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# A new kind of graduate? Discourses on critical thinking

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This paper discusses the public discourses of Japanese government and business interests on the subject of critical thinking within education. It examines the dilemma the conservative elite faces regarding the perceived erosion amongst the younger generation of traditional group-oriented values and the need for a new kind of nonconformist and independent employee to help Japan compete successfully in the globalized marketplace. This conflict echoes the tension within the concept of critical thinking itself. It has implications for English language educators in terms of what role they can play in the overall education of their students.

本書は、教育におけるクリティカル・シンキングに関する日本の政府と企業の論考について検証する。さらに、若い世代に見られる伝統的な集団志向の価値観の低下、およびグローバル化している市場において、日本が首尾よく競争するために必要な自主性を持ったクリティカル志向の人材に関し、保守的なエリートが直面するジレンマについて分析する。クリティカル・シンキングという概念そのものにおいても、同様の論争は起こっている。この論争は英語教育者が自分たちの生徒に施す教育全般においてどのような役割を果たせるかという点で意義があるといえる。

**T**his paper will examine the public discourses of the Japanese Education Ministry and the influential Japanese business organization Nippon Keidanren on the subject of critical thinking within education. With the advent of globalization and hyper-competition, a new discourse has emerged regarding the skills and attributes desired of new graduates by Japanese corporations. In the past, group-oriented attributes such as cooperativeness, eagerness, and trainability were deemed most important when hiring new workers (JETRO, 2004). However, in recent years government and business interests have begun to call for more individualistic qualities such as initiative, independence and originality in order to

help Japan compete in the fast-moving global marketplace (MEXT, 2002, Nippon Keidanren, 2003). The difficulty, however, is that individualistic traits do not sit well with the traditional set of social values promoted by Japan's conservative elite. While initiative and originality may be important for business success, they may also pose a threat to harmony and smooth running of organizations and society as a whole. Indeed, there is a fear amongst the ruling elite that individualistic traits amongst Japan's younger generation have already gone too far, and that Japan needs to return to the group-based values of its prewar past. This has led to the revival of what might be called the discourse of "traditional Japanese values," which is now in competition with a more modern discourse of "nonconformist individualism". These two opposing discourses can be said to be involved in a hegemonic struggle for dominance within Japan today. The outcome of this struggle may well decide the future of educational policy within the country, and, by extension, the future direction of the country itself.

### Critical thinking: A double-edged sword

What is 'critical thinking'? Many scholars in both Western and Eastern contexts have debated this question and it sometimes appears that there are as many definitions of the term "critical thinking" as there are people who espouse its importance. Nevertheless, despite the controversies, there are two broad aspects that most conceptions agree upon, namely that:

- (1) critical thinking is concerned with cognitive reasoning skills;
- (2) critical thinking also implies the ability and willingness to question social norms.

This dual aspect to conceptions of the term makes it very much a double-edged sword as far as governments and large organizations are concerned.

Since Bloom's seminal work of 1956 on higher-order thinking skills, scholars have sought to pin down and categorize definitions of "good thinking." Taxonomies of skills such as that of Facione (1990) and Ennis (1987) have identified a number of abilities that critical thinkers must acquire. Ennis lists these abilities as follows:

- focusing on a question
- analyzing arguments
- asking and answering questions for clarification
- judging the credibility of a source
- observing and judging observation reports
- deducing and judging deductions
- inducing and judging inductions
- making value judgments
- defining terms
- identifying assumptions
- deciding on an action
- interacting with others

Generally speaking, successful critical thinkers must be able to gather information, judge the credibility of that

information, analyze and draw conclusions from it, and finally explicate those conclusions in a clear and logical manner. These are skills that are central to success in a business environment, where the gathering, analysis and dissemination of knowledge is essential for effective marketing and production strategies.

The second aspect of critical thinking, however, may be less attractive to organizations. This aspect emphasizes the ability and willingness of critical thinkers to question established social norms. Benesch (1993, p. 546) conceptualizes critical thinking as “a search for the social, historical, and political roots of conventional knowledge and an orientation to transform learning and society.” Paul argues that the development of cognitive skills for “vocational” purposes is critical thinking “in the weak sense” (1984, p. 5). Critical thinking “in the strong sense” implies “emancipatory reason” (1984, p. 5) and an inclination for people to “free themselves from the self-serving manipulations of their own leaders” (1993, p. 359).

The degree to which critical thinkers choose to use their ability to oppose conventional beliefs naturally depends on their own reaction to the environment around them. Nevertheless, we can say that conceptions of critical thinking contain within them the potential for reasoned nonconformity, which can provide both benefits and risks to societies and organizations.

### The traditional idea of the Japanese graduate

In the past, when Japanese companies sought to hire new graduate-level employees, their main concern is said to

have been with group-based trainability (Nakamura, 1992). Hired as generalists rather than specialists, new workers were expected to follow the direction of their superiors or sempai in order to learn to become loyal, hardworking “company men.” The attributes sought at the hiring stage reflected this concern. Cooperativeness, eagerness, stamina, a willingness to work hard, broad general knowledge, and a good educational background were the main qualities desired of new graduates (JETRO, 2004). Workers who displayed too much “individuality” were looked upon with some suspicion. This is said to have been one of the reasons why Japanese companies were reluctant to hire employees with postgraduate degrees.

The education system also largely reflected this concern. The “exam hell” which dominated students’ lives from junior high school onwards inculcated the same qualities of hard work and stamina (*gambaru seishin, gaman*) that were later required by corporations. Students were schooled in what McVeigh (2002) has termed “closed-knowledge” methods in contrast with the “open-knowledge” approach favored in the West. Closed-knowledge questions are those with a definite right or wrong answer. Open-knowledge questions have no perfect answer: students are required to think and argue for themselves.

### A new kind of graduate? Tensions within government and business discourses on education

In recent years, however, there has been a change in the way graduate work skills are discussed by government and business interests in Japan. With the advent of globalization and hyper-competition, as well as the long-term economic

downturn in Japan, businesses have begun to call for a new kind of graduate who can help to drive a post-industrial economy dependent on innovation and new ideas. The emphasis in this new discourse is not on cooperativeness and enthusiasm but on individual achievement and self direction.

Nippon Keidanren, the most influential business organization in the country, predicted in a report entitled *Japan 2025* that individuals would need to become the core unit of Japanese society. In the future, it argued, workers will “identify themselves less with the companies they work for and more with their own personal talents and interests” (2003, p. 6). In order to thrive within this new society, individuals must “innovate and develop themselves”, be “empowered and assertive” and “tolerant of diversity” (2003, p. 6). The Japanese Education Ministry added a powerful voice in agreement, arguing that students must “develop natural gifts and faculties to find assignments, learn and think by themselves, make decisions independently, take actions and solve problems better” (MEXT, 2002, p. 1). Another government report ‘Innovation 25’ (2007, p. 3) issued by the office of the Prime Minister pressed the need for Japan to develop people with “unique and exceptional talent who are often described as nails that stick out of a conformist society.” These pronouncements appear to be an implicit call for critical thinkers, in both of the two aspects defined above.

This, however, is only part of the story. At the same time as this modern discourse of individualism has sprung up, an older discourse of traditional Japanese values has been revived by the conservative elites of the country. The Education Ministry in 2005 bemoaned the perceived

“deterioration in the socialization and moral consciousness of children,” which it put down to the “tendency of society to overemphasize individual freedom and rights” (MEXT, 2005 p. 1). In a recent speech, the then Education Minister, Bunmei Ibuki, went further, saying that “Japan has stressed the individual point of view too much.” He argued that a society which values human rights or civil liberties (*jinken*) too highly will get “human rights metabolic syndrome” (Asahi Shimbun, 25 Feb 2007). Nippon Keidanren too has taken up this discourse. Its *Japan, Land of Hope* report of 2007 stated that education should emphasize the “traditions, culture and history of Japan,” and that young people should be taught a “consciousness of social norms” in order to “live within society” (Nippon Keidanren, 2007, p. 120–1).

This latter discourse reveals the apparent fear the elites have of growing individualism among young people in Japan. Long-term attitude surveys have revealed that individualistic values have become mainstream in the last two decades, particularly amongst the younger generation (Mohwald, 2000). This has had an influence, for example, on marriage and work patterns, which are now seen as issues of personal choice rather than societal duty. Over thirty percent of new workers quit their jobs within the first three years of employment, while the number of young people known as Freeters taking part-time rather than full-time positions has now reached well over two million (Adachi, 2006). Although there are strong economic reasons for both of these two statistics, there is a perception that motivation for hard work has dropped among recent graduates, and that this is a consequence of the erosion of traditional Japanese values.

## The Future of Japanese Education: A Hegemonic Struggle over Discourse

The two discourses outlined above – the discourses of “nonconformist individualism” and “traditional Japanese values” – can be said to be involved in a hegemonic struggle for dominance inside Japan today. Just as the discourses of *nihonjinron* (“theories of Japaneseness”) shaped attitudes strongly in the post-war years, so these two competing discourses do now. Controlling the discourse means, to a good degree, controlling social attitudes, structures and policies. As Foucault has written, “Discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but it is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized” (1984, p. 10).

The reintroduction of the discourse of traditional Japanese values into a country that has seen individualist values gradually become mainstream can be regarded as an act of “hegemonic intervention” (Gramsci, 1991) by the conservative interests of the country. By painting the nation’s youth as indolent, immoral, and selfish and associating these characteristics with individualism, the government is attempting to supplant mainstream values with their own conservative ideologies. This is likely to have a huge influence on areas such as educational policy, labor relations, and attitudes towards immigration.

The problem the conservative elites face is that economically Japan appears to be dependent on the very kind of individualistic traits that they distrust. This leaves them with a dilemma in terms of educational policy. How does Japan produce the type of Human Resources it needs for business success in the globalized world while preserving the traditional social norms and conventions of its society?

For English language educators in Japan, the issue is an important one, for it calls into question the very purpose of education itself. Many universities, struggling with the specter of declining student numbers, are attempting to position themselves as institutions that will produce the kind of graduates Japanese corporations are demanding. This has long been seen as a key factor in how universities are evaluated (Kempner and Makino, 1993). If companies truly do want employees who can think for themselves, make independent judgments and challenge conventional knowledge, this presents an opportunity to educators interested in developing the critical faculties of their students. Critical thinking becomes not merely a course taught by one or two eccentric lecturers, but the very basis upon which university curricula are founded.

It becomes crucial, then, to know what Japanese institutions mean by the term “critical thinking”. Is it merely critical thinking “in the weak sense” (Paul, 1984, p. 5)? Are educators to attempt to sharpen the analytical skills of their students so that they can apply them for the benefit of the workplace only? Must we leave untouched the second element of critical thinking which challenges students to look at the beliefs and assumptions of themselves and the world around them?

Educators who believe strongly that education goes beyond merely the development of effective Human Resources have a duty to make a stand in this debate. Japanese education is at a turning-point right now, and the future direction it takes largely depends on the outcome of the struggle between the two discourses outlined in this paper. The question is whether we stand aside while the struggle takes place or whether we add our own voices into the mix.

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