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There's Something About a Classroom...

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As strange and unsettling as this year has been, I can't help but think how much stranger and more unsettling it would have been if the Covid-19 pandemic had arrived before the invention of the Internet and Zoom. In my first online classes I found myself amazed at what was happening: I was meeting students in real time, over 20 of them, lecturing, asking questions, showing them “handouts” (share screen function), putting them in groups for group discussion (breakout group function), writing things on the “Blackboard” (chat function), and basically sharing all the things I normally share in a physical classroom—despite the fact that we were all sitting at home in disparate locations around Japan. Only a few decades ago, when I first started teaching at Rikkyo, there were no laptops and no Internet; if the pandemic had happened then, schools might have had to shut down entirely, and the isolation and social disruption would have been far worse. Now, however, thanks to the advances of digital technology, I finish my “virtual” classes with a sense of having had a real class, including genuine interactions with students—to the point of forgetting that none of us ever left our rooms! And over the course of the semester I've been able to watch my students work hard to make the best of their online classes and grow in their language abilities, in much the same way they would have worked hard and grown in a regular classroom setting.

As lucky as we are to have such communicative technology, however, the switch to online teaching has given us an opportunity to reflect on what we value most about the old-fashioned classroom. One thing I've noticed about Zoom classes is how quiet they are. Clicking the mute button when one isn't speaking is a matter of Zoom etiquette, but the result is an eerie electronic silence, as though the Zoom room is a soundproof booth. Gone are all the familiar sounds of the classroom: the school bell chiming, footsteps shuffling, pencils scratching, students chatting, laughing, clapping. Among these sounds it's the laughter and clapping I miss the most. Laughter, because laughter

means that the ice is broken, that we're enjoying the process of learning and appreciating each other as individuals. Clapping, because clapping is what we do to acknowledge our classmates for a job well done. Online classes "decontextualize" the learning environment to some extent, stripping away environmental cues—not just sounds, but visual cues as well, body posture, gestures, the rich innuendo of the face and eyes. These cues are all part of the "chemistry" of being together in a classroom, and all contribute to an energy and camaraderie that seem lacking in the subdued, disembodied realm of cyberspace.

Language classes in particular thrive on such energy and camaraderie. Language involves the whole person, and I've always believed that language classrooms should involve the whole person as well, with a focus on participation and experience. The challenge is how to get students to overcome their shyness and self-consciousness, and engage in classroom activities. My approach is to create an atmosphere of encouragement and mutual support, where students know and trust each other, where we don't take ourselves too seriously, and where the most important thing is to get our ideas across, not use perfect grammar. I always encourage students to speak and write about topics that are interesting to them, as that helps them worry less about their performance and focus more on the excitement of sharing their ideas. I often start class with a warm-up question, for example, "If you could ride a time machine, would you go into the past or the future?" We learn that one student wants to go back to the age of dinosaurs, to see what color T-rexes were; another wants to visit the Heian Court and have an interview with Murasaki Shikibu; and yet another wants to go 1,000 years into the future to see whether humankind has been able to protect the Earth's environment. And though our class does due diligence with the textbook, I always give my students "poetic license" to go beyond it, even break the rules if necessary, so as to be as imaginative and original in their class projects as they want to be. The results are often inspired: I've had students take the class on an interstellar journey to the Andromeda Galaxy; make a sales pitch for a magical homework machine; or tell a ghost story, based on true events, that had the entire class gripping their seats.

Creating a classroom atmosphere of spontaneity and creativity not only helps students relax and take chances, however; it also helps convey the very spirit

of the English language. A key premise of my approach to teaching is that all languages contain hidden cultural assumptions that influence the way we think, feel, and act. Compared to Japanese, for example, English accentuates the distinction between “I” and “you”, between speaker and listener, so as to highlight each person’s identity as a unique center of thinking and willing. The subject’s action—its intervention on the world—tends to come at the beginning of the sentence, followed by the context of that action, whereas in Japanese the reverse occurs: context tends to come first, with the subject and its action being downplayed, appearing at the end of the sentence (if at all). The emphasis in English speaking, put simply, is on self-expression and asserting oneself in social contexts, rather than self-restraint and adjusting oneself to those contexts. Communication serves to bridge the gap between singular, isolated minds, and as such tends to be explicit and logical rather than indirect and suggestive. An understanding of such tacit cultural logic, I believe, helps students to understand the “why and wherefore” of basic English skills, and to make the language their own.

Learning a second language allows us to “step outside” our own cultural worldview and to see our own cultures—and ourselves—more deeply. I’ve always tried to teach my language classes at Rikkyo in this light, as a cross-cultural experience, as an opportunity not only to develop the skills of speaking, writing, and listening, but to notice and explore the hidden premises of language and the cultural worlds they construct for us. I’ve found that a classroom atmosphere encouraging creative self-expression, spontaneity, and the willingness to take chances without fear of failure, works best to this end. Such an atmosphere is more difficult to achieve when everyone in the class is a thumb-sized pixelation on a 13-inch computer screen. Digital technology will continue to evolve, of course, and the online learning experience is sure to become more immersive and realistic. Yet as long as we’re sitting in our own rooms in front of a computer, we’re unlikely to find the sense of place and shared striving that comes with being together in a classroom. There are some things in the world, like bicycles, printed books, and ice cream cones, that will never become obsolete. I believe that the old-fashioned classroom—with its blackboard, chalk, desks, and chairs—is one of those things.

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