school, also called middle school or upper elementary school, for ages 12-15. Nearly all education in elementary and junior high school is in the form of neighborhood public schools.

At the university level, total undergraduate enrollment in Japan in 1995 was 2,263,512 students. Enrollment in engineering and computer science was 516,244 (23%). At a comparable time in the United States total undergraduate enrollment was 7,791,000.

Engineering and computer science consisted of 696,000 or 9% of the total. The US and Japan have about the same number of computer science and engineering undergraduates but in Japan this is a much higher fraction of the undergraduate population<sup>4</sup>.

The total number of colleges and universities is 565 in Japan and 1809 in the United States. Of this total the number awarding engineering degrees is 187 in Japan and 390 in the United States. Until recently the control of technical education, including engineering, resided with the Japanese national government. The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture (MONBUSHO) determined engineering curricula and certification of both public and private universities. MONBUSHO determines the minimum number of course and class hours required for each college to grant degrees in any given field<sup>2,5,6</sup>.

For Japanese students, entrance to universities is determined by performance on entrance achievement examinations taken at the end of high school. The examinations are difficult and challenging even for the best students. Outside observers have noted that Japanese high school is “not a minimal competency curriculum”<sup>1</sup> and “pre-university education in Japan is demanding, and gets results.”<sup>6</sup>

There is inordinate competition for admittance into those few universities considered to be the most desirable and prestigious. This stems from the hiring practices of the largest corporations and the government in Japan which hire only graduates of certain schools<sup>7</sup>. Undergraduate grades are not considered to be an important factor in determining eligibility for employment. Since, until recently, the lifetime employment system made job changing uncommon, a student’s future economic status was highly determined by university admission and therefore the entrance examination.

The gravity of the university entrance examination tends to draw the entire educational system into its orbit<sup>3</sup>. Starting from kindergarten some children are focused toward that event. Private high schools which have a record of success in getting students into selective universities are also highly sought. The high school entrance exam taken after middle school is a precursor of the university exam to follow. To help prepare students for the high school and university entrance exams, there exist some 35,000 *juku* or cram schools operated as private enterprises<sup>4</sup>. Parents may send their children to these schools, often at considerable expense, throughout the middle and high school years. For example, 50 percent of ninth grade students also attend a cram school meeting outside of normal school hours<sup>6</sup>.

Students in Japan select a major at the time of taking the entrance examinations. Students therefore begin undergraduate education in their major program. Most students do not change majors.

A diversity of opinion exists as to the intensity of Japanese undergraduate education compared to the United States. The time spent in the university in Japan is sometimes characterized as a respite or four year hiatus after an early adolescence of intensive study for the entrance examinations and prior to entry into the demanding world of work<sup>2</sup>.

While some hold that Japanese undergraduates work less hard than their US counterparts<sup>6,7</sup>, others conclude that workloads and effort expended are comparable<sup>8</sup>.

Japanese education has also been characterized as a more dispersed life-long process compared to the US, especially in technical fields<sup>6</sup>. It consists of rigorous broad-based training before college, focused study as an undergraduate, and acquisition of applied or practical knowledge on the job. In contrast, most aspects of career training in the United States are concentrated almost entirely into the undergraduate program. While education in both countries leads to largely an equivalent result, the locus of activity has been markedly different. This observation has been described as a “phase shift” between the education systems in the two countries<sup>4</sup>.

In the US, students from all colleges and universities face pressure to develop an undergraduate record that establishes their employability upon graduation. While hierarchies of more selective programs exist, employment of graduates from even the most highly regarded schools is not without reference to a student’s undergraduate accomplishments. Once hired, on-the-job training is usually brief or informal. Frequent job changing, especially in the first few years after graduation, is common.

### **Exchange Environment**

The authors have taught the liberal arts subjects of economics, history, sociology, social work, psychology, and general education/first year seminars at both Hope College in the United States and equivalent courses as exchange faculty at Meiji Gakuin University in Tokyo, Japan. Hope College is a private liberal arts college of 3000 students located in Holland, Michigan. Meiji Gakuin University is a comprehensive university of 15,000 students.

### **Recommendations**

For faculty participating in an exchange program, a key element is successful adaptation of existing familiar course materials for use in a different institution and culture. Several areas need attention in exporting a familiar course to an exchange program. These include: amount of material to be utilized, nature of the assignments and exams, format of the lecture or classroom activities, and language competence.

The amount of material to be covered must be adjusted due to differences in the amount of classroom time per course in a typical semester. While the length of the semesters is comparable between the US and Japan, the Japanese students take more courses that meet less often. In one semester, a typical Japanese student takes 7-10 classes that meet once a week for 80 to 90 minutes. This is about half of the contact time for the usual 3 or 4 credit hour one-semester course in the US.

Many Japanese college and university students have very little time to devote to homework and outside assignments. They are not accustomed to extensive homework assignments in college. Meiji Gakuin University, like many Japanese urban universities, has no dormitories. Students live at home or in apartments. A one to two hour commute one way is typical, and it is not unheard of to find students that spend 5 or 6 hours commuting each day. Many students have part-time jobs. The time available for any one class is not large.

The dominant mode of instruction is the lecture format. Often grades are determined by one exam at the end of the semester. Classroom discussion, group work, even asking questions of students in class itself, is not part of the common experience. Those expecting to utilize any of the more active learning techniques should anticipate the need to acclimate the class to these procedures.

A common expectation by students is that it should be possible to pass a course by passing the final examination. In other words, grading schemes that factor in homework, class participation, projects, along with multiple examinations are not familiar. Class attendance is not seen as essential, and attendance is typically around 75%. There is an expectation on the part of the students that it should be possible by outside study exclusive of class attendance to pass a course. The connection between this mode of thought and the university entrance examination system is obvious.

In our experience, a major theme in successfully negotiating the exchange process is shifting from a process-oriented approach favored in the US, to one emphasizing the specific learning goals and assessment methods of a particular course. Students at our private liberal arts college generally expect their experiences in the classroom to support their learning the course material. The role of the faculty member is to create and deliver this semester-long learning experience. The expectations of the Japanese university students are for the professor to clearly define what is to be learned and how this learning will be evaluated. In other words, “What do I need to know and how am I going to be tested?” The students generally hold themselves responsible for the learning process.

This can be likened to a second “phase-shift” between US and Japanese higher education. In broad outlines, the Japanese faculty member is expected to devote attention to the endpoints of the educational process. These are the course objectives and the summative assessment. The US faculty member generally devotes more attention to the middle portion of the process: facilitating student learning.

In our exchange program, the US faculty members taught in English. English language is part of the university entrance examinations so all college students know some English. Many are exceptionally good English speakers and courses taught by exchange faculty naturally attract a higher proportion of Japanese students with this type of interest. However, the reality is that it is not the same as teaching to a roomful of Americans. It is far too easy for the US faculty member delivering familiar material to overtax the capabilities of those for whom English is a second language.

In achieving the right level of instruction to accommodate the second language barrier, the following guidelines have proven effective:

- Whatever the class, envision yourself teaching it to entering first-year students at your US home institution.
- Use readings that are slightly easier than what you consider appropriate for entering first-year students at your US home institution.
- Assign at most 5-10 pages of reading per class. More than this is not likely to be read.
- Use PowerPoint for the lectures and give a handout of your slides. If possible, place downloadable copies of all handouts on a course website, for the benefit of students who cannot attend a particular class session. This also allows students to copy and paste unfamiliar words and phrases into translation programs.
- Like most people who are using a second language, Japanese students are better at reading English than at understanding spoken English. Most students are very insecure about their English conversation abilities, and are reluctant to participate in full-class discussions.
- Many students have pocket electronic translators which can be used to translate written English words into Japanese.
- Japanese students will often take any handouts or assignments and immediately translate them. Expect this, and allow time for this in planning the class.
- Emphasize main points through diagrams, pictures, and graphs.
- Give a short quiz at the start of each class based on the reading. This should be extremely brief but require some information from the reading. To save class time, consider administering these quizzes on a course website.
- To break up 90 minute lectures, assign the students to small groups and give them an assignment to work on together. They can then discuss it together in their native language. This allows those less fluent in English to contribute. Each group writes their response on the board or a large piece of paper. One person in each group reports out to the rest of the class in English.
- If you show any type of English language video material, provide a short handout that outlines or summarizes what is on the video. Stop the video at intervals and refer to the current location on the handout.

## **Illustrative Anecdotes**

As already noted, Japanese students are not surprisingly hesitant about speaking English (they display greater confidence in reading and writing), yet an American style classroom includes student participation. To overcome this in a class on diversity in America it was possible to take advantage of the Students' considerable interest in Native Americans, and introduce them to the tradition some American Indians have of a "talking stick." Traditionally made from a buffalo rib and decorated with beads, a small leather pouch of tobacco, and other decorative materials, only the holder of the talking stick is allowed to speak while others attentively listen. (One could easily take a wooden stick, add bits of decorative material, and create something similar.) When the speaker is finished, the talking stick is passed to another person so that now holding the talking stick, they can speak. Adapting this to the Japanese classroom was quite easy and was used as a means of engaging students in conversation in a question/answer format. With the teacher holding the talking stick, a simple question was asked of a particular student who was then handed the talking stick and asked to answer the question, all the time understanding that when the student had answered, they were to ask the next question and choose who they wanted to pass the talking stick to for the answer. After two weeks of class use, the talking stick was no longer necessary, most students having acquired the confidence and willingness to both answer questions and answer them.

Though Japanese students are intellectually capable, we must remember that it is challenging when we ask them to read material in another language. After returning from teaching a semester in Japan, one of us agreed to examine the syllabus and readings that a colleague had prepared for his semester of teaching. He arrived with volumes of primary sources that he had used in his master's program. When a comment was made on the challenging and difficult reading, he responded that this was due to an underestimation the capabilities of Japanese students. Using short, concise, readings that examined current topical trends and summarized empirical data was suggested. Good experience resulted when essays and editorials from publications including *Psychology Today*, *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, *Health, Family Therapy Newsletter*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Time*, *The New York Times*, *The American Enterprise* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Appeals for thoughtful, yet contemporary and topical fare feel on deaf ears. Upon his return, the colleague suggested that he had spent a great deal of money shipping texts that he never used. He was thankful for the advice.

In their attempt to digest readings and articles, plan that many of the Japanese students will need to translate each of the readings. It was found 4-7 page readings very useful. The readings and discussion questions would be handed out a week before the actual lecture and discussion on the same, thus giving them time for translation and thought about each reading. Along with direct questions regarding the readings, the discussion questions would always challenge the students to consider how the student individually or the Japanese population more generally would respond attitudinally and behaviorally to similar issues, situations or conditions. This seemed to prepare them well for the small group discussions during which they would examine both the responses of each country

to particular situations and conditions and the underlying attitudes and values associated with those responses.

In a class on creative problem solving, an exercise was conducted using the technique of brainstorming. Successful brainstorming requires rapid free association of ideas and that each person contributes his or her ideas without fear of criticism. Although the class was small, this exercise did not work very well in English. When the class was divided into smaller groups and directed to brainstorm in Japanese, the session produced the anticipated set of novel insights. Groups later translated their results into English.

## Conclusions

We have found that participation in a Japanese exchange program can be an exceptionally rewarding experience, and would encourage anyone who has such an opportunity to consider it seriously. Our host university in Japan has been extraordinarily accommodating in helping us. The guidelines summarized here, while over-simplifications, represent broad practical experience derived from ten years of faculty exchanges. It is hoped that these suggestions will help to make course materials that are familiar and successful at a US institution, equally effective when used in a Japanese exchange program.

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