

Quiet Moments in Learning—Japanese and Americans Listening to Each Other

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In fall of 2001 I had the esteemed privilege of traveling with the Fulbright Memorial Fund Scholarship Program to Japan to participate and conduct a comprehensive study of educational methods that I could apply to my teaching in high school in California. Out of 200 American delegates I was chosen to address Japanese officials and educators, colleagues, politicians, and the guest of honor, the Vice Minister of Education for Japan.

It was important to make a positive impression. After all, I was representing not only America, but also being given the chance to be the spokesperson for some of the finest educators in our country. I was also hoping that my speech would help to further conversations between our countries. Somewhat nervous, somewhat excited I approached the podium. I looked out to see the waiting faces before I began my speech. I intended to start with the customary greeting of “konbanwa” meaning “good evening.” However, instead of this greeting, I started with the more informal adventurous Ninja turtle greeting and Bart Simpson’s favorite expression “Kowibanga” by mistake.

There was a hush, a quiet lull, and then rolling laughter. We soaked up the words like we had the culture. It was yet another quiet mistake between two countries.

In hindsight, it is the quiet mistakes or awkward silences on my trip that have stood out as benchmarks for my teaching. During my three weeks in Japan, there were reflective times that I observed, contemplated, and even felt awkward. I think these were the times when I learned the most. I shall never forget the awkwardness of sitting in a Japanese elementary school during lunch not only having no idea what I was eating, but how to eat it. I can still see the gentle young hands that showed me the proper way of holding chopsticks and the manners upon which to eat. I remember the awe that I felt as they took their milk cartoons and tray of food, and not only threw it away, but compressed into a size that I did not think possible. Recycling was a reflex action in their mealtime. It was the awkwardness of not knowing, they made it more important for me to know. When Abba or the Beatles began blaring through the loud speakers, I had no idea what was going on. Two very young Japanese girls struggled to explain it was “clean up time.” For me, clean up time meant cleaning up your desk or perhaps your area, but in Japan “clean up time” was a time that all the students cleaned the school. For the next twenty minutes two students showed me the areas that they cleaned and I followed with dish rag in hand for my first rock and roll clean up time. I later discovered that they did not hire janitors and that this was the way they kept the school clean.

No amount of words can express the heartfelt gratitude for the ceremony that the student put on at the middle school. I was to later understand that for one year they prepared for our arrival. Equipped with student displaying art works, singing American songs, and presenting us with a thousand paper cranes, I was in awe of the celebration. However, the time that stands out the most was after the ceremony. Three of us were given the duty of putting away the flag. When we began to fold the flag in the traditional way, a large crowd had gathered around us. It was then that I realize these Japanese students had never seen an American flag folding ceremony. It was then that I realized the importance of our “reflex actions.” We carried on an honored tradition.

On one particular day, at 4:00 in the morning I woke up to visit a Japanese Fish market. I had no idea why I was up so early to see cold dead fish. You would never catch me at the local Red Lobster at this time just to watch cold dead fish. Why was this time different? I asked a fellow teacher that had visited the market the day before and his reply was “You are a storyteller and a teacher, right?” I told him yes since I also teach storytelling at the high school. He said, “I won’t spoil it for you. The only thing I will tell you is look for the small things.” I did not understand till later what that meant.



After securing a taxi, riding the subway, and even a brisk city jog, I arrived at the market. At first all I saw was cold dead fish and chaos as people began to scramble to prepare the fish for auction. However, after taking a quiet moment to reflect, I noticed that there was so much more to see. As I looked at the tiny, and some not so tiny, vats I noticed that every type of sea life was contained in these spaces, from the smallest squid to sea urchins each sea creature created its own beauty. I also noticed that old tired hands helped the new hands learn the art of caring for each type of sea life. Like a master sculptor gentle instructions and sometimes even strong syllables of command were echoed in those voices and hands. The apprentices had a sense of awe as mastery was shown. I learned much from that quiet moment at the fish market. Just like the fish market, when visiting another culture or school, one must take time to see the quiet moments or the small details around them. At one school we shuffled into a physical education classroom. We stood on stage as we watched kids from the ages of 7 to 12 scramble to be in line from the sound of a whistle. All one could hear were sharp whistle blasts, I watched how over 150 students began to form human pyramids that I did not think were possible. By the end of the last whistle the students had formed into one massive pyramid. Despite the weight, size, or age level of the student, each student, like a well organized concert was able to create this symphony. . From the quiet moment of reflection, I really began to understand the value of working together. I could not help but think of the

arguments an American gym class teacher would have from parents if “Mary” or “Andrew” were asked to create this pyramid. There would be protests about safety, health, and public embarrassment.

However, at the Japanese school, I saw none of that. The students simply knew these exercises so well they could do them in their sleep. I actually witnessed one young lady who did just that. It was amazing to see what a whole group could accomplish when the group works toward that goal.

There were other quiet moments that gave me pause. For example, when we met with the parents of an elementary school and found out from them they were not expected to be as involved in the learning process as much as an American parent. We had wonderful conversation of how parents could be involved and exchanged ideas and discussed plans. I also had to eliminate the preconceived notion that “Japanese students are too involved with their school work to have time for fun.” Tell that to the students who showed us new games with tops, flying airplanes, and even the ones who just laughed while they chased us down the hall. However, saying all this I did notice that the high school that we visited has a deadening sense of “no thrills” about it. Even when it was announced that no student was available for class, the principal did not allow us time to just talk with the students. This same principal picked the teachers who could respond to our questions. I shall never forget the feeling of being on restriction when it came to asking and answering questions.

It is not to say that all Japanese learning is this way. However, it is recognized by the Japanese education department that students need a “Zest for living.” In fact, this was the policy that were enacting. They found that rigorous testing and rigorous school hours can dramatically alter the confidence and the sense of accomplishment of their students. They were discussing ways to lessen a student’s stress level. They were for the first time going to a five day, instead of six day school week. Many teachers did not think that the students could find ways to deal with this extra out of class time.

I find it quite ironic at a time when we are testing our students more and more, at a time when we restrict the arts and the creative learning strategies and instead resort to specific standardized methods of learning that we don’t look to our neighbors in the East who have had standardized testing for years. We need to learn to work together, like the students in the P.E. class, to work in concert to instill a “Zest for learning” in all students.

Why, when we look at the subject of international relations, do we put so much distance in our learning? We need to work together so that we can avoid or at lessen the mistakes in our pasts. As I boarded the plane, I took home not only the wonders of a Japanese fish market, but also the wonders of listening to each other. The Japanese are known for gift giving or ‘*omiyage*.’ They take special care not only for the gift but for the way it is presented. This is the way it should

be in our struggle to find the proper education for our children. We need to freely exchange ideas for each culture and without prejudice seriously consider all styles of learning. Instead of concentrating on standardizing our learning, let us embrace world wide opportunities to expand it. Our classroom is the world. We need to embrace the students and educators in it.

