

Adult Learning and Development of Japanese University Students: Educating to Produce Proficient Critical Thinkers to Contribute on a Global Stage

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ABSTRACT

Currently, Japanese universities seem to be at a crossroads at which change is being encouraged to become more productive institutions of learning. There has long been criticism of Japanese university graduates not having critical thinking skills or sufficient communication skills to participate productively in a global arena. The Japanese government has attempted to increase the feeling of a growing necessity for language, specifically English, education in order to stimulate a change in curriculum and the way university students are trained. Key to this goal, an increasingly large number of native English speakers have been employed by universities. However, it is questionable whether or not the alternative methods of education have been effective in helping Japanese young people develop and learn so that they are capable of thinking critically, or to gain the necessary critical thinking skills to become global leaders. Using various theories from adult development and learning theory, this article focuses on the role of self-reflection, situational aspects and of cultural aspects as they relate to the role of education in relation to the development and learning of Japanese university students.

In the literature of the fields concerning adult development, adult learning and transformational learning, three main elements are commonly mentioned. These are the concepts of 1) self, including self-awareness and self-reflection, 2) situation elements, such as formal, informal, and incidental education and 3) the role of culture in development and learning. This article focuses on the role of self-reflection, situational aspects and cultural aspects of the role of education in relation to the development and learning of Japanese university students.

According to Hoare, (2006), the field of Adult Development began formally in 1978 and combined with Adult Learning in approximately 1998. There are many theories and some key concepts such as elements of individual and societal transformation, self-awareness and self-reflection, the role of personality in development, as well as setting, that of formal versus informal and non-formal, that stand out in the adult learning and development literature.

Adult Development can be defined as “systematic, qualitative changes in human abilities and behaviors as a result of interactions between internal and external environments” (Hoare, 2006, p.

8). Hoare continues to point out that the adult is not only an agent of personal change, but also an agent of opportunities for cognitive and behavioral change at the individual and societal level. Even before becoming a formal field, early theorists such as Erik Erikson's biopsychosocial model (1950) explored biological, psychological and sociological development of individuals linked to society. Many years later, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development (2005) was further developed and linked biology with social contexts within societies. However, these models only represent the contextual parts of adult learning and development, and there remains a need to incorporate more models that take into account the microlevel factors that contribute to adult development (Hoare, 2008).

Theories of Learning and Development

Self-awareness and self-reflection

Other theories that have influenced current adult learning and development theory include Kegan's constructive developmental learning theory (1994) and Meziro's transformational learning theory (1990, 2000). One of the key concepts of these theories is that the way individuals make meaning must be transformed in order for development to occur. Self-awareness and self-reflection are necessary in order to form one's own identity and make meaning of oneself. Jan Sinnott's Theory of Postformal Thought (2003) expands on these ideas by asserting that postformal thought, or an understanding of reality, is the key to adult development, learning, and wisdom. It is necessary to understand the complexities of the modern world in addition to human emotions and relationships, which develop in adulthood through interaction with people who have different views and realities from one's own.

In addition to the roles of self-awareness and self-reflection in adult learning, transformation and development, the role of personality is also considered to be an important factor. Expanding on the framework in which Jung (1933), Erikson (1959), and Labouvie-Vief (1982) developed theories based on understanding personality development throughout adulthood, in the 1990s, there was a broader adoption of the idea that personality changes throughout a general life span. Bolkan, Meierdiercks and Hooker (2008) assert that due to the importance of the links between personality and life's outcomes, it is a key that enables adults to participate in their self-development and adaptation throughout the life cycle. Personality traits have been linked to emotional regulation, adjustment to life tasks, various aspects of well-being, health, personal wisdom and motivational change during the maturation process (Bolkan, et al, 2008; Staudinger & Kessler, 2008; Sheldon, 2008).

Informal and incidental learning

Besides personality, self-reflection and other factors in learning and development, situational factors have been explored. Informal and incidental learning were explored by Malcolm Knowles (1950) as well as others. Knowles made a distinction between formal adult learning and informal

adult learning. Others, such as Baxter Magolda, Abes, and Torres (2008), explored development in adult learners mainly in formal situations during the college years, while Marsick and Watkins (1990) examined more incidental learning in the workplace. Another study by Malcolm, Hodgkinson, and Colley (2003) discussed differences among formal, informal and non-formal learning by examining setting, purposes, and the nature of what was being learned by participants in their Learning and Skills Development Agency of England project.

Informal and non-formal learning are especially important to take into consideration since, as Kegan (1994) and Rogoff (2003) point out, formal education and linear models of development that researchers from “western” countries look for may not be present in other cultures. Human development is guided by the goals of the community, meaning that emphasis is placed on learning to function within the community’s culture. Not only do the values and beliefs of that community reflect behavior, but also adults prioritize adult roles, practices and personalities necessary for becoming mature members of that community in the present and future (Rogoff, 2003). However, the starting point of adult learning and development theory is that people begin with what they know already. With this in mind, it is safe to say that most theories, whether they focus on personality or learning in general, are similar in that they insist that awareness of one’s own personality and one’s own knowledge and experiences and stories is a starting point for transformative learning. It follows that self-knowledge and self-reflection can then be utilized to increase the chances of development (Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 2000). This development through transformation while participating in cultural activities subsequently leads to changes in their cultural communities, which is one of the key elements of adult learning and development (Mezirow, 2000; Kegan, 2000; Rogoff, 2003; Friere, 2000).

Application of theories

Japanese university students and English education

These theories can be used to examine learning and development of Japanese university students in relation to English education. Visitors to Japan often question why Japanese people do not speak English better if they have studied it for at least six years by the time they have left high school. This lack of advanced language skills can be attributed to the fact that English vocabulary and grammar have historically been used as a way to evaluate knowledge to attain high scores on entrance examinations, which included only answers on paper with one possible choice for exam questions (McVeigh, 2002). As the number of Japanese who found English to be necessary in their work or social interactions, yet found their skills lacking increased, it was deemed necessary to increase proficiency in spoken and written English, and not only choosing the correct vocabulary definitions and grammar elements on a written exam. In order to meet this need, boards of education, high schools and universities began to hire an increasingly large number of native English teachers and to include listening as well as essays on their entrance exams. Students and their parents began to see the benefit and necessity of studying English, to increase

their chances of entering universities and high schools if nothing else. This helped to create a larger demand for native English-speaking teachers and more practical teaching materials. Nevertheless, it was eventually noticed that only language was not enough. Without sufficient cultural knowledge, Japanese speakers of English were having difficulties communicating with non-Japanese people. This led to an increase in the number of native English teachers again. One of the results of the influx of non-Japanese language teachers was the moving away from grammar-translation methods to more interactive communication classes. While students seemed to enjoy these types of classes, having not grown up in that kind of environment, most felt awkward and out of place. They had to return to a way of learning most had left behind from their grade school days. This has proven to be very difficult for most, as can be shown by the large number of native English speakers who remain puzzled that Japanese people do not know how to be assertive in using English and continue to be awkward even when they have acquired sufficient language skills. This is in part due to the continuing emphasis of English as an exam subject over a practical skill. No matter how much they are told that English is an important skill to know in today's world, the way English is taught, as an exam subject, does not support the rhetoric of it as a necessary skill.

On the surface, it would seem that Japanese people in the Japanese education system being exposed to non-Japanese English speakers would provide motivation and a basis for transformative learning experiences (Gattig, 2012). However, emphasis is placed solely on language and cultural skills with little or no self-reflective elements. Thus, it can be argued that very little personal development as a direct result of formal language classes occurs. However, non-formal situations such as study abroad, traveling to other countries, English speaking clubs, and so on, provide more opportunities for self-reflection. As mentioned previously, self-reflection by individuals is a key element in adult development and transformative learning (Meziro, 2000; Kegan, 1994). This is particularly true at the university level in which students have more flexibility to participate in informal activities. In fact, students who have participated in many informal activities, such as clubs, are more highly valued by Japanese companies than those whose university life has been limited to formal university classes.

Informal learning in the English language classroom

According to Marsick and Watkins, (2001), informal learning is learning that is planned or intentional. However, it is not highly structured and can include self-directed learning, performance planning, and other activities, which incorporate opportunities to review learners' needs. Similarly, incidental learning is learning that is often unconscious. This is similar to what happens in language classrooms taught by native English speakers in Japan in which students study and do a wide range of activities designed to allow students to practice English, but learn many cultural norms of English-speaking countries as an indirect byproduct. It is incidental learning in that students often learn other things, such as how to be more assertive and speak up.

In many cases Japanese students experience participation as a large part of their grade for language courses taught by native language teachers. However, the lasting effects of incidental learning is more obvious among Japanese students who go abroad to study language and return only to seem out of place due to adopted unconscious direct communication styles in which they give their opinions more freely and ask questions more often than typical Japanese students.

Marsick and Volpe (1999) concluded that informal learning can be characterized as follows:

- Integration with everyday routines
- Triggered by an internal or external element of surprise
- Predominantly unconscious
- Random and influenced by chance
- Inductive process of self-reflection and action
- Related to the learning of others

People frame new experiences that they encounter according to Marsick and Watson (2001). They then do an assessment of problematic or challenging factors, and compare the new situation with prior experience, identifying similarities or differences, and using their interpretation to make sense of the new challenge. People refine their judgment by interpreting the context. They manage different factors in the context that influence their interpretation. In the case of Japanese people who go abroad, they are often forced to go through a personal transformation at some level in order to succeed in a new culture. These criteria must be met in order to succeed in a new culture. In order to successfully communication with people in a new culture and create meaningful relationships, typically reserved Japanese university students must take on, in most cases unfamiliar, communication styles in which they have to become more assertive to live satisfactorily in the new culture.

Marsick and Watson continue by explaining that interpretation of the context allows one to choose from a variety of alternative actions. These choices are guided by past solutions and by a search for other possible models for action. Successful implementation depends on choosing from capabilities that are adequate to the task. If the solution calls for new skills, the person will acquire these. It has been said that when asked which would be more important in a Japanese company, English language skills or being hard-working, a Japanese company president answered hard-working. The logic was that a hard worker would work harder to gain language skills if necessary, whereas a proficient English speaker might not be a hard worker (Miyahara, 2012).

Many factors influence the ability to learn well enough to successfully solve a problem. These include the availability of appropriate resources, such as people from whom to learn, available knowledge, willingness and motivation to learn, and the emotional capacity to take on new capabilities. Once an action is taken to attempt to solve a problem, a person can assess the outcomes and decide whether or not they correspond to his intended results. It is relatively easy to assess intended consequences if a person takes the time to make his or her goals clear. This step of judging consequences and self-reflection enables a person to reflect on lessons learned and

to use them to plan future actions (Marsick & Watson 2001).

Marsick & Watson (2001) emphasize three conditions to enhance this kind of learning: critical reflection to superficial inferred knowledge and beliefs, motivating the learner to actively identify options and to learn new skills to implement those options or solutions, and creativity to encourage a wider range of options. They continue by saying that normal adult learning may also be enhanced if adult educators heed the lessons learned informally and incidentally. Critical reflection is one of the key elements in order to gain the capacity to utilize past experiences, newly acquired skills and knowledge. In the case of study abroad programs, often there is a lack of opportunities for students to think critically about their experiences to enhance their personal development. This might be a deficiency of study abroad programs in Japan in which students are encouraged to go abroad, but not encouraged or forced to self-reflect on their experiences and further develop as individuals.

Japanese student learning and development within culture

Kegan (1994) and Rogoff (2003) assert that the way adolescents and adults express any new capacity is shaped to a large extent by interaction between the indoctrination of their culture and the way they understand that encoding. As makers of that social structure, it is necessary to be aware that the wish to exercise this new capacity is irresistible and that the ways adolescents and adults understand social structures will vary. Kegan (1994) states that if curriculum aims are not presented to entering students in a way that can easily be grasped, educators need to build a transitional or bridging context that is both meaningful to students to enable them to understand it and that will facilitate a transformation of the mind so they can understand the curriculum. The transitional bridges for those with advanced English skills is provided by those who have gained enough skills through hard work and those who have gone abroad for study or work and acquired and refined their language skills due to necessity. They act as a bridging context for the curricular emphasis on creation of more global individuals and current realities in Japan.

Kegan (1994) notes that it is helpful to examine the society in which the participant being observed functions to see what kinds of demands are made upon its citizens, since non-western cultures may not follow the same notions of orders of consciousness or may be at different stages during different periods than what he has deemed as typical for Western contexts. Nevertheless, there appears to be a need to bridge incidental learning, in clubs for example, with formal classroom instruction. Currently, the two are often like polar opposites so that learning in Japanese universities has become devalued as companies hire new Japanese graduates, no matter what they have studied or not studied, but more based on the clubs they have belonged to while attending university. This can also be shown if compared internationally by the fact that there were no Japanese universities ranked in the top 20 for the years 2012-2013, and only Tokyo University ranked in the top 50 at number 27 ("The Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2012-2013", n. d.). Because the criteria for the rankings are teaching, research,

dissemination of knowledge and international outlook, all factors that the Japanese government and corporations have pointed out need to be improved, it seems that incidental education through club and circle activities is not enough for success in a global environment. Nevertheless, recently even Japanese corporations are increasingly looking for Japanese graduates who have critical thinking skills and who can give their opinions openly (Gattig, 2012).

Examining Japanese students using Kegan's model

Besides theories of informal and incidental learning described by Marsick and Watkins, (2001), Kegan's model of consciousness (1994), can be used to examine education in Japan. Japanese students could be deemed to be somewhere in Kegan's second order of consciousness moving towards the third order. Kegan characterizes the second order of consciousness as one in which there are stable needs and habits as well as self-interest. His third order includes a need for peer approval, acceptance of the given rules of a community and a vulnerable attitude towards the views of others. The education system is highly controlled by the Japanese government, and high schools and junior high schools must choose from a very limited choice of government-approved textbooks and teach a structured number of required courses. During the high school years, students who are in the college-advancement track of schools must study very diligently in order to enter a prestigious university. In fact, a large number attend special preparatory courses or have tutors after attending regular day school classes. They have so little time outside of the studies that society, their teachers and parents force upon them that when they enter university, they still expect to be force fed knowledge and have no expectations of being asked their opinions or for them to reflect upon what they study in classes.

According to Kegan (1994), there are two types of learning. One of them is informational through studying. It is the accumulation of more information, such as that which dominates the Japanese education system. The other is transformational learning in which the actual vessel in which information is put grows and changes. Akira Miyahara, a keynote speaker at the 27th Annual SIETAR Japan conference noted that the Japanese education system only encourages informational learning, but that it is necessary to incorporate transformational learning in order to promote better communication (2012).

During his discussion with the audience, the question of what educators can do to rectify this problem was posed. Kegan (1994) points out that educators can help facilitate and encourage shift from a second order of consciousness to a third order of consciousness or a third order to a fourth order of consciousness. While Dr. Miyahara used theories and examples from the field of Communication, his answer corresponded with Kegan's ideas. One of those ideas was using activities and teaching styles that incorporate critical questioning to identify teachers' and students' own underlying assumptions, beliefs and values in order to challenge Japanese students to see things from different perspectives. Unfortunately, since most Japanese universities prefer to hire Japanese who have been educated in the Japanese education system and are more likely to

use teaching methods they were taught with for most non-skills courses, the exposure Japanese students have to other ways of learning is severely limited. Since one of the main causes preventing Japanese students, and teachers from communicating more effectively is fear, (Hall, 1998), the importance of providing a safe haven where engagement in dialogs safely was mentioned. In fact, lecturers at Japanese private universities often complain that Japanese students require positive feedback. They also lament that many Japanese students do not attend classes for mundane reasons such as rainy weather, and often expect to pass courses just because they attended or submitted a final report, no matter how little they participated in class, or how poor their work was. This fits Kegan's description of a second order of consciousness, in which an individual is described as needing positive experiences and tends to act impulsively, making choices based on immediate experiences, and have self-interested relationships.

On the other hand, particularly in the informal learning environment of Japanese universities, students show third order consciousness tendencies. In club activities especially, Japanese students show a need and reliance on senior club members and peers. This often creates bonds that are so strong that they can become lifelong relationships that incorporate trust and loyalty. These elements match Kegan's description of third order consciousness, which is characterized by need for approval and support, particularly from peers, loyalty and commitment, and vulnerability to the attitudes of others.

Discussion and Implications

The role of Japanese university education

Dr. Miyahara (2012) and others advocate the necessity of educating for transformational change. In addition to this revelation, there have been arguments for investigations to involve more "non-Western" theories. In the context of Kegan's model of consciousness (1994), higher education would strive to facilitate the development of university students to move to a fourth order. Kegan's fourth order is characterized by self-direction, self-reflection, leadership, vision-setting, and responsibility. However, even though Japanese university students seem to fit nicely into Kegan's model in the stages of second and third order of consciousness, it could be argued that as a non-Japanese model, it could be less accurate than it seems. Rogoff (2003) asserts that it is necessary to consider the indigenous culture and its role in learning and development. Rogoff continues by pointing out that cultural values and norms play a large role in how individuals make meaning and in their ideas of development. Despite Japanese university professors and the Japanese government expressing the need to produce more Japanese young people who show what could be deemed to be more "Western" examples of critical thinking, policies and actions do not necessarily support this (Gattig, 2012). With the exception of language-related courses, most professors at Japanese universities have gone through the Japanese education system learning Japanese values of pacifism and the all-encompassing importance of information gathering without analysis. This reinforces a teaching style that supports the traditional system. Even those

lecturers who try more interactive types of classes often give up after encountering seemingly apathetic Japanese university students.

Recently the national government has given grant money to universities to increase the number of Japanese students who go overseas as well as the number of international students who come to Japan. In response to the anticipated increase in the need for educating and training Japanese university students to go abroad, job advertisements from universities looking for teachers to teach language and help set up programs with universities outside Japan have suddenly increased. However, as a result of a labor guideline allowing contract employees to become permanent employees from their sixth year of full-time employment, like most institutions fearing unwanted permanent employees, an increasingly large number of universities have decided to further limit employment contracts for non-Japanese teachers to three year limits with no renewal. This brings into question the earnestness of Japanese universities and the Japanese government to create a sustainable education system to educate globally minded young people (Gattig, 2012).

If however, one views these incidents from a more Japanese perspective, as Rogoff (2003) says is necessary for theorists to move beyond the researchers' own cultural biases, they could be seen to be only a manifestation of Japanese culture and a common cultural trait, fear of uncertainty and emphasis on in-group members to the detriment of diversity, critical thinking and adult development. In fact, Rogoff points out that human development is influenced by the goals of the local community. In this case, the goal has historically been one in which a conformist work force was required to work in rice fields and factories, in a society in which corporations trained employees to become loyal corporate followers. Kubota (2002) suggests that the Japanese government has implemented its style of acceptance of English education and internationalization not for purposes of encouraging a more outward-looking population, but as a way to promote a more nationalistic population, which can be considered on par with English-speaking countries. However, Gattig (2012) and Miyahara (November, 2012) point out that there are economical factors as well, since many corporations are finding it no longer financially feasible to train unskilled university graduates, and that the Japanese government seems to truly be aspiring to create a more global Japanese work citizenship. Thus, in order to reach these goals, another of Rogoff's ideas, that of learning from other members of communities in order to understand how various cultural practices of diverse members of a society can fit together to create a more dynamic community is necessary. This is the idea that cultural communities, and the individuals that make up those communities, are endlessly changing. In today's world, this means the global community. Realizing that, and that there is no one best way to do things, is a key to seeing diversity and self-reflection as a way to encourage individual development as a resource that can be utilized to inspire and stimulate young people in order to energize and sustain cultures.

Conclusion

This article has examined the development and learning of Japanese university students using Kegan's constructive developmental learning theory (1994), theories of informal and incidental learning described by Marsick and Watkins, (2001), and others, and by using a cultural lens encouraged by Rogoff (2003). Due to the nature of the ever-changing and evolving aspect of Japanese university students, ideas incorporated in this article can only be used to make generalizations at a certain point in time. With the hope of such researchers as Miyahara (November 2012), Rogoff, Japanese corporations and government agencies, at some point it is possible that Japanese universities and the Japanese students they serve will be forced to become more proficient critical thinkers and contribute more openly to various discussions on the world stage. It is hoped that ideas presented here will stimulate dialogue to contribute to developing and changing curricula to encourage and facilitate students to become more self-directed learners and take increasing larger roles in their self-development, which is seen as a necessary criteria for a sustainable community.

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