

Building Cultural Awareness in Japanese Adults Through Experiential Learning

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Introduction

In an ever shrinking world, the need for intercultural or international skills by people of all walks of life has taken on great importance. One result of this is the drive for internationalization in Japan. **Internationalization** can be described as the process of becoming more open to other countries' ideas and culture. In order to achieve this the Japanese government is encouraging education in international understanding. **International understanding**, according to a Ministry of Education White Paper (1994), is the ability to build relationships of trust based on peoples' mutual understanding of one another's histories, cultures, customs, and values. This, the Ministry asserts, is necessary if countries and ethnic groups are to achieve harmony and development, and if Japan wants to make an active international contribution in keeping with its international status.

While being officially promoted by the Japanese government and Ministry of Education, the actual responsibility for providing educational programs that lead to internationalization and international understanding is delegated to schools and community centers. However, as many teachers and administrators in the Japanese school system as well as administrators of community centers will attest to, the reality is that there are relatively few persons on their respective staffs who have experience with intercultural theory and practice to implement such programs. Furthermore, government policies provide only suggestions for specific courses of action that organizations might take to promote intercultural understanding, e. g. sister-school or sister city exchange activities and regional international exchange activities (1994). Administrators are thus left to adapt these suggestions to their own situations.

Most schools and community centers, therefore, tend to rely heavily on established formats for promoting international exchange, of which there are three types. The first involves introducing foreign nationals to Japanese culture. The second is a panel discussion type format where those people who have "international" experience are invited to discuss a certain topic in front of a large group of listeners. The third format is limited solely to foreign nationals who can speak Japanese and it calls on them to act as lecturers, commenting on their experiences living in Japan. Much like the panel discussion this is conducted in a public speaking format.

As a person who is a member of this last group, I am often asked to make such speeches at schools and community centers. The title of the speeches, usually predetermined, are invariably, "Japan as seen through my eyes." I am given instructions by the sponsoring organization to speak for anywhere from one to two hours on my experiences living in Japan. While the actual content of the speech is left to my discretion the sponsoring organizations usually "suggest" that I include the following three aspects: things I find strange or interesting about Japanese culture, "bad" points of Japanese culture and aspects of Japanese culture that are in need of change.

When I first began to make such speeches, almost 8 years ago, I was content to follow this format as it appeared to be what most organizations required. However, after beginning training and research in intercultural theory and practice, I began to question the effectiveness of such a format in promoting internationalization. My questions were three fold: 1) Was I helping people understand their culture (and indirectly my own) by speaking about what I found strange and interesting in Japan, 2) if values are relative to culture, are there any “bad” points that need to be changed in Japanese culture and 3) wouldn’t people benefit from exploring culture in a more experiential and less didactic way? In response to these three questions, I answered, 1) “maybe, a little”, 2) “definitely not” and 3) “certainly so.” A survey of current literature found below will help to answer these questions more thoroughly.

Survey of the literature

The first step in the process that eventually leads to international understanding is awareness (Schalkoff, Kogai and Nakamura 1998). Indeed, if Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1993, 1998) is to be believed, the process of international understanding (**inter-cultural sensitivity**) moves from an awareness of differences in cultures (different world views) to an understanding and tolerance of those differences. This is followed by adaptability or the ability to hold different world views. Thus, the progression is one of growing sophistication in dealing with cultural differences. It is one that moves from ethnocentricity to ethnorelativism.

If this process begins with awareness of the existence of other world views, then in a primarily mono-cultural society like Japan, the first step towards international understanding would appear to be the fostering of this awareness. Specifically, the fostering of an awareness of a Japanese world view as well as other world views.

Cultural awareness is described by Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) as being sensitive to the impact cultural has on communication, both verbal and non verbal, as well as on beliefs, values and daily life. Three qualities of cultural awareness are described: Awareness of one’s own culturally-induced behavior, awareness of the culturally-induced behavior of others and the ability to explain one’s own cultural standpoint.

How does one become culturally aware? One way is through exposure to different cultural viewpoints. This could occur through such media as television, newspapers, movies, novels and the internet. It could also occur through interaction with persons from a different culture. Is this exposure enough to induce cultural awareness? Ramsey in Seelye (1996) asserts that it is not. Ramsey states that intercultural interactions are not enough to guarantee that people will come to a state of self or other awareness and argues that it is the job of qualified trainer/teachers to “guide the journey of discovery” necessary to achieve awareness. This is enabled by events that are constructed to intentionally provoke cultural awareness. What are these events?

Seelye (1996) refers to them as vehicles or teaching methodologies that actively involve participants in finding the causes of misunderstandings related to culture. Seelye states that this type of **experiential learning** has been seen by social psychologists, such as Triandis, to offer advantages over didactic ways of learning about culture, e. g. reading a book or listening to a lecture about culture.

Goal and objectives for the study sessions

The overall goal of both sessions was to help participants begin to move towards the type of international understanding described by the Japanese Ministry of Education. The first step in this move was believed to be cultural awareness. Thus the following objectives served as the guidelines for each of the sessions. First, that participants would be able to establish a working definition of the concept of culture. Second, that through experiential learning participants would consider a number of aspects of Japanese and American culture. Third, that this consideration would enable participants to become more aware of the impact culture has on perception and behaviors. Fourth, that awareness would help the participants realize and accept the existence of cultural differences. Fifth, that awareness of cultural differences would encourage an awareness of the possibility for conflict when members of different cultures interact. And finally, that participants would be encouraged to resolve these conflicts.

Methodologies

A similar format was followed for both of the sessions described in this paper. Each session began with a disclosure of the agenda and objectives for the session. As the sessions were conducted in a rather different format than participants were accustomed to, i. e. they would be experiential and not didactic in nature, a short warming up period followed the disclosure of agenda and objectives.

The warming up period consisted of two activities, one physical and one mental in nature. The first activity was designed to get the participants into pairs and to help the pairs begin a relationship that would last the entire session. It was game like in nature and required participants to form pairs with the person next to them. One of the participants held out both of their hands, about 30 cm apart. This was the trap through which the other person attempted to pass one of their hands vertically through without getting caught. When the person was caught the roles were reversed (Maley and Duff 1982).

The second warm up activity was a whole group activity. It required participants to respond quickly and together to aural prompts. Again it was game like in nature. The first half to eight Japanese proverbs were read and the group completed the proverbs. The last proverb, "when in Rome. . .," formed the basis of departure into the main section of the session: Participants were asked to briefly reflect on the difficulties that may arise from trying to implement that proverb. Participants were told that in my experience the culture in which I was brought up often prevented me from "doing as the Romans do." It was at this time that I posed the question, "What is culture?"

The first main activity was designed to help the participants develop a working definition of the concept of culture. Participants were asked to take approximately five minutes to brainstorm in written form on the word culture. They then reported to the class what they had written and these responses were recorded on a blackboard. Each reported response was placed in one of three different, unmarked categories. After all responses were recorded, titles were affixed to each category. Those titles were Concrete, Concrete yet Abstract and Abstract. Physical representations of culture that could be accessed through the senses were found in the Concrete category, e. g. art, music, etc. Aspects of culture which could be observed though were not tangible were found in the Concrete yet Abstract category, e. g. customs, daily life activities, etc.

Intangible aspects of culture were found in the Abstract category, e.g. beliefs, values, etc. Participants were informed that the day's session would focus more on the second and third categories than the first.

The second main activity was designed to show participants the impact culture can have on human thinking (Tomalin and Stempleski 1993). Participants heard four words and were given approximately two minutes to free associate in writing on each word. The four words were tea, blue, breakfast, and home. Again responses to each word were recorded on the black board. After all responses had been recorded certain words were circled. Participants were asked to reflect on the reason for the words being circled: They were all responses that were culturally influenced. In order to further underscore the fact that culture does play a role in human thinking, I proceeded to read and record responses that my mother made for the same words. A comparison of the difference between the Japanese participants responses and my mother's responses followed.

The third main activity required participants to make a direct comparison of Japanese and US culture (Tomalin and Stempleski 1993). Pairs of participants were given a handout that listed 8 different statements of American thinking and behavior in regards to taking and spending weekends, vacations and personal days (see Figure 1 below). After reading each of the statements each pair was to determine whether it was similar to or different from Japanese thinking and behavior. If it was deemed different, participants were to include a written explanation detailing how so. Following the pair work discussion by the entire group took place. Each pair was required to report back their findings to the whole group. In the final stage of the activity, participants were asked to contemplate problems that could occur if an American were to work for a Japanese company or to live in Japan.

Figure 1 アメリカでの休みに対する考え方及び過ごし方

次の「休みに対する考え方及び過ごし方」が日本と同じ(S)か違う(D)かを答えてください。もし違っていればどういうふう違うかを書いてください。		S	D
1	全ての学校又はほとんどの職場は完全に週休二日になっている。	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	有給休暇は与えられている日数を全て消化する。	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	遠慮せず、長期的な休みを必ずとることができる。	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	結婚していれば週末を家族又は夫婦中心に過ごす。	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	結婚していれば長期的な休みに家族又夫婦で旅行をしたりする。	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	ちょこちょこ有給休暇を利用して買い物、旅行、夫婦のタイム、子どもの行事などのために使う。	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	年度始めに長期休みの予定及び時期の希望を会社に申し入れる。	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	休日の地域行事は参加したい人だけが参加する。	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The final activity played a synthesizing role in that it called on the students to utilize their growing awareness of cultural impact on behaviors and thinking as well as engage in resolution of an intercultural conflict (Gaston 1984). Participants heard a critical incident involving two parties (see Figure 2 below) and were asked to consider the incident from the perspective of each

before trying to help each party resolve the conflict.

Figure 2 近所づきあい

スコットというアメリカ人が9年前に山口にやってきました。6年間アパートでの暮らしをしてきましたが、結婚してからあるところに一軒家を日本人の妻と借りることにしました。そこに引っ越してきてからもう早三年になります。当然ながら近所の人は皆日本人です。

住んでいる家が100何年前に建てられた農家で、日本に来てから古い家が好きなスコットにとっては最高の家です。また仕事への通勤がとても便利だし、土地が広いので趣味の園芸や家庭栽培もできます。ただし、一つ不満なところがあります。それはこの地域には行事が多いということです。毎月必ず一回、そこに住んでいる人たちが集まってスポーツ大会を行ったり、ごみ拾いをやったり、草取りをしたり、祭りをしたりしています。そのうえ、ほとんどの行事が日曜日に行うということです。なぜ知らない人と一緒に大切な日曜日を過ごさなければならぬのかと思いつつもスコットは一年ほど我慢して参加していました。けど、2年目から少しづつ断っていて、今年はあまり参加しないようにしています。そこで、スコットにはなぜかわかりませんが、だんだん近所の人に声をかけられなくなりました。最近、どこかに引っ越していけば、そこではうまくいくなあと悩んでいます。

一方で、最近行事に参加しなくなった、または行事には参加しても打ち上げに欠席するスコットは近所の人にとってはよく理解できません。一年目はよく参加してくれて、どんな行事でも楽しそうで、皆も国際交流ができてよかったと話をしていました。が、地域の人のことが嫌いになったか、行事がスコットにとってつまらなくなったので参加しなくなったのだろうか、と話しています。もっと嫌われたらいけないと思って、あんまり自分たちからスコットへ声をかけないようにしている人もおり、結局、彼が声をかけてくれるようになるまで待つておこうと皆で決めました。

Following all of the activities participants were invited to ask questions and then to give written feedback on the study sessions.

Feedback

Feedback on each of the sessions was given on small index cards distributed to everyone. Participants were instructed to reflect on the session attended and to write what they felt about it. No specific questions were posed. Hence, each participant was free to comment on whatever they wished. Responses were received from a total of 40 participants. 25 of the responses came from the first session and 15 from the second.

36 of the responses fell into 8 content based categories with varying frequency. They were a new awareness of the differences between US and Japanese culture (13 responses), opinions about the structure of the sessions (7), relationships between the topics of discussion in the session and participants' own life experiences (5), questions that participants still had (3), how one methodology helped make a certain concept of the sessions clear to participants (2), advice for me on living in Japan (2), a desire for reflection on certain Japanese behaviors and thinking (2) and general comments about my Japanese ability (2). The remaining 4 responses fell outside of these categories. These responses dealt with the following issues: an awareness of previous lack of reflection on one's own culture (1), an awareness of a problem solving solution for personal crisis (1), a comment on the session attended (1) and a personal conceptualization of international

understanding (1).

Evaluation

Let us look at each of the categories individually. 13 persons indicated a new awareness of cultural differences between the US and Japan. Specifically, they mention becoming aware of different ways of thinking in regards to concepts like family, community and vacation time as well as an awareness that there are differences in behavior occurring in daily life.

7 participants indicated that the methodology used in each of the sessions, though unfamiliar to them, was stimulating and enjoyable. The warm up activities, after activity discussions and the game like aspect of most of the activities appealed to these participants. The fact that the participants were not passive recipients of knowledge during the sessions was also mentioned by one participant.

5 persons made connections between the topics raised in the sessions and their own life experiences. 3 discussed the difficulty of human interaction regardless of culture or nationality, i. e. among Japanese people themselves. 1 participant wrote of the difficulties he had in integrating himself into his new community after moving from another part of the country. Another participant spoke of the similarity of the mother-in-law/live in daughter-in-law relationship (a situation still common in Japan) to the difficulty encountered living in a culture other than one's own.

3 participants still had more questions that they wanted to ask when the session ended. All of the questions dealt with specific behaviors and ways of thinking in US daily life.

2 persons commented on the fact that the second main activity helped them to clearly understand the way in which culture impacts one's thinking. One indicated that it is only natural for behavior to be influenced by culture if thinking was this easily influenced.

2 participants offered me advice for further understanding Japanese culture. One suggested further immersion and another a deeper study of Japanese religion and history.

2 persons were stimulated by the discussions which occurred after the second and third main activity to question Japanese thinking in regards to taking paid holidays and community activities respectively. Both spoke of the necessity for renewed commitment for reflection on these aspects of Japanese life.

2 other participants commented on their surprise at my Japanese ability. One went on to question why the Japanese education system wasn't producing English speakers of a similar ability and the other spoke about my understanding of Japanese culture.

Finally, four participants made comments that were quite different from the other participants as well as themselves. One participant wrote that through the session he was able to reflect on his own culture while discussing another. This was important for him in that he had never considered his own culture and his relationship to it. Another participant found that through work with the last main activity, particularly the conflict resolution part of it, the best method for resolving problems was through seeking the advice of persons close to her. Another participant made only a general, positive comment about the entire session, i. e. "It was an extremely good lecture." The final participant on whose feedback I will report offered a perspective unique to all participants. His comments centered on the final proverb of the second warm up activity (When in Rome...) and its relevance to international understanding. While he recognized the

importance of awareness and acceptance of cultural differences as well as the role empathy plays in resolving intercultural conflict, he was concerned about the fate of one's identity when empathizing with another (as participants tried to do in the last activity). He suggested that a more realistic and self preserving approach to adapting to life in another country would be a twist on the "When in Rome" proverb. His new proverb would read, "When in Rome pretend to do as the Romans do."

Conclusions

In contemplating the feedback responses received from the participants as it relates to the goal and objectives that I initially set for the sessions, I believe that both sessions met that goal and those objectives. Participants as a whole seemed to have developed a stronger sense of awareness of US and their own cultural. Participants as a whole also seemed to enjoy learning experientially. While only 7 persons made explicit comments in regards to the methodology used in the session, almost all of the participants expressed that they had enjoyed the sessions.

Future considerations

In order to evaluate if the sessions had any lasting, positive effects on the participants, i. e. did it heighten their cultural awareness, further study needs to be done. Possible avenues of exploring this issue might be to conduct short telephone interviews or give written questionnaires to all of the participants a number of months after the session. A follow up survey would indicate whether the sessions had any lasting impact on the thinking of the participants in regards international understanding.

In addition, the type of sessions described above need to be conducted a number of more times to see if other participants' reactions to the content and methodology used correlate to the responses in this study. Validation of this content and methodology would provide an effective approach to increasing cultural awareness.

Further study must also be done using the methodology described to introduce other cultures. In this study, the use of American culture as an example of a non-Japanese culture was unavoidable in that the instructor is a member of that culture. However, if Japanese people are to become more culturally aware then it would appear certain that exposure to many different world views is necessary.

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