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# An Analysis of University Students' Perceptual Change through Course Learning and a Suggestion to Academic Writing Education in Undergraduate Curriculum

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*Academic writing education in Japan had remained informal until recently. The topic has recently been discussed and investigated in relation to improving Japanese university education and more and more universities have started offering academic writing courses. However, there may be some concern about this trend, because it has overlooked the important role of academic writing in students' holistic development. Academic writing should not be regarded as an only matter of writing and thinking ability. Psychological research can contribute to this debate by providing an empirical analysis of how students actually write during their university learning. Therefore, how weekly papers, written by students after a history class learning Southeast Asian history, had changed during a semester was analyzed in this research. The results showed that there was a gap between students' attainment of the learning goal of the class and their critical thinking attitudes. This result implied that present trend of the reform of undergraduate education, which stress on the learning of generic skills, may leads to an incorrect evaluation of students' learning.*

## WRITING IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

The purpose of this study is to show how the text written by students changes during the attendance at a lecture of history. Before the explanation of the analyses, the role of writing in university learning and the present trend of academic writing education in Japanese universities would be discussed briefly.

Writing in course learning plays a role of fostering students to become a citizen who create their future. This is the basic standpoint of this study about the role of writing in university learning. As both philosophical research (e.g., Fulford, 2009) and developmental psychological research (e.g., Uchida, 1990; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987) have demonstrated, writing could help people to consider deeply and, find and refine themselves. Moreover, writing is actually an effective communication tool with which teachers and students communicate their thought. As an international survey carried out by a research group of Institute of Education (Welikala & Watkins, 2008) showed that Japanese students are not happy at speaking publically in classroom, but they are good at writing and thinking critically. Taking those things into consideration, it could be said that writing in course learning plays an important role for students to relativise their prior way of thinking and to rebuild their view of the world.

## **ACADEMIC WRITING EDUCATION IN JAPANESE UNIVERSITIES**

In Japanese universities, the education of writing academic reports and essays had been informal or embedded in disciplinary lectures and seminars. However, the education programs which are called first year experience have been widespread in this decade, and many universities now offer a course in which students learn how to write academic essays. As the trend of quality assurance of educational outcome had an influence in the spread of first year experience, those academic writing educations tend to emphasize generic writing skills, including cognitive strategies for writing. Those cognitive strategies might help students to write to some extent. However, education which emphasizes those skills and strategic aspects may have a risk to prevent students from making their voice. In other words, it may spoil the important function of writing to foster students to become a citizen who create their future.

Here is an example to show the risk. There is a book about education for critical thinking published in 2006. The author of one chapter in the book showed a text written by a student as an inadequate example. The student wrote an essay about mercy killing. She wrote that she could not decide whether she is for or against mercy killing, because she could understand all of conflicted hopes of the patient and the family, and medical staff. I do not think her writing was inadequate as writing in university learning, though I agree that her essay could not pass the entrance examination of graduate school in the USA. She considered very well, and she wrote she could not decide for or against. The author of the chapter said she must not write what she hesitate and vacillate. This kind of writing instruction, which forces our students to pretend to be very decisive and free from any hesitation and vacillation, may have a risk to prevent students from finding their voice.

What psychological research should do today is, I should say, to investigate how students actually engage in writing in university learning, rather than exploring how to train students to get a kind of 'ideal and effective writing strategies'. In other words, we should grasp the holistic picture of students' engagement in writing in university learning. From this standpoint we do not seem to have enough empirical data yet. We need to investigate how students engage in writing not only in writing oriented classes but also in ordinary disciplinary lectures and seminars.

### **THE GOAL AND THE OUTLINE OF THE LECTURE 'WAR AND HUMAN'**

The weekly papers written by students who attended the class titled 'war and human' are analyzed in this study. The goal of this lecture was that students should become able to discuss their responsibility of preventing the present from being pre-war era in this globalized society. In order to acquire enough knowledge for it, students learned the history of the relationship between Southeast Asian countries and Japan through reading and watching the phonographs of the monuments and the museums related to the Second World War.

This course had some purposes or sub-goals. The first purpose was the transformation of the concept of history which students have. Most of students believes what they have learned in the history class in high school is absolute historical knowledge. However, what they know is only one of 'national histories'. National history means a history from a viewpoint of one nation. Believing that our

own national history is an absolute historical fact causes dangerous confliction, because each country has its own national history and they conflict with each other. Moreover, what they learned at school were only a history based on written documents, mainly officially written document, although there are many histories which had not been officially written. The war monuments and museums show our students the history which they did not know.

The second purpose of the lecture was for students to become able to understand historical events and matters from the perspective of Southeast Asian people. This standpoint is a new point of view for our students. They need to know how Southeast Asian people's impression to Japan has historically changed and to understand the reason of the change from the viewpoint of Southeast Asia, not only from Japanese viewpoint. They also need to know how the present behavior of Japanese people, including consoling activities, might be interpreted by the Southeast Asian people.

'War and human' was a course in general education curriculum. Students had a ninety-minutes-class per week from April to July in 15 weeks. About 100 students from all of department in Osaka City University participated. The procedure of this class was simple. Every week, after about a 70-minutes-lecture, students wrote a weekly paper on what they had learned in the week. Then at the beginning of the next lecture, the professor of this class made some comments on some of students' papers. The professor explained repeatedly as the responses to student's writings that young people have responsibility to understand history not only from the standpoint of Japan but also from the standpoint of Asian countries.

It is not easy for students to achieve the purpose of the lecture. They experience both emotional and cognitive difficulties in taking another view point to look at historical events and our present behaviour. It may be possible to pick up some background of the difficulties. First, our students do not know well about the countries and cultures in Southeast Asia. They learned Japanese invasion into China and colonization to Korea, but they did not learn about Southeast Asia at school. Our students are very optimistic, and they tend to believe Southeast Asian people are just nice to Japan. Second, most Japanese people are taught, in a sense, that the Japanese Army was evil and cruel, and that the Japanese ordinary people could be said to be the victims of the Army. We tend to forget the fact that Japanese people, including conscripted soldiers, hurt people in other countries. Third, Japan has no experience of land war, except for Okinawa. Asian people saw Japanese soldiers killed their family and friends with their eyes. This kind of experience is very different from the Japanese' experience of air raids and atomic bombs.

Those backgrounds of students would make students resist in having new perspectives to look at history. The patterns of their reaction to the lecture would be analyzed in the next section.

## **THE CATEGORIES OF STUDENTS' WEEKLY PAPERS**

As the course had just finished at the beginning of this month, the result of the analysis of 36 students' writing from the first week to the eighth week of the lecture is to be shown here. Their weekly papers could be categorized into these four categories: Writing with new perspectives (NEW), Writing with resistance to new perspectives (Resist), Writing without clear perspectives (Non-clear), and Irrelevant writing (Irrelevant).

The first category is writing with new perspectives. Students wrote that their conceptions of history and war were largely changed. They also wrote that they noticed how ignorant and naïve they had been. They showed some understandings why people in Asia still have anti-Japanese emotion, and wrote that they should change their too optimistic view of the world and change their attitude toward learning. Some of them mentioned that they had understood why learning cultures and history of other countries is important.

The second category is opposite of the first category. Writings in this category were texts with resistance to taking new perspectives. There were in this category the criticisms against the Southeast Asian countries, 'Although what Japan did was wrong, those countries also had fault', the defensive writings, 'It was unavoidable because it was war', the escaping writings, 'although what Japan did in the past was wrong, it has nothing to do with us', and the writings of resignation, 'it is impossible to eliminate wars and it is no use learning about war history'.

The third category was writing without clear perspectives. Their writings were not against the direction of the lecture, but these were writings as if it were nothing to do with them. It was difficult to judge whether they achieved the purpose of the lecture, because they did not mention their future responsibility at all. For example, writing just an expression of compassion to Asian people, writing just how students were surprised to know the facts, and writing just a summary of the lecture.

The fourth category was irrelevant writing. For example, writing their memory of their school trip to Singapore, and writing a comment about the commercial importance of Asian countries to Japan.

## **PATTERNS OF THE CHANGE OF STUDENTS WRITING**

The 33 students of 36 whose weekly papers were analyzed could be categorized into the five patterns of perceptual change through the attendance of this lecture. Nine students were judged to be in the first group, who showed many writing with the new perspectives. While all papers written by four of them were based on the new perspectives, five of them also showed some non-clear writing. As keeping writing with a new viewpoint every week to every topic in the lecture is not so realistic, their writing pattern could be called New-viewpoint-dominant. Those students seemed to be likely to take the other people's perspectives from the early stage of the course.

The second group of students was the six students who wrote a resisting text at the first stage of the lecture or at the most difficult week to take the new perspective, but began to write with new perspectives, while sometimes some non-clear writing. Those students may be said to have achieved the purpose of this lecture.

The third group was the two students who showed strong resistance to taking new perspectives. Most of their papers were the resisting writings or the irrelevant writings. An important thing is their writing included a kind of critical thinking comment. They often pointed out imperfectness of evidence of what is written in the monuments and what the professor said. When the goal of this lecture 'preventing the present from being pre-war era' is taken into consideration, their criticism is invalid. They seemed to have forgotten that their naïve historical view is also imperfect, though what is written in the memorials is not perfect in a sense. However, if their 'domain-general critical thinking skills' had been measured, they might have been highly scored.

Seven students who mainly showed non-clear writings with some irrelevant writings were categorized into the fourth group. They were not obviously against the purpose of the lecture, but they seemed to be awkward to having new perspectives. They kept a neutral stance in a sense.

The fifth group of students are nine students who were absent from about a half of the class. It seemed to be difficult for them to take new perspectives.

It was difficult to judge how the remaining three students understood the purpose of this lecture. They wrote no resisting paper, and their writings included new perspective writings, but more non-clear writings.

The results could be summarized as follows. First, more than 40% of students could relativise their prior view of the history of Japan and Southeast Asian countries. Second, 25% of students could not take a new perspective at the middle point of the course. Some of them showed a kind of critical thinking performance among them, but they could not achieve the purpose of the lecture. Third, the attendance was necessary to acquire the new perspectives to look at the history.

## **THE IMPLICATION FOR WRITING EDUCATION IN UNIVERSITY**

The analysis of weekly papers did not show the direct relationship between the achievement of the purpose of the course and students' domain-general critical thinking skill, although this study did not measure their critical thinking ability by a reliable measurement. Some students' papers contained several critical comments, but their papers showed no signs of their understanding of the lecture.

Even students who could consider the past and the present of Japan from the viewpoint of Southeast Asia showed the back-and-forth change of their writing. They showed some resisting writing toward some topics. Comments by professors and the contents of lecture seemed to help students to recover and keep the new perspectives. It may be possible to say that students need to write their thoughts without suppressing in order to achieve the purpose of the course, even if their thought is not so logical and clear.

If academic writing education suppresses students' expression, it would prevent students and teachers from having communication on their world views and, as a result, damage students' development. Today's trend of academic writing education contains such risk regrettably, because it may often strongly require students to write skillfully and clearly without hesitation and vacillation. They may be forced to avoid writing their honest thoughts and questions.

Students need to write a graduation thesis when they come to graduate. Students need to explore the new way of viewing the world for themselves when they engage in graduation research. It might be said that having enough experience of writing for deepening their thought and building and rebuilding their view of the world would enable students to have more comprehensive writing ability and to engage in academic writing.

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