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Women's Issues in Japan

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Women's Issues in Japan is the title of a course the author developed and has been teaching for the past 2 years. During the Waves of the Future, 2002 JALT conference, the author presented a workshop based on the student-centered learning strategies she has initiated, and her students have personalized, over the duration of this course. Violence against women, women's reproductive health and women's images in the media are sensitive topics the author has been able to guide her students through by bringing her community into the classroom and starting from where the students are. The author shared student presentations, the text she created, and films and human resources she has found to encourage participants to teach this content area. She also shared with the participants the volunteer

requirement her students must complete and the on-going commitment many students make to these activities even after they finish the course.

「日本の女性問題」とは著者が過去2年間に渡り取り組み、教えているコースのタイトルです。2002年のJALT会議、the Waves of the Futureでは、著者が開始し、コース期間を通して各個人に合わせて展開していった、学生中心の学習法に基づいたワークショップを発表しました。女性に対する暴力、女性の生殖器官の健康、メディアにおける女性像といった事はデリケートな問題を、実際に専門家達を授業に招待し、学生に実際に教授いただきました。会議では、学生の発表内容、彼女の論文、映像や様々な専門家など、この手の分野を教える参加者を激励するものを紹介し、その他にも、学生が授業期間中にこなさなければならない、ボランティア活動や、授業履修後もその活動に参加する学生が多くいることなども語りました。

Course Proposal

The idea for teaching *Women's Issues in Japan* actually stemmed from my experiences teaching advanced writing at my current employer. I assigned my class the task of writing a comparison research paper that dealt with a social problem in Japan. The paper could not compare Japan to other countries, but had to be a comparison of a social reality in Japan that could be compared to Japan at another point in its history. I restricted this paper in this way because I wanted my students to focus on their own social context instead of the constant comparison they seemed to have been taught to make with the United States of America. One topic that seemed to be of greater consequence to the majority of my class, most of whom were women, was abortion. A large

portion of the class wrote on their experiences of abortion, either personally or through friends, as well as other topics particularly sensitive to women; including stalking and sexual harassment. I was very concerned with how little my students seemed to know about reproductive health and their rights to equal citizenship. Consequently, I decided to propose a content course that would focus on these as well as other issues related to Japanese women's human rights.

Building a Framework

I didn't know in the Meiji Constitution it was legal for a father to sell his daughter if the rice crop was bad. This was the constitution, not just the law!
(Student B)

The accepted course I outlined has been covering three sections: Women's Reproductive Health, Violence Against Women and Media Images of Women. To emphasize a student-centered class and to invite the students to get involved in these topics from their current level of knowledge, I asked several students from my writing class if I could include their papers in the text I made for *Women's Issues in Japan*. I told them their identity would be kept confidential. These students agreed, and their contributions as well as the English version of *The Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society, Law No. 78 of 1999* formed the framework around the three sections outlined above. From this framework, I was able to gather reading materials from newspapers, magazines and social service groups to build a text for my students. I also secured through libraries, film distribution services and the Women in Education and Language Learning (WELL) network of educators audio-visual sources to supplement my course. An excellent English source that provided me with valuable

reproductive health information from a Japanese perspective was the book *Broken Silence* by Sandra Buckley and the Japanese edition of *Our bodies, Ourselves* first published by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective.

Community Resources

Beth-Sensei called me for help.
(Tsushima, Ruriko MD., Ph.D.)

Looking around my community, I found a number of valuable human resources who enthusiastically offered their time and expertise to my students. My gynecologist, who is a member of *Women's Wellbeing*, an advocacy group for women's reproductive health, lectured to my students, and another friend and self-defense expert conducted a women's self-defense course in the university *kendo-jo* every semester. My goal was to try to bring into the classroom a representative Japanese woman for all 3 segments of the course, not only to enliven the course content, but also to introduce the students to real Japanese women in non-traditional careers living their potentials. Bridging the course content from the classroom into the real world was and has remained a basic component of the philosophy behind this course. Most recently, to add the third representative guest speaker to this course, I was introduced to the Japanese woman filmmaker of the historic film *Breaking the History of Silence*. This film is a documentary of the war crimes tribunal held in Tokyo to exam the cases of women used as sexual slaves for the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II. The director of this film agreed to discuss this film with my students and the images and job potentials of women in Japanese media for the first time this semester.

Classroom Dynamics

We need more sex education in middle and high school. (Women's Issues in Japan students' unanimous opinion in all four semesters.)

Creating a text and finding the human resources from my community were the foundations of this course, but how well the students would be willing to tackle the material and dig deeper into it was another question. Relying on the community approach to second language acquisition, I have insisted on “consciously taking a back seat to the students and allowing them to be central to what is happening as well as to each other” (Counseling-Learning Institutes, 1997). To teach from the *back seat*, I first give the students a new context in which to think of themselves as learners. I have found it very successful within the opening week of class to address the class as researchers, social scientists and thoughtful people on a voyage of inquiry. When I have given them this context, the potential titillation involved in talking about contraception, sexual harassment and other sex linked issues has been neutralized. Once neutralized, this becomes a topic of discussion itself. Students start asking the question why are we socialized to be embarrassed about talking about our bodies? Who benefits by making open discussions of men's and women's sexuality and sex-based social roles a taboo practice? Analyzing what they have taken for granted, students have brought forward discussions on how the success of the sex industry relies on this kind of socialization.

Peer Teaching

I was shocked that most rapes happen by acquaintances. (Student D)

Beyond discussing *Women's Issues in Japan*, students are also made to research and present their findings on a variety of topics related to the three segments of the class. Among other topics, Rape, the Eugenics Protection Law and the Revised Equal Employment Opportunity Law are assigned to 6 different groups within a class of 30 students to research and present for a mid-term evaluation. I have found students to be very clever in approaching these potentially intimidating topics with candor and creativity. Cartoon storyboards, puppet shows, role-plays, as well as posters and handouts, have been used by students to transform this material into easily digestible units for their peers to follow. I emphasize students must create a handout that they incorporate into their presentation and their peers can use as a reference later on. Focusing the students in the direction of their peers and not the instructor has been very critical. Once it is clear that grades will be weighted on how intelligible the presentations are to their peers, students use, among other things, their drawing aptitudes and cultural references easily transferable to the material to present their finding to their peers. Starting from where they are and from their own referencing systems, students are able to learn from each other.

Bridging the Classroom with the Real World Volunteerism

Stalking is a crime. It's not your fault. (Student C)

As a final project, students are assigned an area of the class we studied to comment on. They must create a video no longer than 10 minutes and handouts that accompany that commentary. The video is intended to provide the students an opportunity to extend their own opinion and possible solutions to one of the problem areas we discussed during the semester. This project like the other presentation project the students are given must be delivered in a form that communicates effectively to their peers. Using the video equipment provided by the university, students use their university-community for resources. Every semester the medical center has allowed students to use its facilities for students interested in creating life-like hospital visits and reproductive health consultations. Representatives from the university's sexual harassment committee have been interviewed regarding the university's policies and solutions for students having problems. University lobbies, gardens and a variety of other locations have been used by students to not only bring their community into their learning environment but to make their presentations as real as possible. By the end of these presentations, students have developed an enormous bank of knowledge and experienced advocating for women in a variety of circumstances. The classroom real-world bridge is reinforced again.

I went to Kobokan Community Center as a volunteer. In this community, many children have parents who are working; both father and mother. (Student A)

As a final component to this course, all students must either choose a volunteer site, find lectures relating to the class in their community to attend and report on, or visit women's centers in their communities and discover what resources are available to them there. In all cases, students must write a report and identify what they did, where and with whom. I provide forms students can take to potential volunteer supervisors to verify their working hours and contributions, but I emphasize that students are their own agents. They have to make the effort to find the sites, contact supervisors, get a schedule of hours set and take responsibility for whatever jobs they are given. I provide students a list of potential volunteer sites Foreign Executive Women (FEW) publishes near the beginning of each semester and give them the entire semester to volunteer, attend lectures or visit women's centers for 5-15 hours. Students can combine various activities or just go to one site. I try to make the most of whatever effort they are willing to put forth since most students are reluctant to volunteer or become informed as to what is going on in their communities regarding social change issues. Students' volunteer experiences have ranged from escorting foreign soccer fans through Narita Airport to child and elder care to clearing forests. I have found that students can apply almost any volunteer experience to the class content by interviewing the people they encounter, observing the roles of men and women and journaling their own impressions using the class content as a framework in which to thoughtfully reflect.

Conclusion

Find a niche and fill it! is a marketing idea that can be helpful to teachers looking for new or different instructional opportunities. I had not intended to create a class when I entered KUIS, but have found the challenge invigorating and the students' growing awareness rewarding. One of the biggest hurdles I have had teaching this class has been convincing students they can be advocates for social change. Having them believe they have the power to inform others and become authorities and social change activists is a slow process. Volunteerism has been an opening for them to see their potentials in society, but whether this action will continue throughout their whole lives is hard to predict. As all my *Women's Issues in Japan* students suggested there is not enough information regarding human sexuality and gender equality in their education. These issues and similar ones need the attention of teachers willing to take risks in the classroom. Crimes against women, HIV and AIDS prevention, the right to reproductive health and control of your own body, and a layperson's understanding of laws concerning basic human rights are knowledge gaps that need to be filled on a large scale. In writing about my experiences navigating new teaching experiences for myself, I hope readers have been given a chance to see themselves taking on similar educational niches in their own communities.

Appendix A

Resources:

Gender Equity Bureau, Cabinet Office
6-1, Nagata-cho 1 chome,
Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 100-8914

Counseling-Learning Institutes
Dr. Jennybelle Rardin
1450 Palisade Avenue
#2A, Ft. Lee, New Jersey
USA 07024
e-mail: Jenny1r@aol.com

Women in Education and Language Learning (WELL)
<http://www.miyazaki-mic.ac.jp/faculty/KISBELL/well/well.html>

Women's Wellbeing
Chi to se biru 3F (Asahi erunai)
Tsukiji 1-9-4, chuo-ku
Tokyo 104-0045
(03) 5565-3588

Orchid Club, Women's Health Care Program
<http://www.orchid-club.gr.jp>

Tokyo Women's Plaza
Jingumae 5-53-67
Shibuya-ku, Tokyo-to, 150
03-5467-1970

Foreign Executive Women (FEW)
<http://www.few.gol.com>
 FEW, Attn: Volunteering Directory Coordinator
 SVAX TT Building, 1F-A, Suite 161,
 1-15 Toranomom 3 chome,
 Minato-ku, Tokyo 105-0001

Films:

Video Juku, *Breaking the History of Silence; The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal for the Trial of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery*. 2001. 68 minutes. (English and Japanese editions available.)
 e-mail: video_juku@hotmail.com

Kurihara, Nanako, *Ripples of Change; Looking for Fumiko*. 1993. 57 minutes.
 The history of the women's movement in Japan.
 (This film is available at the Tokyo Women's Plaza and other women's centers around Japan.)

Telebi Asahi Koubou, *Watashi wa Danjyo Byoudou wo kempo ni kaita, (I wrote of Men's and Women's Rights in the Constitution)*, Director: Teramoto, Mana.
 The story of Beate Shirota Gordon creating the current Japanese constitution and insisting on including articles to establish women's equality in Japan.
 (This film is available at Tokyo Women's Plaza and other women's centers around Japan.)

Seoul and Tokyo Women's Film Festivals:
 (These are annual events that supply a variety of women's views via film. Check the internet for details. For classroom use of the films being shown, contact the festival organizers.)

Books:

Buckley, Sandra. (1997). *Broken Silence; Voices of Japanese Feminism*. Berkley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.
 Matsui, Yayori. (2001). *Women in the New Asia* (Second Impression). London: Zed Books, Ltd.
 Ogino, Miho, (1987). *Our bodies, Ourselves* (Japanese Edition) The Japanese Edition is no longer being published, but a copy is available at Tokyo Women's plaza and women's centers around Japan.)