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Conceptualizing Campus as Community
Through Classroom Podcasting

David Gann

When we began the project during the first term, as I have said in my previous article on classroom podcasting my goals were to give students the opportunity to take more control over their own development by placing them in decision-making situations (Gann *Seigakuin* 6). The aims and the methods were vague, being under construction at the time but my assessment of students' abilities were as realistic, my intent was as optimistic as were Horton's when he envisioned Highlander and developed his two-eye method of teaching (Horton *The Long Haul* 131). The aims were first to motivate students through novelty of broadcasting; secondly to focus their efforts towards a concrete, non-ephemeral goal (i.e. not "We're going to study English for a distant future imagined goal of using English in work or travel"; but "We're going to use it starting now to create something real, tangible"); thirdly to leave them with a greater sense of worth and the understanding that their opinions and experiences have value. The goals were to design an educational experience where equal and related but discrete roles and responsibilities accrete.

The project succeeded in so much as students had an interest in producing an entertaining radio program. It also defined and focused their efforts to create what Kagan calls "positive interdependence and individual accountability" (Kagan *Cooperative Learning* xi). In the coming terms perhaps it will also succeed in truly empowering the participants. In the following section I will discuss that last goal and how it may be achieved.

Shortcomings and Workarounds

After last term, while assessing how well my students and I had reached the aforementioned goals, I noted three categories in which we could have improved. These included preparing for the project by providing information about the podcast content-provider community, presenting a more concrete perception of audience and helping students to understand and continually reminding them of the relevance of audience to content and presentation.

First, in order to infuse interest in podcasting, in addition to cultivating a sense of community within the class, the instructor should make students aware that they are about to enter the podcasting community. However, during the first term of my research, I did not realize the full importance of the social dimension of the project. Since the advent of podcasting several years ago, I have listened to several thousand podcasts. I have a concrete idea of the podcast community as a virtual city that I visit frequently. Some listeners are surprised to find that podcasters are real people. I have corresponded with other content providers of some of my favorite podcasts, sometimes commenting on an episode, sometimes pointing out an error, sometimes asking a question. There are neighborhoods of podcasters (and comment-posters) who live together. There are friendly neighbors who help each other and neighbors who are not on speaking terms. There are podcasters who visit other neighborhoods. Some are welcome and some are not. Some are invited and others asked to leave. There are districts that I have heard about that I would like to visit and there are territories of which I am not even aware. There are highly trafficked main streets. There are poorly lit narrow back alleys. The podcasting community is as dynamic and interwoven as many other kinds of community.

During the last two years, I learned that my students, by contrast, are almost completely unaware of podcasting and the podcasting community. This was surprising to me given the increasing proliferation of mp3

listening devices but I came to understand that my students have not really realized the connection between the Internet and their devices. They know that music can be downloaded for a fee, but they think of audio downloads largely in terms of dark, illegal terms. They are completely unaware of the cornucopia of information and, yes, entertainment that is available for free. Sadly, by the end of this semester, the only podcast that ninety-nine percent of my students will have listened to is Seigakuin Radio Broadcast. With the passage to another world before them, they have never ventured beyond our campus gates. There are other Internet media they can access, such as web pages and chat rooms, but as I have already pointed out in our previous article, none of those media is as non-ephemeral, access-automated, portable and easy to use in various situations as the podcast. In the coming term each of the group's radio program will include a recommendation of another podcast that one member will find and report on.

Secondly, is the problem of audience and this is a problem that is not easily solved. In any communicative exchange there are people speaking and a listening and in terms of a radio program this equates with a sender and a receiver, a content provider and an audience. Whether, they are engaging in podcasting for monetary gain, for altruistic purposes or for self-aggrandizement, listenership is a major motivating factor for content providers. I did mention to my students that Seigakuin Radio has listeners in Europe, North and South America, Australia and Asia, but this kind of information needs to be made more visual. A printout of the statistics page from our website would have both made the idea of Seigakuin Radio Broadcasts listenership more concrete and have provided an opportunity for a short question and answer activity reading and interpreting simple bar graphs and pie charts.

However, the problem of audience is more complex than simple numbers. Assuming that there are listeners in various countries eager to listen to a Japanese university student-produced podcast, our students understand that their exchange with these listeners will be fleeting. As the content creators, Mehran Sabet and I are aware that there are a dozen or

so listeners in the world who listen to our program regularly, know our voices and to a certain extent our personalities. We also receive occasional feedback from our listeners on Seigakuin's campus, students, teachers and administrators. That we appear on the show weekly and have been doing so for three years and know that we have that growing listenership is a motivating factor to continue. Students by contrast know they will appear on the program one time and one time only. We are unlikely to invest a great deal of time or energy speaking to someone we know nothing about especially when we know that we will never meet them again. The audience is still faceless, lacking identity and moreover their listenership has no sympathetic resonance with whatever message or meaning that my students may attempt to convey. Indeed, the audience's lack of identity diffuses students' communication since there is no context in which the communication can take place.

It is a mistake, however, to assume that there are not listeners much closer to home. In terms of entering the community of content providers our students must step beyond are campus gate. By contrast, the audience needed to define the podcast group's purpose and identity on campus. Knowing that their peers will be hearing their work is a motivator, but students who are aware that their work is being listened to by administrators, will begin to take the project—and themselves--more seriously. Education Ilych agrees, "relies on the relationship between partners who already have some of the keys which give access to memories stored in and by the community" (Illych *Deschooling Society* 25). Furthermore, if students receive praise and recognition for their work, they will value their role in our campus community.

One obvious question is what is the place of building social values and cooperative skills in English instruction; but in what other subject is pair-work and group-work so consistently used? Social activism is one aspect of Western culture and one that seems sadly lacking in Japanese culture and it may be incumbent upon English teachers to instill these values in students (although there certainly are some excellent Japan

activists that instructors can encourage students to find out about). However, one doesn't teach by standing on a soapbox and railing against his or her pet social injustice. Rather values should come of themselves when students learn to associate stewardship and leadership. Kagan points out, parents who are asked what they want their children to do after they graduate respond that would like to see their children in a position of leadership. Kagan poses the question: "If your student doesn't have the opportunity to work with others, where will he or she obtain the necessary leadership skills?" (Kagan *Cooperative Learning* 1:2). I see a lot of excellent cooperative student work occurring on Seigakuin University campus especially during school events such as entrance and graduation ceremonies, open campus events and the culture festivals and I would like to make my classes part of that process.

The skills should be accompanied by a social conscience and problem solving abilities gained through practical application and the acquisition of critical thinking skills applied to ethical questions. A teacher can support this development by creating or highlighting situations where students are aware of conflict or contradiction. When students are made aware of such cases in the form of their own mistakes are allowed to correct them then they are less likely to repeat them. An example that comes to mind involves one student in a class of all male local community policy majors. The members of this class were good-natured, got along fairly well, and it was not uncommon for me to overhear some colorful banter when I entered the classroom in the morning. The student had handed in a first draft of his talk about his school club and I had just read it. After reading his first draft in which he had praised the members of his school club, I had a short word with him and his group. There was nothing particularly offensive in what he had written and in its own way it was quite kindhearted. However, it was not the sort of content that I felt ought to go on a university podcast or in any university writing for that matter. Without telling him what he had done was innapropriate, I simply asked him if he thought there was any difference between the kind of discourse he might have on a weekend with

his friends and the discourse he would like to broadcast on our university podcast where some of those members of his school would probably hear his words. His face went blank for a moment as he processed what I had said and then I saw a spark of understanding. He suddenly understood, after his own fashion, that he was part of a small community and he understood what he had written within the context of community. I handed him his paper, which he was very glad to have returned to him, and he began his rewrite. It is important to recognize that he was not only rewriting his paper, but he was rewriting his social consciousness.

A positive way of podcasting in our campus community is to have students interview teachers and administrators as a part of their program that they might call the featured personality segment. The purpose of this would be to let students, teachers and the public know about some of the interesting people we have at Seigakuin. Even if the interview with the featured teacher cannot be recorded—as is highly likely—one or two students can speak about the interview.

Thirdly, having established both their place within the podcast community and their own university, students should think about how that relates to what kind of content they want to provide.

Some of the interviews suffered from quality altogether different from the one mentioned above: blandness. Many students who had written interview questions that could have been asked to anyone. As I told them; "There's not a single question here relevant to the person you're interviewing. You have done a good job of copying questions out of the book onto this sheet of paper, but you haven't thought about the person to whom you're asking the questions.

If their audience is people who know nothing about Japanese culture, then telling about rice crackers might be appropriate, but as I have pointed out, such an content provider/audience relationship doesn't yield much in the way of conflict, contradiction and problem-solving. There is really nothing there to foster the development of a social conscience. There wasn't even enough there to foster local pride. The student had no more

reason to write about Soga crackers then the fact that he'd received them as omiyage and liked them. It was about as relevant to local pride as Sony. Rather than going out of our way to provide content with wide appeal students should do interviews with teachers or administrators and to ask questions about matters that they feel really affect them. If the content is intrinsically interesting then listenership will increase and if not then so be it.

Start with modest goals. Students who bring to the administration's attention the sign in front of our university has the word, "Christian" misspelled as "Chirstian," who make efforts to urge administrators to correct this error and who follow the process through the bureaucratic steps are the same students who may someday take an active role in more critical matters in their community such as petitioning against a small elementary school being closed down or demanding that a traffic signal be placed at a busy and dangerous intersection in their neighborhood.

They can also ask questions to persons in their local area. Although this should be done in a safe context there are certainly ample opportunities with local privately owned restaurants, bookstores, Internet coffee shops they can highlight some of the good things about the communities surrounding Seigakuin.

They can also point out some of the problems and perhaps affect positive change. An example, of this is the corner in front of our university. It is no secret that very few drivers actually come to a full stop and we have all often seen cars speeding through even on rainy days without slowing down at all. Certainly such an obvious safety hazard is an appropriate topic for the students to question and they could ask local police as well as our security office questions. These interviews could be recorded or notes could be taken and reported later by the students. More importantly, the teacher after giving such examples should ask students if they have any similar observations, and should both encourage them to ask the right questions and give guidance in how to go about getting answers.

In this way students may come to see themselves as members of their

community. They may see themselves as actors and not merely subjects in a socially democratic society where their opinions matter and their voices. The entire concept of education should be examined, but most students go through their entire four years without ever seriously asking themselves why they have entered university. They assume what they have been taught to assume all their lives: that you go to university to get a good job and on an individual level this is certainly so. However, on a social level, which is just as, if not more, important, educational institutions, at their best, exist for the maintenance of values and improvement of society.

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