Lifelong Learning in Japan: Community Centers and Learning Circles

Stacy Marie Clause

Abstract: The Japanese community center classroom model constructed from U.S. occupation directives after World War II is a ubiquitous feature of Japanese neighborhood life. Through interviews and observation of community center classes over a period of several weeks, this study describes several features of community based adult classroom dynamics and operations. Long term social commitment to a group over many years, division of administrative duties from teaching, and alternative models of learning (correspondence, visiting teachers, or no teacher at all) emerged as features of community center learning groups. Research conducted in foreign countries presents challenges to the best of methodological intentions.

Background

In Japan, 90 percent of college graduates are under 24 years old (Yoshimoto, Inenage, & Yamada, 2007) and only a small proportion of adults re-enroll in college or university. But this does not mean adults are not engaged in lifelong learning. Statistics from the Ministry of Education website lists a substantial number of community centers: 12,915 community centers and 230,000 lifelong learning classes with over 10 million participants (Ministry of Education, Culture Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), 2006). Japanese national education policy includes “lifelong opportunities to all strata of society...activities that help to deepen a sense of community among local residents, and promote the social participation of people” (MEXT, 2006).

Social aims, not the acquisition of skills, dominate lifelong education policy in Japan (Okumoto, 2003). Lifelong learning in Japan “aspires to the integration of the individual’s experiences through thinking, feeling, and action. A piecemeal approach to learning, which tends to separate thinking, feeling, and action, may not effectively contribute to the human resource development task of the individual...lifelong learning aims to achieve a matured citizen” (Ohsako, 2002, p. 199). Yamamoto, Fujitsuka and Honda-Okistu characterize lifelong learning in Japan “as a means for achieving a richness of spirit and a sense of purpose in life...learning for pleasure is one of the rationales for lifelong learning in Japan” (Schütze & Slowey, 2000, p.12). The aim of the study was to learn how lifelong learning programs at a local community center in Japan operate to support social goals and better understand the features of teaching and learning practices for adults.

Community centers in Japan were established during the American occupation after WWII, and range from small unmanned buildings in neighborhoods to large staffed downtown centers. Learning circles, as part of a myriad of services, offer citizens an opportunity to participate in educational programs for a small basic room rental fee. Once a program is initially started and the participant roster filled, the members of the group are completely responsible for maintaining membership, determining activities, and establishing classroom practices. Although the learning paradigm and student-centered classroom has been recently reintroduced as a revolutionary concept in the college classroom (Barr & Tagg, 1995), learning circles from their
inception in the 1950s have been driven by the efforts of the group, as members act as stewards of their programs.

**Methods**

Interviews were conducted with staff and participants of learning circles at a central community center in a prefectural city capital north of Tokyo over a period of several weeks. Classes were also observed. Once a prestigious downtown department store, the building was repurposed in 2008 as a public space housing a children’s library and play center, community center (classrooms with tables and studio spaces), grocery store, as well as a citizen’s volunteer center and a hall for performances. Large open tables in the lobbies are used by high school students and community center participants for studying and eating lunch, reflecting a multi-use facility that exemplifies Ministry lifelong learning policy aiming to integrate all strata of society (MEXT, 2006).

One hundred and ninety-three circles have developed over the years, initially promoted by the community center through neighborhood newsletters that circulate house to house, which continue after an introductory period as self-sustaining groups that range between a few and about forty participants. Most groups practice general arts, including many Japanese cultural arts: dance (ballroom, international folk, Japanese fan, and yoga), Japanese arts (haiku, calligraphy), art (ceramics, painting, papercutting), music (instrumental and choral) and language (English, Thai, and French) and meet as frequently as once a week or just once a month.

The arrangement of when to observe and interview was a collaborative and imprecise process. It was my first time to arrange interviews in a second language in which I knew no one personally. It was the first time a researcher has visited the center (from abroad or otherwise). Understanding who and what I was about with the administrative staff took time and introductions, and this was facilitated in part by my prior work connections in a nearby city. All the groups were contacted by phone and protocols distributed in advance, and in some cases the staff accompanied me to the rooms to make introductions. This resulted in a collaborative and changing process of selecting groups with the help of the staff. Groups were visited in their classrooms, resulting in public or semi-public interviews, and due to the public nature and unfamiliarity with the participants, the interviews consisted of modest questions about what happens in during class, how the participant got involved with the group. Observations sometimes ran the full length of class time, but when simultaneous classes were held, I would observe for part of the lesson and leave for another.

Some groups formed a circle and invited my questions, along with asking me to participate (in one case, the Virginia reel). With groups that had a teacher commenting in small groups, it was more appropriate to talk with participants off in the corner. Some groups were so large that it was impossible to have more than a few comments from a large number of people. I acknowledge contributions from Geertz (1972) on being an insider (as one with many years and connections to help facilitate this project) and Whyte (1993) on the importance of informants (staff who provided valuable insights into the working of the groups). In more than one instance, as a young American, interviewing Japanese seniors ended in poignant conversations about World War II. With this experience of both planned and random interviews and observations, I came away with more data, more ideas, and deeper relationships in place.
Observations and Patterns

Time and friendship

Many of the circles have been in existence for over a decade, some for over two decades. Social bonds between participants are often the impetus for attendance. Given the public nature of the interviews, it was not too surprising that comments ranged from pleasant to more pleasant: “Sometimes I just don’t feel like going, but I think about my friends, and I want to go.” “It’s really fun, I enjoy seeing everyone.” More than a few members in different groups said that it was like a family. A significant proportion of members were original members of the initial group and new members, who joined through the years, were usually introduced by friends in the group. Outsiders interested in joining phoned the leader about the group (phone numbers are provided by the community center on request). One leader commented that it was through the phone conversation that the two parties considered whether the group was a match. Groups that involved a specific skill, such as the black and white paper cuts, often attracted new members through exhibitions. Overall, group membership changed very slowly over time.

Teacher and leader roles

Community center courses operate as part of a bureaucratic system, and it fell to the members to clean up the room, collect the fees for the facility, and organize any announcements (such as the upcoming yearly public exhibition for all groups). Each group had a designated leader who began the class, gave the news, collected payment, and serves as a contact person for both the center and potential newcomers. This role usually rotated among members, but sometimes, the leadership role was taken by one person for several years or even decades. One leader, who was particularly active both in the group at hand as well as other community groups, was termed a “social leader” by another member. A “social leader” seemed in one form or another to be part of nearly every group.

In addition to the leader, some groups had renowned experts that did not function as a teacher giving lectures, but rather as a commentator upon work, offering suggestions as to individual work and directions for future activities. In Japanese arts such as calligraphy, the teacher would mark and comment upon a piece while other students gathered at the table to listen. In the case of Japanese cut paper art, a master comes once a month to give individualized comments on works in progress that students bring to class. Some of the participants had made considerable efforts on pieces in their portfolios and others had nothing for that particular class. The teacher discussed upcoming exhibits that students might prepare for. As members of a national association, with local and national exhibition calendar set in place over the year, students had a strong grasp of what could be expected over the year without much explicit guidance.

Other types of classrooms

Another calligraphy class was run essentially as a correspondence course, with the syllabus, exercises, and samples provided through a nationally syndicated magazine. Members prepared their work at home, and brought it to the meeting to discuss and comment. This work was sent in to the head office by mail and returned with comments. A few times a year, a teacher from Tokyo visits the group and gives personalized instruction. Some groups experienced the death of a teacher but found ways to continue studying. Supported by the International Folk Association, one of the longest running groups (27 years) sent a representative to learn new
dances, which was then taught to the group. In this way, there was barely the notion of a “teacher” at all, but rather simply a member of the group responsible for passing along instruction. All groups had yearly plans for a group trips related to their interests (i.e., a Thai language group’s outings to local Thai restaurants), traditional Japanese year end parties, preparations for the community center open exhibit, or volunteer activities (i.e., folk singing performance at an old age home).

**Conclusion**

Though literature points out that categories, and conceptions of adult learning vary in different places around the world, especially enacted practices (Merriam & Kim, 2008), it is difficult to imagine what these conceptions might look like in the lives of everyday citizens. This Japanese community center illustrates a case of educational borrowing that has grown into accord with Japanese culture and norms. Teaching and learning arrangements such as correspondence courses might seem familiar as an example of Chautauqua’s (Moore, 2003) correspondence courses, while “stealing” from the master calligrapher as she corrects other student work might strike a chord with students of martial arts. Whatever the borrowing or lending, the teacher is subservient to the demands of the social needs of the participants, but master of the content. A wide variety of opportunities that might be classified as simply “hobbies” have not discouraged policymakers from investing in basic classroom space that is devoid of technology (the community center was chagrined that they still use a paper master schedule to keep track of courses), with a keen eye towards encouraging the interaction citizens at a central location. Expert knowledge, whether in the form of a magazine, a visiting teacher, or through the voice of another student is considered legitimate lifelong learning, and supported by national policy. This research is at an early stage, but in an age of education where the “knowledge worker” and acquiring job skills (Drucker, 1992) are considered one of the imperatives of educational programming, the slow, long learning of Japan’s community centers provide a counterpoint to literature (i.e., Friedman, 2006) that suggests global competition is the model upon which policymakers operate, or that a skill-based learning society of citizens is the only option in a competitive world.

**References**


Stacy Marie Clause, Department of Educational Administration, Michigan State University, 412 Erickson Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824, clausest@msu.edu. The author gratefully acknowledges the Michigan State University College of Education and the Michigan State University Graduate School for making this research possible.

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