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Learning Together in the Global Classroom

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With the internationalization of Japan's universities, an increasing number of foreign students are coming to Japan to study. As a result, it is not uncommon for both Japanese and foreign professors to have a wide mix of students from a variety of countries in their classrooms. Given the variety of cross-cultural differences with respect to both teaching and learning styles, the question arises, "Which educational style should we use in our classrooms?" This essay explores some possible ways of answering this question, based on my own experience as a foreign teacher in a Japanese university. Although this essay is by no means a research paper, it does attempt to apply, in a very practical way, some of the more theoretical points about intercultural communication, which I have tried to write about in previous papers (see the references in the bibliography), to the issue of teaching students from a variety of cultures in the global classroom.

Some examples of cultural differences in the global classroom

In the School of International Politics, Economics, and Communication at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo, Japan I teach several courses on intercultural communication to students from many different countries. The courses include both Japanese and foreign exchange students. On the very first day of class I tell the students that our classroom itself is an example of an intercultural situation, since students from different cultures have different ways of participating in class and professors also have different styles of teaching. Some professors may prefer to

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lecture without expecting students to respond much in class, for example, whereas other professors, particularly those from Western cultures, often try to engage their students by encouraging active class participation.

Managing class participation in classes with students from different cultures can be challenging, however, given the fact that Japanese students are often hesitant to speak out in class, whereas many foreign students, particularly those from Western cultures, frequently raise their hands to ask questions and make comments. As a result, foreign students may be perceived as "monopolizing" class time, while the Japanese students remain silent. On one evaluation form (the form which all students write at the end of semester to evaluate their professors) I was once accused by a Japanese student of "favoring" foreign students and not giving Japanese students equal chances to speak in class. My initial reaction was to think that Japanese students have as many opportunities to speak in class as foreign students do; the problem is simply that the Japanese students do not raise their hands to speak! But on further reflection, I realized that it may be necessary for me, as a teacher, to actively encourage Japanese students to speak out in class by directly addressing questions to them and, in some cases, even asking individual students to share their ideas with the class.

I also encourage Japanese students to ask questions and make comments during class time rather than after class, on the ground that if a student asks a question after class, only that student can hear the answer. If a student asks a question in class, however, then everyone can hear my response to it. Japanese students may sometimes think that asking a question in class disrupts the lecture. They may also feel embarrassed asking questions in front of their classmates. Once Japanese students see foreign students asking questions and making comments in class, however, the Japanese students often begin to open up and speak out in class themselves. Nonetheless, since some students may feel hesitant to speak out, I often do a "round robin" in the classroom, asking each student one at a time if they'd like to ask questions or make comments on the topic we've been studying. The students can "pass" if they don't want to

say anything. In my experience, however, students will often have a lot to say once they are given an opportunity to do so. Hearing comments and questions from the Japanese students also gives the foreign students a better understanding of the Japanese students' point of view.

A related issue is that foreign students sometimes challenge their professors in class. Generally, as already noted, Japanese students will not interrupt the flow of the class by asking questions during the lecture, but will rather approach the professor after class with their questions. When they do ask questions in class, Japanese students will frequently ask what I call "softball" questions: "Sensei, I couldn't understand this point. Could you please explain it to me in more detail?" Such questions are similar to throwing a slow ball in softball and not so tough for professors to hit back a response to. Foreign students, however, particularly those from cultures where challenging ideas is not only accepted but promoted, often throw what I call "hardball" questions to the professor: "Teacher, I think you're wrong! Here's my own opinion about what you just said!"

Professors need to know how to respond to such challenges. They can't just tell the foreign student, "Don't ask me any hardball questions!" Different professors deal with hardball questions in different ways, but my own style is to honestly consider the student's opinion before making a reply. If I think the student is right, I usually say something like, "Thank you for giving me a different perspective on this issue, which I'd never considered before!" If I think the student hasn't really understood what I was saying, however, I take the opportunity to explain the point in more detail. Teachers often assume that students have sufficient background information to understand the point they are trying to make, but this may not always be the case. So, a hardball question provides the teacher with an opportunity to explain the point in more detail, not just to the student who asked the question, but to everyone in the class.

The cultural values at play here are that in Japan a professor is typically regarded as an expert, a "sage on the stage" who is (or should be) always "right." If a professor doesn't know how to respond to a question

or comment, the professor may lose face. In the West, however, a professor is thought of more as a "guide on the side," who works together with the student back and forth to jointly arrive at a better understanding of the point in question.

One final issue that deserves consideration is the use of language in the global classroom. Foreign students come to Japan to learn Japanese, but often their Japanese isn't good enough to be able to learn effectively if the Japanese professor doesn't make any concessions to the foreign students' language ability. It is also important for professors who teach classes in English, especially native speakers, to simplify their manner of speaking so that both Japanese and foreign exchange students from non-English speaking countries can understand what the professor is saying.

Previously the teaching of English was sometimes based on the idea that students would (or should) acquire "perfect English," meaning that they would have a perfect grasp of English grammar, vocabulary, idioms, and all the rest. These days, however, the idea of "World Englishes" has become popular. Rather than learn "standard English," as it is spoken by native speakers, it is recognized that different countries come up with their own varieties of English—Singapore English, Chinese English, Japanese English, and so on. The idea of World Englishes is that it isn't necessary for students to learn or to speak standard English; rather, each student can speak whatever version of English is used in their home cultures, provided that there is "mutual intelligibility" across cultures.

My own opinion is that neither the use of "standard English" nor encouraging teachers and students to simply speak their own varieties of English necessarily leads to mutual intelligibility, however. If English is to become a truly "international language" in the global classroom, native speakers of English (whether teachers or students) need to simplify what they say by speaking slowly and clearly, expressing complex ideas in relatively easy, non-technical vocabulary to express complex ideas, and avoiding the use of idioms and cultural references that may be intelligible to persons from English-speaking cultures but not to outsiders. In international situations, native speakers need to recognize that to

be successful, whether in education, business, or diplomacy, requires them to be able to communicate effectively in English that is readily intelligible to non-native speakers.

At the same time, however, non-native speakers of English also need to learn basic standard grammar and vocabulary, to adopt reasonably intelligible forms of pronunciation, and to avoid using expressions that may be understood only by people who speak their own particular variety of English but not by others. English as an international language cannot be associated with any of the standard forms of English spoken by native speakers, but neither should we adopt the relativist stance that "anything goes" in the use of non-standard varieties of English. Instead, English as an international language should be seen as something that we are now in the process of co-creating among both native and non-native speakers across cultures with the aim of promoting genuine cross-cultural understanding. Mutual intelligibility is still the standard we should aim at.

Possible responses to cultural diversity in the global classroom

Given the wide range of differences in teaching and learning styles that are possible when teaching students from a variety of cultures, which educational style should we adopt in our classrooms? One way to answer this question would be to say that since our classes are being conducted in Japan, we should follow the Japanese style. This answer is based on the idea of *assimilation:* "When in Rome do as the Romans do." Or, in this case: "When in Japan do as the Japanese do." Generally, assimilation means that foreigners, whether professors or students, should adapt themselves to the ways people from the host culture think and act. There are several problems with this approach to cross-cultural differences in the classroom, however.

First, is it really possible for me as an American professor to teach in exactly the same way that Japanese professors teach? Additionally, is it really possible for the foreign students in our class to behave exactly the same as Japanese students do? The answer to both questions is "Probably not." No matter how hard foreigners try to adapt themselves to the

norms of their host cultures, it is unlikely that they will ever be able to completely do so. This insight applies not only to foreigners in Japan, of course, but also to Japanese professors who teach overseas and Japanese students who study abroad.

Second, is it really necessary for foreigners to adapt themselves to the norms of their host culture? Of course, foreign professors and students need to follow the rules of the universities they are teaching and studying at, but to say that foreigners should simply assimilate themselves to the norms of their host culture in effect means that foreigners are being forced to give up their own cultures and to unquestioningly accept the norms of the other culture. It also implies that people from a foreign culture have nothing of value to contribute to the host culture.

Another way to answer the question about which educational style should be used in the global classroom would be to say that all of the students should follow the style of the professor. It might be argued that foreign professors have teaching styles which are different from those of Japanese professors and that it is good for Japanese students to be exposed to different educational styles in the name of "internationalization" or "globalization." As an American teaching at a Japanese university, if I followed this approach to the letter (which I don't), I might expect all of the Japanese students in my classes to give up their own cultures and become exactly the same as American students.

This solution to the problem of cross-cultural differences in educational styles also fails, of course, and for many of the same reasons. If I tell my Japanese students that I expect them to act like American students, is it really likely that they will suddenly start raising their hands and asking questions in class the same as American students do? Should Japanese students really be expected to give up their own culture and simply conform to the educational style of the professor? As a matter of fact, some foreign professors do try to impose their educational style on students in the host culture (not only American professors in Japan but foreign professors in any culture which is different from their own). The rationale is often based on universalism, the idea that certain educational styles are better than others and that once we find the one "best" style,

everyone—both professors and students—should follow it. The problem with universalism, however, is that it can easily lead to "cultural imperialism" if a professor (or even a student for that matter) believes that the style of his or her own culture just happens to be the universal one that everyone else should adopt.

Universalism has fallen on hard times recently, not only with respect to educational styles but with respect to cultural differences in general. How can people from one culture presume to judge the norms and values of people from another culture? If the only way I can evaluate another culture is on the basis of my own culture, then any judgment I make about the other culture will be ethnocentric. There is no neutral way to decide which culture is "best." This approach to cross-cultural differences is called cultural relativism—the view that all cultures are equally valid and that it is impossible to determine whether one culture is better than another. Cultural relativism is extremely popular in the field of intercultural communication because it promotes the seemingly "progressive" view that we should accept other cultures just as they are. Instead of persuading people from other cultures to adopt the norms of our own culture, we should try to "understand" and "respect" other cultures, with everyone continuing to follow the norms of their own culture.

Certainly understanding and respect are important, but on their own they tell us absolutely nothing about how people from different cultures can work effectively with each other. If we simply say, "You have your culture and I have mine," you end up doing things your way and I end up doing things my way. We never find a way to do things together, no matter how much understanding and respect we have for each other. Moreover, far from being "progressive," cultural relativism is actually regressive because it not only prevents us from critically reflecting on the norms of another culture, but it also obliges us to blindly follow the norms of our own culture without questioning them. I am not allowed to criticize your culture and you are not allowed to criticize mine. We are not allowed to criticize our own cultures either! Ultimately cultural relativism fosters the smug attitude that we have nothing to learn from other

cultures. We remain locked in our own respective cultures and impervious to change. Instead of being genuinely open to the ideas of people who are different from us, we become close-minded. Cultural relativism is closely connected with the idea of multiculturalism. On the positive side, multiculturalism encourages us to share our views with each other and understand each other better. On the negative side, however, multiculturalism is sometimes interpreted to further mean that we should never consider adopting the views of another culture as our own.

A multicultural approach to education suggests that since it is impossible to arrive at a single universal style of education that applies to everyone, differences should be respected. Professors have their own way of teaching and students have their own way of learning. If the two happen to coincide with each other, that's great. But if they don't, it doesn't matter. Differences must be accepted and respected at all costs. So interpreted, multiculturalism implies that professors and students from different cultures have nothing to learn from each other, nor are they able to widen their own perspectives by genuinely engaging themselves with the views of others. Moreover, allowing everyone, both teachers and students, to follow the educational styles that are prevalent in their own respective cultures may simply lead to anarchy in the classroom. Standards of some sort are necessary.

In my opinion, a better approach to the problem of standards is the idea that entirely new cultures can be co-constructed through the interactions people from different cultures have with each other. Rather than think that it is impossible to criticize either our own or another culture, we are able to critically reflect on the norms of both our own and the other culture. We can then take what we regard as "best" from each of the cultures, while discarding those aspects of both cultures (values, norms, educational styles, etc.) that we don't find particularly useful. The Japanese educational system is pretty good at giving students factual knowledge about the world, for example, but sometimes overemphasizes memorizing facts to the extent that students are unable to think creatively. The American system is fairly good at promoting critical and imaginative thinking, but often fails to provide students with sufficient

factual knowledge about the world. Combining the Japanese emphasis on facts with the American emphasis on creative thinking gives us the best of both cultures, while rejecting the worst. The end result is what is sometimes called a "third culture," which in this case is an educational style that isn't based exclusively on either Japanese or American culture, but is rather an entirely new style that has been created by adopting positive elements from both of the cultures.

I once attended a seminar on intercultural education in which the presenter focused exclusively on the need for professors to adjust their teaching styles to accommodate the learning styles of students from other cultures, with no mention whatsoever of the need for students to adjust their learning styles to fit the teaching styles of the professors. Ideally, however, intercultural education involves a process of mutual adjustment, in which professors and students modify their styles to be able to meet each other somewhere in the middle. If you come my way a little and I come your way a little, perhaps we can build a bridge between our two cultures.

This approach is based on constructivism, a pedagogical theory which suggests that students construct knowledge not only individually through their interactions with the world, but also socially through their engagement with others in the learning environment. From this standpoint, both professors and students should be perfectly willing and open to changing their own views and styles if they find something of value in the views and styles of others. In the global classroom, professors and students from foreign cultures are not expected to simply adapt themselves to the norms of the host culture (i.e., assimilation, as noted previously, or "When in Rome do as the Romans do"). Rather, people from both the foreign and the host cultures are able to share their perspectives and learn something new from each other, which they may then possibly incorporate into their own way of thinking.

Darwin's original theory of evolution was based on the idea that species evolve by adapting themselves to their environmental niches. In the same way, intercultural theory has often emphasized the need for sojourners to adapt themselves to the "niches" provided by their host

cultures. It's the sojourner who's expected to adapt and change, not the host culture. Current evolutionary theory, however, which is informed by ecology, recognizes that many species, such as bees and flowers, co-evolve by mutually adapting themselves to each other. Flowers need bees for cross-pollination and bees need flowers to make honey. If there aren't any flowers, there aren't any bees, and vice versa.

More recent approaches to intercultural theory similarly suggest that cultures evolve through a process of co-adaptation. Not only do foreign students change when they study at a Japanese university, but Japanese students also change as a result of being in the same classroom with foreign students. Mutual changes also occur when foreign professors interact with students from a culture that is different from their own. Co-evolution is what enables entirely new forms of culture to emerge. It's impossible to understand contemporary Japanese or American culture, for instance, except through the interactions the two cultures have had with each other. A simple example is that we have *wa-fu* (Japanese-style) spaghetti in Japan and California rolls (American-style sushi) in the US.

When I have students give group presentations in my classes, I never put all of the Japanese students into one group and all of the foreign students into another. Dividing students from different cultures in this way simply encourages competition between the two groups, usually with negative results. Instead, I mix the students to the extent possible, so that each of the groups has both Japanese and foreign students in it. Dividing the students in this way gives everyone an opportunity to cooperate and learn from each other. As mentioned earlier, I often find that Japanese students are good at collecting data for their presentations. If the topic is global warming, the Japanese students will make excellent PowerPoint presentations, with all kind of charts and diagrams showing how rising temperatures and CO_2 emissions correlate with each other. But when I ask the students, "What should we do about this problem?," typical replies are "Everyone should think about this problem more" or "The government should do something to solve it." Of course, not all Japanese students respond in this way. Many are capable of coming up with very imaginative solutions to complex problems.

I've also noticed, however, that some (not all) students from my own country, the United States, are better at presenting their opinions about an issue than they are at collecting data to support their opinions. No PowerPoint presentations, no statistics, no charts and diagrams, just "I think this is what we should do to solve the problem!" Generally speaking (and, indeed, it's a generalization that doesn't apply to everyone), Japanese students excel at gathering information about a problem, but are relatively weak when it comes to proposing creative solutions. American students are generally good at expressing their opinions about a given topic, but often don't have a good mastery of the necessary background information.

When I put Japanese and American students together in the same group to give a presentation, however, they usually adopt a more balanced approach, with a good blend of information and opinion. The American students become more conscientious about collecting facts, while the Japanese students become more adept at expressing their opinions. Cultural differences remain, of course. Based on the Japanese cultural value of maintaining group harmony, Japanese students often look for solutions that take various points of view into consideration, aiming at a consensus everyone can agree with. By contrast, American students usually adopt a debate style of communication, in accordance with the American cultural value that conclusions should be based on whichever side presents the better argument. It's interesting to observe cases in which mixed groups of Japanese and Americans are able to do both, however. The Japanese students learn how to debate and defend their ideas, while the American students start thinking about integrative "win-win" solutions, which incorporate the best of the competing arguments into an entirely new position that gains everyone's support.

The same basic ideas I've been talking about here can be applied to other situations, of course—to Japanese professors dealing with foreign students in their classrooms, Japanese students studying abroad at foreign universities, and so on. The main point is that when people from different cultures are given opportunities to interact with each other, they are often able to learn something new and expand their view of the

world. The lessons students learn in the global classroom go far beyond the actual content of the courses they are taking. Learning how to interact with people from different cultures in the classroom helps prepare students to better deal with the cross-cultural situations they will encounter after they graduate and begin to participate in global society.

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