
Opinion & Perspective

University is Not a Finishing School...or Is It?

Andrew Woollock

During a rather heated lunchtime debate on classroom management, a colleague uttered, "Well, university is not a finishing school, you know!" But, as I reflected on this over lunch, I thought, "but it is!", for it occurred to me that university does and should indeed fulfill some of the social functions that institutions like finishing schools might once have performed. A university, not unlike a finishing school, is the last stage in an individual's education, when education has a broader meaning. It occurs in a young person's life when they are at last at the stage to fully comprehend and internalize concepts such as social justice, morals, and manners. And as professional teachers we should recognize that matters of personal conduct certainly have a definite impact on the development of a student and on the running of the class as a whole. It is these factors, relating to attitude and behaviour, which I strongly feel we are responsible for teaching and should be part-and-parcel of basic classroom management.

To support this view I would like to make reference to Hindu philosophy. As with many cultures that have rites and passages or acknowledge stages of human existence, Hindu philosophy has an enlightened way of looking at human life. It divides life into four distinct phases or Ashrams. However, only the first and second phases are

relevant to this discussion. The first of these is Brahmacharya (Student), covering the period of schooling up to about the last year of university with a focus on training and discipline, and on learning about spiritual, community, and family life. The next phase is Grahasta (Householder) which encompasses the period from graduating university until about forty years old. So we are looking at a period of learning (defined in the widest possible sense of the word) which then gives way to a period of entering more fully into society, childhood transitioning into adulthood. As part of that transition university life plays a pivotal role, and as university teachers we too are charged with our part in this process. That is especially true in Japan.

If we take a look at the Japanese etymology for 'teacher', we can see there are various terms used in common parlance: koushi (lecturer/speaker), kyoushi (instructor) and sensei (teacher). If we take the latter as the ideal, and we consider its kanji compound (先 sen-ahead/first/previous, 生 sei-birth/student), we find an idea, which, although no longer so common in school education, still rings true in the world of bushido. That is the idea that one's teacher has previously walked the path the students in their care now walk. They have accumulated knowledge, wisdom and experience and it is that greater acquisition of knowledge that they, like a parent, now share with their pupils in an effort to offer them a truly holistic educational experience. Naturally, a cynic might argue that we are only university teachers, a mere link in the chain, and that the above lofty ideals are not really their cup of tea. However, to my mind, anyone who makes such a retort is probably in the wrong profession.

Japanese (Buddhist) parenting style also acts as a model for introducing discipline at a later stage. The tendency in Japan is to let the children run free in the early years and then become progressively stricter as they grow up - in opposition to the European model which is strict at the outset, then more lenient later on. As the dominant

approach to child-rearing in Japan, it would therefore seem logical to interweave pedagogy into that tapestry. And at university, students are heading towards the early stages of adulthood, so we should be able to successfully introduce the concept of responsibility and accountability.

Due to the nature of Japanese primary and secondary schooling, the focus being largely on test-taking, the teaching of other, more basic skills such as interpersonal skills and manners are often set aside. And so the responsibility for training and learning (manners etc.) is traditionally given over to external bodies such as clubs (circles), educational institutions and later companies. In a poll of my students, they all admitted (to differing degrees) that they felt one of a university's responsibilities was to engage their students in the broader context of learning, and that teachers should be firm and control their classes effectively. If we then fail to provide this support, it is arguable that we are not doing our jobs properly. Furthermore, as a unique profession, teaching should attract professionals who, aside from matters of curriculum also aspire to be positive role models in that we should lead by example and show students the way. We should also maintain and adhere to our own standards, standards we should encourage them to follow.

The most pathetic excuse I have ever heard proffered with respect to failing to call students on behaviour which one could deem antisocial, impolite, inappropriate or downright rude, is the 'pseudo enlightened pedagogy', the old quandary of 'lazy' or 'laissez-faire'. I have, in all my discussions and debates on this subject, yet to see enlightened laissez-faire pedagogy that is not simply window-dressed laziness. The bottom line is that some teachers either don't care or are turning a blind eye and have simply given up addressing behaviour which is immediately inappropriate. This can eventually have a knock-on impact onto the greater student body of the class and can result in marring their shared

learning experience, because after all, students are learning as part of a class, a collective unit.

Also, it also seems to me that if you don't set the boundaries and standards, and establish the rules, then not only is that wholly unprofessional, but it has a negative impact on the student too. Likewise it is also unfair to the other members of faculty (who might get our students later on) because if we negate our responsibility to maintain standards and rules, and other teachers end up with our wayward students, then we are simply passing the buck to our colleagues. That is especially true if we pair-teach, or we have a one-term rotation system. Of course it should not be forgotten that we are ultimately shifting the burden onto society as a whole.

In fact, if we check our job descriptions, we may find that we are actually charged with being responsible, with maintaining class discipline and through that, class morale. We therefore have a responsibility to maintain standards and rules in the classroom because it is our class; after all we are the driver and not the passenger. Moreover, we owe it to our students to help them make the right choices and through sharing our own experiences and knowledge give them an initial framework within which to work. If, for example we teach late students to knock before entering the classroom, then we not only ensure the class is not unduly interrupted, but more importantly we introduce two important factors into the students lives: accountability and *modus operandi*. To take the first point, we introduce to students the notion of cause and effect, and furthermore the idea of accountability and personal responsibility. Secondly, if we give them a *modus operandi*, and they are faced with a similar situation later in life it is anticipated that they will automatically revert to what they have learned previously; that is as much true of linguistic functions as it is of behavioural patterns. Arguably, learning is all about acquiring various *modus operandi*, which can be retrieved and reverted to at will.

Another aspect of the laissez-faire approach is the fact that it is an entirely selective 'methodology', and rather echoes of 'what teachers can get away with'. I mean to suggest this: on native lands, imagine teaching bone fide SLA to immigrants, and then imagine the teacher failing to correct, advise or guide a student in matters of conduct or behaviour they thought remiss. Likewise, if we teach students who are planning to study overseas and we fail to anticipate how their behaviour might be interpreted or rather misinterpreted, then we could be placing that student in a position of undue tension or stress, and possibly in harm's way.

This brings me to the final point: the language plus culture equation. It seems to me that here in Japan, certainly at the primary and secondary levels, English is often not given the same respect as Japanese, and is too often taught in a stand-alone manner devoid of cultural context. The fact of the matter is that language and culture, the cultural appropriation of language, are inseparable. To teach one without the other is akin to teaching half a mathematical equation. With this in mind we realise one of the real strengths of a native-speaker teacher, perhaps our greatest strength: that we have a chance to bring our cultural background and knowledge to the classroom and help the students engage in the true richness and diversity of language and its cultural application and appropriation, to take language off the page, out of the textbook and to breath life into it. One fine example of this language and culture mélange was demonstrated to me by an American colleague, who had a great beginning of term exercise. The role-playing exercise centred around giving excuses for being late: "Sorry I'm late..." Not only did this teach students much needed social skills, but it did it in a fun, creative and non-threatening manner. At the same time it also taught them the protocol expected should they be late to class.

Finally, I would like to add one example of my own. Personally,

I insist that all my students hand in typed submissions of any written work. In accordance with the language plus culture equation, I explain to students that at English universities hand-written submissions are not accepted. Firstly, the teacher cannot always read your handwriting and hasn't got the time to spend wondering what you might have written. Secondly, it is not actually professional to submit hand-written essays any longer; this is after all 2009! Lastly, couple the previous points with the fact EFL students can use the aid of both a spell and grammar-check and furthermore make full use of the cut and paste function in the development and editing stage of their writing; all this ultimately saving them time. In addition to these obvious merits, there are numerous benefits such as orientating students to the college's facilities. So, finally the student ends up knowing their way around campus and after a term or so, at last starts becoming computer literate, a much-needed skill for when they go 'job-hunting'.

In this brief article, I have put forward the view that we, as teachers, are in control, it is our class and we have a responsibility and duty, to establish and maintain boundaries. To guide and educate students in a much more holistic manner, we should articulate to our students the reasons why we need rules. If we don't widen our focus to encompass modes of human behaviour beyond academia, we are effectively failing in our responsibility as a teacher and ultimately failing the students in our care.

* * *

Andrew Woollock has been teaching at universities in the Kansai region for the last 10 years. His research interest are in material development, the use of Japanese in the EFL classroom, classroom management and using art in an EFL context. He is currently teaching at Doshisha Women's College and Ritsumeikan (Kinugasa Campus).