

TEACHING DEBATE IN JAPAN

PART TWO

日本におけるディベート教育

第二部

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Summary : An instructor of debate in Japan not only needs to understand cultural differences outlined in Part One, but also differences in the educational system in Japan that will impact both teaching style and curriculum utilized in the classroom. Looking at the differences, a review of the literature examining the differences, classroom work and expectations and teacher training and management will allow for effective teaching strategies to be developed.

Key words : Debate, Teaching, High Order Thinking, Educational System, Teacher Training and Management

Introduction to the Issue

In order to effectively teach debate in Japan, there is a need to recognize the intrinsic differences between the current Japanese and American educational systems at the elementary and secondary levels. There is a difference between the ways in which Japanese and American students learn (Huang & Klinger, 2006; Yamazaki, 2005; Yonezawa, 2007) and also the ways in which Asian and American educators teach information and concepts (Carless et al., 2008; Crandall, 2000). To this end, the higher order thinking skills of both American and Japanese students may be different (Yamazaki, 2005), and this may affect the ability of Japanese students to be successful in learning Debate.

This essay will take a deeper look at the issues connected with the differences between the current Japanese and American educational systems. The essay will explore cultural differences, classroom expectations, and teaching styles as indicators of these differences, and will explore any similarities as well. The thesis of the essay is that the higher order thinking skills of Japanese and American students differ in a significant way, which is tied to their cultural and organizational expectations.

Analysis of the Literature

Overarching Differences in Educational Systems

There are both similarities and differences between Japanese and American educational systems on an overarching basis. On an organizational level Yamazaki (2005) explains that both Japanese and American learning organizations are hierarchical, in that there are set rules for everyone at every level of education. This can include organizations such as state educational frameworks as well as individual schools or classrooms.

At the same time, the ways in which these hierarchies are expressed in Western societies and in Japan are very

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different. Yamazaki (2005) suggests that in the United States, for example, this hierarchy is explicit. This means that everyone is given a set of information that explains what their role is, and what the roles of others are, from lawmakers to principals to students. In Japan, on the other hand, Yamazaki (2005) suggests that the hierarchy is hidden, but everyone is intrinsically aware of their role. This means that Japanese students and teachers are people-orientated rather than task-orientated, and American students and teachers take the opposite approach.

This difference in how they approach information means, according to Yamazaki (2005), that while American students learn through the use of abstract conceptualization abilities, Japanese students learn through the use of concrete experience abilities. This may be tied to the fact that, as noted in the literature, Asian communities share a similar cultural foundation that places an emphasis on education, family honor, discipline, and respect for authority (Zhou & Kim, 2006). Yamazaki (2005) also points out that this means that Japanese students have a high uncertainty avoidance. These students want to know what answers are right, and what answers are wrong, whereas American students are more comfortable with ambiguity. These students different higher order thinking skills, therefore, are tied to these different approaches to learning and understanding information.

Classroom Work and Expectations

When it comes to the classroom, therefore, there are completely different approaches taken to the same material, based on the cultural differences outlined in the previous section. While there is a similarity in that both Japanese and American classrooms place a high value on achievement (Zhou & Kim, 2006), again, the ways in which these students go about reaching their academic goals differ (Yamazaki, 2005).

For Asian students, there is an expectation that those who will succeed are those who go above and beyond with respect to participation in academic and extracurricular programs (Zhou & Kim, 2006). This is likely tied to the fact that Japanese students have been taught to learn through the use of concrete experience abilities, which requires the advancement of skills such as repetition and rote memorization. When teachers are expecting students to know a definitive answer, then these classes are more likely to be necessary (Yamazaki, 2005). As Huang and Klinger (2006) write, this type of learning experience is common across Asia. Asian students who arrive in the United States at the post-secondary level state that, in Asia, “teachers take the full responsibility in the classrooms, they use the cramming method. The teachers mainly lecture in class. Students are very passive. They just listen to the teacher. The teachers do not encourage students’ participation” (Huang & Klinger, 2006, p.55).

Western students, on the other hand, are expected to debate teachers and question authoritative texts in the classroom, which is part of the Socratic method of approaching information (Huang & Klinger, 2006; Yamazaki, 2005). This expectation leads to the development of higher order critical skills (Huang & Klinger, 2006; Yamazaki, 2005). Classroom work for American students places a high value on being able to examine the reasons behind information, and its multiple meanings to different people, which allows students to examine their own points of view in comparison with others (Yamazaki, 2005). This strongly contrasts the Japanese point of view in which there is a higher value placed on the ability of students to reflect their teachers’ points of view, as well as the opinions that they read about in their textbooks (Huang & Klinger, 2006). Over the long term, therefore, there are significant gaps between the expectations that Japanese and American teachers have for their students in their classroom activities.

Teacher Training and Management

The ways that teachers are trained also has an impact on different educational systems. In Asia, a teacher’s

job is complicated by social structures which determine how and when they are able to make decisions for their classroom (Carless et al., 2008; Crandall, 2000). The context of education in the school is one in which rote memorization and emulation of teachers is encouraged, and the same principles apply to the school's organization as well. As noted in the literature, in most Asian classrooms "traditional teacher education views teachers as passive recipients of transmitted knowledge rather than active participants in the construction of meaning (in learning by reconstruction)" (Crandall, 2000, p.35). This means that teachers are expected to do what they are told, and when they are told. There is no room in this type of education administration for shared learning or for individual leadership.

At the same time, there are indications that ideas about education are changing in this region of the world. As Carless et al. (2008) note, in Hong Kong, where many business trends start in Asia, educational standards are moving away from rote memorization and toward outcomes-based evaluation. This means that knowledge and skills must be assessed in line with attitudes and values. There is a push toward critical literacy and cognitive assessment rather than end-of-course tests. These new methodologies require teachers to take a hands-on approach in ongoing evaluation. The teacher's role, in this process, is to help the student understand potential differences in points of view, and apply independent research to their analysis of the information presented. As Carless et al. (2008) note, in the new Hong Kong curriculum, learners must not only be able to complete tasks in the classroom, but they must also be able to utilize the skills they acquire in real-life situations in a flexible way.

Knowing that there are changes happening in the classroom, there may also be changes happening in the administration of Asian schools. As Chen (2010) notes, leadership and flexibility are becoming key factors in the retention of teachers in Asia. As educational research begins to demonstrate that these are important factors in the creation of excellent classrooms, the more teachers are becoming aware of their interests and values and how they might personally contribute to making the school more effective. As Chen (2010) writes, "the subfactors of leadership, professional opportunities, workload and working stress, and income are significantly related to teachers' future career planning" (p.269), and these changes have occurred in the teaching community in line with similar changes in Western nations. What this means is that there is a strong likelihood that the ways in which Japanese students learn will change over time, whether or not there are equivalent cultural changes.

Conclusion

What is clear from the literature is that both Japanese and American school systems place a high value on hierarchy and academic success, but at the same time have very different approaches to achieving their students' goals. The higher order thinking skills of both Japanese and American students differ in a significant way, one which is tied to their cultural and organizational expectations. Japanese students are taught to value the status quo and have respect for authority, because these skills will allow them to achieve their goals once they enter the Japanese working world, where there is a high value placed on cooperation. In the United States, where there is a high value placed on innovation, on the other hand, students learn to question authority and push back against the status quo.

Nonetheless, the world is changing, and the post-secondary educational field is also adapting to new global norms. As noted by Yonezawa (2007), the "increasing impact of the knowledge economy and globalization now presents a significant challenge" (p.488) to the Japanese education system as a whole, due to the fact that new knowledge is linked to pushing the boundaries of what we believe, which is a Western learning trait but not a

Japanese one. While educational norms are slowly shifting in Japan, they may have to continue to shift more quickly so that Japanese students can adopt the same higher order thinking skills necessary for Debate. This means that the curriculum for Debate in Japan must first teach the skills necessary for higher order thinking skills and creative thinking.

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