

## **The Shibata Project: A Freirean Approach to Community-based Research in the EFL Classroom**

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### **Meaningful Research and Community-based Education**

The purpose of this paper is to introduce an ongoing experiment in community-based research at Keiwa College, a small liberal arts college located in the historic castle town of Shibata in northern Niigata Prefecture, Japan. Using a problem-posing approach developed from Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, as well as techniques from the field of community-based participatory research, students study about Shibata through primary and secondary sources, produce original English documents based on this research, and present them back to the city in a kind of educational recycling. Over the past 4 years, students have been turning the community into an open classroom, with a textbook created by their own lived and discovered experiences.

In *Revolutionary Social Transformation*, Paula Allman asks, "Why have language teachers been reduced to technicians whose intellectual and creative skills have been incorporated in learning packages the consumption of which they now only disseminate, manage, and assess?"<sup>1</sup> This is especially true with post-secondary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Japan. As the number of college-age young people decline, colleges and technical schools have become more competitive: in the process, English education has taken a conservative turn to skills-based, achievement test oriented curriculums.

Moreover, the institutional classrooms for the privileged classes of first world countries provide safe spaces which while allowing students to study safely and work with amenities such as clean desks, computers, TVs, and other equipment, largely cut out the life which goes on outside. The voices of those working around the school, in the community, in the rice paddies around Keiwa College, the voices of workers and ordinary community

people, have a hard time being heard inside.

In contrast, American educator Myles Horton (1998) suggests that the problems and the needs of education cannot be separated from the problems and needs of the community. A sound curriculum should be based at least in part on community problems and needs: in other words, educational goals should be adapted to meet the larger goals of the people in and around the school.

Education, especially research, helps students make sense of the world while at the same time helping them to understand their role as 'players' in the world. Classroom activity can lead students to a point of critical literacy, the ability to understand the construction of the world around them and their relation to it through projects that do not measure success in terms of high test scores or micro-skills tests. This vision of classroom research "involves student inquirers as courageous citizens, not merely good students."<sup>2</sup>

Commercially produced EFL textbooks exacerbate this problem by further isolating students from their surroundings. While our school is surrounded by agriculture and many of my students' families are involved in farming, there are no farmers in the textbooks produced by the large companies. There is a serious shortage of traditional workers, laborers, and civil servants as well: occupations close to my students' lives, experiences, and ambitions. Furthermore, commercially produced textbooks give students little opportunity to meaningfully provide content from their own local point of view. The devaluation of the local is passed from textbooks through teachers on to students.

Community-based research gives students and teachers an opportunity to step outside of language textbooks. Instead of grappling with watered down English created elsewhere (usually not Japan and very likely not Niigata), students are invited to engage with the problems of their own community and to express these things in English for the first time, challenging the textbook hegemony by creating a new one. Students and teachers, through learning together and creating original texts, can share their discoveries with other learners. In *Experience and Education* (1936), John Dewey suggests that instead of learning from texts and teachers, students and teachers should learn from experience—"a created experience, if necessary."<sup>3</sup>

How can we create meaningful experience for college students? I have

tried to replace traditional textbooks with direct experiences in our local community, guided by the teacher but created the students. In doing so, I have sought to break down the institutional walls separating the college from its surroundings and take critical English education to all places in the community. I have been inspired by Myles Horton to take what we learn and create in our classroom and give it back to the community as volunteers: an education for collective change, not personal gain. Our Shibata Project consists of three main steps: (1) Primary and secondary research done in the community, (2) Production of original English documents, and (3) The recycling of these documents back into the community through public presentations and the donation of materials.

For students to truly engage their community they must understand something about it. They must be engaged in the research of its culture and history as a fluid thing: not culture trapped in time or textbooks, but changing and being shaped by many forces. Most English textbooks feature units or activities based on cultural exchange. How is Japanese culture represented here? More often than not, it is either a static thing, or a victim of unstoppable change. I would suggest that both presentations are inaccurate, and can best be corrected by engaged primary research in a Japanese community.

Primary research exposes students to a sometimes ambiguous, human point of view. Students discover that opinions and data come from people, and people do not always agree. The unquestionable and unquestioned hegemony, as well as the limitations, of secondary research is thus broken. Patricia Hinchey suggests, "When students need information they can't find in the library, I point them to a telephone book and a telephone: yes, they can call someone they don't know and ask for information."<sup>4</sup> Although my students are usually nervous about calling a community person for the first time, this experience becomes another opportunity for education. Student confidence increases. This is an working example of Dewey's "created experience." In this type of education, learners and educators participate together in an ever-widening context: students are not limited to their immediate experience, and educators are not limited to textbooks and texts created elsewhere.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, in his landmark work *Pedagogy of the*

*Oppressed* (1970), describes two kinds of education: banking and problem-posing. In the traditional, teacher-centered banking education model, information is "deposited" by the teacher into the student and "withdrawn," unchanged, at test time. The teacher is in control of the material from beginning to end; students are empty containers, and the knowledge itself is considered unquestionable and timeless. This model suppresses meaningful student inquiry and reduces learning to what Myles Horton has called "mental gymnastics."<sup>5</sup>

American literacy advocate Herbert Ginnis writes that "learning occurs most effectively, and with the greatest positive acceptance on the part of the learners, when the educational environment empowers the learners, and engages them in the active exercise of their individual and collective powers."<sup>6</sup> Of this empowering aspect, Freire says that education is politics, and that the teacher who claims to be apolitical is only supporting the politics of the status quo. He suggests asking the question: "What kind of politics am I doing in the classroom? That is, in favor of whom am I being a teacher?" Every teacher in every classroom works *in favor* of something and *against* something. Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, in his 1986 acceptance speech, said, "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."<sup>7</sup>

In Freire's problem-posing model, learning can transcend the one-way transfer of skills or information from a talking teacher to a passive student. Teaching should offer an illumination of reality that helps both teachers and students to examine the social limits constraining them. Teachers cannot be content to be the voice of the commercial textbook, nor can they merely serve as test givers and skill checkers, border guards who insure that those who pass carry the appropriate credentials. Skills may be neutral, but education never is. As Nina Wallerstein states, "Education starts from the experiences of people and either reinforces or challenges the existing social forces that keep them passive."<sup>8</sup> If we wish to help students break out of their passivity, we must start where the students are, both physically and historically: students' experiences and students' communities should become the foundation of our classrooms. Using a Freirean approach, we can urge learners to make critical interventions in the "real world," to take cultural

action designed to promote and perpetuate a better community.

### **Generating Themes: How the Class Works**

In *Experience and Education*, John Dewey poses three questions for educators: Who decides what counts as knowledge? Who controls how, where, and when knowledge is made? Where does subject matter come from and what do we do with it? Freire suggests that the first step to answering all three of these questions is *naming the problem*. For students in the Shibata Project, the first step was naming the community: What makes our community? Who makes our community? Where and when did it come from? Where is it going? After separating the problems into 6 broad categories: agriculture, food culture, economics, festival history, history, and culture, students can begin the naming process. They divide themselves into teams based on their own interests in the six categories, and begin brainstorming. Of course, at this stage there are many questions. As the teacher, I participate in the process from the beginning. At the same time, I work outside of class with the community to continue the naming process. I talk to local people to get an idea of what is unknown in Shibata, what needs naming in English, and where students could start. This is an essential step: by breaking down the wall between school and community, by inviting community participation from the very beginning, a truly collaborative syllabus is created.

A community class implies not only participation on a student level from local people, but involvement at the highest levels with community input. In the course of the project, I have begun to feel that teachers might be better off designing their syllabi at the City Office rather than in their own office. The very design of the class can be laid out on the table with sympathetic community activists, creating a truly bottom up classroom. I have found many kind, generous people who are waiting for the chance to interact with young people and pass their experience and feelings on to the next generation; as educators, all we have to do is ask.

After the problems are initially named, the next step is to create what Freire (1970) calls "generative codes." A generative code is a representation of a problem to help us understand and approach it outside the normal confines of language. A code can be anything: a short text, a picture, a

drawing, an object, or a skit. The syllabus and the structure of the course are then created around the codes.

The process of creating codes usually takes us from two to three classes. In small groups, students use brainstorming, free writing, group writing, drawings, and mapmaking to codify their questions. In one assignment, I asked the students to make 10 drawings about their topic, their understanding of it, their experience with it, and their questions about it. Other assignments have included role-play, interviews with grandparents, and fiction writing. One purpose of creating codes is to allow students to think about their problem without the barriers of language. Even if their English skills are not sufficient at first to discuss their problem deeply, with a visual or physical code, dialogue with others can begin. Language proficiency develops from this, rather than the other way around.

From codes, vocabulary and grammar are generated. Teams create weekly writings and vocabulary lists based on their codes, gradually expanding their ability to converse fluently about their community questions. My role in this phase is to focus the investigations, give advice, and provide support. Using the codes, we start to gather background information. Students begin by using the Internet or traditional print sources; I also use my collection of Shibata articles from *Niigata Nippou* as well as archival materials loaned to me by the City Office and collected personally.

Soon, research questions emerge: Why are all these downtown shops closed? Why is there a castle here and what does it mean today? Why was Shibata chosen as a castle town in the first place? What are the connections between Shibata and Kyoto? Where did the character of Shibata come from? In the writings that come from these explorations of code, I ask students to try to fit their stories into the larger socioeconomic, cultural, or political context, to ask why there is a problem. My role as a teacher is to lead the students into positive action, through the power of their research and their English writing.

While gathering the background information necessary to continue with our inquiries, students are also gaining important skills: how and where to do meaningful secondary research, and how to summarize articles and other materials in English. These summaries and short writings provide "textbook" material for the class each week, serving the dual purpose of providing more

Shibata information for everyone while improving individual English writing skills. These weekly journals also introduce students to the key vocabulary and expressions they will need to complete their final projects in English. Every week, all research is shared with all class members through the journal.

Furthermore, by assembling the weekly paper, students can see that their efforts in class every week have meaning and validity. Their work, rather than being done for a grade or for individual grammatical gain, makes a primary contribution to the class progress: their work is the class.

For about a month, students analyze and synthesize the available data on Shibata, both in English and Japanese. They cross-reference their findings with other teams, occasionally giving me difficult questions to take to the City Office. Some of their themes are quite challenging, and I have to do my own share of the research as well. While the Shibata Project is a community learning experience, the students remain always at the center.

Many of the materials I borrow from the City Office are out-of-print or very rare, presenting another question for students: why are these essential pieces of Shibata history not available to everyone? The materials that are available are often very difficult for students to read—even though they are in Japanese. "Where are the easy-to-understand, introductory explanations of Shibata?" my students ask. "We are making them," I answer. Our project is working on two solutions: distributing our materials as widely as possible, and making them easy enough for even young students of English to enjoy. As English writing teachers, we often demand, "Write for the audience!" In this project, the need suddenly becomes real, and students themselves realize it—the rule doesn't have to be imposed from above.

After the initial research is completed, we move to the next stage: primary research. This is the point where the students enter the community and make contact with community people, the living representatives of the secondary research they have been doing up to this point. To develop a list of possible contacts, I take the students' codifications, questions, and essays to a local community representative and ask for his or her help in matching student interests with local people. In this capacity, Noriko Takahashi, of Kanemasu Brewery, and Keiko Yamaguchi, of Shibata City Office, have been immeasurably generous and supportive. To keep the project as student-

centered as possible, we follow a three-part contact process: first, the community representative contacts the interviewees informally and explains the project. Then, I ask my students to make their own contact with the interviewee. Finally, I follow up and confirm the interview appointment.

At this stage, some students complain, "But Mark, can't you just make the appointment yourself and save us the trouble?" Of course, I can, but I don't, because this initial contact between student and community person, even a hesitant telephone conversation, is essential. By means of this small step, students make a giant leap in their social education. Calling the interview sources is a first experience for many students talking to the adult world—the vague world of "company president" and cultural keepers that many students feel cut off from. However, after making this initial contact, students gain confidence and grow in their ability to communicate with humans outside of their immediate social group.

At all stages of the project, I am concerned that the fluency of the teacher not silence the developing verbal styles of the students. One way to insure this is to assign students roles that the teacher cannot fulfill. My students know more than I do about some things, and I know more than they do about others. When the class is finished, we all know more. What the students have to say is essential for the progress of the class. They cannot be passive and wait for the teacher to fill in the missing pieces. We are united together in the search for information and the creation of knowledge.

The documents brought to class determine the direction of lesson plans, not the other way around. I don't start from a position such as, "I have to find an interesting text to illustrate conditional sentences because we've come to that point in the textbook." Our project, and thus our syllabus, follows the course of each week's research. We have to be flexible, and especially I as teacher have to be open to new ideas as they emerge week to week. I have to listen to students' concerns and ideas and input. We use the tools available to us to see, and then to *make sense* of what we see. At each stage, as a new tool or technique is introduced, students must again come to terms with their understanding of what they are looking at.

The final stage in the Shibata Project is creating English texts and "publishing" them in the community, through public presentations, homepages, newsletters, and educational materials. This step requires an

essential shift: as Nan Elsasser and Vera John-Steiner write,

Mastery of written communication requires a difficult but critical shift in the consciousness of the learner, a shift of attention from an immediate audience that shares the learner's experiences and frame of reference to a larger, abstract, and unfamiliar audience.<sup>9</sup>

This step of the Shibata Project requires the translation of what Lev Vygotsky (1986) calls "inner speech" (what has transpired inside the self, inside the group, inside the classroom) into written speech, providing a context for a reader who is not familiar with the class's context. This is intensely important when writing about the local community. At the same time, the student compares her own inner speech, her own web of context, with a physically close but removed, new set of contexts through interaction with local people.

To accomplish this step, our class focuses on three activities: (1) publishing our essays in Shibata's monthly English language journal, (2) preparing a book of our essays and presenting it to the City Office and Board of Education in Shibata, and (3) holding a lecture series for community people. Our primary goals are to share our knowledge of Shibata with the community and to share our English work with children and teachers. Through our research, Shibata citizens can gain a new appreciation of their hometown while building closer bonds with our students and our school. Similarly, our English materials can help young people develop a knowledge of their community and their history while learning English. The materials we produce fill a gap in the textbook market by providing real, local stories in accessible English.

Through primary community-based research, students gain a deep knowledge of their subject. This "knowing" the subject leads to what Freire calls *conscientization*, where students become central players in the world they uncover. Without the students' participation, new knowledge cannot come into being, and the class ceases to exist meaningfully. Subjectivity leads to motivation, as Shor (1992) indicates when he says that subjectivity is a synonym for motivation.

### **Transforming Community/Transforming the World**

Creating something that exists beyond the classroom is motivating, as students sense a responsibility to the community that lies ultimately outside the teacher's control. Students no longer study to please the teacher or simply get a good score but *together with a teacher* they begin to fulfill their responsibility as citizens and community participants. In this way, community-based classrooms stand in contrast to skills-based academic systems that encourage small private gain, personal goals, career-based decisions—niche-based education. Writing ceases to be homework done for the teacher, and learning is no longer something to demonstrate on a test. The writing and the demonstration of skills are done in a living context, for real people, some known, some unknown. English for tests, English for study abroad, English for special purposes: while undoubtedly important, they only apply to a small part of most students' lives. What about the rest of their lives, spent in their hometowns? How can English help everyone in the community, not just those with enough time and money to travel abroad? How can English open up lines of communication between Japanese people in Shibata—not just English reserved for talking to foreigners? These are issues that EFL education must consider. According to Freire, a teacher-centered classroom with a traditional syllabus invites students to develop as authority-dependent people who fit into the top-down power relations predominant in society. Likewise, a native-speaker centered English education based on materials developed elsewhere and reflecting an "other" reality produces students who are not prepared to use English to express themselves, and their own experienced reality, to the world.

Teaching critically through community interaction means inviting students to create new bottom-up interpretations of their realities. Students are challenged to make original statements, to create a new body of knowledge accessible to all: their classmates, their teachers, and their community. The Shibata Project seeks to place critical practice in actual classrooms, seeking social change and a greater ability to express a deeply felt and understood and lived reality.

Community knowledge has no official view and no textbook perfection: rather, it is a disorganized body of knowledge in which students can use their own identities to shape and process. The Shibata they discover is very

much their own; it is as contemporary and alive as the students themselves. The knowledge has been created, not regurgitated: the community, its history, and its culture are reformulated in students' imaginations and seen through students' eyes, based on questions that emerge naturally from engaged student and teacher discussion.

After the project is finished, students possess a clearer notion of what is possible and impossible in their world: what is being done and what needs to be done. The Shibata Project acquaints students with the people who are actively *creating culture* in their community: the workers, farmers, craftsmen, business people and company owners. Ideally, students will feel more prepared to assume their own roles as cultural creators and community builders.

In the end, the way in which rural, small town Japan is verbalized or silenced internationally cannot be left up to the hegemonic controllers of English education in the "native-speaking" world. Rather, this is a point where young Japanese can, and must, assert themselves. The students involved in the Shibata Project are developing a strong English position for agriculture, food culture, and the local economy, going beyond usual tourist clichés such as "The rice and water are delicious in Niigata!" by identifying unique, important parts of the Shibata story in easy, understandable English. In this way, the Shibata Project students are allowed to make their own unique contribution English education.

EFL education in Japan need not be cut off from local, traditional wisdom and rural life. Indeed, EFL education can be a means of resistance against economic globalization and the erosion of traditional, self-sustaining lifeways. Through community research, EFL educators can, in the words of Ira Shor, "choose critical consciousness over commercial consciousness."<sup>10</sup> I ask myself as a teacher, "What can I offer students of English at a humanities college such as ours? And what can we offer our community? Am I just training students to join the elite, to try and perhaps fail to gain admission to an exclusive group, determined by TOEIC scores rather than by social responsibility?" English education in Japan cannot limit itself to passing down a version of English that Shor calls "the idiom of the triumphant middle class."<sup>11</sup> In a community-based, Freirean model, English teachers are neither language enforcers nor cultural ambassadors but rather

ethnographers and anthropologists of their communities. Before beginning a class, they ask, "How can English be useful to *this* community?" I believe the answer calls for a geographically specific approach to international language. A community-based, student-centered approach using Freire's pedagogy can provide a practical model for education, activism, and volunteerism for our students—starting from their own lives as they are now.

John Holt, in *How Children Fail*, writes, "If children come to feel that the universe does not make sense, it may be because the language we use to talk about it does not seem to make sense, or at least because there are contradictions between the universe as we experience it and as we talk about it."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps nowhere is this truer than in contemporary EFL education in Japan. To this, Freire counters: "The person who learns is the person who can reinvent that learning."<sup>13</sup> As they uncover Shibata, my students, through reinventing it, become a part of it: they become subjects in their own stories. Their research and their words transform both Shibata's history as well as their own. Freire speaks of the worker who can say, "I work and by working I transform the world." In this project, I hope students reach a similar point, from which they can say, "I study my hometown in English and *by studying* I transform the world."

#### Notes

- 1 Allman, Paula. (2001). *Revolutionary Social Transformation: Democratic Hopes, Political Possibilities and Critical Education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, p.13.
- 2 Steinberg, Shirley R., and Kincheloe, Joe L. (Eds.) (1998). *Students as Researchers: Creating Classrooms that Matter*. London: Falmer Press, p.3.
- 3 Dewey, John. (1938). *Experience and Education*. New York: Touchstone, p.19.
- 4 Steinberg, Shirley R., and Kincheloe, Joe L. (Eds.) (1998). *Students as Researchers: Creating Classrooms that Matter*. London: Falmer Press, p.43.
- 5 Jacobs, Dale (Ed.) (2003). *The Myles Horton Reader: Education for Social Change*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee, p.77.
- 6 Shor, Ira (Ed.) (2000). *Education is Politics: Critical Teaching Across Differences, Postsecondary*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, p.25.
- 7 Shor, p.1.
- 8 Shor, Ira (Ed.) (1987). *Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, p.33.
- 9 Shor, p.48.
- 10 Shor, p.14.

- 11 Shor, p.15.
- 12 Holt, John. (1964). *How Children Fail*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus, p.148.
- 13 Freire, Paulo. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, p.101.

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