
Conference Reviews

The CUE's 30th Year Anniversary Conference in Toyama

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I'm new to CUE. I'm new to JALT. I'm new to Japan. After living in Canada and the US for more than 25 years, I was suddenly recalled to Japan due to family circumstances just a few months ago. I came to Toyama because I needed to start a new academic life, and I was hoping to find a welcoming group and friendly colleagues – and perhaps even some new friends.

As I watched people come in on the first day, I was struck by the collegiality of this group. They seem to know each other very well on a personal basis, and the group struck me as a tightly-knit community. Still, I was surprised by how personal both plenary presentations were. Laurel Kamada described her personal struggles, first as a half-Japanese when she was a teenager and then more recently as a stroke victim. It was hard not to be moved by Dr. Kamada in her wheelchair, obviously affected by the consequences of her stroke, yet bravely delivering her speech to the auditorium full of people. She kept a stoic face, but I thought I heard a tinge of lament when she admitted she could no longer continue to work as a university professor. Life happens (yes, even to language teachers). The question might start from cogitating “whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer/ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,/Or to take arms against a sea of troubles/And, by opposing, end them,” but it is ultimately about learning to live with life circumstances and identities you wish you didn't have to deal with and come to peace with them.

The second plenary presentation (on Day 2) was by Julia Kimura, who narrated her personal journey of becoming an academic and a union activist

through the lens of Lave and Wenger's "community of practice." In this theoretical framework, one learns and becomes a veteran member of a community through "legitimate peripheral participation," by doing something that really needs to be done (thus "legitimate") but starting from relatively easy tasks (thus "peripheral"). Her personal reflection nicely reinforced her pitch as director of membership to encourage us to get more involved and volunteer in CUE and JALT: these activities constitute learning, and they are the path to becoming an established academic in Japan. I appreciated her scholarly and analytic assurance that I was doing the right thing by coming to this conference and becoming (just a day earlier!) a reviewer for CUE journals. It also reminded me of my earlier journey of becoming an academic in North America by starting out at a small Canadian conference similar to CUE and becoming involved in their community. There were some highly emotional moments in Julia's presentations, and I saw how audience members responded to show their emotional and personal support.

The other plenary session was a panel discussion by Amanda Yoshida, Adrienne Verla Uchida, Takaaki Hiratsuka, Kie Yamamoto, and Jennie Roloff Rothman. Again some of the panelists shared their personal struggles to start their careers as academics, and how lonely they felt at times, especially during the pandemic. I don't think I have ever seen a presentation on friendship at an academic conference (even though theirs was theoretically grounded as "critical friendship"), and it was a testament to CUE's concern for each individual member's personal well-being.

I did not actively pursue sessions that explicitly dealt with emotions or mental health (e.g. "Investigating mental health and well-being among tertiary language teachers in Japan" by Brian Gaynor and Bob Ashcroft, "Never Alone: How Friendship can be Critical and Reflective" by Amanda Yoshida and Aviva Ueno, "Group Emotions - What they are and why do they matter?" by Nicholas Marx, and "Alienation and teacher well-being: a research agenda" by Robert J. Lowe and Richard Pinner), but even in other sessions, both presenters and the audience did not hesitate to acknowledge and discuss their insecurities, vulnerabilities, and other personal struggles (e.g., "imposter syndromes" in Victoria and James Thomas' "Self-Perceptions of Teaching Capability & Teacher

Identity in Tertiary EFL” generated a murmured agreement). I got the feeling they knew they were in a safe place, and they had confidence in their colleagues to be supportive and non-judgmental.

One might expect such a close-knit community to be closed to newcomers, but they were both friendly and welcoming to newcomers like me. The conference organizers (e.g. Theron, Tim, Fred, Martin, and Victoria) helped me orient as a first-timer, and Julie introduced me to a number of people. Everyone responded well to my overtures, and they included me in their circles of friends. I did not feel alone at the conference dinner on Saturday night, and I was included in two small informal gatherings on Sunday night, a dinner at an Indian restaurant and a drink at a pub. I don't know when exactly I started to feel like I was part of the group, but people treated me as if I had been an old friend, and at times I felt as if I had been speaking among old friends.

The conference, of course, had other content, and I attended quite a few sessions on technology. Russell Minshull told us about his experience of using Screencast to give video feedback on student essays and students' reactions to this mode of feedback. Two presentations (one by Irina Kuznetcova, the other by Jerry Talandis Jr.) focused on ChatGPT, and they generated lively discussions. I have been playing with ChatGPT myself, and I agree with both presenters that we cannot ignore its growing capability and its role in writing, as well as its implications for the changing roles of human writers (My cousin says he would not be working as a computer programmer if it weren't for ChatGPT.) Kuznetcova argued that it is important to address AI use in your classroom from day one even if you disallow it altogether. Your students need to know your stance, rationale, and policy. Talandis Jr. took the stance that it is his responsibility to introduce his students to ChatGPT and teach them how to use it responsibly and ethically. Otherwise, the students will likely meet ChatGPT on their own anyway with no guidance from anyone. Based on my conversations with my friends and colleagues elsewhere, I know ChatGPT scares a lot of people for many good reasons. Regardless of your stance on ChatGPT and other AI technologies, I think it is important to have a public conversation now about what it is, what it does, what it could do in the future, how to use it,

how to control it, etc. so that we will have at least some say in the direction of this powerful technology. I look forward to more sessions on this topic in the future.

Other sessions I attended include Jonathan Hennessy's experience of teaching an English debate class, Theron Muller and Alaa Salem's study on international postgraduate scholars in Japan, Christopher Moddell's techniques to solicit student engagement, and Quenby Hoffman Aoki's reflection on teaching CLIL. I also appreciated the discussion on teacher intuition in Richard Pinner and Richard J. Sampson's session as it was interesting to hear about the intuitions of many teachers in the audience developed through the course of their career. Finally, I was glad I stayed for the last session by Jennifer Jordan, who presented her findings from her doctoral dissertation on the relationship between proficiency and formulaic language. I appreciated the care she took to collect and analyze her large discourse data.

I definitely made the right choice in coming to Toyama all the way from Tokyo. Before the conference, I didn't really know anybody in the Japanese academic community, and I didn't know any issues that concerned the community. Now I can name some of those issues: underemployment, job insecurity, workload, professional development needs in response to the changing and growing demands on our abilities, relationship with JTEs, and so on. More importantly, I now have more than 20 people with whom I feel I made some meaningful connections, and I wanted to stay longer. I lingered in Toyama on Monday for the optional walking tour. I was sorry that Julie and Martin had to leave at the last minute because of logistics problems, and we were all shocked to see Theron get hit by a bicycle just as we were about to start our walk! So, Kerrie and her dog Red led us (Victoria, Jim, Rachel, Parvathy, and me) to a hilltop with a beautiful view of the city. Kerrie had to leave early, but the rest of us sat down at a café to savor the last hour of the CUE 2023 experience. We parted unwillingly with a promise to see each other again in Tsukuba in November.

Author Bio

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