

Iowa Meets Miyazaki

Bringing Coursework to Life Through a Cross-Cultural Electronic Exchange

By Cynthia Dickel Dunn and Debra J. Occhi

The Internet increases the ease of international communication and creates exciting new opportunities for American students to learn about Asia. In this article we will discuss our experiences using the Internet to engage college students in Japan and the United States in a cross-cultural discussion of contemporary Japanese society. This electronic exchange allowed us to accomplish specific learning objectives for each class while giving our students a unique personal connection with the culture and language they were studying. While the American students focused on the study of contemporary Japanese society as presented in textbooks, lecture, and videos, the Japanese students reflected on Japan in a cross-cultural context as part of a content-based English as a Second Language (ESL) pedagogy. We have conducted this exchange twice in the past two years, using both email and a Web-based discussion board format and are quite enthusiastic about its potential.

The Educational Settings

Our professional assignments are useful context for the remainder of the essay. One of us (Cynthia Dunn) is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology who teaches a Non-Western Cultures course on Japan at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), a public university of 14,000 students. Learning objectives for the course include a basic knowledge of historic and contemporary Japanese culture, developing skills and frameworks for understanding another culture, and gaining a broader perspective on American culture through cross-cultural comparison. Sections are thirty-five students each, with no previous knowledge of Japan or Japanese language required. (A bibliography of course materials is included at the end of this article.)

The other author (Debra Occhi) is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Miyazaki International College (MIC), a private, four-year liberal arts college of 300 students located in Miyazaki, Japan. MIC offers a BA in Comparative Culture; the college's curricular foci are critical thinking and English proficiency. All students spend the second semester of the sophomore year on study abroad in an English-speaking country. Classroom use of digital technology is integrated into the curriculum.

During the first year of the exchange, Dunn's class corresponded with sophomores in a course on Japanese Film and Media, team-taught by Occhi as content specialist and Jerry Greenfield as ESL specialist. This class meets requirements for Contemporary Japanese Arts and Culture. Occhi and Greenfield each taught two sections of twenty students headed for study abroad in various English-speaking countries after semester's end. With that in mind, the learning objectives for this unit and throughout the course included fostering self-expression, particularly the ability to represent oneself vis-à-vis Japanese culture as it may be construed by both natives and non-Japanese.

In the second year, Dunn's students corresponded with Occhi's upper-division social science course on World Ethnography. This class was comprised of two sections of twenty students who had all previously studied abroad. Learning objectives for this course included reflection on and exploration of cultural issues encountered abroad and application of these experiences to a broader understanding of culture and the ethnographic enterprise.

The Exchange Process

The first step in initiating an exchange is to make contact with a willing colleague teaching at the appropriate level in the target country. Colleagues at Miyazaki International College who have conducted similar exchanges report that the best results emerged from situations where faculty at the exchange institutions were already acquaintances rather than previously unknown partners chosen through advertisements. The exchange may thus be facilitated if the teachers involved already have a previous connection.

Another necessary prerequisite for an exchange is access to computers and the Internet for students in both countries. Both teachers should have sufficient experience and facility with the relevant technology to help students troubleshoot any problems that arise. When computer use is scheduled during class time, it is important to have an alternative activity planned in case technical problems prevent students from going online. Many universities offer training workshops on the use of instructional technology for both their own faculty and K-12 educators.

In spring of 2001, we conducted the first year of the exchange via email. Due to the difference in class sizes, individual pen pals were not assigned. Rather, students were placed in small groups (five Americans and three Japanese); the groups jointly composed and responded to e-mails. The American students began by asking questions on a particular topic that had been studied in class (e.g., family life, religion, education, etc.). For example, the American students asked what the Japanese students thought about *miai* marriages (in which people are introduced to prospective spouses by a go-between), how the Japanese students felt about wearing uniforms in high school, and whether they thought someone could belong to two religions at once (e.g., Buddhism and Shintō). The questions were sent to Occhi's Japanese students, who discussed the questions and wrote group responses. They, in turn, asked their own questions of the Americans. Possible questions and answers were discussed in class, with some email being done in class and some as homework. Copies of the emails were sent to the instructors. To add a personal touch, Greenfield constructed a photo page of the Japanese students and posted it to the class Web site. The students attached these photos to their initial emails.

For the second year of the exchange, we used a Web-based



Students at Miyazaki International College.
Photo courtesy of Jerry Greenfield.

electronic discussion board designed by WebCT. WebCT is an educational software package that provides templates for designing Web-based courses. Similar courseware packages that include an electronic “bulletin board” or “discussion” section include Blackboard, eCollege, Web Board, and Microsoft Class Server. Despite the name, the electronic “discussion” does not take place in real time. Posted messages remain on the discussion board and can be read and responded to at a later time. The discussion board was housed on the UNI server, but students in both classes had password-protected access. Occhi constructed a Web page explaining how to use WebCT and link to the UNI Web board, and posted a photo page of her students.

The instructors posted possible topics on the Web board, and the American students each posted a question under a topic of their choice. The Japanese students responded to these questions and were also invited to ask their own. Each group then had an additional chance to respond to each other’s questions and comments. Both teachers read the discussion board regularly and spent time in class discussing the individual and cultural differences that appeared in the posted comments. Students in both courses received points towards their grade for participating in the exchange, but their individual postings or email messages were not graded.

In order to get the most benefit from the exercise, it is important to plan space for students to reflect on the experience. Occhi interspersed the electronic exchange with reading prompts, discussions, and journal writing activities, while Dunn’s students were asked to write a one-page reflection at the end of the course on what they felt they had learned from the exchange. These assignments were intended to help students solidify their learning by thinking more deeply about the complexities of intercultural exchange and the diversity within and between cultures.

Overcoming Challenges

The UNI spring semester begins in January, while MIC’s begins in April. The resulting mismatch in university calendars limited

both email and discussion board exchanges to one month. Fall semesters are generally better aligned and allow for a longer exchange. There was some advantage gained by the time lag, however, in that the American students had some familiarity with Japanese culture at the start of the exchange.

UNI class sizes are larger than those at MIC. In the email exchange, we compensated by putting students in groups of different sizes. On the discussion board, Occhi told her students to answer more than one question each to make up for the lower number of Japanese students. Despite these efforts, however, not all of the discussion board questions received a response.

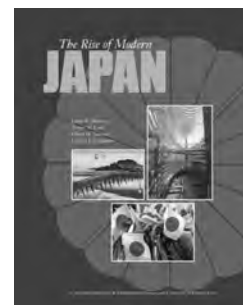
Because the exchange was conducted in English, the linguistic limitations of the Japanese students posed another challenge. A certain amount of difficulty is to be expected when communicating with second language learners, and this can itself become part of the learning process for both sides. Native speakers will need to focus on and control the complexity of their language use. We found, for example, that lengthy queries were less likely to generate a response from the Japanese students. When language proficiency is low, this may limit discussion topics and require more active facilitation by both teachers.

Comparing the Different Methods

Email involves sending messages from a single sender to specified recipients. On a Web-based discussion board, messages are posted and read by anyone with access. Individual posting on the discus-

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sion board allows students to communicate freely and spontaneously without teacher interference. Students can respond to topics of their choice and may be exposed to a wider variety of opinions and perspectives. This freedom, however, can result in redundant questions and responses, while questions of little interest or greater complexity may not receive a response.

We also experimented with having students post either individually or in groups. In the email exchange, students were placed in groups and discussed questions and responses before sending or posting them. The fact that consensus was not always reached (this was expressed in the responses) runs counter to much writing on Japanese behavioral patterns and in itself may have been instructive to both groups of students. The group email format is particularly successful for the limited language learner. It allowed students to print out and analyze questions, discuss them in class, compose a response, and have it checked by an instructor before posting it.

Depending on computer availability, the exchange can either be conducted as a classroom activity or assigned as homework. There are advantages to conducting the exchange during the class period when teachers are at hand to deal with language- or technology-related issues as they develop. We found that students often write longer messages during a dedicated class time slot than when the project is assigned as homework. Group work is also best assigned as an in-class activity.

Educational Benefits

Perhaps the most important benefit of such an exchange is simply that it allows students to have the personal experience of communicating with someone from a different culture. Many students expressed excitement about being able to communicate with someone in a foreign country, and the exchange allowed them to deal with linguistic and cultural challenges of such communication in a supportive environment. This sense of personal connection can create more interest and positive affect towards the nation being studied.

For many of the American students, being able to communicate with someone in the country they were studying made the course material "real." As one student put it, the lectures and readings helped her learn facts about Japanese society, but through the exchange, "I got to learn about the feelings that go along with it and that cannot be learned in a text book." It was important to the American students to see how things they had learned about entrance exams and "cram schools," for example, had a real impact on the lives of Japanese college students. Conversely, the Japanese students were intrigued to see how their own culture is represented in foreign books and education. Those who had been abroad were able to compare the American responses to their own experiences of living in an English-speaking country.

The exchange also helped to break down stereotypes by making students aware of individual differences within each culture. The American questions often began with a springboard such as "We learned in class that . . . (statement). What about you?" The Japanese students were able to see how their own culture is perceived, and enjoyed composing responses that represented the diversity often lacking in texts. One American commented, "It was very interesting to learn that not everyone in Japan does things exactly the same way or has the same feelings on complicated issues. I think that without these insightful discussions, it would have been very easy for me to simply generalize many aspects of Japanese culture."

Both groups of students were appreciative of the opportunity to get an "outside" view of their own culture and see how people in another country perceive them. Perhaps the most valuable effect of a cross-cultural experience is when it allows us to become aware of our own cultural assumptions. One American student commented, "Some of the questions they asked seemed so matter of fact, things we take for granted living in the United States. We do not realize some of our customs are confusing to other cultures, and it was sometimes kind of hard to explain certain issues and ideas."

In short, the exchange was both very popular with the students and supported class learning objectives. Students in both countries were able to learn about each other's cultures, as well as to become more aware of their own culture and how others perceive it. The Japanese students had the opportunity to practice their English skills with native speakers. Lastly, both groups of students were able to improve their skills in intercultural communication.

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Adapting the Exchange to Diverse Situations

Although the current exchange was conducted between American and Japanese college students, the technique is adaptable to a wide variety of situations. Provided that computer technology is available, exchanges could also be arranged at the high school level or with other Asian countries. The goal of such an exchange may be as simple as having students communicate with a peer from an Asian culture and learn something about day-to-day life in the other country. This could be extended to creating a cross-cultural discussion of literary or philosophical texts, social conditions, historic or current events, and so on. Such discussions would require curricular coordination between the two teachers and would depend on the language proficiency of the students. Teachers would obviously need to be sensitive to nationalist sentiments and current conflicts.

For the American students, the goal of the exchange described here was to learn about Japanese culture in English. However, the technique is also useful for language learning and could be used for Japanese language courses at the high school or college level. In this case, the Japanese students could communicate in their native and/or second language. At the college level, such exchanges might be particularly fruitful in ESL or Japanese teacher training programs.

While a certain amount of effort is required to set up and coordinate the exchange, we felt the educational benefits were well worth it. This type of exchange makes course material come alive for students and gives them immediate application for their learning. It not only educates them about cultural differences, but also encourages them to reflect more deeply on their own culture.

Course Materials for Japan Course Readings

BOOKS

Benjamin, Gail R. *Japanese Lessons: A Year in a Japanese School through the Eyes of an American Anthropologist and Her Children* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

Bernstein, Gail. *Haruko's World: A Japanese Farm Woman and Her Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983).

Hendry, Joy. *Understanding Japanese Society*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 1995).

Kondo, Dorinne K. *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

FILMS

Meiji: Asia's Response to the West. The Pacific Century series, vol. 2. Seattle: Pacific Basin Institute/Jigsaw Productions (1992).

Families of Japan. Wilmington, Del.: Families of the World (1998).

The Japanese Economic Bubble. Princeton, N.J.: Films for the Humanities & Sciences (1993).

The Japanese Version. New York: Center for New American Media, Inc. (1991).



U.S.-CHINA TEACHERS' EXCHANGE PROGRAM

The National Committee on United States-China Relations is now seeking applications for an exchange program for teachers in American and Chinese schools. This is an unusual opportunity for schools and districts wishing to begin or to strengthen Chinese language and culture programs and for teachers wishing to live and teach in China.

Now in its eighth year, the program has placed American teachers from across the country in "key" secondary schools throughout China—in Beijing; Dalian (Liaoning); Hohhot (Inner Mongolia); Luoyang (Henan); Suzhou, Changzhou, Yangzhou, Nanjing (Jiangsu); and Chengdu (Sichuan). We anticipate that many of the same schools on the Chinese side will participate in the next year of the program.

The American teachers in China teach English as a foreign language. The Chinese teachers, all of whom teach English as a foreign language in China, will be prepared to teach Chinese history, language, and culture and/or English as a second language at participating American schools. The National Committee sponsors orientation programs for participating teachers in the U.S. and China during the summer before the exchange year.

The National Committee pays the salary of visiting Chinese teachers and the transportation of American teachers. Participating American schools continue the salary and benefits of American teachers during their exchange year.


For more information and an application package, please send a letter to the Teachers' Exchange Program, National Committee on United States-China Relations, 71 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10010.

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Example of a Discussion Thread

(The original, unedited responses of American and Japanese students are included.)

Hi. My name is Allison and I am a junior at the University of Northern Iowa. I am a criminology major and am currently taking a class on Japan. In this class, we have been studying a lot about the education systems in Japan, and I was curious about the emphasis on group orientation and hans used in the elementary schools. When you were in elementary school, was the majority of your work and activities done in groups? Did you ever feel like you could not be as creative or individual as you wanted to be? Thank you for your help in answering my questions. — Allison

When I was elementary school student, I like individual work and group work. But now I like individual work much better than group work. Japanese elementary school teach how group work is important to kids. Because Japanese people like group work better than individual work. I know American people think Individual is very important. After I entered college, I started think "Group work is not good for me." Because Different opinion, Partner's character and thinking, etc. That is why I like individual work much better than group work.

Hi, I'm Masafumi. When I was elementary school student, it was so boring, because most of the class was group work, so I asked about group works, and teacher said that "group work makes people cooperative," does it make sense? Anyway, I don't like group works, because I feel stress about every thing. How about you? Does American school have group works? Tell me about it.

Hi! My name is Mariko. I'm a 3rd year student at college. I'd like to answer your question. I think group study is very important the reason why to study with groups we can share each opinions, also we can get to know what other classmates thinking, then we can compare with own opinions. So I think it's very helpful.

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