

Pedagogical Implications: Approaching Writing in Different Cultural Contexts

Laidlaw Leadership-in-Action Project Report

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Introduction

Yoronjima is an island in the southern part of the Kagoshima Prefecture in Japan. Its population is just under 5,000 people, with most residents never having been outside of Japan or met a foreigner. Particularly concerning the Kagoshima Prefecture, there remains fewer opportunities to pursue extracurriculars or activities outside of the school, with a significantly less budget for Kagoshima jurisdictions. This, in part with the lack of interaction with foreigners, presents fewer opportunities to appreciate cultural differences and contexts, as they have never met.

Anecdotally, students in Yoron, when asked about their least favourite subject, almost always respond with English. The English proficiency in Japan is low. Most students, having no desire to study internationally or in English, also do not study for English proficiency tests.

With both of these problems presented, I sought to do a multi sub-project initiative in Yoronjima to address these educational gaps in students. The issue with teaching writing is not only limited to Japan; it is a systematic problem worldwide. Often, schools are criticized with how they teach writing, more so in relation to understanding why we cite and how we incorporate other voices in writing to elevate our own. Thus, an entire revamp of how writing is taught in English is usually a major area of discussion in pedagogy. Furthermore, there is a lack of insight as to how universal English citation pedagogical practices are. Therefore, I wanted to see firsthand how the students would understand how to cite. This would be done in the main project of this LiA, in which the goal was to help teach the students about research presentations through a culmination of workshops. In the end, I write a report about the feedback of the science camp.

To give an overview of the science camp, first, we need to understand the intended purpose. This is the 4th iteration of the science camp, whereby students traditionally coming from Yoron only (but having expanded to students in the Amami Islands this year), come up with their own research questions pertaining to research on water and land, in relation to the problems in Yoron. This encourages the students in Yoron to be future leaders of the island by giving them this opportunity that would not be found in such a small island otherwise. The students have continued and created unique questions pertaining to water practices and availability in Yoron. These questions have really practical implications, but it is the teaching of the scientific method and presenting the research background that is really important for them to do well. So, this is the one project my LiA mainly focused on: applying pedagogical implications to research presentations. I did this with grade 11 students, which was a bit hard since even at the university level, students have a hard time wrapping their head around some citation frameworks. This, coupled with the language barrier, would prove a challenge for me.

On the topic of cultural exchange, I wanted to do a Pen Pal project since the students rarely interacted with people from different backgrounds. Moreover, it was another opportunity for the students to improve in their English, because the English teacher wanted them to write the students in English to work on their communication. I at first did not care if the students wrote the letters in English or Japanese since cultural exchange was the end goal. However, seeing how this presented an opportunity for the students to improve their English and apply pedagogical research, I was really on board with the suggestion.

Lastly, to present more extracurricular opportunities to the students outside of sports, I wanted to translate a Model UN (MUN) curriculum I had developed in my last couple of years in high school and modify it for the Asia MUN circuit. This would help students with other areas such as public speaking.

In this report, I will discuss the project with the following underlying themes: community engagement, leading with love, time management, and navigating cultural norms.

Challenges Faced

I was going into Japan with a limited understanding of how students' lives were structured. Suffice it to say, I was extremely shocked with how busy the students were around the clock. More specifically, a handful of students would do club activities in the morning, with school going to around 4pm, and then most students did club activities after school. Following that, they would go to after-school classes to do their work. Their schedules sometimes demanded them to come on weekends, as was also mandated once a month to have school on Saturdays due to the structure of Kagoshima's educational system.

More than that, I was shocked to see how busy the teachers were. I was told there was a curriculum change two years ago, and that is why the teachers would be making new materials constantly. This, coupled with their extensive involvement in the school activities, also resulted in them having tight schedules. A lot of teachers would leave school at around 7pm, and the work culture was such that employees who were supervised by someone would come earlier than their supervisors and leave after their supervisors too.

This meant some of my intended timelines to execute projects involved putting some more workload on the students. Even in the summer, all students would take summer classes, which was an option in Canadian schools, but that was only for half of summer usually. Furthermore, club activities typically run during summer vacation in Japan. Due to this, while I was planning days for the science camp workshops, I would constantly get blockers in giving a whole curriculum of workshops due to the students having different club activities such as

archery and table tennis, and the fact that the science camp wasn't considered a club activity. When we think about club activities, we usually think in terms of going to a meeting once a week, or only usually meeting leading up to competitions. But these students had club activities almost every day, and as a result, they only did one and up to two club activities. Thus, scheduling time to adequately teach the students about research was very difficult.

Another problem which I did know I would encounter was the perception of teaching pedagogical research practices. I think the school admin were confused as to why I was starting the science camp modules on scientific writing and citing. As such, when I moved onto the more presentation-related portions, the teachers kindly told me that this is what the students and they themselves were expecting in terms of the workshop content. I started out with very unfamiliar concepts such as parts of a research introduction as well as frameworks that were in research papers and not implemented in any curriculum. Thus, a challenge was not only explaining the significance given the different structures of writing in English and Japanese, but also, simplifying the language so students who have never been exposed to citation practices could make sense of what I was talking about. Oftentimes, Tanaka-sensei, the English teacher, would spend a lot of time explaining to the students because when some of them were quiet, it meant they didn't understand what was going on.

Leadership Skills Applied and Developed

Here in this section, I will reflect upon my leadership skills that were used and built upon throughout the LiA. The ones I would like to focus on are cultural humility, leading with love, and the fast competency.

Although I thought I wouldn't be challenging many cultural biases, there were some that I had of Japan prior to arriving. One of the biases I don't really think was related to the project. I was afraid of how I would be perceived in terms of how I looked because weight-wise, I'm a bit above average. I was reading people's stories about being made fun of for being overweight in Japan, and I was scared I would get judged and treated in Yoron based on how I looked, which made me anxious. However, it was the complete opposite, and I would say the culture around how people were treated had to do with the environment communities would foster. I was welcomed everywhere, even though I didn't know how to speak much Japanese. The people in Yoron were all so hard-working, not caring about superficial things like one's appearance. When I was perceived as Canadian, I never got asked the question of, where was I from *from*. That question does not really bother me anymore anyway, but I was really grateful to how open-minded everyone in Yoron was.

Another cultural bias I had to challenge was the assumption that students were shy, when they were absolutely far from that. It takes time to get accustomed to strangers, but that transition was quick. I couldn't communicate properly with many students, but despite the language barrier, they were very friendly. I would have lunch with the students every day, and sometimes I remained quiet so as to not disturb their conversations in Japanese, but at some point, they would start including me, and then we would go on back and forth the next time I'd see them. So, there were many assumptions I made that I shouldn't have, which may have contributed to my initial anxiety and imposter syndrome.

For the fast competency, this came about when I would grade English writing the morning of a class where I would hand it back and notice common themes that emerged in a pedagogical context. Therefore, I created a very impromptu lesson about how to translate writing to reflect critical thinking, translate the entire lesson to Japanese, and then have them complete an activity. This turnaround for creating the lesson occurred in 40 minutes, and even I was surprised that I could get it done in such a short time. Compromising in situations to enhance student learning was a valuable skill to learn and apply, which happened many times during the LiA when creating lessons and applying what the students learned the day before. This also became important to apply due to my time after going to the hospital following my back injury, where the students for the science camp needed to apply and learn many more skills through the workshops, but there simply wasn't much time left, especially when lessons I prepared would be interrupted by sudden typhoon warnings, at which point I would need to compromise on the portion of time spent teaching each section of scientific writing and presentations.

To really be fast, however, I needed to be there for the students during the science camp. With it being so intensive, the students barely had a day to analyze their data, interpret it via graphs, and make the remaining portions of their presentation. I was with them during the science camp, helping interpret the data and make the presentations. That day, we finished officially at 7pm, but I came by the hotel at 9pm (was supposed to come at 8:30 but I couldn't find the hotel since I didn't have a phone on me and relied on pictures of the place) to help them finish up, and I was moving back and forth between all the groups. One of the students had caught a cold, but she was still working through it.

And this all brings me to the final competency: leading with love. For the Pen Pal projects, I gave individual feedback for every student on their letter and sat down one on one for a lot of them to go through the writing. The language barrier was difficult, and at times, I felt that I wasn't able to help them a lot due to that and since there was no signal in the school, I couldn't use a translation service. But I still did my best by giving some written feedback in Japanese, which was really difficult for me, but if it made it easy for the students, I would be

more than happy to do it. They put effort into the letters by taking it back for homework, and similarly, I wanted to be there for them to take the assignment seriously. I really cared for the students, despite only meeting them three times. They were adorable and curious too, and I learned so many interesting things about each of them through their Pen Pal projects. It taught me that having the best interests for the students meant showing up for them despite the difficulties, and that was one way to lead with love. My relationships with the teachers coordinating these projects extended outside of the LiA, where I was also giving feedback to students pertaining to spoken word competitions in English, dedicating many hours to editing their drafts and giving feedback with the English teachers in Yoron. They, too, are hardworking and the students are incredibly lucky to have such dedicated teachers. The teachers taught me a lot about leading with love too, seeing how enthusiastic and close they were with their students.

For the science camp, there were also many instances presented whereby I could see leading with love in action. This is where I would define it as trying to do as much as possible for the mission. Obviously, there are healthy boundaries for doing work. But wanting to work to optimize parts of the LiA and not strictly stick to the goals, but rather trying to better tailor it to them, is one of the biggest ways that we lead with love. This may also be exemplified in the form of building long-term connections. I was with the science camp students on the ferry to Naha before we flew out to Tokyo, and I was talking with them all as we were laying down, about life, advice I'd give them as an older sister, and I felt like I was travelling with a bunch of my siblings. With the teachers, I learned so much from them and gained so many valuable insights on their views of life and experiences pertaining to culture, all contributing to my understanding of how I can better lead with love.

Ethical Considerations

I don't think I engaged in too many ethical challenges. One thing that was really important for me was making sure I was contributing to a safe environment for the children. I remember when I was in a program where I would be matched with my mentee, there were strict rules to never have contact with the mentee outside the program. Similarly, while I valued creating lasting bonds with the students in Yoron, I wanted to be mindful of the safety and potential power imbalances that could be presented if I were to extend friendships outside of school. I've had high school students network with me in the context of Model United Nations. So here, the students' parents and teachers encouraged the children to reach out to me about anything pertaining to English help. So, I limited my network to grade 11 students and above. The grade 5 and 6 students wanted to add me on Roblox though haha.

Also, I did not want to perpetuate the idea that English pedagogical practices were better than Japanese. The findings of this LiA in the context of the science camp indicated to me that there are cultural differences in how English pedagogical frameworks fit depending on the language. Overall, in Japanese, the application of such frameworks occurs in a less direct context and avoid criticizing people in particular. Yet, contrary to what some scholars debate, there presents no lack of pedagogical practices due to writing and citation forms in different languages. Not everything may be a universal indicator of good writing, but that just means we should take the time to appreciate language and its context in culture.

As for what this taught me about ethical leadership, I extensively reflect on this in one of my weekly logs. Ethical leadership is about putting the needs of the community first. It means prioritizing their experience, working with them rather than making decisions on how to apply the project alone, getting their input and feedback through some sort of means, and creating an impact that can be sustained by the community. This also ties into accessibility, because part of the challenge with LiA is that sometimes we work in places with resource access is limited. Thus, another ethical consideration is that we should strive to make our LiAs accessible outside of our presence, otherwise we can unintentionally create barriers.

Collaboration and Team Dynamics

I learned a lot about working with others in Yoron. Even from the way we would ask to execute tasks and support others. There's obviously a different level of respect when children interact with the elderly on the island, but it's not the kind of respect that distances themselves from the adults in their lives. In fact, everyone treats each other like family and I really got to witness how it felt to be in a collectivist society. I was very comfortable telling teachers and students what I needed to go forward with stages of the LiA and they likewise trusted me with getting tasks done. One thing I wish I could do was communicate with everyone before the LiA. Collaboration does not necessarily have to be done in a professional setting or with professional relationships when we talk about it in the context of work. I think we avoid conflating family and collaboration together in the West because usually it's used to justify working long hours. And truth be told, sometimes people do work long hours in Japan, and I don't think that really has to do with how people viewing each other as family, but rather, that is the work culture. There were so many people involved in making this possible and I only got to know a handful before I began the LiA. So even if people don't like the concept of treating the people you work with as family, which I completely understand, I don't see a problem with it as long as labelling the work environment as such does not come at the expense of unpaid or uncompensated work.

So I've come out of this LiA with so many sister and brother-like figures. I just got this image for the school culture festival showcasing the science camp, and the students wanted to show me what they did. The message and picture are from my little sister, Shana.

今日は文化祭です！サイエンスキャンプのブースを作って、展示をします！！ぜひアイシャさんにも見てもらいたくて、写真を送りました💕

Today is the Cultural Festival!
 Making a booth for science camp and displaying it!! I wanted Ayesha to see it, so I sent her a picture 💕

[Hide translation](#)

I wanted you to see it in person 🥺



Conclusion

This reflection covered the importance of teaching pedagogy in a cultural context through both the science camp and the Pen Pal project. Key insights included:

- Cultural humility being important to understand how to apply concepts taught in English and integrate them into Japanese
- The fast competency being important in order to deliver the whole workshop studies that I have developed after the fact after experimenting with the first iteration of the science camps
- The importance of making a impact that can be applied through the locals there, thus, accessibility is an important part of leadership
- Ethical leadership goes hand in hand with leading with love in order to best serve the interests of the community

This experience made me comfortable with starting initiatives on my own that are dedicated to creating equal opportunities for everyone, and dealing with a focus on addressing marginalized communities, which is the theme I would like to continue with in graduate school. Moving forward, I would like to apply my research in pedagogy studies in a broader context, as this was a pilot in two ways: one, introducing the concept of citations in this way to high school students, and two, investigating the cultural differences in good writing presentations when approaching the research genre.