

TEDxUniversity: Promoting Ideas, Global Citizenship and English Fluency

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Abstract

TED Talks are short, passionate and engaging speeches by experts on important topics. Delivered at TED conferences, they are recorded for all to see freely online. Recently there have been a growing number of smaller TED-sanctioned but independently organized “TEDx” conferences taking place throughout the world. This paper reflects on a visit to TEDxYouth@Kyoto 2013, a conference held by Kyoto area university students, and addresses why involving language learners in TEDx conferences might prove beneficial, not only for sharing ideas, but also for English practice and development as global citizens.

Key words : TED talks, global education, extra-curricular activities

I. Introduction

As a teacher I am reluctant to admit it, but the most formative experiences of my student years did not happen in the classroom. Special events such as sports, concerts, and theatre productions have had a greater impact on defining who I am today, than weeks of in-class study. These events also gave my daily work a sense of purpose – something to strive for.

Speech Contests

Now I understand how extracurricular events can change young people’s lives, so I seek them out. As a high school teacher in Japan, I focused on English speech contests, but often came away feeling dissatisfied. Despite the fact that my students often took home trophies, I disliked the sometimes arbitrary nature of judging, and the fact that first prize didn’t always go to the most deserving student. I also grew tired of the over rehearsed gestures, unnatural accents and overdramatic expressions that so many Japanese students adopt, yet have no real place in spoken English. Finally there were the students’ regurgitated messages (about cell phone manners, bullying, and recycling) that their teacher more often than not wrote for them. Of course speech contests also have a number of positive effects, but the negative factors pushed me to look for more meaningful outlets for my students.

Model United Nations and International Youth Forums

In time, I found what I was looking for: conferences where English language learners debate together on important issues, and everyone is a winner because it is not a contest. I am

referring to such activities as the Model United Nations, UNESCO Youth Forums and similar events. At these, student-run (and therefore student-centered) conferences, participants exercise all of their English skills: reading and writing as they research the topics; listening to speeches and debates delivered by their peers; and, speaking (often impromptu) as they deliver their own original ideas. Unlike speech contests in Japan, where almost everyone present is Japanese, a significant number of participants at MUN and other conferences may be from abroad. This provides a real reason to speak English. By the end, students gain not only increased English practice, they also feel a sense of accomplishment for having engaged in something challenging and meaningful. They often feel more motivated to continue studying English and other subjects, after attempting to solve important problems that affect us all, with peers from around the world. In other words, I could see my students developing into global citizens. (See Fast, 2012, for more details).

TED Talks

Now in my first year lecturing at Okayama University, I have renewed my search for outside events that promote English and provide a sense of global citizenship, particularly for students enrolled in the university's fledgling Global Human Resources Course (グローバル人材育成特別コース). In my classes, I have been experimenting with TED Talks as a teaching tool. TED Talks, or short speeches from TED.com on a variety of topics by experts in their fields, are always informative and inspirational, but I'd never considered viewing one live until I learned of TEDxYouth@Kyoto, just a short train ride away. I was intrigued. Not only because it carried the prestigious TED title, but also because it was by and for students. I chose to investigate, hoping it might be an extra-curricular event similar to those I'd discovered in the past that promote English usage, global citizenship, and most of all, change my students' lives.

II. Background Information

About TED Conferences

The first TED conference was conceived in California in 1984, as a meeting where the world's elite and influential leaders from the fields of Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED) could gather and share their ideas. According to Ted Conferences (2013):

The goal of the foundation is to foster the spread of great ideas. It aims to provide a platform for the world's smartest thinkers, greatest visionaries and most inspiring teachers, so that millions of people can gain a better understanding of the biggest issues faced by the world, and a desire to help create a better future. Core to this goal is a belief that there is no greater force for changing the world than a powerful idea.

While garnering attention and praise for their entertaining and thought-provoking TED Talks, these conferences have also drawn criticism for being prohibitively expensive (Cadwalladr, 2013; Hui, 2013), as evinced by the ticket price for TED Vancouver 2014, set at 7,500 US dollars. TED organizers have made significant efforts to shed their elitist image by

making videos of TED Talks freely available and subtitled in multiple languages at TED.com. In 2006, they went one step further by allowing grassroots “TEDx” conferences to carry the TED logo, but be independently organized in local communities. This has helped TED better live up to its mission.

TEDx in Japan

TEDx volunteers are now creating their own conferences in 130 countries. An online search revealed a large number of TEDx events in Japan, held within the last few years:

Cities	Universities	Other
TEDxTokyo	TEDxTodai	TEDxYouth@Tokyo
TEDxOsaka	TEDxWaseda	TEDxTohoku
TEDxSapporo	TEDxAoyama	TEDxRyukyu
TEDxFukuoka	TEDxOsakaU	
	TEDxTitech	
	TEDxNagoyaU	
	TEDxKG (Kansai Gakuin)	
	TEDxKUIS (Kansai U.)	
	TEDxKEIO	

As mentioned above, this trend is not specific to Japan. Last April, *Aljazeera* reported that in China, “since TEDxUniversity took place in 2010, interest among students surged” (Wang, 2013). For more information about how TED maintains its brand while lending its name to the ever-growing number of independent TEDx groups, see Merchant’s (2013) article, “When TED Lost Control of Its Crowd.”

III. What are the Benefits of Holding a TEDxUniversity Event?

TEDx conferences may be booming in China, but why should Japanese university students hold a TEDx conference on their campus – in English? What might be gained by the organizers, speakers and listeners, besides sharing ideas? “Universities are centers of knowledge and incubators for great ideas – a perfect match for TEDx events. Events held at universities, organized by both students and administration, have shown the benefit of a captivated audience and groups of engaged volunteers poised to make meaningful change” (TED.com).

Lasting Memories

Schools in Japan have a long tradition of student produced “culture festivals.” They are considered important enough to cancel class, so there is a precedent for student-organized, multi-dimensional educational events outside the classroom. Informally surveying my former students, I find they often refer to culture festivals as their best experience in school. According to a study by Kuh (1993) on the impact of extra-curricular educational experiences

on his students, “all reported personally meaningful changes in one or more areas considered to be important outcomes of college (e.g., interpersonal and practical competence, critical thinking).”

A Local and Global Sense of Community

Fostering a sense of global citizenship is currently one of the UN’s three highest educational priorities (Secretary General, 2013), and Cates (2004) specifically recommends organizing extra-curricular activities as one of his ten ways to teach global education. If a citizen can be defined as someone who contributes to a community, then a global citizen would be someone who contributes to the betterment of the world beyond national borders. It would seem then that TEDx conferences, by their very nature, promote a sense of global citizenship. According to Ochoa (2011), “TED conferences are in exemplar case study of fostering community. Community rites of passage begin with the application to the conference, continue through presenting new, innovative information, and entice opinion leaders through exclusivity and friendly competition.” The task of organizing (or simply attending) a TEDx conference would provide students, “opportunities to contribute to their school or community,” one of the many benefits of project-based learning (Railsback, 2002).

High school students who helped put together the successful 2013 TEDxBiddeford conference in Maine, USA, said next year they hope to “spur more students to create a brighter future for themselves, for Biddeford and beyond” (Mendross, 2013). TED.com features examples of successful TEDxUniversity events: “TEDxKinnaird was held at an all-girls college in Pakistan and focused on the theme ‘Believe In Tomorrow,’ addressing a variety of issues and feelings in regards to the future of Pakistan. The event attracted a global audience – people applied to attend from outside of Pakistan – and introduced TED to many in the area.” (TED.com)

English Language Practice

While TEDx conferences may not be intended for language study, unlike speech contests, one could argue that they provide more language practice and motivation for some participants. English is the most common working language for TEDx conferences. Participants listen to English talks, read English TED materials, and have the opportunity to speak English with international participants. If students actually get involved in the organizing process of a TEDx conference, they would have the opportunity to use their English even more.

Motivation

Organizing a TEDx conference would essentially be a form of task-based learning (TBL). Benefits of TBL include improved communicative skills and a deeper sense of understanding, as a result of active learning (Larsson, 2001). Giving students the goal of using their English skills to create a prestigious conference like TEDx, and allowing them to work autonomously toward that goal would fulfill at least two of Dörnyei and Csizér’s 10 Commandments for motivating

language learners, and possibly make language learning more interesting overall (Dörnyei and Csizér, 1998).

IV. TEDxYouth@Kyoto 2013

This section of the paper describes my observations of the second TEDxYouth@Kyoto, which took place at the Kyoto University of Art and Design on June 29th 2013. TEDxYouth@Kyoto is student-run subgroup of TEDxKyoto, which was founded in 2011 by Jay Klaphake, associate professor at Ritsumeikan University, and co-founder Junya Kondo, the founder and CEO of Hatena Co, Ltd. (an internet services company). TEDxYouth@Kyoto was comprised of approximately 70 students from Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto University, Kyoto University of Art and Design, Kyoto University of Foreign Languages, Doshisha University and other institutions.

Application Process

As a general rule, one cannot simply buy a ticket and attend a TED conference. First it is necessary to apply. This involves writing an essay, in English or Japanese (in the case of TEDxYouth@Kyoto) about why you want to go and what you might be able to contribute as a “participant.” Another special aspect of TED events is that even audience members are considered contributors, thus they are referred to as “participants.” As I filled out my application, I wasn’t sure what “participating” would entail, but it would become clear once I was there (see below).

Another “TEDism” is that participants are “curated” during the application process to insure an event ripe with interesting people. I sent in my application and encouraged many of my first year university students to do so as well. I was informed a few weeks later that I had been accepted. Unfortunately, only two of my students made it through the vetting process. Perhaps they would have been accepted if they had a little more life experience under their belts.

The TEDxYouth@Kyoto 2013 Conference

The official program, which featured student artwork and carried the subtitle, “Possibility of Ideas,” listed 12 speakers in three one-hour sessions. Each session was separated by two 45 minute intermissions and a two-hour long party at the end. Initially, I was surprised to see so much of the schedule dedicated to break time, but I would later discover this was where I was expected to “participate.”

The speakers represented a balanced group of local and international, male and female, students and professors, mostly based in Kyoto. Topics ranged from traditional Japanese storytelling, to primate intelligence, to more environmentally friendly footwear. Five speakers spoke in their native Japanese, and five, including the international speakers and Japanese professors, delivered their talks in English. One talk, by Doshisha University student Emma

Harrison, half in English and half in Japanese (Osaka dialect), reflecting her dual British/Kansai cultural identity and her message. No language support was provided, however talks were recorded with the goal of being posted online with subtitles at a later date. All talks are now available online (still without subtitles at the time of writing). See Appendix A for a list of TEDxYouth@Kyoto 2013 speakers and links to their talks on YouTube.

As mentioned above, in between sessions were lengthy 45 minute breaks in the lobby, where mingling was encouraged with catered food and music by a live DJ. A lot of time at TED conferences is dedicated not only to hearing others' ideas, but also sharing your own. During the breaks, people spoke to me freely, and as best they could in English. Many were at least as interesting and memorable as the featured speakers, who were also present and very approachable. Among those I met were a junior high art teacher, a Bolivian amateur photographer and an officer in the Japan Self Defense forces with an interest in martial arts and traditional healing. Some have become lasting acquaintances. A small but significant 15% of the participants (including myself) were non-Japanese (Isobe, 2013).

The event truly seemed to bring out the best in Kyoto, promoting its ancient traditions, but also the vision of an active contributor to the global community of the future. An informal survey of those I met, reinforced my opinion that it was a great success (no one had anything negative to say) and worthy of being repeated, not only in Kyoto but other locales.

V. Interview with the Director of TEDxYouth@Kyoto 2013

To get an insider's perspective on how the event was organized, I interviewed the Director of TEDxYouth@Kyoto 2013, Kaori Isobe, a 3rd Year Ritsumeikan University International Human Rights Law major.

Organization

According to Isobe, preparation began six months prior to the event. There were approximately 70 students who made up the Youth Team, with a core of about 20 members. There were seven sub teams within the overall group that performed specific duties as described below:

1. Curation Team: Found speakers and performers, mainly through connections in the TEDxKyoto community, then helped them prepare and polish their presentations.
2. Committee Team: Led weekly meetings and facilitated all communications between participants, team members and other stakeholders.
3. Show Team: Handled all things related to staging TEDxYouth@Kyoto 2013, including set design, and backstage operations.
4. Creative Team: Produced artwork and graphic design for the event.
5. Documentary Team: Photo-documented the preliminary meetings and the event itself.
6. PR Team: Promoted the event using social networking software (i.e. Facebook and Twitter), posters and other media.

7. Partner Team: Established relationships and negotiated with partner sponsors.

Students met initially for three hours each week and there were varying degrees of involvement. Of course they became much busier as the final date approached. Some students engaged in TEDxYouth@Kyoto as part of a class project, while for others the event was entirely extracurricular.

Use of English

When asked how much of a factor English was in the creation of TEDxYouth@Kyoto 2013, Isobe (who spent a high school year abroad and speaks fluent English), answered that the team included a small but critical number of Japanese English speakers, who along with a handful of English speaking international students (exact ability levels unknown), were responsible for making the conference as bilingual as possible. No more than 20 of the 70 students spoke English, and yet they were able to pull off a seamless and English error free event. All announcements that appeared on Facebook and Twitter appeared in Japanese and English, the hosts of the conference introduced the speakers flawlessly in both languages and, as mentioned above, the speakers presented in both languages (albeit minus any form of simultaneous translation).

Isobe was relieved to hear my surprise that there were not more English speakers involved as there had apparently been some concern, especially among the native English speaking students in the group. Isobe added that if a student wants to improve their English and meet a lot of interesting people from around the world, holding a TEDx conference is a great way to do it.

Isobe felt the event went well, but remarked that it had been a challenge to get so many students with diverse motivations for joining the conference to work together. She said to overcome this, they dedicated the first 30 minutes of each meeting to forming a common vision and goals. When asked what she felt she gained through the experience, she replied on a personal level, she was able to learn a lot about project and team management. She added that it was great to meet so many people from different universities and involved in different fields. Through the event Isobe has also been able to connect with other TEDx groups including TEDxTokyo and TEDxTaiwan, which she will attend in September, 2013.

VI. End Reflections

Overall I was highly impressed by TEDxYouth@Kyoto 2013 and believe it would be worth replicating on university campuses elsewhere in Japan and abroad. It was a quality conference that lived up to the TED brand. It also fulfilled the TED mission of sharing ideas, both on the TED stage and in the lobby during break time. Some of the messages from those talks have stayed with me and I have gone on to share their videos with others.

A Sensory Experience

The event had a way of appealing to nearly all my senses. The student organizers utilized their individual talents to make it visually attractive in terms of graphic design and stage lighting. The music performed on stage and by the DJ during the breaks was highly professional. And the food: green tea from Kyoto along with *tsukemono sushi*, representing Japan, and crepes, cheese, and other western options, tasted great.

A Sense of Global Community

I discovered a strong sense of the Kyoto community in a way I'd never experienced before, despite several trips there over the years. At the conference, I was treated like a local. I could see ancient Kyoto with the opening dance, the storytelling and Murabayashi Yuki's ink paintings. I could also see the optimistic future of Kyoto in the young organizers, and the global significance of Kyoto in the ideas that came out of the conference.

A Sense of Participation in Something Great

I greatly enjoyed the sense of being a "participant" and although merely observing was my original intent, I quickly discovered that people were not going to let me simply sit and watch. The music, food and general ambience encouraged even the shyest participants to talk – in English more often than not. I got the sense that it could have been any one of us selected to talk on stage. Everyone had interesting ideas to share. And those who did give talks were there during each break, just as accessible as anyone else. There was a sense that all were equal and all had something to contribute.

Learning Experiences and Opportunities via TED

Of course I didn't find all the talks at TEDxYouth@Kyoto to be the caliber of TED talk videos I'd seen previously. But those young speakers that fell short did their best, and they still managed to feel natural and spontaneous on stage, not over rehearsed. Some of the talks, which in my opinion did merit being featured on TED.com, were those by Professors Iyoshi and Matsuzawa, and resident artist, Yuki Murabayashi. It seems TED has discovered a very successful format for highly meaningful speeches that merits being adopted and promoted (see Appendix B for the "TED Commandments" of creating a good TED talk) as a better approach to public speaking.

Final Thoughts

It was this sense of participating in something both local and global, where despite being in the heart of Japan, it seemed natural to communicate in English, that I found most impressive. I suppose English could be avoided during the breaks, but the international atmosphere created by the variety of participants was ever present. I've attended many "international" or "English" events in Japan over the years that often seemed forced or awkward. TEDxYouth@Kyoto was neither. Perhaps it was the emphasis, not on language, but on communicating ideas. One caveat however, Okayama University students would benefit far more by holding their own

TEDxYouth@Okayama event, than by applying for the limited seats available at the next TEDxYouth@Kyoto. Not only would they have a better chance of getting involved and sharing their talents, it would positively impact the greater Okayama community, and link us to the global TED network. For anyone interested in conducting their own TEDx event, TED provides a thorough explanation of how to get started on its website:

http://www.ted.com/pages/organize_tedx_event

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

Links to Videos of TEDxYouth@Kyoto 2013 Talks

1st Session

Takeuchi Yukiko, 4th year student (Opening Dance performance)

Ritsumeikan University, Department of Literature

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=rvH68jBfNp8

Eddy Joe Reber, Global MBA Graduate

Doshisha Business School

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Hcn2Z9MTgEU

Tomobe Haruka, 3rd Year Student

Kyoto University, Department of Agriculture

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=HLegEiKxEwQ

2nd Session

Iiyoshi Toru, Educational Innovator and Professor

Center for the Promotion of Excellence in Higher Education at Kyoto University

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=jzaLqeGwCPE

Tehu, 3rd Year Student

Nada High School

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=XBWeLbFWKGw

Ikkyu, 3rd Year Student

Kyoto University of Foreign Languages

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=p1B36yceO44

Inhyeak Yeo, Singer

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=vLeEPPAmnhw

Murabayashi Yuki, Resident Artist

Taizo-in Temple in Myoshinji Zen School

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=QjaueQpp4XY#t=55

3rd Session

Kawaguchi Kana

President of Homedoor NPO

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=L9UrBH5pfTY

Emma Harrison, 4th Year Student

Doshisha University Department of Policy Studies

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=t2st9f7XeJI

Matsuzawa Tetsu, Primatologist

Primate Research Institute, Kyoto University

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=fzUyX5kezb0

Makiura Doga, Broker/Representative

Rwanda e-Education Project

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=CPY9W7yToFc

Each session also featured one or two well-known talks from TED.com which are listed below.

Candy Chang: Before I die I want to...

http://www.ted.com/talks/candy_chang_before_i_die_i_want_to.html

Larry Smith: Why you will fail to have a great career

http://www.ted.com/talks/larry_smith_why_you_will_fail_to_have_a_great_career.html

Matt Cutts: Try Something New for 30 Days

http://www.ted.com/talks/matt_cutts_try_something_new_for_30_days.html

Shawn Achor: The Happy Secret to Better Work

http://www.ted.com/talks/shawn_achor_the_happy_secret_to_better_work.html

Links to all the talks listed above can also be found at TEDxYouth@Kyoto's Twitter and Facebook pages and the TEDxKyoto official homepage:

<https://www.facebook.com/tedx youth.kyoto>

<https://twitter.com/TEDxYouthKyoto>

<http://www.tedxkyoto.com/events/tedx youthkyoto-2013/>

Appendix B

The Key to a Successful TED talk: The TED Commandments

1. **Dream big.** Strive to create the best talk you have ever given. Reveal something never seen before. Do something the audience will remember forever. Share an idea that could change the world.
2. **Show us the real you.** Share your passions, your dreams ... and also your fears. Be vulnerable. Speak of failure as well as success.
3. **Make the complex plain.** Don't try to dazzle intellectually. Don't speak in abstractions. Explain! Give examples. Tell stories. Be specific.
4. **Connect with people's emotions.** Make us laugh! Make us cry!
5. **Don't flaunt your ego.** Don't boast. It's the surest way to switch everyone off.
6. **No selling from the stage!** Unless we have specifically asked you to, do not talk about your company or organization. And don't even think about pitching your products or services or asking for funding from stage.
7. **Feel free to comment on other speakers' talks,** to praise or to criticize. Controversy energizes! Enthusiastic endorsement is powerful!
8. **Don't read your talk.** Notes are fine. But if the choice is between reading or rambling, then read!
9. **End your talk on time.** Doing otherwise is to steal time from the people that follow you. We won't allow it.
10. **Rehearse your talk** in front of a trusted friend ... for timing, for clarity, for impact.

Author

Thomas Fast is a new member of the faculty of the Language Education Center. His interests include the promotion of global education in language learning. He believes it is his mission to prepare his students for the world by bringing the world to them. For information, please contact him at: fast@okayama-u.ac.jp