

Collaboration with a Social Studies class in the AP/Level 4 Japanese Language Classroom

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to discuss a collaborative teaching arrangement made between an upper-level Japanese class and a Social Studies class called the Pacific Rim at a high school in the Midwest region. Every semester, both the Japanese teacher and the Pacific Rim teachers select four or five culture topics together. The Japanese language students then do research on the selected topics in small groups and present their acquired culture information and viewpoints to Pacific Rim students. This paper reports on the collaborative teaching experiences and further describes how Japanese students interacted with Pacific Rim students. It highlights the advantages of collaborative teaching and also raises some concerns about the disadvantages of a collaborative approach. The teacher reflection includes implications and suggestions for facilitating interactive culture learning activities in the Japanese language classroom.

Key words: collaboration, promoting interactions, culture learning

Introduction

This paper is intended to discuss a collaborative teaching effort between an upper-level Japanese class in the World Languages department and a Pacific Rim class in the Social Studies department at a high school in the Midwest region. The school presented in this paper is a public high school, and has extensive curricular offerings in English, Math, Science, Social Studies, World Languages, Art, and others. The World Languages department offers six different

languages including Japanese. The Japanese program began in the 2004-2005 school year and now offers a full sequence of Japanese courses from levels 1 through Advanced Placement Japanese Language and Culture, while the Social Studies department provides various history and social science courses. One of the Social Studies courses offered is a one-semester Pacific Rim class, which is a survey-course on Asian countries such as China, Korea, and Japan. Students explore current Asian influences on U.S. events by studying Asian cultures.

In the Japanese language and culture course, students are expected to develop both language and culture skills in order to function in various social contexts in an appropriate manner. They are also encouraged to appreciate different points of view and ways of thinking about the world. One of the ACTFL Standards for Foreign Language Learning is Connections: Connect with other disciplines and acquire information (College Board, 2012). Benefits of interdisciplinary teaching are well reported by educators and researchers in educational institutions.

Interdisciplinary methods are particularly useful for creating connections among various disciplines (“Coffey,” n.d., para. 1). According to Ivanitskaya, Clark, Montgomery, and Primeau (2002), “students develop critical thinking ability and metacognitive skills, and an understanding of the relations among perspectives derived from different disciplines.” (p. 95) In addition, collaborative instruction is essential in order to promote interdisciplinary learning. It fosters student enthusiasm and inquiry for learning (Letterman and Dugan, 2004).

Dillenbourg (1999) presents in his article three dimensions regarding collaborative learning: the scale of the collaborative situation; what is referred to as ‘learning’; and what is referred to as ‘collaboration.’ First, the collaborative situation refers to group size and time span (p. 2). Second, collaborative learning defines “a situation in which particular forms of interaction among people are expected to occur, which would trigger learning mechanisms, but there is no

guarantee that the expected interactions will actually occur” (p. 5). Lastly, collaboration is concerned with some aspects such as situations, interactions, and mechanisms.

Collaborative teaching/learning arrangements

Collaborative learning/teaching took place between the level 4/AP Japanese and Pacific Rim classes. The Japanese AP and level 4 classes reported here were offered during the 2011-12 and 2012-13 academic school years. Most Japanese AP students were high school juniors and seniors, and began learning Japanese when they were freshmen. They were required to obtain Japanese cultural knowledge, as well as language skills. In the academic year of 2011-2012, 21 students from level 4 and 16 AP Japanese students participated in the culture project, while 19 AP students worked on the Pacific Rim project in the 2012-2013 academic year.

Every semester the Social Studies department offers a Pacific Rim class, which is a one-semester survey course mainly for sophomores. Throughout the semester the course covers the cultures of China, Japan, Korea and other Pacific regions, and students further investigate Asian influences on the United States. Two Social Studies teachers were in charge of three sections of a Pacific Rim course in those school years (one taught two sections; the other taught one). About 24 – 28 students were enrolled in each section. It is important to note that Japanese students worked on two identical culture projects during the year since there were different groups of Pacific Rim classes in fall and spring semesters of the year. The goals of collaborative teaching/learning between the two disciplines were:

- To have Pacific Rim students become familiar with some aspects of Japanese culture and have them interact with Japanese language learners;
- To have AP/level 4 students discover some specific aspects of Japanese culture; and

- To provide AP/level 4 students with the opportunity to interact with Pacific Rim students and to obtain culture learning/teaching confidence.

Creating Situations

In order to achieve the aforementioned learning goals, three types of collaborative situations were created. First, there were three meetings between one Japanese teacher and two Pacific Rim teachers about cultural topics. During the meetings, the teachers exchanged information about their students, schedules, and classroom situations. They also discussed appropriate topics and narrowed it down to four topics. They exchanged ideas about how to make Japanese and Pacific Rim students interact with each other in the classroom. The seating arrangements were also designed to promote interactions between both Japanese students and Pacific Rim students.

Second, AP/level 4 students spent five class hours (50 minutes per class) on their presentation preparation in small groups of four or five. In the 2011-2012 academic year, AP and level 4 Japanese students were divided into four groups of 4-5. The grouping was made according to student topic preferences. The selected culture topics were: Traditional foods, Origami, Traditional clothes (i.e., *kimono* & *yukata*), and Japanese writing system. In the following year, the AP class worked on Anime/Manga, Japanese Aesthetics, Japanese modern fashion, and Architecture in small groups. In both years each group prepared four questions for Pacific Rim students to answer. During their preparation period, all Japanese groups did research on their topic. Then some groups worked on creating PowerPoint slides, while others discussed use of real objects and/or pictures.

The third collaborative situation was arranged between Japanese students and Pacific Rim groups during one 50-minute class period. There were four culture topic stations created in the

classroom. The Pacific Rim groups visited each station for about eight minutes. Under teacher direction, they moved to the next topic station. One Japanese group gave its presentation to four Pacific Rim groups of 6-7 students. During the 2011-2012 academic year, the AP students gave their presentation to one Pacific Rim class, while level 4 students made a presentation to two classes. In the following year, only AP students worked on the project for three Pacific Rim classes. That is, they gave their presentation to three classes during the day.

Scaffolding Interactions

Dillenbourg (1999) emphasizes that the teacher needs to specify certain rules in order to facilitate productive interactions. For the Japanese students, the Pacific Rim presentation was a credit based culture project. They were responsible for completing their assigned tasks with other group members. The grading components were: 1) Content with questions; 2) Organization/Design of Presentation + handout; 3) Delivery; and 4) Creativity/Efforts. The first and second components were group points, while the third and fourth were individual points. This meant Japanese students had to work together in groups.

During the first two days in the computer room, Japanese students researched their selected culture topic in small groups and worked on four questions for Pacific Rim students to answer (see Appendix). The teacher, while walking around the room, provided groups with assistance and feedback to facilitate group tasks and discussions on the topics and questions. On the third and fourth days, students worked on their presentation slides and photos. Some group members prepared real objects such as origami art works. They also made a one-page handout and practiced their presentation on the last day. For example, the traditional clothes group practiced how to put on *yukata* and *obi*. The 2011-2012 Japanese writing system group made hiragana and

katakana charts to show Pacific Rim students what Japanese characters look like. They also discussed how to explain the writing system with three different characters. The teacher often reminded students that group members should work together, and made sure that each individual was accountable for completing his/her assigned task.

On presentation day, four Pacific Rim groups of 6-7 students visited each culture station and rotated to the next station every eight minutes. They were supposed to find answers to the questions written by the Japanese language students. The teachers walked around the stations in the classroom, and observed how Japanese and Pacific Rim students were interacting with each other. Interaction styles varied among different culture groups.

In the 2011-2012 academic year, the traditional foods group prepared cooked rice, seaweed called *nori*, and rice seasonings called *furikake*. Between Japanese students and Pacific Rim students there were conversations about, for example, *nori* and *furikake* ingredients and rice flavors. At the clothes station, after providing information on traditional clothes, Japanese students helped Pacific Rim students put on *yukata* with *obi* and/or *happi* coat. Many photos of smiling faces were taken here and there. The origami group explained the history of origami and helped Pacific Rim students make origami figures, like paper cranes, by explaining the information sheet on how to make origami. The Japanese writing group gave information about the three types of Japanese characters, through explanation of the prepared hiragana and katakana charts. Furthermore, they wrote names in katakana for Pacific Rim students.

It was observed that most Pacific Rim students were listening diligently to Japanese students, when filling in the worksheet with culture topic questions. As described above, they seemed to have fun putting traditional clothes and taking photos. However, not many were asking

questions about the presented topics. The spring groups were very similar to what was observed in the fall of 2011.

The 2012-2013 academic year groups worked on different topics: Anime/Manga, Japanese Aesthetics, Japanese modern fashion, and Architecture. There were two reasons for selecting different topics. One reason was to shift from traditional aspects of Japanese culture to more modern culture. The Social Studies teachers intended to introduce some aspects of pop culture to high school sophomores, because of greater potential interest from young people. The other reason was to consider the AP students who worked on the 2011-2012 topics when they were level 4 students. The teachers agreed it was better for students to not work on the same culture topics again.

The Manga/Anime group worked on PowerPoint slides, and also brought Anime DVDs and *Totoro* stuffed toys. The Japanese modern fashion group focused on introducing *Harajuku* fashions. On presentation day they showed pictures and used real *kosupure* costumes. They also reported on young kimono themed fashions with PowerPoint slides. Japanese Aesthetics students explained what beauty is in the Japanese sense, referring to traditional tea ceremony and its utensils, while the Architecture group used only PowerPoint slides to explain modern and traditional Japanese homes and buildings.

As compared to the previous year presentations, there was less interaction observed between Japanese students and Pacific Rim students. In the beginning of the 2013 spring semester, the Social Studies teachers suggested a reflection meeting with the Japanese AP class. It was intended to provide feedback on previous presentations and to discuss better presentation styles. AP students pointed out that Pacific Rim students were more focused on writing answers to the culture questions on the assigned worksheet by their teachers. It was also indicated most

presentations were photo & text oriented, and not with real objects such as foods. According to the Social Studies teachers, understanding the concept of Japanese aesthetics was pretty challenging for high school sophomores. More background information should have been given to them in advance. Many AP students expressed that they were a little disappointed by the fact that Pacific Rim students paid less attention to their presentation because they were busy filling in the worksheet.

The meeting discussions with Japanese AP students helped the teachers to find a better way of facilitating student interactions between two different classes. One change proposed by the Social Studies teachers was not giving a worksheet to their students. The worksheet would be provided after the presentation day: They would be instructed to pay more attention to the presentations on the day. It was suggested Japanese AP students use tangible objects and ask more questions to Social Studies students. For example, their questions could be given a true-false format, so that Pacific Rim students might interact more.

Although the Japanese group was the same AP class in the spring of 2013, different students were in charge of different culture topics. They were instructed to make their presentation more interactive. Aesthetics students used tea utensils to explain some concepts of Japanese aesthetics, while the teacher in a kimono demonstrated a traditional tea ceremony in front of the whole class. Pacific Rim students were invited to try *maccha* and Japanese sweets called *wagashi*. The fashion group demonstrated how to put on *yukata* with *obi*. Since the teacher was in a kimono and brought some kimono items such as *zori*, they were able to interact with Social Studies students through real traditional clothes, in addition to the use of PowerPoint slides on *Harajuku* young fashion. The Manga/Anime group used a laptop to show some clips of Anime films and gave questions about them in the quiz formats. However, the Architecture presentation

was based on PowerPoint slides, which was not too much different from the previous group's presentation.

Discussion of collaborative learning/teaching

According to Panitz (1999), collaborative learning is intended to promote human interactions, where individuals are responsible for their actions, including learning and respecting each other. He also states that the premise for collaborative learning is founded in constructivist theory that knowledge is discovered by students. Learning comes from student active participations. It encourages student responsibility and motivation for exploration and promotion of interpersonal relationships. Dillenbourg (1999) argues that collaborative learning is neither a mechanism, nor a teaching method. It creates a physical setting for peer interactions, which may generate extra activities such as explanation, and might trigger cognitive mechanisms such as internalization.

There were several advantages found in the collaboration of the Pacific Rim class and the Japanese class. First, collaborative learning promoted a student-centered/self-learning environment for Japanese students. They spent time obtaining cultural information through research, and designed their own presentations in a small group setting. Second, the collaboration provided social studies students with the opportunity to study some aspects of Japanese culture in an interactive way. They needed to find the answers to given questions, after visiting various culture stations in the classroom. Third, the collaborative teaching/learning opportunity lead upper-level Japanese students to a deeper understanding of target culture, based on the assumption that learning is more likely to occur if students actively participate in learning activities (Panitz, 1999). Lastly, it was very beneficial for the teachers to exchange curriculum information and to share new teaching ideas with each other.

However, there were some disadvantages/concerns found in the collaboration process. First, despite the teacher's reminders of the importance of member contribution, some Japanese students seemed to depend much on other group members during the process. Second, there was little language learning involved for Japanese students, except the Japanese writing group in the 2011-2012 academic year. One reason for this situation was the collaboration content was tailored more to the Pacific Rim curriculum, which did not require language learning. Third, there were some situations in which Japanese students felt disappointed by Social Studies students who were not paying attention to their presentation. They spent much time filling out the worksheet provided by their teacher at each culture station in the classroom. Lastly, it was a time demanding project for both Japanese and Social Studies teachers. It was not easy to find time for meetings within such limited time to discuss details of the project collaboration.

Teacher Reflection: Implications and Suggestions

The collaborative teaching/learning arrangement made between the two disciplines was intended to help both Japanese and Pacific Rim students discover and become familiar with Japanese culture in an interactive way. Japanese students were also expected to obtain confidence in cultural knowledge and skills through instruction to Social Studies classes.

In order to create an environment in which both Japanese students and Pacific Rim students would interact well with each other, the Japanese and the Social Studies teachers arranged meetings before the project started. However, it is important to point out that more communication about the curriculum contents, selection of culture topics, and presentation styles was necessary among the teachers. The meeting times were not adequate enough for teachers to understand each other and discuss details in terms of their counterpart classes and students.

First, it is suggested that a Japanese teacher observe a Pacific Rim class so that he/she would have a better idea about what level of Japanese culture content Social Studies students are actually learning in the classroom. It was good that the Social Studies teacher and Japanese AP students had the feedback meeting in the beginning of Spring 2013.

Second, it is also important for the teachers to discuss in detail three aspects of culture: Products, Perspectives, and Practices (3Ps). The discussion of these cultural aspects may lead to more appropriate selection of culture topics and presentation styles so that both Japanese and Social Studies students could be engaged in learning interactively. Culture topics such as Japanese aesthetics were a little challenging for Social Studies students to understand for a short period of time, while the Japanese group in the fall of 2012 ended up with a lecture-type presentation about the topic. To design an interactive presentation style, understanding the relationships among 3Ps will be helpful for both the teachers and the students. For example, the Japanese group could explain a Japanese way of welcoming guests through demonstration of tea ceremonies with tea utensils such as ceramic tea cups and a bamboo spoon called *chashaku*. Pacific Rim students would be guests who try *maccha*.

Third, the learning goal for Japanese students was more focused on student-centered cultural learning and obtaining confidence in culture knowledge and skills. However, Japanese students could incorporate Japanese words and expressions in their presentation. In a tea ceremony demonstration, they could practice and use polite Japanese greetings such as “*Doozo omeshiagarikudasai* [please have tea/sweets]” as well as Japanese words for utensils.

Lastly, collaborative learning/teaching is one way to create a situation in which students may interact with each other to promote learning opportunities. In order to create an interactive learning environment, it is crucial that teachers have sufficient communication regarding the

curriculum content and the students' knowledge level. The appropriate selection of culture topics and the design of presentation styles are important factors to be considered for promoting student interactions.

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Appendix

Manga/Anime group:

1. Why is anime so popular around the world?
2. What are different types of manga /anime?
3. What are some reoccurring tropes in anime?
4. What are common artistic traits of typical anime/manga characters?

Japanese Aesthetics group:

1. Where is the beauty in Ikebana?
2. How is this representative of Japanese aesthetics?
3. What is an example of mono no aware?
4. What does the cleaning of the utensils symbolize?

Japanese Fashion group:

1. Describe “harajuku.” Any (famous) designers?
2. How did the different styles get developed? Any inspiration involved?
3. What are the different types of Japanese cosmetics?
4. What is the difference between *Kimono* and *Yukata*?

Architecture group:

1. How has Japanese architecture evolved over time?
2. What major changes occurred in Japan from tradition to modern?
3. What is their plan for structuring new houses in Japan that is resistance to earthquakes over magnitude of 8.0?
4. What are the key aspects to tradition and modern Japanese architecture?