

JAPANESE CULTURAL EXCHANGE: THE TEACHER— ANTHROPOLOGIST'S ROLE

Editor's Note:

International cultural exchanges are becoming an increasingly common part of the secondary school experience. American schools are opening their doors to foreign visitors, and American students and teachers are visiting their counterparts abroad. For many students these exchanges are their first experience of another culture, and students as young as eleven are travelling abroad as part of a formal exchange program. The teacher trained in anthropology can play an important role in making the exchange an easier and more meaningful educational experience for him or herself, other teachers, or students. The following articles describe the role of the teacher-anthropologist in two cultural exchanges with Japan, one an exchange of high school students, the other of teachers.

Anthro.Notes editor JoAnne Lanouette is an English teacher at the Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C. and has a master's degree in anthropology. This summer, she led a group of four high school students on a month-long visit with Japanese host families and high-school students. As an anthropologist, she was able to develop a program on very short notice to prepare the students in advance for what they would experience. Once in Japan, she saw her role as a cultural "broker" or mediator, and her ability to perceive cultural differences both eased the students' fears and anxieties and helped them avoid behavior offensive to their hosts.

Bonny Cochran, a social studies teacher at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School in Montgomery County, Maryland was a participant in the year-long

George Washington University/Smithsonian Institution Anthropology for Teachers program in 1979-80. Last year Bonny participated in a five-year old teacher exchange program between Kanagawa Prefecture near Tokyo and the state of Maryland. She spent the entire school year as a teacher of American Culture and English language in Japanese schools. In an interview with Anthro.Notes editor Ann Kaupp, Bonny describes her experiences and discusses how her training in anthropology helped her to understand and adapt to Japanese culture.

ANTHROPOLOGY SMOOTHS THE WAY TO JAPAN

Two years ago the Japan-U.S. Culture Center in Washington, D.C. began sponsoring a summer visit to Japan for four Sidwell Friends High School students and one teacher. The month-long stay entailed, in part, living with a host family, becoming a student for a week at Mitaka High School in Toyko, visiting preparatory schools, exploring the cities of Kyoto and Nara, attending a conference on war and peace with Yokohama high school students, and, most poignantly, touring Hiroshima with a survivor of the tragic bombing.

How did my knowledge of anthropology from graduate study and teaching help me on this journey? Despite only two months' notice, preparation to cushion culture shock and aid rapport proved to be critical. We arranged for 10 hours of language training, and I looked for linguistic differences and insights into the Japanese culture. Certainly honorifics suggested a society more concerned with age and status than the U.S. "Hai," the Japanese word for "yes," means "I understand you," but not necessarily "I agree with you." Anthropology taught me the importance of not only using another culture's language as much as possible but also using their polite phrases--a critical social lubricant. Therefore, the students and I said

"itadakimasu" before meals and "gochi so sama deshta" at the end of the meal. To be polite we would not say thank you with just "domo" or "domo arigato" but instead "domo arigato gozaimasu." (Roman script renditions of the Japanese script.) We bowed and did not attempt to shake hands, our custom.

Through reading we learned not only the rudiments of the language but also some of the culture of Japan. These books were especially helpful: Japan: A Survival Kit by Ian McGueen (Lonely Plant Publications, P.O. Box 88, So. Yarra, Victoria, Australia, 1986); The Japanese by Edwin O. Reischauer (Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1977) and Japan's High Schools by anthropologist Thomas P. Rohlen (University of California Press, 1983). I also read again the classic ethnography, The Chrysthamum and the Sword by Ruth Benedict. Although much of her book is outdated, some essential truths remain.

In addition to books, we consulted other organizations that had conducted similar trips. The Japanese Association of the Experiment in International Living and the Japan American Student Conference (1981) gave us invaluable advice. For example, we learned that the correct way to drink is to fill the glasses for other people first, and the correct way to take a bath is to soap and rinse on a stool inside the tub before immersing your spotlessly clean body into the tub of very hot water. Some of the complex rules of gift giving were explained and we were advised to avoid giving anything associated with the numbers four and nine: the Japanese word for four is a homonym for death; nine is a homonym for hardship.

Reading could not supplant the useful advice we gained from last year's students, the first to go on this program. They told us about sleeping on a futon, slurping noodles (a very polite sound), living without privacy, being the center of attention,

contending with restricted space, coping with constant curiosity and generous kindness, and going to public baths.

My study of anthropology led me to ask the students and myself to keep a journal. This proved an invaluable record of our changing impressions, our varying degrees of culture shock, and our knowledge of the new culture. I also gave the students six guiding questions to consider as we observed and participated in events ranging from sushi meals, kendo (martial art) training, Buddhist services, tea ceremonies, and kabuki theater. 1) How is Japanese culture different from American culture? 2) When something seems strange to you, ask yourself: How might that make sense from a Japanese point of view? 3) How do the various parts of the culture considered in the first question integrate or support each other? 4) What parts of the culture create friction with each other? 5) What diversity in attitudes or behavior exists? and 6) What is the function of various activities?

Once we landed in Tokyo my anthropological training proved invaluable. First, it made me highly receptive. I relished seeing similarities and differences, and I was eager to enjoy the differences, whether it meant slipping in and out of slippers at the entrance to houses and schools, sitting on pillows, squatting to urinate, sleeping on pillows filled with beans, or eating almost everything with chopsticks. I never was inclined to ask why can't they live the American way?

Second, anthropology helped me to answer questions. For example, Japanese students and teachers at the war and peace conference were puzzled by the American students' behavior. All students were asked to write an essay defining a possible problem and a possible solution. The American students scattered off to think and

write alone--by a tree, on a balcony, in a room, at another table. The Japanese students stayed together in one room. The Japanese were worried that something was very wrong. I could explain that American students would often study alone. The Japanese students explained that even if they wanted to study alone they would worry that they would hurt their friends' feelings and hence they stick together. Another time I was asked: Is it true that American wives and husbands often kiss each other every day? Or, with twelve Buddhist scholars we considered whether a Buddhist would encourage revolution, and whether Buddhism could be adopted by Americans or if the American value on individualism mitigated against such an adoption.

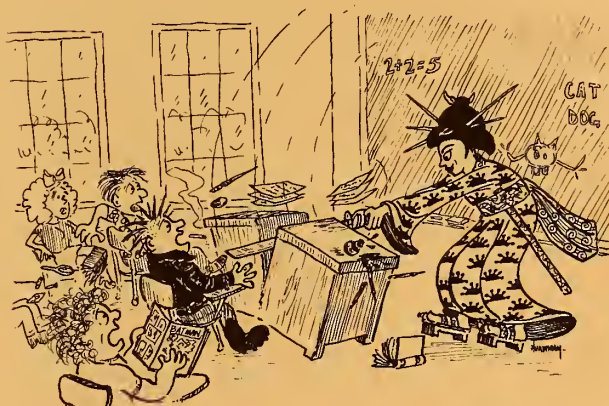
Third, anthropology helped me to be sensitive to possible culture shock on the part of the students. Miso shiru (a soybean based soup), pickled cucumbers, rice, seaweed, and raw fish for breakfast had one student longing for a Dunkin' doughnut after a week. Periodically I would hunt down and find apples, granola, doughnuts, and chocolate to ease the shock.

In many ways, anthropology helped me to be a kind of "cultural broker" for these students. At times they talked and gestured on the subway as if they were back in Washington, D.C. I could provide the perspective that such actions perpetuated the stereotype of the loud, aggressive American. I reminded them that they could still keep their individuality and yet talk softly and walk compactly.

Most of all, anthropology taught me to question and to realize that there are layers and layers of meaning to peel off--like the skins of an onion. In one month, no matter how intense, I would never presume to understand Japanese culture, and yet I hear tourists come home from a short stay with many set opinions. By meeting so many individual Japanese people, I

banished generalizations. Without anthropology, I would have seen Japan far more narrowly and far more superficially.

JoAnne Lanouette



AN AMERICAN TEACHER LOOKS AT JAPANESE HIGH SCHOOLS

Q: How is the Japanese school day organized?

A: The school day starts and ends an hour later than here, and classes are held for a half day on Saturdays. Teachers start their day with a ten minute meeting in the teachers' room. In Japan students, not teachers, have classrooms, so you would never send a student out of the room for misconduct, because the room belongs to the students. Classrooms are not furnished with maps, books, or posters since the

rooms are not designated for a specific subject.

After their meeting, teachers go to their homerooms to take class roll, before their first period class. Teachers teach only three 50-minute classes a day, out of six periods. However, the class schedule varies each day unlike the scheduling in most American schools. In addition, two teachers may split up the teaching of a four-hour-a-week course, each teaching two hours. Since there are only two administrators in the school--a principal and a head teacher--the teachers are responsible for much of the administration as well as for career counseling. Teachers rotate their membership in various committees, which may be concerned with next year's schedule, a school festival, PTA, safety in the building, or a final exam schedule. It was nice not to hear teachers complain about the administration, because the teachers there take part in most of these duties and gain much experience and understanding of these responsibilities.

Q: Is there any room for creative or independent thinking within a cultural system that stresses conformity of behavior?

A: Americans tend to equate conformity with heavy handedness. However, the Japanese love to identify with the group and don't want to appear different. On the other hand, it is almost expected that American students will be spontaneous once in a while.

It is hard for me to say much about this issue, because teaching a foreign language requires imitation and repetition. I encouraged the students to voice their thoughts in practicing conversational English by asking questions that required an individual response. But it was very difficult to get a response. A previous student of mine who was a Japanese exchange

student a couple of years ago told me, "Ms. Cochran, in Japan, students expect teachers to talk; there is no classroom discussion. American teachers sometimes find they have run out of classroom material because they expected classroom discussion. The Japanese students then think these teachers are dumb and unprepared." This was excellent advice, and I followed it, since I didn't want to start out looking dumb. But wow! It was different!

Q: Can you describe some of the extracurricular activities?.

A: Every student is expected to join a club. Unlike in America, in Japan students are expected to put their heart and soul into only one activity. Clubs meet frequently, and students do not compete for membership, even for sports clubs. Some of the clubs are concerned with the traditional arts--koto, tea ceremony, and kendo. Students develop strong loyalties to their fellow club and homeroom members. Here they learn to be part of a group and to cooperate always.

Q: What do students do in their leisure time?

A: I don't think they have any leisure time, since they are at school practically six days a week. They learn to study while commuting one and a half to two hours on the train, which is not uncommon. When I asked them this same question they said they call up friends, listen to music, watch television, and, right before the exams, they cram. It is against the rules for Japanese high school students to hold part-time jobs. Some, however, do break this rule.

Q: How do the students prepare for college?

A: Japan is a nation of people that like to organize. There are schools called juku, which students may attend

after school. Juku gives students extra help to prepare for the university entrance exams. Students even take entrance exams for junior and senior high school. Teachers take their role very seriously in helping their students to gain entrance to the universities and to find jobs. Senior homeroom teachers do not rest until each student is settled for the following year in a university or in a job. Teachers will even design a study plan to assist a student who has failed the entrance exam and needs to retest the following year. Entrance into a school is based almost completely on the exam. A high school's reputation, as far as I can figure out, is based on how well its students did on the college entrance exams, how many were accepted into college, and on the reputation of those colleges.

Q: What are popular career choices for Japanese high school students?

A: Many young women go on to college but expect to get married and quit working when they become mothers. The career aspirations of Japanese male high school students are similar to those of their American counterparts. They are interested in becoming lawyers, doctors, computer specialists, teachers, and rock stars.

Q: What are Japanese students' perceptions of America?

A: Some common questions are: "Does everyone really drive to school?" "Do students come to school in yellow school buses?" The Japanese schools do not have school dances, and so the perception is that American students attend many dances and have a great time. They also believe that in many cases high schools are a bit dangerous and students are not well disciplined--probably based on what they see on television. I showed them my school yearbook and they were surprised at many things, such as our schools offering driver education. In

Japan you have to be 18 to get a license, and you may have to attend a school many miles away from your home. They also wanted to know if there were any Japanese students in America, and, if so, why?

Q: Can you compare some of the strengths and weaknesses of the Japanese and American school systems?

A: I appreciated the tremendous feeling of cooperation among the faculty and between the faculty and the administration. I think a lot of things are comparable such as the concern and care for the students. In Japan, however, it is not considered the teacher's fault if the student doesn't learn. Students are expected to work independently and are responsible for mastering the content of the lessons. And students were always well prepared; I never heard "I don't have a pencil."

What I found difficult getting used to were the large classes; there were always 45 students in a class compared to 32 students at my school. It was also hard to get used to the lecture style teaching that results in little teacher-student interaction.

Q: How would you say Japanese students are different from American students?

A: Japanese teachers would often ask me that question, and I would say, "American students will think. They may not have a fact to think about, but when the teacher comes into the room and says three things, there are 30 students asking a question and saying 'What if....'" Japanese students will master all the content but think no more about it. I require my students to read a variety of sources offering varying viewpoints, and then I encourage them to reach their own conclusions.

Q: How did you promote discussion in your classes?

A: The Japanese place much emphasis on self introduction; they like to know who you are, something about your family, and where you come from. So my first lesson in class was always a self introduction. I would say, "I want to introduce myself to you. But let's make it like a conversation. Since you are Japanese and you are shy, I know there are things you would like to ask but you won't, so let's practice asking them in English." Afterwards, I would go around the room asking students questions about themselves.

Q: Did you get any feedback from your students about their reaction to being taught by an American teacher?

A: I think they found me very impatient and very hard to understand at first. Japanese students are very eager to please, and I think at first they didn't know how they could please me. Therefore, I slowed down, and I would make jokes to set them at ease. Some of their anonymous comments were: "You have been a very kind teacher." "You helped me in many ways, and now I am not so nervous when I see a foreigner." We are used to seeing foreigners, but Japan is a very homogeneous society. We Americans like to think we are comprehensible; the Japanese like to think they are unique. When Americans meet people, they try to find commonalities but the Japanese often focus on what is different. So a lot of my lessons were broad cultural experiences. I did a little dialogue on American bathing customs. Students wanted to know if it was true we use soap in the bath tub and that the toilet and bath tub are in the same room.

Q: What were the questions frequently asked by your Japanese colleagues?

A: Most frequently asked was, "How much do American teachers get paid?" It may

look as if American teachers receive higher salaries, but what is not stated is the Japanese bonus system. Twice a year, in June and December, teachers receive a bonus, which is equivalent to about five and a half months' salary, so our pay is very comparable. They were also curious about how, and if, we get paid during the summer months when many of us do not teach. They were shocked when I told them we teach five out of six periods a day, whereas I was appalled that they had to teach such large classes. They also give less work, usually just a mid-term and final.

Q: Do you think that your Japanese experience will help you in any way become a better teacher?

A: Oh, yes! I think I'll appreciate things about American students and American education that I took for granted before. I like feisty students, and I like them to say "So what!" I like to hear them question the material and engage in an active classroom discussion.

Q: Did your knowledge of anthropology help you in Japan?

A: Emphatically yes! One of the things it did was lead me to Ruth Benedict's The Chrysanthemum and the Sword. Even though the book is out-of-date, I found it useful in understanding some aspects of the Japanese culture, such as their strong sense of obligation and duty. Feeling very much an outsider in Japan, it was nice to take refuge in assuming an anthropological perspective rather than concentrating on my loneliness. I think my knowledge of anthropology enabled me to arrive more quickly at an acceptance and understanding of some Japanese attitudes I thought very strange. For instance, an explanation would often begin with "We Japanese always," a statement implying cultural uniformity and cohesion. I, in turn, would explain that Americans might approach a similar matter in a

variety of ways. Anthropology is a field that promotes understanding and tolerance, which is a good reason why our children should have the opportunity to study it.

Q: What are you going to tell your students when you return to school?

A: That Japanese students seldom miss class. I realize what a burden student absences are on teachers. I'll tell my

students about the general atmosphere in Japanese schools--quiet, clean, no smoking on campus, no smoking in the bathrooms. In Japan it's the students' responsibility to keep their school clean. Every day students keep the classrooms swept and periodically there is a major cleanup of the library, halls, and gym. But I will also tell them how much I love them because they "look alive" and are eager to engage in our classroom discussions.