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The Possible Creation of a New Inter-generational Learning Space between Vulnerable Young Japanese and Older Adults: Some Findings from Personal Experience through a Face-to-Face Instructional Course at the Open University of Japan

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**The Possible Creation of a New Inter-generational Learning Space between
Vulnerable Young Japanese and Older Adults:
Some Findings from Personal Experience through a Face-to-Face Instructional
Course at the Open University of Japan**

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Abstract

There are a certain number of young Japanese people called 'NEET' who are 'Not in Education, Employment or Training', and they account for approximately 2% of all young Japanese. Most of them have had problems at school, such as bullying or poor performance in exams, resulting in social withdrawal. Though the percentage of such young people is not very large, there has been wide debate in this country on how to 'find' the most vulnerable young people who tend to isolate themselves from society, and how best to encourage them to go back to school or employment. Coincidentally, while providing a face-to-face instructional course as a lecturer, the author has found that some vulnerable youths tend to use their local learning centres which are affiliated to the Open University of Japan (OUJ). The author found that all the young people who appeared in that classroom had some problems at school and tended to have been socially withdrawn in the past, but had restarted their lives through being enrolled in the OUJ. Interestingly, adult students in the same classrooms have tried to help young people by giving them advice or telling them their own stories. It is suggested that since the OUJ has great potential for providing an ideal inter-generational learning space, more careful attention should be paid to the young people in OUJ classes.

1. Introduction

Issues surrounding young people are hard to capture in every society, and Japan is no exception. Along with the changing labour markets in the early 1990s, it has been pointed out that the situation of young people, especially in terms of employment, dramatically changed after most companies began to downsize the number of regular workers to reduce costs, and relied more on part-time workers. While some young people have been faced with very unstable labour markets resulting in low income and insufficient social security, there is another group of people who are called 'NEET' (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Though this term 'NEET' was originally created in 1999 in Britain, where it includes young people who are seeking jobs, in Japan, NEET does not include people who are seeking jobs. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, the so-called NEET in Japan are 'people aged between 15 and 34 who are unemployed, unmarried, not enrolled in school or engaged in housework, while not seeking work or the technical training needed for work despite the large number of jobs available'. It is reported that these people accounted for 2% of the same age cohort, which was approximately 850,000 in

2002.

What has been reported about the actual state of Japanese NEET is limited, but some characteristics were pointed out in a survey conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2007) as follows:

- 1) Most NEET had experienced bullying at school and 40% of them had withdrawn from school.
- 2) Family backgrounds of NEET were diverse, and they were not necessarily from deprived backgrounds.
- 3) 80% of NEET had experience of work, though this was often in the form of part-time temporary jobs in the service sector, but some of them had experienced problems with people at work.
- 4) Half had been to hospital to be treated for mental illness, while some had been diagnosed as having developmental diseases.
- 5) 80% felt guilty about not doing anything in society.
- 6) Most were unable to have a positive view about their futures. They were afraid of human communication, and they did not expect much from their jobs.

It is still difficult to find any effective way of approaching NEET to discover their actual living conditions and thoughts, although numerous projects and programmes to encourage these young people have been introduced at national, local, and regional levels to reduce the number of such youths. This paper intends to illustrate the author's experience of providing a face-to-face instructional course, and her subsequent interaction with vulnerable young students at the Open University of Japan (OUJ). It is hypothesised that most young people who are enrolled in the OUJ tend to have negative backgrounds at school, and therefore the OUJ has a great potential to offer an ideal inter-generational learning space to encourage vulnerable Japanese youth.

2. General trends in students at the Open University of Japan

The University of the Air in Japan was established in 1983 (which was renamed as 'the Open University of Japan' in 2007) and started to accept students who wished to take undergraduate degrees in 1985, though at the beginning the available area was confined to the central area of this country. Its programmes were taught mainly by utilising broadcast media such as radio and television, and these programmes were also available in video and other forms. Since 1998, when the CS digital broadcasting service started, the programme has become available throughout Japan, and since October of the same year, the university began to accept full-time students pursuing undergraduate degrees from all over the country. In October 2011, a BS digital broadcasting service was launched and it will replace the previous CS broadcasting service by March 2012. Apart from the headquarters of the OUJ in Chiba, there are 50 local learning centres called 'Study Centres', seven 'Satellite Spaces' and 61 'Audio-visual Rooms', all of which are located throughout Japan. These 'Study Centres' are used for various purposes, including face-to-face class sessions, credit certification examinations, tutorials, counselling services, library services for students to view and/or listen to broadcast lectures and so on. Making use of its 'Study Centres', OUJ provides not only broadcast lectures through TV and radio, but also face-to-face instructional courses. The latter cover various subjects and are normally coordinated by each of the 'Study Centres' across Japan.

According to the OUJ (2011), current students comprise 77012 undergraduate and 5262 postgraduate students and they are categorised as follows in terms of their

enrolments: regular students pursuing an undergraduate degree (58.9%), one-year non-degree students (20.5%), one-semester non-degree students (9.8%), special auditing students (4.2%), master's course students (1.4%), one-year non-degree master's course students (4.2%) and one-semester non-degree master's course students (1.1%). With regard to age groups, the OUI is well balanced and has the following proportions: in 10s (2%), 20s (13%), 30s (22%), 40s (25%), 50s (17%), and 60s (21%). It is also reported that slightly more female students are enrolled than male students.

Apart from categorizing these students in terms of their enrolment, not much attention has been paid to providing a career service to existing students (Yoshimoto & Tan 1998: 100), although there have been a number of surveys conducted on the learning needs and motivation factors of the students (Iwanaga, 1989; Otsuka, 1988; Hori & Hashimoto, 2003; Sakurai, Awahara & Wang, 2003). In other words, the OUI has not taken seriously students who have a clear vocational intention, and it is generally the responsibility of students to determine how they should proceed in their learning to find their own goals. Also, it can be found that, regarding the OUI, although there have been surveys of students by area, gender and age group, no research has ever focussed on the characteristics of young people studying at the OUI in particular.

According to the OUI (2011), the backgrounds of its students were: those from private companies (23.6%), those who are unemployed including housewives (25.1%), public servants (13.9%), those who are running independent businesses (4.6%), teachers (3.7%), part-time workers (5.3%), farmers and fishermen (0.3%), students of other higher education institutions (3.4%), and others (19.6%). Though it is not obviously reported, the category of 'those who are unemployed' includes vulnerable youth, and there are various reasons why vulnerable young people tend to choose the OUI as their way of becoming involved in society. Firstly, there is no requirement to take a 'University Entrance Qualification Test' or high school equivalence test to enter the OUI. As far as non-degree students are concerned, all are accepted if they are over 15. Secondly, even for those who enter the OUI as non-degree students, there are opportunities for them to become degree students at a later stage if they meet certain conditions while studying at the OUI. All these flexible admission policies and the curriculum have enabled vulnerable youth to feel it is easy to go back to school, and resume their study which had previously been interrupted. Thirdly, since they are not necessarily from low-income families and most of them do not face financial difficulty, it is easy for them to choose the OUI as an alternative route. In addition, in contrast to younger students, fewer older students at the OUI dropped out of school when they were young, and they normally come from a variety of backgrounds. It is assumed that this atmosphere produced by older students has indirectly made the classroom a safe and fascinating learning space, which has motivated vulnerable young people to study there, free from worrying about how they are viewed by ordinary young people of the same age.

3. Personal experience through a face-to-face instructional course at the Open University of Japan

The author was asked to conduct a face-to-face instructional course in recent years which required 12 hours in total¹⁾. The class was provided at one of the 'Study Centres' and was offered for two days at the weekend. There were 14 participants (10 males and four females) in the class, aged from 18 to 83, including six young people.

The only information provided beforehand was their names and ages, and the backgrounds of the students were not disclosed to the lecturer. Through the personal introduction given by each student, it became apparent that six adult students were retired, while two were still working. Their previous work experience included: nurse, insurance sales consultant, teacher, and businessman, but most seemed to have led successful lives since they were young, without serious financial problems. Since the course was concerned with andragogy, at the beginning of the course, all the students were asked to draw their lives so far from their own perspectives on a piece of white paper using several coloured pens. It was not necessary for this to be a precise figure or pictures, and they were just asked to draw whatever came to mind. Detailed explanation could be provided by adding short sentences.

The drawing of each student was observed carefully by the lecturer, and some encouragement was given if anyone seemed to find difficulty in drawing their pasts. For almost all students, it appeared to be an enjoyable time, and they demonstrated their creativity freely without serious hesitation. There was a tendency that some male students who used to be white collar workers wrote out details very neatly, and the drawing was almost like a CV. On the other hand, female students did not care about 'what it meant' very much, and tended to describe their feelings more directly with some interesting figures which were difficult for others to understand. Yet, it did not take long for the lecturer to realise that all six young students aged from 18 to 34 had negative experiences of school, and almost all of them were hesitant to describe what had taken place at school. However, most depicted their present lives better than those tough times.

Those drawings took almost 1-2 hours on a Saturday morning, and the lecturer originally thought that she was going to spend an equal amount of time checking each student's drawing, giving some comments if necessary. However, things did not proceed as originally expected. The lecturer had to spend most of the time with a male student 'X' who was aged 20. At the beginning, he did not draw anything, showing anxiety with an uneasy look. After much advice and suggestions from the lecturer, he finally said 'I've got it... Give me some coloured pens.' He started to draw a house with a black pen, then he tried to delete it with a red pen by drawing fire. After more than a couple of hours, it was the only thing he had drawn. Before Saturday lunchtime, all the students were asked to turn in their drawings to the lecturer, and say whether or not they wished to make a presentation about their drawings at the end of the class. One third of the students stated that they were willing to speak in front of the class, while the rest stated they would not wish to do so. Needless to say, their preferences were respected. During lunchtime, while the lecturer was checking each of the drawings submitted by students, she realised that student 'X' had added a sentence to his drawing of a burning house. What he wrote was 'It was the first time I could understand why some people would like to kill somebody'. That extra sentence made the lecturer reconsider the appropriateness of the teaching content and the coordination of that class.

That afternoon, three students' drawings were displayed and at the same time the students were asked to redraw their creations on a large piece of paper for display. A 23-year-old female student who had experienced problems at school in the past, a 52-year-old female student who used to be a nurse, and an 83-year-old male student were chosen to explain their drawings. After their presentations, some comments and questions were provided by other students and later by the lecturer. It was one of the most impressive moments in that class, since people of different ages tried to

encourage each other with warm comments. For example, when that 23-year-old female student, who had once dropped out from school, started to explain her past with the drawing, she sometimes stopped talking, remembering her sad memories. Then, other participants of different ages soon started to help, giving her very encouraging comments such as ‘You are a brilliant student now, aren’t you? Now you can reflect on your past very clearly and objectively. Above all, you are now able to look at your past very positively. You are doing very well now’. The same thing happened to another 52-year-old female student when she revealed that she had had a still-born baby when she was young. All the other students tried to find the right words to encourage her in all respects. While the class was going on, student ‘X’ was carefully observed by the lecturer. He did not comment on anything to the others, but listened to what the others said quietly, with an uneasy look. He wrote at a later stage that he wanted to get out of the classroom at that point, but thought that he should stay there, as the lecturer had tried to support him in various ways. For the rest of this course, the contents of the lectures revolved around more general matters closer to the author’s speciality.

4. Some findings through subsequent interactions with vulnerable young students

After the course, in addition to their personal reports on the course, some participants personally e-mailed the lecturer, saying that they were inspired by the course, especially ‘the drawing experience’, not only in terms of the contents, but also in terms of the interaction between vulnerable young people and adult students. Some older students stated that they did not know young people in the same classroom had experienced such serious problems in the past. On the other hand, young people stated that they had been very encouraged by older experienced adults’ thoughtful comments. According to them, they had hardly talked with each other before the class, though they met from time to time to take such ‘face-to-face’ intensive courses. The classes were an unexpectedly good opportunity for people all ages of to interact with each other, bringing out the advantages of each individual. Student ‘X’ did not write to the lecturer immediately, but one and a half years later, he suddenly sent an e-mail. He said that the face-to-face instructional course had been a turning point in his life and he had gone abroad afterwards to experience many different new things because he was inspired by the lecturer’s experience of studying abroad. Although Student ‘X’ still seems to have problems in communication with others, he has now started listening to what others say, and is rethinking his opinions, according to his e-mail messages to the lecturer.

This experience has made the lecturer wonder about the appropriateness and future possibilities of the course, and she has come to the following conclusions. Firstly, there is a possibility of having a new inter-generational learning space in each of the ‘Study Centres’ within the OIJ. Whilst most of the classes are occupied by elderly people in other types of institution for lifelong learning in Japan, there is an ideal balance of different ages of people in the OIJ. Considering the fact that some vulnerable young people chose the OIJ as a route to restarting their lives, it could be a better learning space, especially if older people think about their young classmates more deeply, not only in the classroom, but also in other non-formal and informal places. Secondly, in terms of the methodology of the face-to-face instructional course, a wider variety of teaching methods could be introduced. According to the students of the course provided by the author, most of the face-to-face instructional courses

tended to be one-sided. However, it is clear that it may be the only space where they can meet people of different ages. Normally, the lectures were conducted by academic staff of the OUI or by academic staff from other universities. The latter members of staff were not well informed about the students' lifestyles in the OUI, so if more information were provided about students in advance it could improve the quality of each course. Thirdly, it is suggested that the OUI should take young people who have had negative experiences at school more seriously by providing careful guidance and advice on learning so that young students can get rid of their anxiety, while enjoying a new learning environment.

5. Concluding Remarks

Established in 1983, the Open University of Japan currently accepts more than 70,000 students of various ages, and has a unique learning environment. Unlike other organisations and/or institutions for lifelong learning in Japan, a feature of the OUI is that it maintains well-balanced different age groups, and therefore one of the OUI learning styles, the face-to-face instructional course, could be a good chance for students to meet different kinds of people in society. Although it is not reported in an obvious way, it is true that some vulnerable young people tend to use the OUI as a route to restarting their lives. Since most programmes to encourage these young people are currently being conducted by non-profit voluntary organisations in Japan, this phenomenon implies many new possibilities, because it is clear that there is a public institution which accepts a large number of vulnerable young people who wish to get back into society. Although more detailed and comprehensive study on the characteristics of young people in the OUI is required, it is suggested that more careful consideration should be given to those young people in terms of learning space, teaching style and individual guidance. Since the OUI has a great high potential for providing an ideal learning space for people of all ages, this factor should not be neglected, considering the current situation surrounding vulnerable youth. It is suggested that more careful consideration should be given to these young people and the opportunities for making more effective use of their older classmates.

Note:

- 1) In order to protect the privacy of vulnerable young people appeared in this paper, details such as the exact name of the 'Study Centre', the name of the course and the names of the students are treated anonymously.

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