



Illinois Wesleyan University Digital Commons @ IWU

News and Events

University Communications

2015

Sawada Brings Abacus Skills to Community Youth

Matt Borse

Illinois Wesleyan University

Recommended Citation

Borse, Matt, "Sawada Brings Abacus Skills to Community Youth" (2015). *News and Events*. Paper 2749.
<http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/2749>

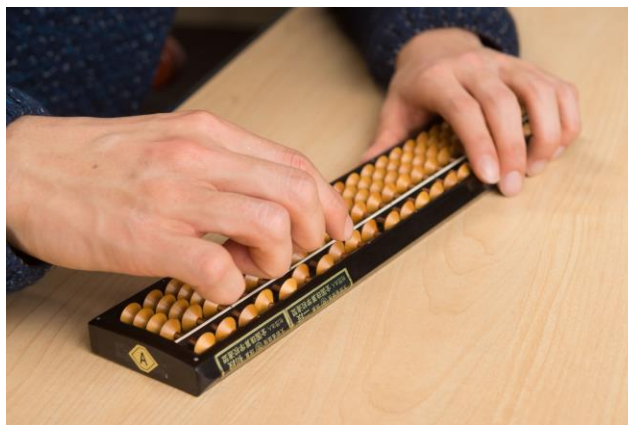
This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Ames Library, the Andrew W. Mellon Center for Curricular and Faculty Development, the Office of the Provost and the Office of the President. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Commons @ IWU by the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Sawada Brings Abacus Skills to Community Youth

Dec. 9, 2015

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Shinnosuke (Shin) Sawada gingerly flips the clasps of a thin wooden box and unfolds a floral-print cloth, uncovering a rectangular object that he places on the table in front of him. Possessing a delicate beauty that belies its usefulness, the abacus, Sawada explained, has been used for thousands of years in his native Japan and elsewhere throughout the world to perform quick mental calculations — helping people from merchants to students in their daily lives. Yet the abacus has never caught on as a learning tool in the United States. Relegated to the waiting rooms of doctor’s offices or left to gather dust in a basement, the abacus is seen as a mere plaything. Sawada is aiming to change that perception in the Bloomington-Normal area.



Attracted to Illinois Wesleyan by the opportunity for original projects in the community, Shin Sawada takes joy in sharing the power of an ancient calculating tool.

An exchange student from Toyko’s Keio University majoring in economics and sociology at Illinois Wesleyan University, Sawada was perplexed by Americans’ lack of interest in the abacus. Called a *soroban* in Japanese, the abacus has been used since the 14th century and is still widely taught in Japanese primary schools — primarily as an aid to faster mental calculation. Using the visual imagery of a soroban, students can arrive at the answer to a problem at the same time, or even faster, than using an electronic calculator.

Once Sawada takes on a mental calculation himself, it becomes apparent that this fact is no exaggeration. The playful rolling of the abacus with his hand guiding it along as a skateboard vanishes. Problem number one is 7,263 divided by 415. Three seconds later, Sawada declares “17.501,” with an air of such certainty that a glance at a calculator is hardly necessary to verify his answer. His fingers move over the abacus so quickly it’s difficult to imagine that a calculation is taking place in his mind. When questioned if his prodigious math ability is a natural or learned trait, Sawada hesitates. “A little bit between the both,” he answers with humility, although he demurely adds that he was the National Abacus Champion in Japan at the age of 12.



Sawada taught local students how to build their own abacuses at the Children's Discovery Museum.

In his first semester at Illinois Wesleyan, Sawada found a way to bring greater appreciation for the abacus to Bloomington-Normal through the Action Research Seminar. This course focuses on bettering the Bloomington-Normal community through innovative student-led projects. Deborah Halperin, director of the Action Research Seminar, asks students to create a community outreach project. Sawada focused on the abacus, and began by teaching other students in the seminar how to use one. Tia Patsavas '16, one of Sawada’s seminar classmates, points out that even though she had never used an abacus, Sawada made it easy for her to understand. This success in class encouraged him to take the leap from teaching university students to teaching children in the community.

Sawada didn’t just teach youngsters how to use the abacus — he also taught them how to build them. With

help from Illinois Wesleyan students, Boys and Girls Club members, and volunteers from the local Tool Library (an organization at which Sawada has also volunteered), Sawada constructed simple wooden abacuses at the Children’s Discovery Museum in Normal. In total, the group assembled about 32 of the handmade “calculators.” The same day, Sawada taught the children how to use their new tools. “Nobody knew how to use the abacus,” he said. “I’m glad that they can

calculate on their own by using them. They were also excited to make an abacus and to use it on their own.”

Sawada is clearly comfortable in the role of teacher. Cheerful and with a smile that rarely leaves his face, Sawada has the ability to patiently explain the ins-and-outs of the abacus in a manner that even a novice would understand as he slowly moves the abacus beads up and down, occasionally referring to his self-created diagrams to clear up any confusion. His teaching experiences began after high school, when he volunteered this past summer with Teach for Japan. Mentoring and tutoring students from low-income areas of Tokyo, Sawada’s interest was piqued by the disparities in education levels between Japan’s affluent students and their less wealthy counterparts. Economists have dubbed this problem in Japan the “education gap.”

The experience also sparked an interest in education issues related to labor and community development. A big attraction for Sawada to study at Illinois Wesleyan was the Action Research Center, its focus on community development and a student’s ability to work on original projects. In ways that surprise even him, the abacus has become a tool that has connected him deeply to the Bloomington-Normal community. He feels real joy when seeing a younger person learn the power of this ancient tool.

Even though his coursework with the Action Research Center is complete, Sawada plans to continue to teach the abacus through the Boys and Girls Club. “I’m excited when the children are excited to use the abacus on their own,” he said. “It makes me feel good when they can begin to calculate on their own using it.” He hopes one day to combine his interests in economics and sociology to conduct in-depth investigations comparing community development in the U.S. with that in Japan.

Long term, Sawada has set his sights on bringing the abacus to an even broader audience. “My dream is that the abacus will be adapted in U.S. elementary education just as it is in the Japanese system.”



An economics and sociology major, Sawada is interested in education issues related to labor and community development.

By Matt Borse '16