BLOGGING, CRITICAL THINKING AND RESPONSIBLE GENERALISATION IN JAPANESE STUDIES

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Introduction

Area studies-based learning presents the regional specialist with tough educational challenges. In Japanese Studies, new students often embark on their course of study with the default assumption that Japan is “unique” or “exceptional”. This idea, commonly rooted in Orientalist discourse and soft nationalistic theories popularly perpetuated by the media about Japan’s cultural uniqueness, creates substantial obstacles for a balanced student appraisal of their subject of study. One conceptual counterweight commonly applied to correct these student biases by Japanese Studies educators is the liberal application of self-styled “critical theory”. Japan, even in basic introductory courses, is variously “deconstructed”, “unwrapped”, or “reinterpreted” in ways which advocate the idea of ‘a Japan’ or ‘many Japans’. This pedagogical offset, however, gives rise to additional problems. After completing such courses, students tend to come away with a reasonably firm idea of what Japan is not, but with very little capacity to clearly articulate a general sense of what life might be like in Japan for particular groups of people based on a careful examination of available evidence.

This paper presents a brief overview of a teaching practicum implemented in the course JS2222 “Japanese Society and Social Institutions” specifically designed to encourage students to generalise about Japan in a theoretically informed, self-reflective and academically responsible manner. The idea for the practicum came from a small but growing body of literature cautioning against approaches to knowledge and learning that, at least in their most unsophisticated forms, elevate the act of “deconstruction” from mere pedagogical strategy to a superior form of reality cognition (Pattai & Corral, 2005; Kitching, 2008). Building on the insights of this literature, the JS2222 teaching curriculum required enrolled students to actively research questions of broader social interest through a rigorous engagement with various kinds of source materials and to comment about their findings in online blogs. Students were provided training throughout the course in the interrogation of their own assumptions about Japanese society through the careful consideration of sources and the interpretative limits posed by the research materials as well as other important research variables. Educational material presented to students in course lectures and tutorials have been carefully arranged so that they would receive constant reminders of the two most common conceptual traps in Japanese Studies—the Scylla' of extreme social constructivism where Japanese society loses all of its particularity and the Charybdis of nihonjinron (theories of Japanese uniqueness) where students simply advocate and perpetuate well-worn cultural theories about Japanese distinctiveness.

Project Rationale: Criticality, Generalisation and Blogs in Japanese Studies

The default assumption shared by many students new to the study of Japan, that the society and its people are essentially unique, is commonly referred to by scholars as nihonjinron. The Japanese sociologist Yoshio Sugimoto defines nihonjinron as the “popular essentialist genre in Japan, which purports to analyse Japan’s quintessence and cultural core” (Sugimoto, 1999, p.81). Yoshio Kosaku (2002a) notes that nihonjinron can be found everywhere, functioning for instance as a nationalist discourse amongst Japanese business elites. Numerous scholars also point out that nihonjinron is a particularly pertinent issue for people involved in education about Japan. Yoshino cautions, for example, that people involved in English language education in Japan tend to uncritically perpetuate the myths of “nihonjinron classics” (Yoshino, 2002b, p.142). Outside Japan, too, the myth of Japanese uniqueness is often reproduced by Japanese language teachers whose reflections about Japanese society tend to “mirror nihonjinron discourse which accentuates the uniqueness of essentialized Japanese culture” (Kubota, 2002, p.25). Avoiding the pitfall of nihonjinron, therefore, is a key concern for all scholars who engage in the teaching of Japanese Studies in any given context. Students need to be sensitised to Orientalist discourses or soft nationalistic theories about Japan’s cultural uniqueness, which are constantly perpetuated through a variety of media representations as well as well-intentioned academic educators.

At the same time, however, a common pedagogical approach adopted by Japanese Studies educators to challenge such common student biases—the utilisation of critical theory—is not without its own problems. Japan, even in the most basic introductory courses, commonly becomes “deconstructed” in ways which generally advocate the idea of ‘a Japan’ in single quotation marks. Often, students who complete introductory courses with this particular theoretical inflection come away with little ability to clearly articulate what it is that can actually be said about Japanese society. Conceptually, therefore, there is a need for educators to make a careful distinction between critical thinking and critical theory. While it may be true that much critical theory does tend to promote critical thinking, it is also the case that critical theoretical positions can (and do) contain and promote certain dogmas which must themselves be subjected to processes of thoughtful appraisal. Of particular concern in Japanese Studies is an overwhelming bias in much of contemporary literature which tends to inform readers of the “constructed-ness” of that society. Often, little attempt is made in recent literature to elaborate on the specific ways people in Japan actually construct their social world and how to understand complex questions of historical continuity and cultural diversity. Students, therefore, also
need to develop critical thinking skills in order to think through the implications of this vast literature.

Critical thinking has been defined by Michael Scriven and Richard Paul as “that mode of thinking—about any subject, content, or problem—in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skilfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them.” While standards may vary, “clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness” are all undoubtedly included. Encouraging students to develop these skills, however, is clearly not an easy task. It requires students to intellectually discipline themselves in order to proactively and adroitly conceptualise, apply, analyse, synthesise, and/or evaluate “information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.” Students are required to embark upon a detailed process of reasoning, examining “purpose, problem, or question-at-issue; assumptions; concepts; empirical grounding; reasoning leading to conclusions; implications and consequences; objections from alternative viewpoints; and frame of reference.” Such reasoning will encourage them to develop two important intellectual traits: the development of “a set of information and belief generating and processing skills” and “the habit, based on intellectual commitment, of using those skills to guide behaviour” (Scriven & Paul, 1987).

Linda Elder (2007) has provided a useful definition of critical thinking as it might pertain to area studies. She writes that

“[C]ritical thinking is self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way. People who think critically consistently attempt to live rationally, reasonably, empathically. They are keenly aware of the inherently flawed nature of human thinking when left unchecked. They strive to diminish the power of their egocentric and sociocentric tendencies….They avoid thinking simplistically about complicated issues and strive to appropriately consider the rights and needs of relevant others.” (Defining Critical Thinking)

Particularly important for overcoming tendencies in Japanese Studies towards cultural prejudices and critical theoretical overload are Elders’ ideas of empathy and the diminishment of ‘egocentric and sociocentric tendencies.’ Students need to be encouraged to learn to speak not only about Japan, but also with it; as people who are not only educationally interested in the country, but as young scholars who have critically engaged with Japanese language and culture to the extent that even their Singaporean “habits of mind” are irreversibly altered. They can do this, primarily, though exposure to and thoughtful reflection upon a wide variety of source materials related to Japan.

The potential role of blogging in the process of formulating critical thinking skills has been emphasised by several scholars. The main focus on blogging to date, however, appears to be its capacity to encourage critical thinking through online discussion and debate (MacKnight, 2000). One important departure point for the JS2222 practicum, therefore, was the less emphatic role placed on online discussion in the blogging process. While certainly encouraged to respond to each other’s blogs and to debate points of idealical contention, students were asked to conceptualise their project more in terms of a research diary which other people were free to access. Students remained aware that their work and ideas were visible in the public realm but were encouraged to view the activity more in terms of the development of individual research skills which would eventually contribute to a more sophisticated group project.

The dangers of formulating the assessment activity in this way were twofold. Apart from regular faculty posts, it was possible that students would not be fully exposed to the excellent learning resource provided by academic peers. There was, moreover, a likelihood that students would be encouraged to see the research process as merely cumulative rather than as something which also occasionally involved the complete abandonment of earlier ideas. Despite these potential downsides, however, considerable benefits also came with the adoption of the above approach. First, faculty members were able to gain a firsthand look into the development of the ideas of individual students as they contributed to a group project over the course of an entire semester. Second, students appeared more inclined to openly explore different ideas and were prepared to take on board constructive comments about their projects. The structure imposed by blogging also tended to encourage students to develop a better sense of how to break up larger research problems into manageable pieces.

Course Overview: Curriculum, Course Structure, Assessment

JS2222 was designed to enhance students’ understanding of Japanese society and social institutions. Students from various academic backgrounds enrolled in the course to learn the history of important institutions in Japan like the family, community, workplace, school and government. Lectures in the course were divided into six separate blocks comprising two lectures. The first block of two lectures contained a basic introduction to Japanese history and society. The subsequent five blocks of lectures were all thematic, beginning with a basic outline of the historical development and contemporary features of key institutions in mainstream Japanese society as well as an introduction to some of the core values that underpin them. The institutions covered in the course were studied thematically, beginning with the family and slowly progressing outwards through the study of community groups, the school system and the workplace, to the study of the relationship between state and civil society. The first lecture in any given block would always provide a basic outline of the distinctive features of the institution under investigation as it pertained to mainstream society. The second lecture in the same block, however, would focus on the lives of people who did not necessarily conform to hegemonic social norms or
ideals. The second lecture would usually explore some of the alternative visions of Japanese society held by a selection of social actors and discuss the social problems they encountered in their everyday lives. Efforts were made to show students, through a large range of source materials, how a variety of ethnic and social minority groups negotiate life in contemporary Japan through the adaption, rejection, replacement, reinvention and affirmation of existing traditional social values and practices.

In lectures, JS2222 students were always introduced to the social institution in question by first examining existing academic debates. In Week 3, for example, students were introduced to a complex debate on the nature and origins of the Japanese family (ie). Students were informed of the ways early Japanese Studies scholars tended to see the Japanese family system as evolving in the very earliest periods of ancient Japanese history. They were then shown the ways scholars in recent times have attempted to project the Japanese family as a modern social construction which emerged alongside the apparatus of the nation-state in the 19th century. Students were then introduced to a range of other scholarly works which questioned basic constructivist understandings. By being exposed to some of the problems with traditional and constructivist approaches to knowledge, students were finally encouraged, through a series of focus questions, to reflect on these issues while listening to the remainder of the lecture on the contours of the mainstream Japanese family. The focus questions given by the lecturer during the lectures were specifically designed to encourage students to think critically about the origin and nature of Japanese social institutions in order to deepen the level of research they were undertaking for their blogs and group project.

All of the grading components of JS2222 were interlinked. The three CA components in the course were for participation, group presentation and the “Japan Log” (blog). Students received 10% of their mark from tutorial participation. They were expected to attend the tutorials, complete the required readings, and participate in discussions through comments and questions. Group tutorial presentations constituted 30% of the final grade for the course. Students were required to script, perform, and analyse a 25-minute group role-play. The aim of this assessment activity was for them to develop a deeper understanding of the values that impacted certain social situations in Japan by developing a better understanding of the fictional “Japanese characters” they were developing. However, to ensure that such group role plays did not fall into gross caricatures of Japanese people bordering on racism, students were required to undertake considerable independent research on a range of social institutions, situations and problems, to set up and administer a “Japan Log” through the website http://blog.nus.edu.sg/, and to blog about their ideas in the public sphere. Twenty percent of the total marks for the module were allocated to this “Japan Log”.

The Japan Log

For this exercise, students chose an institutional setting in Japan discussed in the course lectures, such as the home, community, school, workplace or public sphere, and identified a problem they believed might arise in that particular institutional setting. They were then asked to research that institutional setting and particular problem through a range of source materials and to write up their observations over time as blog entries. Students were encouraged to look at a wide range of source materials including newspaper articles, documentaries, films, novels, websites, blogs and discussions with knowledgeable informants. They were instructed to adequately prepare for this task by spending considerable time in the library researching institutional rules, social trends and norms of behaviour, rules of social etiquette in Japan, as well as examples of divergence in relation to the problems they were examining. Students were advised against arriving at conclusions based on groundless assumptions. When in doubt, they were asked to consult with their tutors or course convener who would offer them more reliable sources. Students were encouraged to refer to a variety of academic books and journal articles which critically examined the values they believed were important in understanding their chosen topics.

Students were provided an example of what a typical “Japan Log” entry might look like. They were instructed that their log should make clear reference to the topic they were researching for their group tutorial presentations and that they should submit a minimum of three dated entries (approximately a page in length each) to the JS2222 IVLE Blog at two staggered dates falling within the teaching semester. Students were also instructed that the “Japan Log” was an individual rather than a group exercise, meaning that the assessment item required their own individual opinions, reflections, and perspectives (in their own prose) on what they have encountered through research, and that log entries should conform to sound academic practices. Marks were awarded to students mostly based on:

- the relevance of the material examined to the group project;
- the comprehension level of the material examined;
- evidence of structured reflection of the material;
- logical progression in development of ideas; and
- overall depth of analysis.

Students were also encouraged to reflect upon the following focus questions in relation to their research:

1. What kinds of social values are being portrayed in the material being examined?
2. What evidence is there that the values portrayed are widely shared across Japan?
3. Are there different sets of values which are socially prominent but not
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through the use of critical thinking and these focus questions.

Students, in group consultation sessions with both tutors and the course convener, were given detailed advice about how to compile and analyse data for their blogs through the use of critical thinking and these focus questions.

Analysis and Evaluation

Students basically focused on seven main areas of social conflict for their group presentations and Japan Logs: schoolyard bullying (ijime); the breakdown of the Japanese family (katei hokai); gender discrimination in the workplace (kata-tataki); social discrimination of people with “obsessive interests” (otaku); the growing disillusionment with and postponement of marriage (bankon); cultural misunderstanding of foreigners in an increasingly globalised Japanese workplace (kokusaika); and strict sociocultural attitudes to time management (jikan). Overall, students tended to research aspects of the social problem that most interested them.

One student working on the breakdown of the Japanese family, for example, clearly identified to a considerable extent with Japanese youth who were embedded in certain subcultures. This student not only designed his blog along these lines, but also included lengthy entries where he translated the lyrics of songs by Japanese “visual bands”.

The JS2222 blogs ranged in style from the functional to the elaborate. In one blog which fell into the latter category, the student actively wrote on various aspects of Japan, writing more than double the number of required entries for the course. Other students spent considerable time making their blogs aesthetically pleasing with an array of images, screenshots and media clips. Some blogs, however, basically left the default template settings unaltered, leaving the impression that they were still under construction. A handful of students failed to submit the required number of posts. One student set up their “Japan Log” but failed to make an entry on the blog for the entire semester. In general, however, students appeared to choose topics which were very close to their areas of main interest and decorated their blogs accordingly.

A number of quantitative and qualitative findings emerged from a close study of the JS2222 student blogs. Quantitatively, several strong correlations emerged. Statistically, poor blog entry grades tended to be related to the following factors:

- limited use of focus questions or failure to engage in a structured reflection of multiple sources; and
- the tendency for entries to centre discussion on a single non-academic webpage discussion thread.

Conversely, higher quality posts with better grades tended to have the following characteristics:

- they began with a specific research question and engaged with multiple sources in an attempt to find an answer;
- they diversified sources and undertook a level of source criticism;
- they actively responded to peer/faculty feedback on their blogs, tutorial comments, and group presentation feedback; and
- they reflected back of their default assumptions about Japanese society being inherently unique.

The practicum also alluded to several thought-provoking qualitative findings. Generally, a growing awareness was demonstrated among a considerable number of students of the need to analyse multiple causes in the study of social phenomenon. Students, particularly in their later blog entries, tended to emphasise the complexity of social phenomenon, showing a keen awareness of the need to better understand the complex interplay of social institutions and not reduce everything to culture. One student commented, for example, that “[t]hrough the approach of looking at each issue under each institution like education and workforce, we see that the cause of every issue is not due to just one factor and we should not be quick to assume that it is this way because Japan is a society that is highly dependent on groupism. Although groupism can be used to explain some behavior for the issues that Japan is facing, it should not be seen as the answer to all problems.”

Some students also began to demonstrate an interest in trying to find a middle ground between interpretative arguments rooted in ideas of “uniqueness” and “constructivism”. One student wrote: “In my opinion, the phenomenon of ‘bullying’ does not differ between countries. It happens everywhere. But what is unique about ijime in Japan lies in the style of how it has been carried out there.” Other students, too, through their critical examination of key source materials, actually discovered meaningful sociocultural differences left virtually untouched by professional researchers. One student discovered that “[t]he percentage of students bullied decreases significantly with age and grade….In Japanese schools, there is no sign of general decline in direct physical bullying as age/grade increases. As reported by the Ministry of Education, physical violence is highest in senior-high followed by junior-high.” This was an important observation which came out of the students’ efforts to seriously analyse and compare empirical data found in government reports.
Perhaps most significantly, however, was the fact that several students demonstrated notable educational development in their understanding and utilisation of high-level concepts. One student in her final blog entry commented that "[b]eing given an overview of the social institutions and how they worked, I am now more aware of how the Japanese society works as a whole. Ideologies and values are perpetrated in these institutions and the problems that arise are no doubt interlinked" (italics mine). Another student struck upon the following concept in her interviews with Japanese residents in Singapore: “The positionality of Japanese whom I have interacted with in Singapore must be taken seriously into account. In the course of interaction with young and middle-aged Japanese female teachers at our school, IKOMA Japanese Language School, as well as with exchange students from Japan, I feel that they are different from mainstream Japanese. Therefore, their views may not be an accurate reflection of the views of mainstream society” (italics mine). It is perhaps in this area of facilitating development in critical thinking about the make-up of Japanese society and encouraging practices of responsible generalisation through increased conceptual awareness that the JS2222 teaching practicum can be said to have particularly achieved a modicum of success.

Endnotes

1. According to Wikipedia, the phrase “between Scylla and Charybdis” (popularly reworded “between a rock and a hard place”) has come to mean being in a state where one is between two dangers and moving away from one will cause you to be in danger from the other. Retrieved 30 July 2010, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scylla.


References


