TEACHING WESTERN PHILOSOPHY IN JAPAN— ONE EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

The experience reflected here is based on so many unique circumstances that I hesitate to draw any conclusions from it. The program in which I taught was just founded in 1994, and from the start the administration of Miyazaki International College (henceforth MIC) failed to recruit the students for which the curriculum was designed. Despite these circumstances, I have drawn on the experience of other teachers and—very selectively—some of the literature about Japanese culture and students to provide background for the techniques that I employed and for my reflections on the results. The paper describes the following: teaching strategies and techniques, teaching Western logic to Japanese students, and presenting ethical theory and environmental ethics to Japanese students. In each section, I begin with typical western stereotypes about the Japanese, state the pedagogical problem that these stereotypes posed, and describe the technique that I adopted to address the problem. In each section I qualify the stereotype and at the end of the section comment on the success of the technique in achieving the goals established by the institution.

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Teaching Strategies and Techniques

Japanese students are often described as passive, uncritical, unimaginative, and uncreative. The program at MIC was modeled on American-style colleges and deliberately designed to challenge the passivity of students in the classroom by using techniques of active learning. This is a philosophy of education that is deliberately contrary to the typical academic experience of Japanese students in high school and in colleges and universities throughout Japan. (Mori ,1997 : 15-22).

In fact, using techniques of active learning is also a challenge to American students, in my experience, so the presentation of it as a cultural challenge made the problem, if anything, clearer.

In the first semester I seized on the idea of using Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" as a way of both introducing students to Western philosophy and challenging them with a philosophy of education that places the responsibility for their education squarely on the shoulders of the students themselves. In preparing the students for reading the "Allegory," I located them in front of a screen onto which I projected numerous objects as well as pictures of objects. From the shapes on the screen the students had to guess or infer what the object is. Afterwards I showed them the originals.

The students enjoyed playing this game because of some of the wrong guesses that they had made. The exercise permitted me to play tricks on them, such as distinguishing between a picture of

an object and the object itself. From this exercise it was an easy matter for them to take the beginning of the "Allegory" as an almost familiar rather than artificial and implausible supposition. It also made it easier for them to "picture" the plight of the prisoners, to imagine what it would be like for them to be unchained, to turn around, to be blinded by light, to see the originals for the first time, and eventually to ascend to the highest truths. They grasped quickly the difference between the image of a teacher pouring knowledge into empty minds and the image of an individual discovering knowledge and truth within. Above all, they recognized that their instructor is not their teacher but, at best, a guide. When asked, "Who is your teacher?", the students saw the point and responded, "I am." For students who missed the point, they got it quickly when I pretended to open up the tops of their heads and pour in "knowledge."

This, of course, was only a beginning, and it had to be reinforced throughout the semester by exercises that involved and engaged the students in understanding and presenting problems, trying to find solutions, and asking questions. Rather than teach the students material, the students were required to present material to the rest of the class. Some students took to the role of self-teacher so enthusiastically that it seemed to motivate them to take responsibility for their education outside of the classroom. Perhaps some of these students were already self-motivators before, but the exercises, in those cases, served to reinforce their inclinations and beliefs about education. As for the "paradox" of having the students teach each other, they realized, of course, that they had to teach themselves the material first and, then, try to explain it to others. In that effort they learned as well what they still did not clearly understand themselves and how to present it to others more clearly. Whether these techniques would be effective elsewhere can only be known by trying. Most students at MIC proved themselves ready for a different atmosphere in the classroom and for a different type of education. In fact, they complained about teachers who resorted only to lecture and demanded a format in which there was more discussion. The stereotype about the passivity of Japanese students may be true, but at MIC the students demonstrated that they were ready for a different approach.

Logic and Critical Thinking

The standard wisdom about the Japanese is that they think and write in a "circular" fashion, that they prefer to solve problems by arriving at consensus and are offended by the coldness and brutality of Western logic, that they are very emotional and therefore shy about expressing their ideas in public, that they are perfectionists and therefore ashamed when they make mistakes in public, that they expect others to be sensitive enough to understand what they mean or what they are thinking or feeling without having to express it clearly in words, that because they literally read and write in a vertical fashion they feel exhausted if they have to "speak sideways," and that their relativistic ethical thinking derives from their situational and group-oriented ethics. (Reischauer, 1988).[2]

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[2]Some of these characteristics are described in a clear engaging,balanced, and sympathetic way by Edwin O. Reischauer.

From my experience I would have to say that there is some truth in nearly all of these observations, but what is masked by such stereotypes is the extent to which the Japanese themselves complain about some of these characteristics. Some Japanese feel that some characteristics have been exploited by individuals in positions of leadership and power, whether in a profession or job, the family, or generally in male-female relationships. Suffice it to say that there are many changes occurring in Japan today, and the Japanese hold many different points of view on all subjects.

In teaching logic to Japanese students, it seemed that the imposition of values taken for granted in Western culture was unavoidable. The problem, in short, is how to present cold and brutal logic to the diplomatic and cautious Japanese.

A Japanese professor, Shinsuke Kishie, himself persuaded that passive learning is related to the inexperience of Japanese students in thinking critically, has used classroom debates as a way of teaching logic to his students in Japanese.(Kishie,1977: 16-20).[3]

In the Japanese Expression (JEX) classroom, debate is one approach which helps students become accustomed to thinking critically. Generally, Japanese students do not have enough opportunity to learn the ways of logical thinking throughout twelve years of Japanese education. For the most part, the lecture format has been used unilaterally by teachers without giving students a chance to discuss or debate in the classroom. Recently teachers are considering the use of lecture style in both compulsory and higher education, including college education.(Kishie,1977 :16).

Notice that Professor Kishie regards the problem as an educational one that can be remedied by using different techniques. The cultural challenge, one might say, has less to do in the first instance with critical thinking than with questions about lecture style as opposed to techniques of active learning. Clearly, some Japanese educators are asking fundamental questions about how students best learn, and those questions are obviously related to questions about the goals of education. Of course, what the Japanese may regard as critical thinking will itself be settled in a cultural context, but suffice it to say that if logic is a part of critical thinking, then Japanese students will have to master logical thinking. Here is Professor Kishie explaining why he has introduced debate in his classroom:

There are two main reasons why I have done so. First, students will be ableto make progress in how to think logically through debate. . . The second reason is that learning to debate in Japanese would also be beneficial to support understanding of what they are taught in content and ESL classes.This directly means that learning the way to debate in both languages will help them to understand critical thinking more than learning to debate in English or in Japa-

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[3]Because this is a locally produced journal, I quote it at length in the text. Professor Kishie is now a full professor at Tokushima University.

nese only. I have stressed learning the logic of debate throughJapanese language education in order to make them familiar with the way to debate. In this sense, my class aims mainly at acquiring the proficiency of building up a logical frame of reference by proving points with evidence.(Kishie,1977: 16).

To anyone familiar with the dialectical techniques employed by Plato, the importance attached by Aristotle to dialectical inquiry, and the centuries-long tradition of dialectical disputation employed in medieval universities, the use of debate to teach logic has a very long pedigree and distinguished career. That debate seems in more modern times to have become a part of training in public speaking should not detract from its potential usefulness in teaching students how to think logically. As Professor Kishie expressed it, The most important feature of debate is learning how to develop an argument. To structure arguments, the relationship among claim, data and warrant should be recognized by students in order to practice reasoning in debate. (Kishie,1977:18)

I have seen the diagrams that Professor Kishie uses in the classroom, and they are clearly related to the schemes developed by Stephen Toulmin.(Toulmin, 1969). I have cited the experience of a Japanese professor in part to justify the use of similar schemes in teaching logic to my Japanese students, and they serve another very important function, namely, they help our students to write clearly in English.

Through carefully designed exercises students can be taught to analyze simple arguments by identifying the claim or conclusion, recognizing the evidence needed to ground the claims, and to learn the different kinds of inference-warrants that can be used to link grounds with claims. Such exercises also help the students to read analytically and critically. These sorts of exercises can be followed by exercises designed to help students construct their own arguments, and here is the part where the students can also be taught how to write more coherent and effective essays. As with any sort of research and writing, these steps have to be repeated many times. After all, we do not always recognize the weaknesses in our arguments until they are pointed out by others.

I confess to some discomfort about imposing western rational values and techniques on non-western students in their own country. The fact that the Japanese themselves are calling for a reform of education, for active learning, and for training in critical thinking does not entirely reduce my discomfort. As Edward Said has so tellingly observed in *Orientalism*, the sad truth is that Near-Eastern peoples themselves seem to be adopting the western constuction of the oriental. The truth has left Said with the great irony that a construction that was utterly devoid of reality has become through its adoption by the very also be alert and sensitive to the effects of these intrusions on other cultures. If we could credibly make these impositions without value judgments about the superiority or inferiority of cultures, then we could interpret them simply as tools suitable for a different environment. Such value-free pragmatism is neither honest nor realistic.

Imperialism has not always been successful, so perhaps we can take consolation in that fact. We have to hope, I suppose, that the affected cultures adapt in ways that preserve their cultures, namely, by transforming what they borrow into forms and styles that suit the culture. Perhaps in some cases they can find sources in their own traditions that make the evolution natural. Cultures can absorb enormous shocks and survive major tensions, but for our part we must be alert to the needs, reflections, and reactions of our students.

Finally, however, we can take further comfort in the aptitude that Japanese and Asian students generally demonstrate in mathematics and mathematical logic. The issue, then, is not the ability to reason logically, but to develop and exercise skills useful in the analysis and invention of arguments in ordinary language.

Professor Kishie's success in teaching these methods to his students in Japanese has been reinforced by the teaching of the same techniques in English instruction. The students were required to complete exercises that trained them to formulate a thesis, provide evidence in support of the thesis, and to draw a conclusion. Their instruction in logic was practical, not theoretical, but it served the goals of the institution. The students have shown a greater ability to write coherent essays and to recognize people who have been so constructed the only "reality" about themselves that even they can recognize. Said (1979). We may excuse what we are doing as preparation of students for a global environment, but we should

flaws in the arguments of others.

Situational and Group Ethics

Western authors often describe Japanese ethical theory and practice as a situational ethics and as a group ethics. As described below, I adopted an empirical approach in the classroom that required the students to respond to such descriptions. The reactions of students led to conclusions that qualify the standard western judgment.

Situational ethics in the west is usually contrasted with principled ethics. The reason for this contrast seems to be that ethical decisions that are made according to the peculiar or individual circumstances of a particular situation are not made in accordance with any definite and rigid set of principles. On the other hand, it may be more accurate to portray western situational ethics as an ethics of shifting principles, for it seems unlikely that absolutely no principles are being applied. Rather, the contrast seems to be between a definite and rigid set of principles on the one hand and shifting principles on the other.

In fact, in western contexts the use of shifting principles is probably more common than ethical theorists would care to admit. American students in my experience seem to use the following principles in varying sets of circumstances: ethical egoism, utilitarianism (act or rule), natural law, epicureanism, and group ethics. In a culture where individualism is pronounced and protected, situational ethics appears to be non-principled. Deeper and persistent questioning usually leads to the realiza-

tion that there are principles that guide ethical decision-making in situational ethics, but the principles tend to be individualistic and shifting, ad hoc, if you will, but generally consistent with respect to the same ethical dilemmas. For instance, individuals who may generally apply natural-law principles to questions about sexual morality may shift to utilitarian principles when evaluating the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

In teaching ethical theory in Japan, my procedure was not to teach theory or different kinds of theories, but rather to adopt a more empirical approach that describes typical Japanese behavior in various circumstances. From these descriptions, I hoped, we might be able to arrive at some general statements or principles. I assigned the students a text written by a westerner with years of experience living and teaching in Japan. Boye (1995). The text is ostensibly about Japanese "code words" or expressions that reveal some fundamental characteristic (sometimes described as a unique characteristic) shared widely and commonly by Japanese people. Students had to present oral reports, summarizing an assigned chapter and offering a personal reaction or judgment about the code words in question. Many of the chapters of this text discuss expressions commonly encountered in business, work, family, student, and bureaucratic contexts. Written by a westerner, the text is intended to explain Japanese customs to non-Japanese, but because it was also written for Japanese learning English, the text is also a way of presenting a westerner's understanding of Japanese customs.

The reactions of students varied, but not widely. By and large, students tended to agree with the judgments and evaluations of the author, even though they often qualified the author's conclusions, or they tried to explain the characteristics in a more comprehensive and contextual, cultural, or historical fashion. Only a few students were highly critical and perhaps offended by some chapters. On the contrary, in most cases students agreed with the judgments and were often even more critical than the author is of some Japanese customs and characteristics, using such strong language as "silly," "stupid," and "old-fashioned" to describe certain characteristics or behaviors. For example, students were most critical of Japanese business or work customs that require employees to play golf with their colleagues on weekends rather than using their free time as they see fit. Some complained openly and bitterly about the social pressures affecting family and colleagues that require what seem an endless series of duties and obligations. It is not uncommon for Japanese to express a desire to leave Japan just so they can escape these obligations.

Where students were critical of the author, their disagreement was usually that the characteristic described the Japanese of older and by-gone generations but that it was no longer true of the Japanese today. Where the author explained a characteristic as Buddhist in origin, students often rejected such a characteristic as irrelevant or no longer typical. Where the characteristic seemed to have a Confucian origin, the students could neither confirm nor disconfirm it, but they acknowledged the importance of

the family and values associated with the family and other groups in their society and in their ethical judgments.

From such observations and discussions we were able to perceive Japanese customs and ethics as not different in kind from the customs and ethics of other societies, but rather different in degree. The text, then, served the purposes of comparative analysis, and it engaged the students in concrete discussions of Japanese behavior and customs.

Most discussions were taken up with reactions to the author's characterization of Japanese ethics as a situational ethics and a group ethics. Typical of such judgments, the author contrasts situational ethics with principled ethics, and group ethics with individualistic ethics. Group ethics in Japan, he claims, is governed by the principle of harmony, that is, the need or obligation to maintain harmony within a group.

The class discussions and subsequent essays written by the students on situational and group ethics led, in general, to three kinds of reflections. Some students were critical of situational and group ethics, viewing them as means used by groups in power to maintain the status-quo and their positions in society. Not surprisingly, most of the students who adopted this view are women.

Some students questioned the importance of group harmony, preferring the individualism characteristic of westerners, but most of the students expressed a deep attachment to the principle of group harmony, suggesting that this remains a fundamental characteristic of Japanese society and ethics. Al-

though the post-war Japanese Constitution protects the rights of individuals, the Japanese are socially conditioned in the family and school to form groups and to maintain group harmony at almost any cost. Again, there have been enormous changes in Japanese society. Although it is still common for employees to stay with the same job and firm throughout their careers, there is increasing mobility. The evidence suggests that Japan is in transition, but to what is not clear.

Some students accepted the judgments about situational and group ethics, but they challenged the way in which most authors contrast situational ethics with principled ethics. They considered this a culturally biased judgment based on western experience. This second group of students argued that situational ethics in Japan is based on principled ethics, namely, group ethics, which is itself based on the principle of harmony. These students defended the principle of harmony as characteristic of the "Japanese way." In their view, the principle of harmony contributed to the success of the Japanese in history and contributes to their success today in the global economy.

I distinguished yet a third group of reactions that was close to the reaction of the second group, but which also challenged the assumption that group ethics is inconsistent with individualism. One might see this group, then, as somewhere between those who criticize the emphasis on group harmony as suppressing individualism and those who approve group harmony as the reason for Japanese strength and success. These students agreed with the views of Edwin

Reischauer, another westerner who lived many years in Japan. Reischauer (1988). Commenting on the standard description of the Japanese, Reischauer had this to say:

Ideally the cooperative, relativistic, group-oriented Japanese is not just the bland product of a social conditioning that has worn off all individualistic corners but is rather the product of firm inner self-control that has made him master of his less rational and more antisocial instincts. He is not a weak-willed yes-man but the possessor of great self-discipline. In contrast to normal Western perceptions, social conformity to the Japanese is no sign of weakness but rather the proud, tempered product of inner strength. Reischauer (1988:166).

In presenting ethical theory to Japanese students, I was worried about imposing western ethical values and judgments on Japanese behavior. For the students it was more important to lead them to some inductive generalizations based on common experiences in their society. The different generalizations that the students achieved suggest that the approach worked as a pedagogical tool. More importantly, it seems that the students were led to reflect about their traditions and customs.

There was one more consequence of the discussions. When we turned to a discussion of environmental ethics, some students preferred anthropocentric ethics, which, it seems, was clearly consistent with their understanding of group ethics. Many students preferred non-anthropocentric ethics, and here, significantly it seems to me, they clearly expressed a preference for a holistic (group or community-oriented) environmental ethics over an individualistic environmental ethics. They judged individualistic environmental ethics to be too legalistic and too amorphous because based on the merits of often very complicated cases and individual circumstances. The students who adopted holistic environmental ethics were attracted to it in part because they found it more congenial with their own group-oriented views, and because they found the extension of their group to other nations and to the larger natural community compatible with their growing international and global consciousness.

There is, of course, a Japanese environmental movement, but most of the Japanese students with whom I have come in contact seem to be almost oblivious to its existence. Most Japanese environmental groups have tended to be local and often formed in response to a specific local problem and crisis. If I can conclude anything from my experience, I would have to say that the Japanese are just beginning to develop an environmental awareness. As their consciousness of global and international problems develops, the Japanese will be able to contribute the lessons learned from their own experiences (for example, the Minamata disaster) as well as ethical principles that emphasize group and community welfare to the worldwide discussion of the major environmental problems facing us. When the Japanese do adopt a program such as recycling, for example, they are far more successful in implementing it than is the case in the U.S.A.

Conclusion

The very fact that we ask questions about imposing western values on non-western cultures and that we seek for indigenous traditions that may support such values suggests to me that there is imposition in fact. An imposition that is violent and destructive will produce a discontinuity in the culture at least with respect to the relevant activity. An imposition that is cautious and sensitive provides an opportunity for reaction, adjustment, adaptation, and transformation. There can be little question that the destruction of Japan at the end of the World War II and the heavy imposition of western political and social values on the Japanese during the years of military occupation produced a discontinuity in Japanese history. No one could sensibly argue that the developments that occurred after 1945 would have occurred despite the events of World War II and the post-war occupation.

The occupation, however, was not totally insensitive. By taking advantage of the respect accorded the emperor by most Japanese and the Japanese tendency to conform to authority and to the group, the occupation's governors served to make the imposition of western political and social values less violent than it might otherwise appear. If we can judge from the resurgence of Japanese independence in the 1950s and 1960s, we could optimistically conclude that the Japanese have reacted, adjusted, and adapted to western values by transforming them in ways that have contributed to a creative tension in Japanese society. The constitutional protection of the rights of individuals placed a limit on the group orientation of the Japanese that challenged them to rationalize their emphasis on group harmony as a product of individual self-discipline and inner strength.

Their concerns about passive learning have led Japanese educators to advocate the introduction of techniques of active learning. As part of active learning, there is somewhat more encouragement of critical thinking, but we can expect administrators to regret these developments. In Japan teachers are used to being the sole authority in the classroom and administrators are used to an authoritarian style of decision-making. It is typical for presidents of schools to remain aloof to the different opinions being expressed by teachers. Presidents see their role as that of mediator or middle-man. They will usually settle the issue by agreeing with the majority, and then they expect the minority to fall in line. The introduction of active learning and critical thinking promises to challenge the culture of schools in ways that Japanese authorities are likely to find unsettling. In the long run either the Japanese themselves will adopt these changes as a needed response to their situation in the global economy, or they will have to find some other way consistent with their traditions of group harmony and methods of building consensus.

The concern expressed about imperialism and insensitivity could be due to exaggerated sensitivity and a failure to recognize that, aside from obvious cases of cultural imperialism, transmission between cultures tends to be a two-way street. Values transmitted from one culture to another are not just absorbed

wholesale by the recipient culture. Successful transmission requires reflection, adjustment, adaptation, and transformation. Moreover, communication between two cultures offers opportunities for enriching both.

Finally, the conclusions drawn here are specific to one experience at one institution. My interpretations, though expressed more generally, refer to this experience. Whether the conclusions or interpretations are more generally valid depends on comparison with the experiences of others. If the ideas expressed here serve as a useful point of departure for others or stimulate teachers to adapt the strategies described, they will have served their purposes.

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