

# Catastrophe, Community and Google Apps: Reflections from a TESOL Graduate Course

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The Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011 disrupted life for scores of Japanese and Japan residents. Nowhere was this felt more than the education contexts in which suddenly millions of students were either unable to continue with their studies, or unsure if even their schools or classmates escaped the disaster unscathed. The following is a reflective account of how the online component of one TESOL graduate class allowed the teachers and students to persevere through the tragedy, continue with their course work and ultimately create a deep and lasting academic community.

2011年3月に発生した東日本大震災により、日本国内の大勢の人々の生活及び人生が一変した。教育現場では、数百万人の児童・生徒・学生が勉強の中断を強いられ、校舎や同級生の無事も確認できない状態であった。本稿では、ある大学院における英語教授法のオンライン上の交流を通して、震災により生まれた学生同士の絆が現在も続いている様子を論ずる。

**T**HE GREAT East Japan Earthquake in March 2011 affected the lives of millions in profound and often tragic ways, causing immense disruption in nearly every facet of life, including education. This paper recounts how the earthquake affected one particular course, the Integrated Skills Practicum at Teachers College Columbia University's Tokyo campus (TC Tokyo). The course made extensive use of Google Apps (Google, 2011), which is a suite of collaboration applications free to anyone with a Gmail account. These “apps” enabled class members to take part in discussions between sessions and share teaching resources and ideas online. Through these media, the course was even able to continue during the chaos and uncertainty following the earthquake.

However, as class members continued in the course, it became clear that an unexpected type of learning outcome was emerging—one that the instructors had not fully envisioned when planning the course. The online tools that allowed class members to stay in contact also enabled them to share in each others' experiences and support one another during this challenging time. This willingness of class members to reach out to one another during the course provided a real-life illustration of the significance of community in educational settings, and how its strength consists in the mutual support and connectedness of its members.



The article begins with a brief description of the practicum, and the types of web tools used in the course. Students from the course then share personal stories of how their lives were affected by the disasters, and how these tools enabled them to carry on and ultimately bond with their professors and classmates.

## The Practicum Course

Prior to the start of the course in January 2011, the practicum had just undergone a complete re-invention, incorporating Google Apps such as Google Sites for creating student e-portfolios, Google Groups for a common email address shared by all participants of the course, and Google Docs for hosting student teaching videos that were linked to the students' e-portfolios and shared with their classmates for review. Much of this technology was fairly new to the two teachers of the course themselves, complicated by the fact that the course was divided into two sections with one of the teachers being called in only a week before the class started to teach one section. With such a digital learning curve for everyone, a new teacher unfamiliar with the course and tools, and an earthquake, tsunami and nuclear power plant meltdown shortly into the course, there were certainly more reasons for it to fail than to succeed.

To help ensure consistency across the two sections, the two instructors decided to combine the online portion of the class, while teaching their face-to-face sessions separately. Therefore, students from either section were familiar with their classmates in the other section only through their weekly online interactions, such as reading and commenting on their classmates' weekly e-portfolio reflection posts, and the section-wide weekly online discussion forum questions posted through the common Google Groups Gmail address. As a result, many students knew each other only through their online interactions, that is, by name only. When the earthquake, tsunami and ensuing nuclear disaster hit, the course was only in its first few weeks,

and had had only two face-to-face sessions. The students, as well as the instructors, were only gradually beginning to use the online tools confidently. However, once the disaster hit, and pandemonium ensued, all activity at Teachers College ground to a halt. The building closed until further notice, meaning that all face-to-face class meetings were canceled, with no indication of when they would resume. At that point, despite everyone's inexperience with the web tools, the Integrated Skills Practicum class was forced to go 100% online.

Like much of the foreign community (and a fair number of Japanese), many of the students in the course fled the country. Others, like the two instructors of the course, Chris and Gordon, were already abroad on 3/11 and were unsure of when or even whether to return to Japan. Too much was in chaos. But unlike the other courses at TC Tokyo that term, this one had a fully functioning online component, which made it possible for the course to continue. What transpired over the following weeks and months was certainly not expected by the course instructors or designers: a close-knit academic community emerged, digitally connected to each other through the web tools of the course, allowing them to maintain contact across multiple countries and even continents. They were able to share experiences, hardships, feelings and, to the students' credit, continue with the course requirements uninterrupted.

When the TC Tokyo building reopened and classes eventually resumed several weeks after the disaster, other classes had to be rescheduled to make up for the lost time, but not the Integrated Skills Practicum. The students in the course simply resumed their face-to-face sessions without the loss of momentum other courses experienced. When they did finally all meet in person again, they were somehow closer to one another because the online tools allowed them to stay in contact and share in each other's experiences. Below, four students from the course share their personal stories of how their lives were affected by the

disasters, and how the course web tools allowed them to carry on and ultimately bond with their professors and classmates.

## Student Experiences

### Reiko

It was never my intention to make the Google site for the Integrated Skills Practicum an outlet to pour my soul. I had treated this website, with all the student e-portfolios, as a place to post my weekly entries for professional and personal growth related to my career of teaching English. However, with the turn of events which started with the earthquake on the afternoon of Friday, March 11th, 2011, many aspects of our lives started taking a new direction—including the class website and the content of entries posted by students.

It was a Friday afternoon, two days before the deadline to post our weekly teaching reflections on our e-portfolios. I was working on the computer at home in Tokyo, ready to type my teaching reflections when my room started shaking. A couple hours later, I remembered that I was in the process of typing my weekly reflection. As I could not concentrate, I decided to talk briefly about the earthquake and forced myself to connect it with EFL instruction because I started wondering how English language learners coped under similar circumstances during the earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, only a month earlier. While I felt I needed to distract myself from the vivid scenes on television of the tsunami washing away coastal cities, as I wrote my reflection, I thought that I needed to make my reflection somehow related to language teaching, since it was for one of my courses. I was sure I was not making sense because of my high level of anxiety over what had just happened in Tohoku.

The following day, one of our instructors sent us a message through our shared class Gmail address. He wrote, “We imagine many of you would like to reflect on how the earthquake af-

ected your professional (as well as personal) lives this week, which we think is a valid and important activity at this point, and sharing your feelings right now with each other via your reflection logs can be cathartic and helpful.” I felt relieved, as if I were given permission to write about the earthquake and how it was affecting us personally without regard to language teaching. This resulted in two more entries about the aftershocks and the rolling blackouts due to the Fukushima Power Plant crisis. Even though I was unsure whether other classmates were posting their weekly reflections, let alone reading them, I felt compelled to let my feelings out in a positive manner.

Writing about the earthquake and its aftermath, albeit for a short time, was an activity which I found therapeutic for myself. Seeing the comments other students made on my weekly e-portfolio reflection posts made me realize that it actually helped other classmates as well. Some said they appreciated that I added information translated into English of what I had heard on television. Another alerted me to the fact that another source, NHK, already had the information available in English. Although we may have our individual ways to express our feelings of fear, and pain in overcoming crises like the earthquake, I appreciate that others respected the way I chose to do it because I needed an outlet at the time. The pace at which we work through our individual situations may differ; it may take more time for some than others. Nevertheless, the student e-portfolios for the course were another tool which assisted and continues to unite the students enrolled in the Integrated Skills Practicum course, and at TC Tokyo at large.

### Ethan

The benefit of having an online component for our practicum was that I did not have to be physically present in Japan to participate in the class. I was able to reflect on my teaching practice and contribute to discussion of the readings while on vacation

in Hawaii. And that was where I was when the earthquake happened. To say that our class was not affected by the earthquake would be false. Discussion was put on hold in the week following the earthquake as most people dealt with the realities of the situation. However, the use of the web tools enabled us to voice our thoughts as well as share our feelings and empathize with each other and as a result we were able to form a closer community.

Even though I was not there to experience it, the earthquake had a large impact psychologically. Some students, like Reiko, took to reflecting on it and posting to their e-portfolios. At first, I was uneasy and chose to avoid this, but eventually I relented and wrote about the emotions that I was feeling. A month after the earthquake I wrote, "I'm feeling quite anxious. I've been having a lot of dreams lately about my new classes and the prevailing theme seems to be that I am unprepared and things are out of control." At the time, I had been in Hawaii for about 6 weeks and was feeling displaced. There was a lot of uncertainty as to what was going to happen in Tokyo. There were rolling blackouts and the information about Fukushima was still limited. Many schools were postponing the start of their school year. Yet, it was my classmates who were there to support me. One student wrote, "I think your misplaced apprehension will immediately vanish, once you see the faces of your students in the upcoming year" and another wrote, "Ethan, I know how you feel. It is a weird time and I think many people have/do feel 'out of control.'" It was also the little comments that showed how much my classmates cared. One wrote, "Have a safe trip back to Japan" while another said, "*Gambatte kudasai* (please do your best)"

From their comments on my e-portfolio reflections, I knew that I was not alone in dealing with the earthquake and that many of my fellow classmates were going through the same thing. The times after the earthquake were tough but it resulted

in the formation of a community of people who cared for each other, and we were able to do that because of Google Apps. In our first face-to-face session after the earthquake, there was a closeness that was not present before. Everyone was happy to see each other and shared their stories. The feeling of community, which developed online in the aftermath of the earthquake, provided a sense of support that enabled us to try new things in our in-class micro-teaching, be more open to critique, and ultimately work toward becoming better teachers.

### Megan

When the Teachers College Tokyo campus closed following March 11th, although I had a lot of support from various friends and co-workers in Japan, I was lucky to be connected to a network of colleagues and friends at TC Tokyo who have lived or were living internationally. From the TC Tokyo community, it was only my colleagues, friends and professors from my Integrated Skills Practicum that I remained in contact with. I think this was due to the ease of staying in touch using the Google tools and our having grown accustomed to receiving group messages, posting on our e-portfolios and commenting on the e-portfolio posts of classmates.

During the initial days after March 11th, my e-portfolio became a resource for me to stay informed on the news in Japan. I remember having a difficult time understanding the terminology relating to radiation or what was happening with the nuclear power plant in Fukushima. I felt a sense of relief when my Integrated Skills Practicum classmate, Reiko, began to post translations of news segments on her e-portfolio reflection page. Another student also shared a link to NHK news in English on his e-portfolio. These were two valuable resources for me as they came directly from my classmates whom I trusted and confided in.

My Integrated Skills e-portfolio also provided me a way to remain in close contact with my classmates when I was not in Japan. Around one week after the earthquake, like many of my classmates, I made the decision to leave Japan and to go back to the United States. After an uneasy two week absence from posting on my e-portfolio and a group message reminder from our professors to continue to post to our e-portfolios about anything, even what we were feeling, I decided to finally share my experience. I posted my 8th reflection, entitled *A Sense of Peace in a Third Culture*, while in the United States. Through this post I wrote about my confusion after March 11th and included, "...I now accept that there will be unpredictable trials throughout life. During these times...It's the friends, family and relationships we have with people that really matter" (March 27th). Soon after this post I received two personal emails from classmates thanking me for sharing my experience and offering support. As I was quite torn between the United States and Japan during this time, my classmates' support helped me realize I was not alone in my uncertainty of the situation.

From that point on and when classes resumed, each of my weekly e-portfolio posts received comments from my professor and classmates. Receiving comments was encouraging to me as it made me realize that someone was always reading and interested in what I wrote. Moreover, these comments helped motivate me to stay involved in class and read other classmates' posts. Due to the continual contact through the Google Group email address and e-portfolio posts and supportive comments throughout the entire semester, I felt a unique closeness to my classmates and professors in the Integrated Skills Practicum.

### Joël

While Tokyo cautiously returned to a business-as-usual routine relatively shortly after 3/11, I was left stranded in the country-

side and it was the Integrated Skills practicum's online component that brought me back to a normal pace of living.

I live and teach in Gunma Prefecture, about 180 kilometers away from Fukushima. My school canceled classes almost immediately. My everyday one-hour train commute became a bicycling journey for about a week. To make things worse, my five-year-old son fractured his skull when he fell down the stairs during one of the first energy conservation blackouts. It was a period in my life I will surely retell several times, but it will be the positive manner in which I got back to normal that will stay ingrained in my memory.

In the first three days after the disaster, the rolling power blackouts limited our access to news and communication. The online component of the Integrated Skills Practicum became a living tool that facilitated our coping with our new reality. The technology helped us to share information and discuss strategies on how to deal with the disaster through our weekly e-portfolio reflection posts. We came to depend on each other when it became clear that the mainstream media had lost focus and, in my opinion, credibility. As Skype calls from abroad frantically came in, many of my fellow students and I in the Integrated Skills Practicum came to depend on each other for information and support. We shared news of events and sought solace in our own group. Even though I remained calm and put on a strong face for my family and my work colleagues, it was not until Professor Hale wrote us from Bangkok that I saw things were going to be OK for us. His concern was obvious. Professor Myskow also wrote an email soon after, reassuring us that things would continue. We were told to put things into perspective and deal with our personal situations first and let the studies be done when we were in a state of mind to focus on them. This helped us make the online contacts very strong.

The Google Sites e-portfolios, which were the platform for our weekly reflections, became a diary of sorts for us. This diary



was the ultimate reflection tool because it provided a reflective outlet with the interaction of an electronic bulletin board so that our classmates could post comments and links directly below our reflection posts. The group Gmail address was also a tool we used to share information between the two sections of the Practicum, and messages often came with Facebook or e-mail responses, links to information about Fukushima as well as supportive feedback. These became information channels open to the people in the class, who have since become my confidants and trusted collaborators in the big projects in my life. (For example, five of us from Professor Myskow's section have formed a team of Cooperative Learning practitioners and presenters.) The online component of the course came to be a source of comfort for me. It was through our "cyber communication" that we decided to get together for a "normalcy beer" once classes at TC Tokyo officially resumed several weeks after the disasters. This gathering would mark for us a celebration of having together overcome a terrible ordeal. It also symbolized the union we had created in the cyber world. The ironic thing for most of us was that there was so little news to tell because we had been in constant contact online!

## Conclusion

During the chaos and uncertainty following the earthquake, each class member used the course web tools in different ways. For Reiko, they became a resource for providing her classmates with up-to-date information on the rolling blackouts and the Fukushima power plant crisis. Ethan and Megan used them to overcome geographical barriers and bond with their classmates during that difficult time. For Joel, the medium functioned as a kind of dialogue journal providing a much needed sense of "normalcy."

Since the course was a practicum on teaching integrated skills, the subject matter was primarily concerned with the practi-

cal application of pedagogical theory. From the perspective of the course instructors, therefore, the disruption caused by the earthquake was initially seen as yet another major obstacle in a course that already had so much working against it.

However, as the course came to a close in May 2011, it became clear that one of the most enduring learning outcomes was something that could not be found in the course objectives—something more fundamental than the application of pedagogical theory. The desire of everyone in the course to reach out to one another during those challenging times served as a powerful reminder that at the center of any learning community is the mutual support and connectedness of its members. It is on the strength of this foundation that community members can make sense of their experiences and most effectively learn from one another.

## Bio Data

**Chris Carl Hale** teaches the Speaking Practicum in the MA TESOL program at Teachers College Columbia University, Tokyo, and graduate and undergraduate writing at International Christian University. He is currently a doctoral candidate in education at Northeastern University, Boston.

**Gordon Myskow** is Adjunct Professor of TESOL at Teachers College Columbia University, Tokyo, and an EFL instructor in the Department of Economics at Toyo University. His research interests include second language writing, genre-based instruction and the interpersonal features of academic discourse.

**Reiko Takeda** teaches undergraduate English at a private university in Tokyo. Currently, she is a graduate student in the MA TESOL program at Teachers College Columbia University, Tokyo.

**Ethan Taomae** teaches Oral Communication at Tokyo Metropolitan University and ESP courses at Japan College of

Foreign Languages. Currently, he is a graduate student in the MA TESOL program at Teachers College Columbia University, Tokyo. His research interests include cooperative learning, language teacher development, and social identity.

**Megan Burke** currently works with learners from elementary to high school levels at special education schools in addition to coordinating ALT programs for the Chiba Prefectural Board of Education. Currently, she is a graduate student in the MA TESOL program at Teachers College Columbia University, Tokyo.

**Joël Laurier** is a teacher at Gunma Kokusai Academy. His research interests include bilingualism, language in education policy, and curriculum development and assessment, but he is better known for his teacher training using cooperative learning. Currently, he is a graduate student in the MA TESOL program at Teachers College Columbia University, Tokyo.

## References

Google. (2011). Google apps [Online web applications]. Available from <http://www.google.com/apps/intl/en/group/index.html>

## Appendix

Below are links to the course website, and two student e-portfolios by Megan and Reiko who have graciously agreed to share them with the JALT community. Note: the Google Groups Feed on the course website is only visible to members of the Google Group. All other areas of the website are visible to the general public.

### Course Website:

- <https://sites.google.com/site/integratedskills2011/>

### Sample Student e-Portfolios:

- *Megan Burke*  
<https://sites.google.com/site/meganburke/>
- *Reiko Takeda*  
<https://sites.google.com/site/reycoshimozawa/>