

JASCE 5th Annual Conference / IASCE 30th Annual Conference – Cooperative learning in Japan and the world

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The Japan Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education (JASCE) held its 5th national conference in conjunction with the 30th conference of its international parent, the International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education (IASCE), at Chukyo University, Nagoya, on the weekend of June 7–8 (http://jasce.jp/conf0507prog_e.html). It was a conference that I had looked forward to with anticipation as I had only recently heard about and joined JASCE, and because its principles meshed with my recent research. The association also seemed to be applying these principles in practice. These principles are those of Cooperative Learning (CL). CL is not new and has had its own volume in the JALT Applied Materials Series (Kluge, McGuire, Johnson & Johnson, 1999). However, many teachers (including myself until recently) are unacquainted with the principles that make CL different from other forms of group work. There are many forms of CL and varying theoretical positions, but the most commonly quoted of these principles are Johnson and Johnson's (1999) five elements: 1) positive interdependence, 2) individual accountability, 3) face-to-face promotive interaction, 4) social skills, and 5) group processing. Though research supports the claims that CL leads to improved achievement

and greater learning for all, CL adherents insist that the process is as important as these results.

On Friday 6 June, the day prior to the conference, there were tours arranged around Nagoya, one of which was a visit to Inuyama city primary schools where participants could see CL in action. As a parent of a 3-year-old, I was disappointed not to be able to attend this tour, but the general response I heard from those parents who participated was that the classes they observed were so much more active and enjoyable than the classes their own children had experienced in other Japanese elementary schools.

The conference itself started with a bilingual keynote by Professor Masato Takahata (one of the pioneers of CL in Japan), of Chugoku Gakuen University. His lecture “The development and present situation of cooperative collaboration in classroom learning in Japan” gave us a brief but clear history of CL in Japan, and outlined the principles and critical points of his approach to CL. This keynote, which served to bring members of JASCE and IASCE together, was followed by concurrent workshops/roundtable sessions where about 60% were conducted in English and the rest in Japanese. The English ones included those by well-known international presenters such as Yael Sharan from Israel, one of the founders of IASCE, and George Jacobs from Singapore, one of the main promoters of CL in EFL. But even if one did not attend their presentations, learning from and interacting with these experts during other sessions was a fruitful part of this conference, as these sessions were structured with discussion time facilitated by a discussant, and the experts all attended and actively participated in many of these sessions that I attended. The ones I went to included Winnie So and Justina Ip’s “Developing a framework for implementing cooperative learning in Hong Kong basic education”; from the US, Lynda Baloche, Dena Beeghly, and Martha Dropnak’s “Developing individual responsibility in cooperative groups”; and, from Germany, Gesa Meyer’s “Design and evaluation of a program for training pre-service language teachers for

cooperative learning”.

These smaller sessions were followed by the second bilingual keynote which served to bring the participants of the English and Japanese presentations of the conference back together. This one was by Yael Sharan on the theme of “Cooperative Learning: A diversified pedagogy for diverse classrooms”. The day ended with the reception party, which did not escape from the principles of CL. There were activities planned to ensure we met new people, share our reflections on the day, and help each other collect seals if we wanted to have some dessert. This first day saw both my knowledge of and enthusiasm for CL develop greatly. While I knew that CL, as defined by many of the leaders in the movement, was not merely a general kind of group work but a specific form that included an individual responsibility component, I was ignorant of its long history in Japan, its variegated forms, its high ideals, and its creativity.

The second day was another full day with sessions organized from 9:30 to 6:30. As with the previous day, there were again the two parallel sessions of English and Japanese presentations. There was also again the wide variety of cultures, contexts, subjects, and themes to choose from. For OnCUE Journal readers, some of those relating specifically to EFL at Japanese colleges and universities included the following: Yoshiyuki Nakata’s guest lecture on autonomy in the Japanese EFL context, Mitsuko Tanaka’s study on CL using Dictogloss, and Kumiko Fushino’s work on measuring students’ readiness for group work in L2 at a Japanese university. However, at conferences like these there is great value in stepping outside contexts similar to one’s own and exploring work in other subject areas, other very different situations, and other cultures. The result is often a realization that there are more similarities than we can imagine between these situations and our own, and recognition of what the differences are that we can understand and appreciate in our own situations more clearly.

In addition to gaining insights from these different contexts,

for me the main value of attending this conference was the deep understanding of CL I gained from experiencing the stories of teachers attempting to apply it systematically and in keeping with its principles, and openly discussing the problems they experienced doing so. I greatly appreciated this focus on the principles of CL throughout the conference, as often these principles get lost in translation when CL is transferred to a different audience of teachers with more heterogeneous beliefs and eclectic approaches. I gave all of my meishi away and received many more in return, all from teachers I intend to keep in contact with, either for collaborative research or for continued sharing of ideas about cooperative learning.

For more information on CL, and on the two associations, the following are their Web site URLs:

JASCE – <http://jasce.jp/indexe.html>

IASCE – <http://www.iasce.net/>

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References

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