
“The Irony of Modern Japanese Education”

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Globalization is said to have accelerated considerably since the events of the last World War. Thanks to the advances in areas such as transportation, communication and technology, companies are now competing in a broader, interdependent market, and people can contact others all over the world instantly. In a sense, things are changing so quickly that the whole of society is struggling to keep up; and a major issue arising from this social transformation is its impact on cultural and national identity. The question that faces us daily is: Is Japan headed in the right direction? Knowingly or unknowingly, we all tend to look to the government and the media for solutions to our problems. But truly, shouldn't *we* be the ones answering these questions?

Having been born and raised in England until the age of 6, moving to Japan was a frightening but exciting experience. Like most returnees in Doshisha, I had attended an ethnically diverse school overseas, and I was therefore exposed to a wide variety of cultures while growing up. I believe this background helped me develop a multicultural understanding, something which allowed me to see things differently from others. It was from this perspective that I gradually began to see the contradictions present in this country's society.

During summer break, I participated in a program that was aimed toward students who were interested in experiencing work at welfare facilities. After finishing our three-day work experience, we were gathered to share and discuss our opinions and thoughts on what we'd learnt during that period. But as soon as the discussion started, everyone fell silent as if they didn't know whether it was okay to speak with one another. Honestly, I was a little surprised; I was used to seeing Japanese students being hesitant, but not to that extent. I'm a rather reserved individual myself, but at that time I actually took on the role of the discussion leader (mainly because I just couldn't stand the silence). It was the first time I'd ever done something proactive as that, and it convinced me that anybody could become an assertive leader, given the right circumstances.

Back in my international school, someone always had something to say, and the majority of students were actively speaking up during class. This may be because we were a small, tightly knit class, but I believe this was also due to us being repeatedly taught to respect each other's opinions. And thinking back, it was perhaps natural that I was confused by some of Japan's customs, having grown up in such an environment. So seeing those unsure students during the social welfare program made me realize how Japanese students were not used to expressing themselves in front of others—especially

strangers. I believe one the main reasons for this is that Japanese students simply have fewer opportunities to discuss their opinions in comparison to their western counterparts. But thankfully, this trend seems to be changing recently as our country is hosting a lot of educational programs that are discussion oriented. There's a definite need for us Japanese to step out of our comfort zone and overcome our shyness to succeed in this global era, and we must put all of our efforts into achieving that goal.

All returnees face a certain problem when coming to Japan—identity crisis. Returnees will often hide their differences to assimilate into mainstream society to counter this, and leave their unique cultural backgrounds behind. And being a returnee student myself, I cannot help but feel that this is a huge waste. One thing that I love about Doshisha is the diversity of its students; we have a large returnee population from all around the world, and that is what sets us apart from other schools. However, I feel that we're not using this to our fullest advantage. I suggest we hold programs and events in which all of our students are encouraged to exchange and share their opinions, so that we can create a more welcoming and positive atmosphere at our school. This way, I believe returnee and non-returnee students would come to understand each other more, and learn to embrace their differences.

A few months ago, a friend of mine who had been attending a Japanese school in Singapore transferred to our school. She said she enjoyed Japanese because unlike most other subjects, there were no “correct answers” to a test, and she had the freedom to generate her own thoughts and opinions. And frankly, I was envious of her. Japanese was one of my favorite subjects as well, but over here things worked differently; students were expected to memorize what their teachers had taught them in class, and coming up with personal interpretations was unthinkable. I didn't have the heart to tell her that she'd just entered a whole new education system that neglected creativity; and certainly enough, I ended up scoring higher than her on the test.

What is the point of reading a story or an essay if you aren't allowed to interpret it yourself? It seems to me that Japanese students spend too much of their time cramming information into their heads, and not enough time on the output of that information. I've come to think that it's not just that Western education promotes creativity, but more that Japanese education stifles creativity. Our education system puts too much emphasis on a student's grades, and not much on the value of education.

I know a childhood friend who went to art school to pursue filmmaking; he won an award for his stop-motion animation and was also invited to study abroad in England by a famous film director. My friend wasn't exactly an academically gifted individual to begin with—rather the opposite; but he found his life's calling and is successfully living up to his potential right now. Watching him fulfill his dream made me think that we all have some sort of potential within us that cannot be measured by our grades.

We live in the Information Age, an era where new ideas and innovations valued above everything else—how on earth can Japan compete on a global scale if we keep on killing our creativity like this? Each and every one of us is born with our own unique

abilities, and education is meant to help students discover and develop those qualities, not squash them. Therefore, it is essential for us to review our teaching and learning process, and facilitate change in our education system if it is not functioning properly. Of course, systematic change is no easy task; but by doing so Japan will certainly make a great step forward. The future of our country rests in our hands, and it is ultimately up to us whether we wish for that change or not.