

## Chapter Eight - School and Education

### I. Reading

#### ***Take that mirror off your desk!***

When foreign teachers begin teaching at universities in Japan, they are often surprised at how different the classes are from classes in their home country. Students don't participate or even pay attention, they don't answer questions, they don't prepare, they talk with their friends while the teacher is speaking, they send messages to their friends on their phones...the list goes on. Are Japanese universities so terrible? My students sometimes ask me about the differences between universities in Japan and in the U.S. Which is better? What do I tell them? I tell them that they're asking the wrong question.



Just as with a gesture (handshake or bow) or verbal expression (よろしくお願ひします - *yoroshiku onegaishimasu*), it's not very helpful to look at the cultural item all by itself. One also needs to look at its cultural context. One can't understand universities in Japan if one doesn't look at its high schools, and the same is also true of universities in the U.S. Furthermore, one also needs to look at the societies for which each educational system is preparing its students.

One of the main purposes of education is to help children to become successful, productive, fulfilled members of society. Of course, that will mean very different things, depending on the society in which that person will live as an adult. We have already learned about the different values in Japanese and Western cultures in terms of harmony, hierarchy, independence, formality, etc. It's no surprise that schools preparing students for lives in these two very different cultures will need to teach those students very different things in very different ways.

From pre-school through junior high school, Japanese students are taught the importance of working together in teams. Students rarely are separated by ability levels, and individual differences in performance often are downplayed. In sharp contrast, U.S. children are taught from a very early age the importance of independence, self-reliance, and individual responsibility.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, there is a good deal of emphasis placed on individual achievement.

#### ***Exam Hell***

Another big difference in the educational systems is exemplified by—or created by—the Japanese university entrance examination system. Because the entrance examinations play such a large role in determining a person's future, schools naturally focus instruction on performance on these exams. Because the emphasis of the exams is on fact rather than on analysis or creative thinking, one finds a similar emphasis on remembering facts in junior and senior high school instruction. Without these kinds of exams in the U.S., there is less emphasis on memorizing facts and more emphasis on critical thinking and expressive ability. Is it any surprise, then, that

<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, the teaching of self-reliance may be fast becoming a thing of the past, as there seems to be a very strong trend these days to blame someone else, anyone else, when something goes wrong.

## Us and Them

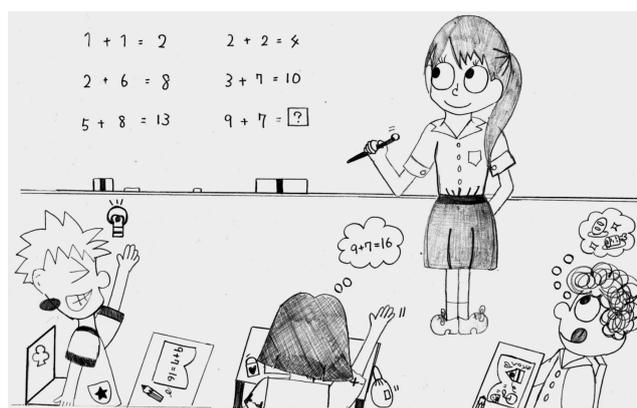
Japanese high school graduates excel in subjects such as math and geography, while their U.S. counterparts tend to be much better thinkers and communicators?

The Japanese university entrance examinations affect the education system in yet another way. Because the exams are so important, Japanese high school study is quite a serious matter, and until recently, was usually supplemented by evening and Saturday classes at “cram schools” or 塾 (*juku*). Once a student gets into the best university he can, however, things change quite a bit. The four years of university life offer the young adult the freest, most carefree years of his life. This is the time for making friends and establishing relationships, socializing, and, well, having fun. In the U.S., however, high school, not university, is the time for clubs, socializing, and self-realization. In the U.S., universities are relatively easy to get into, but difficult to succeed at. At the university I graduated from and where I later worked, less than 60% of the beginning freshmen were able to successfully complete their bachelor degrees in four years. For U.S. students, their university years are four years of very hard work.

Additionally, the two societies and their educational systems differ in their thinking about the responsibilities of the student and the teacher, especially at the university level. The role of an American university professor is often more like that of a facilitator (進行役) or even a colleague. It is the student who is expected to read, research, and prepare on his own, and to show up for class ready to discuss, contribute, question, challenge, and debate. A Japanese student sits down in class without preparation and waits to be taught, or, as often happens, lectured to. In Japan, if a student fails, the blame falls on the teacher; in the U.S., the responsibility for failure falls on the student. I have seen several classes in which a Japanese professor stood at the front of the class, reading from a textbook or his notes while the students in class slept peacefully with their heads on their desks. My students are surprised when I tell them that such a “professor” would lose his job for this kind of “teaching.”<sup>2</sup>

### What do I think?

Because of the importance of the university entrance exams in Japan, there is an emphasis on the importance of getting the “right” answer. To any question or problem, there can be only one correct answer—the answer considered correct by the graders of the entrance exams. You’ll notice I used quotes when I wrote about the “right” answer. I do that because, as a product of the U.S. educational system myself, I separate questions that have one



objective answer (What is the capital of England? What is the square root of 100?<sup>3</sup>) and questions that have several or no answers (What caused World War I? How many colors are there in the rainbow?<sup>4</sup>) Of course, because Japanese students have been taught that there is only one answer to a question and that individual achievement isn’t necessarily a good thing (出る釘は打たれる - *Deru kugi wa utareru.*), they are, of course, reluctant to answer questions. This is especially true when it’s a foreign teacher asking them, “Well, what do you think about that?”

<sup>2</sup> For a first-hand look at what American students think about their professors, take a look at <<http://www.ratemyprofessor.com>>.

<sup>3</sup> By the way, there is only one answer to the question, “What is the square root of two?” It’s  $\pi$ , or 3. 3.141592653589793238.... - not 3.14, regardless of what MEXT says. Ironically, a Japanese mathematician hold the record for calculating the value of  $\pi$  to over 200 billion places.

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter Zero.

## Us and Them

They struggle to determine what the “correct” opinion is. In the U.S., one is expected to have an opinion, and be able to give some explanation or reason why one thinks that way. Is it any wonder that new foreign teachers are surprised by the differences in their classes in Japan from those they remember from their university days?

The expectations of society also affect the educational systems greatly. Japanese companies hire university graduates with the expectation that the company will train them. It almost seems as if the companies would prefer the universities not teach their students too much, lest the company have to un-teach bad habits, attitudes, and assumptions. U.S. companies, on the other hand, expect their new employees to report for work trained, educated, and ready for work. As a result, an American student’s major is much more likely to be related to his career plans than is a Japanese student’s. Companies in the U.S. also look hard at a student’s “G.P.A.” (grade point average), a numerical average of his university course grades. Can you see why American university students need to think differently about their university education?

### ***Studying and Learning***

Another example of words and concepts that don’t translate well are the ideas associated with the English words “study” and “learn” and the Japanese words 勉強 (*benkyou*) and 習う (*narau*). There are many situations where one would use the Japanese word 勉強 (*benkyou*), but using the English word “study” would seem strange. It was my habit at a school where I taught years ago to sit outside with a news or tech magazine after lunch. One of my students commented on how I was always “studying”; I had no idea what he meant. In English, the ideas of studying and learning are quite separate from each other. For example, if the textbook you are using is of too high a level, you might study very hard for a long time, but might not learn very much. Similarly, a young child playing with matches for the first time will probably soon learn a very important lesson without any study at all (Fire is hot!). Studying is the conscious, deliberate act of trying to learn something; learning is the result, the new knowledge one has gained, whether or not it came as a result of studying. I really love learning, but studying...well, not so much.

### II. Comprehension Questions

If you have a difficult time answering these questions, read the passage again. If you can't find the answer, make a note of your question and ask the teacher for an explanation in your next class.

1. Why is comparing Japanese and American universities so complicated?
2. What effect does the Japanese university entrance examination system have on secondary school education?
3. What are some of the big differences between Japanese and American universities?
4. What is the difference in meaning between "study" and "勉強".
5. What have you learned without studying?

### III. Thinking

#### *New words and expressions*

***What are the main points in this chapter?***

General summary of main points.

List some examples from your own life or observations that support these points:

List some examples from your own life or observations that do not support these points:

Your reactions and opinions: