

Thoughts on Teaching General Education Courses**

Lynne Nakano *

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

I am grateful for the opportunity to teach here at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and as part of the General Education Program. It was a great honor to have received the Exemplary Teaching Award in General Education for 2007–08. I wish to thank my Department Chair, Professor Lee Wood Hung, for his support and for his dedication to students and quality teaching at the Department of Japanese Studies. I am also indebted to all of my colleagues for their advice and for providing models of good teaching. I am grateful to my Ph.D. supervisor, Professor William Kelly, for creating the course on Japan at Yale University upon which my own course on Japan is based. From my former teachers, predecessors, and colleagues I have been fortunate to have been taught principles and guidelines that I try to practice in my own teaching. I believe these principles are relevant to the core vision of General Education

* Associate Professor, Department of Japanese Studies, Faculty of Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

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at CUHK.¹ My principles are to teach the students to prepare them for their future beyond university and to encourage them to believe in their potential in the classroom and beyond. Although not listed in any of my course outlines, I try to draw on these principles when I make decisions about how to organize a course, select topics for discussion, and structure assignments. They constitute a secret curriculum that I generally keep to myself, but that nevertheless informs my teaching and defines the spirit that I try to bring to my lessons.

My secret curriculum emerged from my initial terror of the enormous responsibility involved in standing in front of 50 bright, expectant university students for a whole semester. I am now no longer as terrified to stand in front of a class, but I am reminded of my responsibility to students in a variety of new ways. Today, my sense of responsibility is sparked by the look of anticipation in the eyes of students on the first day of class and in the seriousness of second and third year students who are willing to risk being excited by learning and who desire to become capable young adults and critical independent thinkers. To fulfill this responsibility, I try to provide students with tools and skills that can help them in their lives beyond graduation.

Secret Curriculum

Although my General Education course is about Japanese society and culture, my aim has not been to try to teach students all I can about Japanese

1 I believe that my principles are relevant to the General Education aims of helping students develop their own judgment and sense of values, providing students with a broad intellectual perspective that integrates knowledge, and equipping students with a life-long capacity for learning by helping them to see connections between knowledge and their own experiences.

society. One semester is far too short a period to attempt such a task. I am also doubtful that students will benefit most from simply accumulating facts about Japan. Rather, my approach is to encourage students to think about what it means to be a human being in Japan and how that compares with being a human being in Hong Kong and in our world. I try to hold up Japan as a mirror to students, and in the mirror I try to show them that people living in Japan are human beings just like themselves, facing similar problems about how to live. In my courses, I focus on how people in Japan make choices about education, family, career, love, and how to live a meaningful life. The aim is to encourage the students to develop a compassionate understanding of other people and to seriously examine their own values and choices, and the consequences of these. For example, as a class exercise I sometimes create scenarios in which an individual in Japan has to choose between achieving success at work and spending more time with his/her family. I make the scenario very specific, down to the amount of salary to be sacrificed and hours per week with one's family to be gained. I ask students to put themselves in that person's shoes and consider how they would respond. Rather than identifying right or wrong answers, I think it is important to focus on the values and logic that informs our choices as human beings. I think Japan serves as a very good example for this process because students are interested in the country to begin with and Japan has an important role to play in Hong Kong, in Asia, and in the world.

There are other lessons in my secret curriculum. I try to teach the idea that accomplishments are achieved with the help of others. I try to give students the responsibility for making the class a success. If students are responsible for one another, they take ownership of the learning process and the success of the class. I ask students to work in groups on various projects and ask all of them to assess the helpfulness of the members of their group.

I ask students to evaluate one another on how hard they think each member of their group worked on a project and how much time they think their group mate spent on the project. I have students change groups every few weeks. By the end of the semester, the students receive feedback from a substantial number of classmates regarding how easy they are to work with. I also ask the students to write qualitative comments on their classmates. The students' comments have included statements such as "Come to class more often!" This encourages responsible participation in ways beyond what I am capable of eliciting from them as a teacher.

I try to create an atmosphere of respect for the students' views by referencing what classmates have said and done to contribute to our shared learning project. I try to speak less and listen more. I use icebreakers on the first day of class to set the tone for participation and listening. Icebreakers are games that encourage students to get to know one another and get into the habit of sharing. Recently, I have been using a game in which I divide the class into groups of five to eight students and ask each group to discover one thing that is unique about each person. Then I ask them to change groups and discover what everyone in the group has in common. I believe that one reason why students do not participate more in class is because they are not comfortable with one another and are not sure how their peers will respond when they express their opinions. I was often surprised in my early days of teaching that I knew the name of everyone in the class but that the students did not know one another. Through the icebreaker games, I try to make sure that students know one another starting from the first day of class.

I try to teach the importance of listening. I do this in part by trying to be a good listener myself. I sometimes have to put a finger or two or even a whole

fist over my mouth to keep myself from talking. Putting my hand over my mouth reminds me to keep silent and may make the students confident that I am listening seriously and respecting their views. I try not to ask questions and then demand that students produce the answer that is in my mind. This kind of class discussion becomes a guessing game with only the teacher holding the correct answer. If I think that a student's answer is really off the mark, I may ask classmates to play the devil's advocate rather than play it myself. Like many other teachers, I find it useful to have students answer questions in groups and then report on their answers to the class. I then ask my teaching assistant to summarize and record the students' answers and I post the summary of the class discussion on the class website (CUForum or WebCT) along with my comments on the discussion. This gives me time to think about how to respond in constructive and positive ways to students' views and I believe it also allows students to more comfortably express their opinions without fear of being contradicted by the teacher during the class. I think this also helps to build confidence in the students about what they have learned from the discussion.

Setting High Standards that Everyone Can Achieve

Having had the privilege of attending some of the best educational institutions in the United States, I sometimes wonder if I am being overly optimistic when I urge students and recent graduates to pursue their dreams, especially given the recent global economic troubles. But I believe that each person is born with their own particular package of unique abilities that it is their duty to discover and develop to contribute to the world. I believe in

building the students' confidence so that they feel that they have a voice and that they know that their decisions matter. Our students, I feel, don't always realize their own intelligence, abilities, and potential. I try to demonstrate to students their own value by taking their written work seriously, reading multiple drafts, responding to comments on the class website, and providing feedback to ideas raised in class. I try to give students my time as a way to demonstrate that they are important individuals who matter in this world. I also try to demonstrate my respect for them by setting high standards in coursework. I have found that when I set high standards, students generally respond by trying hard to achieve those standards. I do not simply set high standards and then demand that the students achieve them. Rather, I make sure that the standards are clear at the start of the class and I try to provide students with step-by-step instructions so that each student is capable of achieving the requirements. For example, I insist that students use relevant up-to-date academic sources in their papers, that their papers have a clear thesis statement, and that they use and cite sources appropriately in making their arguments. I spend time discussing what I expect in the papers and make it clear to students that this is not some idiosyncratic whim about how I would like to see their papers done. Rather, I explain that this is what a good academic paper should look like and that I expect nothing less. I believe that every one of my students is capable of achieving the standards that I set. I believe that most students leave my class feeling that they were challenged and that most students feel a sense of accomplishment in being able to meet that challenge. Students sometimes surprise me with standards that are even higher than my own. One student, for example, continued to rewrite her final paper even after she had finished the course and graduated from Chinese University.

Getting Students Involved in the Learning Process

Teaching has also been a learning experience for me. I have learned that classroom learning is a collective effort. I have learned that it is more effective to work at inspiring students to help and motivate one another than to try to take on this job alone. It is difficult to define and even more difficult to achieve a successful collective learning environment, but I know that such an environment has been created when I see it. Such an environment involves a sense of community, respect for the opinions of others, recognition of the achievements of others, open-mindedness, humility, students motivating each other, and a sense of humor. When a class becomes united, the atmosphere is magical and there is a lot of laughter. I have also learned to loosen up and be a little silly, in the realization that at times the best laughter is when the students laugh at me. It means that I am not immune to being teased and not so different from them. Laughter to me indicates that a course is being taught successfully, while a failure to laugh signals that there are problems with the course. I think that students laugh when they feel comfortable with the course materials, the teacher, and with one another. In this atmosphere, I think that I am more likely to get their attention, that they are more likely to be themselves, and that they are more likely to use the opportunity to learn.

As I have mentioned, students often help me in this effort. There are usually a few students in each class who are willing to emerge as class leaders, intellectually and socially. These individuals can push their classmates to think further and more deeply by generating excitement about learning that spreads to their classmates, and by creating opportunities to laugh. I try to create an environment in which these students feel comfortable enough to step forward. I try to show students that I am not always right and that

I have made and do make mistakes. I sometimes ask them to solve intellectual, cultural, or practical problems that I have faced in the past and then inform them afterwards that they had solved a problem that troubled me at some point. I also try to encourage students by affirming their achievements. I like to tell them, “You see what you are doing? This is the way to learn!” Or “Look, this is what you have accomplished!”

I know that the idea of a shared learning project has been successful when students voluntarily bring in relevant articles or photos to class, when class discussions inspire enthusiastic online debate, and when students volunteer to give presentations about relevant topics in class. These small acts create a sense of sharing and enthusiasm for learning in the class. Students sometimes surprise me by continuing to send me updates about their learning even after they have left my class and even after they have left the university. Students send me pictures of their travels to Japan and the world, explaining how their pictures relate to what they learned in the course and telling me that they are still learning. I usually ask whether I may share their pictures with current classmates and they are happy to do so.

It has been a privilege to teach the General Education courses to the students of CUHK. I love it that CUHK provides a first-class education at an affordable price to Hong Kong’s people. I love it that this education offers the possibility of being more than functional or specialized academic training, rather allowing us to address questions of how to live a meaningful life. It thus offers the potential to improve the quality of our students’ lives and the lives of those they touch. This to me is the only reason for pursuing knowledge. I try to pass my enthusiasm on to my students.