
Conference Review

A Different Kind of Conference: A Day on Intercultural Communication with JII

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The Japan Intercultural Institute (JII) held its annual conference on October 17, 2010 at Shirayuri College, near Sengawa Station on Tokyo's Keio Line. JII is a non-profit institute sponsoring seminars, projects, and materials development focusing on intercultural education and skills for educational and business settings (<http://www.japanintercultural.org/Default.aspx?l=1>). In addition, JII sponsors events through the year such as the annual conference, where members can convene to discuss intercultural issues, network, and have fun together. JII's 2010 conference theme was "Intercultural learning for a global world: From the classroom to the boardroom," reflecting the varied interests and backgrounds of the participants. This marked the fifth time the event has been held, and participation has continued to grow each year, according to JII Director Joseph Shaules. The turnout in 2010 was about 120, compared to the previous year's turnout of just over 100. This means the event was smaller in scale than something like the annual JALT conference; however, this was in no way a drawback. The JII conference had a very personalized and at-home feeling from the start of the day, and there was plenty to do with over twenty presentations on the schedule.

After registration opened at 9:00 a.m. on the scenic Shirayuri

campus, Shaules started the conference officially with a warm greeting. As this was my first time attending the event, it was useful to hear him explain JII's goals as an NPO. Perhaps because JII's members do get together for activities, the event had a very "at home" feeling to it. People seemed to know each other yet welcomed me as a newcomer. I found participants were as eager and receptive as any conference audience I have seen—a good thing, as I was scheduled to give a workshop as well.

Presentations, some in English and some in Japanese, were interesting to language teachers and intercultural trainers, as well as those involved in building bridges across cultures in other ways. It's hard to define this further. People working in this field are sometimes involved in business, but there's a wide range of things interculturalists do—some are in health care, others are volunteers who troubleshoot/advise, some are translators/interpreters, some counselors, etc. Others just come to this kind of thing out of personal interest.

I spent the morning listening to an engaging speaker in Japanese on English language education for computer science majors. She asked questions of the audience about our teaching contexts and backgrounds, and kept our responses in mind as she explained how she approaches her own students, who did not necessarily feel a need for English. As I have not taught computer science majors, her description of her students' attitudes and needs allowed me a glimpse into the unfamiliar teaching context of a science-oriented university. This in a sense allowed me to encounter another of Japan's communities and the perspectives of its students on English study, through her eyes.

This was followed by a presentation from Peter Mizuki, of Nihon University, on a course about Japanese culture for international students. He explained how he has his students prepare presentations on Japanese cultural keywords, working with them on their understanding of Japan while simultaneously building their autonomy. Like the presenter in the morning, he took audience questions as he presented. I saw this

interactivity in all the sessions I attended at the event. After listening to his talk, I decided to take a break to focus on my own presentation and eat lunch.

Lunchtime highlighted the one thing that I felt might be a drawback of the conference: the location. As beautiful as the campus was, there were no shops immediately around us. The conference organizers solved this by providing a bento service.

Following lunch, most participants went to see the plenary speaker and current Chairman of Airbus Japan, Glen Fukushima, speaking on intercultural skills and globalization. His session went a little overtime, but the conference was small enough that the afternoon presentations could all be shifted a few minutes without confusion. The volunteers and organizers were quick in handling this change.

In the afternoon, I attended a presentation in the room where I would be giving my own workshop. The talk was on some basic concepts from intercultural communication—mainly leading into a discussion of Geert Hofstede’s influential ideas (2001). Hofstede’s ideas were new for some members of the audience, and hearing the presenter describe his cultural dimensions framework was interesting enough; however, the speaker stayed on stage answering questions straight through until it was my time to start. The student volunteers were afraid to force the speaker to stop (understandably), and I was thankful that one of the JII organizers came in to help. She managed to get the presenter to finish and also rescheduled things so I was able to have the full time for my own session.

When I took the stage, the JII audience was warm, and quick to participate in my own session. I spoke on the challenges of preparing university students for study abroad when they are enrolled in a pre-departure English for Academic Purposes course, but they come with unrealistic expectations regarding what coursework abroad will entail. My workshop allowed participants an opportunity to try some parts of an activity set developed for working with students on this problem by

allowing the teacher to become a cultural informant, and the audience eagerly responded with their own questions and comments. It was very worthwhile as a presenter to share what I had to say, as the audience and the JII volunteers were all so participatory and energetic. It is also worth noting that despite the small size of the conference, I had a good-sized audience attend; it was larger than some I have had at bigger events.

Unfortunately, with a long trip back to Okayama, I had to leave once my presentation was done; however, in addition to the other presentations on the schedule, there were two events worth noting. The last session of the day, which I hated having to miss, was by Joseph Shaules again, talking about deep culture, his term for “the unconscious conditioning that shapes our thinking and view of the world in hidden ways” (<http://www.pico-global.com/>). As he has been influential in intercultural materials development here in Japan—co-authoring the textbooks *Identity* and *Different Realities*, for example—I would have very much liked to hear his presentation. Finally, in the evening, some of the participants and planners went out for dinner together. The conference is small enough that this is a very appropriate end to the event, and very much in tune with what Shaules stated at the start of the day, that the conference would have a different feel from other similar events, with perhaps less of an academic focus than some other conferences. I should mention that as I attended the sessions, I never felt that myself. Every presentation I attended would have been equally likely to be on the schedule for the JALT or SIETAR Japan conferences, depending on the topic focus.

At the end of the day, I felt the conference reflected my understanding of the goals of JII itself—personal, with a focus on real people and real interaction. The experience left me wishing I lived closer to Tokyo. Anyone with an interest in intercultural communication or international events around Kanto might enjoy getting involved with the group, as JII seems to have events scattered throughout the year. I cannot attend

them, being so far away; however, I will certainly be going again for future JII conferences.

References

Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

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