

Generation X : Considerations for Teachers in a Globalized Japan

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The focus of this paper is on the age group that is often referred to in the West as "Generation X". Some questions which the paper seeks to consider are first, what parallels can be drawn in the realm of education between the much-discussed Generation X students of the West and Japanese students of the same age group? How have the similarities arisen in such different education systems and societies as those of North America and Japan? What implications do the characteristics of Japan's Generation X hold for the Japanese classroom? Finally, what practical points can be of help to teachers and students in Japanese teaching and learning environments, particularly at university level? Many behavioral and attitudinal changes among university-age students have come to light in the Japanese education system, and some have had a noticeable effect on higher education. Among the succeeding "Millennial Generation" (those fourteen and younger, from elementary to secondary school levels) syndromes such as bullying, school-refusal syndrome and apathy seem to be even more widespread (Rohlen & LeTendre 1998). Teachers are finding it essential to reconsider time-honored teaching methodologies and strategies in the classroom, in order to

gain a better understanding of the widest generation gap in history. While practical strategies for higher education are the immediate concern of this paper, behavioral and learning problems such as bullying at elementary school level, short attention spans and difficulties with self-control are being reported from kindergarten level. (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999) It is reasonable to assume that revisions will be necessary throughout the education system. Even then, changes within the economy and the family structure in Japanese society indicate that education will undergo further changes in the foreseeable future. Such changes are becoming a major challenge for today's educators, who will need to develop new skills and flexible approaches to keep up with rapidly changing times.

Origins of Generation X

A generation is defined by Abbot (1999 : 1) as "a group of people who can be demographically identified by biological trends and who have shared experience."

Defining Generation X is problematic, mainly because individualism and diversity are among its strongest characteristics. There is even disagreement about

the origin of the label itself. The most widely accepted credit is given to writer Douglas Coupland, a Canadian who titled his first novel Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture (1996). The themes in Coupland's book reflect issues which characterize the current generation: lack of faith in, and respect for, former generations and the society created by them, which Coupland portrays as having left a legacy of divorce, nuclear threat, economic chaos, despair and loneliness (Codrington 1998). The characters in his novel want to get away from modern society in order to try to gain perspective and a better understanding of themselves. They move to the desert, where they create, and try to live by, their own rules. As their main entertainment, they tell each other stories which seem to embody Coupland's commentary on modern society and consumerism. Interestingly, and most relevant to this paper, Coupland emphasizes globalization, and the striking similarities among modern societies whose cultural foundations are vastly different. This premise in particular is notable among Japanese youth. Although Coupland claims that his intent in writing the novel was not to make a statement about youth culture in general, but rather only about a group of his own Vancouver contemporaries, the term "Generation X" came into wide use by the media to stand for an entire generation. It encompasses those between the approximate ages of 15 and 35, and is a label which has taken on somewhat pejorative connotation, most likely reflecting the frustration of earlier generations in attempting to understand a group so

at odds with past societal norms.

Characteristics of Generation X

Any attempt to define or explain the characteristics of this age group, more unlike any previous generation than any other throughout history, it is necessary to consider some profound changes which took place in society while its members were growing up. Codrington (1998) points out that during that time, double-income families became the norm rather than the exception. From this the phenomenon of "latchkey children", who were left alone outside of school hours and returned to an empty house, became widespread. Concurrently, personal computers became affordable and gained popularity. Children came to use computer games and the Internet as substitutes for human contact during long and lonely hours at home. Parents who were subject to the strain of working full-time while raising a family also left even small children "parked" in front of the television set, even when they were present. Peer-group surrogate families often came to substitute for real family closeness, and in some cases took on more value than parent-child relationships.

Numerous attempts have been made to list the characteristics common to this group. (Barna, 1995), (Hutchcraft, see Jochim, 1996). The media has persisted in stereotyping the X generation as slackers (Codrington, 1998), but the unprecedented diversity which is a notable characteristic of the age group signals danger to categorization. Some commonly cited characteristics which

have been mentioned or affirmed by both “X’ers” themselves and former generations include a strong need for dependable relationships and a desire to be loved at any cost, financial dependence on parents, (children often continue to live with parents into their mid-30’s), a high value placed on individualism, self-sufficiency, and lack of trust, including skepticism of governmental and other established institutions. (Codrington, 1998). The most prevalent attitude toward work is as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Pessimistic about the future, this age group takes more risks, spends more money and lives more in the present than any preceding generation. Pragmatic and practical, Generation X exists in a speedy, stressful world amid a glut of information. Instead of seeking information, their priority is to sort through the available overload and extract what is directly and immediately relevant to their lives. Young people make more short-term commitments, and are less interested in knowing history and truths than in finding what works in their own lives.

Pragmatism extends into issues of morality. The boundaries formerly made between right and wrong have become ambiguous, and pragmatism takes the upper hand in individual decisions. Perhaps the greatest area of divergence from former generations is the preponderance of relativism over objectivity.

As Sacks (1996, p. 124) concludes :

“Members of Generation X are cynical and sophisticated, and their reality is not objective, measurable, or fixed. In the postmodern world, reality and truth are a

fiction. This represents a profound break from modernity’s belief that reason and science can discover what’s real and what is true. When George Orwell wrote 1984, many critics presumed that his attack was aimed at Soviet-style communism in which truth and reality were questions only for Stalin . . . But as Erich Fromm suggested in the afterword to the book, Orwell actually was warning us about a more subtle but equally dangerous trait of Western societies. It now appears that Orwell’s warning not only has come to pass, but that modernity’s whole notion of truth as something that is knowable is under attack.

The philosopher Hilary Lawson states, ‘We have for millenia accepted the distinction between fact and fiction, reality and myth, truth and falsity.’ Postmodernism, he says, poses a threat to this distinction, and in doing so ‘threatens facts, reality, and truth, but so does it also threatens fiction, myth, and falsity.’”

Another characteristic which has been cited as prevalent by both members of the X Generation and those outside it, is a strong individualism, which finds expression through fashion, music styles, story-telling with a view toward validating and understanding one’s life, and personal empowerment, which manifests in entrepreneurship and a wide range of alternative lifestyles. Members of this group tend to question authority and are much more concerned with acceptance by a group than with traditional moralities. Some writers have gone so far as to say that morality is considered subjective, and that there are virtually no moral boundaries. (Codrington 1998)

Technology is central to the lives of this generation: e-mail, the Internet, cell phones, personal computers, scanners, video games, VCR's, FAX and color-copy machines are all taken for granted as necessities. In computer skills, the X-Generation is second to none, and as a group they are able to work effectively with huge banks of information. The amount of available information coupled with the independence which many people have assumed as a survival tool, is one factor which has influenced learning styles.

Weiss and Wesley (2002) assert that the characteristic which determines this generation as "post-modern" is the rejection of the logic and universal truths on which modernity is based. The negative "skeptical faction" of "Gen-X" holds that theory is used to "conceal, exclude, order, and control rival powers" (Rosenau 1992 see Weiss & Wesley) while a more affirmative element denies Truths but believes that Theory can be transformed through such movements as environmentalism, feminism, and peace activism.

Douglas Rushkoff, in his book, *Children of Chaos* (1996), however, takes a positive and interesting attitude to the capabilities developing within the generation, recognizing their "mosaic learning style and unprecedented information consumption capabilities." He suggests that short attention spans and lack of concentration may be less of a problem than supposed, focusing instead on emerging coping mechanisms for dealing with an overload of information. Youth can do many things at one, and surprisingly have perfected skills for

working in a "virtual office" :

Generation X seems to have been born in the West, and to have developed out of reaction to the problematic aspects of modern individualistic societies. Coupland asserts that with this generation a global society has actually manifested. He writes that since the end of the twentieth century, "regional and national identities have become blurred." (1996 :) His observations of life in the late 20th century indicate that "all post-colonial societies have merged, as those in control ultimately share the same mind set." He cites broken families,

"diminished expectations due to economic and environmental woes, and the threat of nuclear war, which has been with youth throughout their lives."

With his book "Generation X Goes to College"(1996), a firsthand account of postmodern attitudes and practices in an average American college today, Peter Sacks gained some prominence and notoriety. A journalist with no former teaching experience, he was hired by a large suburban community college in the Western U.S. to teach journalism. His findings suggest a wide chasm between educators and students, as well as between public assumptions about higher education and its grave reality. Sacks' experience bears out many of Coupland's prototype descriptions :

"The culture war I discovered was between college teachers, typically Baby Boomers like me or older, and members of Generation X. But this was no ordinary 'generation gap.' I witnessed a cultural divide, which I now believe to be the result of a quantum break between past and future-in essence, a break between the

modern and postmodern worlds. The problems I saw stemmed from educators, reared under the tenets of the modern age, confronted and bewildered by a new reality: a generation of young people who had emerged from a radically changed, postmodern society." (Sacks, 1996 : xii)

The first half of Sacks' book elucidates his assertion with accounts of students who demand good grades as their right, regarding higher education as a commodity and themselves as consumers. At the same time it portrays an academic system which has bent to accommodate student demands.

The development of this situation is complex, based on diminishing enrollments, and a breadth of generational differences so extreme that there seem to be no solutions. If, as Codrington suggests (1998), conventional reason itself is no longer respected and trusted, traditional teaching and learning styles and content itself run up against an insurmountable barrier bordering on the absurd. According to Sacks, (1996) today's student wants to trust but refuses, often because of bitter experience even before adolescence, to trust "authority, institutions, knowledge, facts", -the values of higher education. Other familiar scenarios include the student who knows the value of learning but expects to be entertained. This student often has a keen sense of entitlement but little motivation, and experiences the tension of being torn between traditions and expectations of the past purported by professors, and the profound uncertainty of the future. In a questionnaire distributed to Sacks' students, 4 out of 10 chose "entertaining" as the most important qual-

ity in a teacher. (1996). He speculates that the average attention span of a second year student in this institution was equal to the time of a television commercial, and cites television as a unifying force in general. If it is not entertaining, he notes, students quickly "tune out".

Generation X-Japan

Matsumoto's (2002) explanation for various similarities in problems facing educators in the United States and Japan is based on the premise that Japanese culture has changed, and is currently changing, with astonishing speed. While he acknowledges that all cultures are constantly evolving, he holds that the speed of transformation in Japanese society "from one end of the spectrum to the other" is unprecedented. His interpretation of this shift is that an individualistic society has been built atop Japan's traditional collectivist society, and the fact that both extremes are functioning simultaneously results in confusion. This duality, he holds, causes conflict, especially when students enter institutions of higher learning, which generally conform to standards dictated by the collectivist culture, which have not yet changed to conform to young adults' individualist leanings. Matsumoto observes that the physical setup of classrooms, teachers' attitudes, values and beliefs as well as teaching methodologies, and the administrative structure of the education system itself all still adhere to collectivist concepts at odds with students' upbringing and lifestyles. He explains that following World War

II, Japan's traditional collective consciousness enabled it to rebuild the nation and create the world's second largest economy. In consequence, this economic development had a tremendous effect on the individual, in terms of growth in personal income and the resultant rise of materialism.

Despite broad differences in traditional cultures, many similarities to these current phenomena in Western education are evident in higher education in Japan. In particular, the short attention spans and passivity among average students have resulted in patterns of "dumbing down" (Washburn & Thornton, 1997) texts and materials, grade inflation, and low expectations regarding the quantity and quality of student production. The cultural duality which characterizes modern society in Japan affects attitudes in students' interactions with teachers, but in somewhat different ways from the insubordination, lack of respect, and disdain depicted by Sacks in North America. While lack of respect for logic and reason and the strong trend toward distrust of systems and subjectivity seem to characterize Generation X in the West, disinterest and passivity seem more accurate to describe the malaise among average Japanese university students. More similar is the tendency to show interest in selecting only that information which directly touches the individual's own life. It may be assumed that the information overload which turns Western students away from searching for historical background, philosophies and causes and toward information relevant to themselves and their immediate present is experi-

enced by Japanese students as well, as the electronic age creates the same information glut for all technological societies.

Before focusing on the Japanese university student, it is revealing to first consider a number of recent phenomena occurring at lower grade levels, from elementary school through high school, because patterns are now emerging more powerfully and clearly than in the past regarding the origin of problems confronting young adults. From the kindergarten level, experienced teachers have reported extreme consternation in dealing with pupils whose attention span does not even allow them to wait for the teacher to hand out materials without losing patience and control. The phenomenon known as "classroom collapse" sees first graders running over desks and shouting at teachers, ignoring polite language traditionally used with adults, and exhibiting disinterest in completing even routine tasks. Some of the multiple reasons for these behavioral shifts are similar to those in the West, while others seem to be uniquely Japanese. Matsumoto (2002) traces the emphasis on education in Japanese culture to post-World War II, when it was perceived that education was the key to a fulfilling life and success. This increasingly exclusive emphasis was adopted so strongly that social development became de-emphasized and in some cases completely ignored by parents. Students were under pressure from elementary school onwards to succeed in examinations, putting a heavy emphasis on test results for entrance to middle school, high school, and finally

university, creating an unbalanced situation. According to Matsumoto (2002: 114,115):

“...when education is emphasized as the sole element of one’s existence, social consequences are inevitable. Children’s whole lives revolve around study and grades. They spend the majority of their waking hours in school or *juku* (cram school) and then at home studying. When children study to the almost total exclusion of all other kinds of learning experiences and social contact, they become ‘study robots’, and problems in social development and morals are likely.”

Matsumoto (2002) mentions that the growth of individualism, superimposed over a centuries-old basis of collectivism, manifests in such formerly unfamiliar scenarios as attribution of success. In the past, Japanese students who attained success in academic efforts generally gave credit to those who had helped them—teachers or parents for example—while today students are apt to take the credit themselves for their attainments, and attributed them to such factors as hard work and ability. As these students, like their Western counterparts, have grown up to expect material things, there may be little awareness of the financial burden and sacrifices taken on by their parents for their education.

Some classroom behaviors parallel those of North American students. Unlike even a decade ago, students may use class time to sleep, talk, daydream, or even talk on their cell phones. Basic rules of consideration and etiquette

have quickly disappeared in what Matsumoto terms a loss of “a sense of interpersonal consciousness and harmony.”

In both the North America and Japan, the faltering economy plays a role in the case of higher education. In Japan this factor is heightened by low population figures at university age level. Thus a resulting trend has emerged toward lower academic standards and leniency in grading. In the West a similar phenomenon termed “dumbing down” (Washburn & Thornton, 1997) has been in play for the past two decades, although here more than in Japan this trend seems to have been exacerbated by materialistic attitudes of a younger generation who tend to regard education as a commodity which can be purchased. (Sacks 1996)

As Japan appears to be in the process of a dramatic and accelerated change from a collectivist to an individualist society, other distinct problems have appeared. Among these are a dramatic rise in bullying at all education levels (as well as among adults in the workplace), a phenomenon less common in the West. Other evidences of generational clashes include a rapid rise in delinquency and school refusal syndrome. The dropout rate of elementary and middle school students more than doubled between the years of 1991 and 1999. (Matsumoto, 2002)

Implications for the University Classroom

With indications of such symptoms as bullying and school refusal appearing frequently in the media, it appears clear that the current problems in the Japa-

nese education system are, as those in the West, deep-seated and require attention first at the level of the family and by implication at every level of society, as well as within the education system. As the rate and depth of change indicate a major upheaval in societal norms, it is perhaps beyond the scope of the university educator to enact core reforms. At the same time, teachers are in the unique position of having direct contact with students in the learning environment. Whether or not socialization skills should be the role of the university teacher is an item for debate among educators, but teachers are aware that if meaningful learning is to take place, pragmatic steps need to be taken. In this regard, it may be of use to look at strategies suggested by some educators both in the West and in Japan.

Brown (1997) takes a pragmatic approach in pointing out the radically different life experiences of this group than those before them in history. She lists such factors as upbringing by single parents, divorce, fast food, quick response devices, such as automatic bank machines, which bring instant gratification, and which set this generation apart. In addition, she points out that youth today are facing low economic growth and limited employment opportunities. Such life experiences have created new learning styles which teachers are often unaware of, and which cause breakdowns in communication. Her observations depict the generation in a positive light as independent problem solvers and "self-starters" who are highly literate technologically. In addition, she characterizes them as conditioned to ex-

pect instant gratification, lifelong learners who know they need to keep learning to retain marketable skills. She also mentions skepticism ("they want to know why they must learn something before they take time to learn how"), ambitious, and ruthless ("I have to take what I can get in this world because no one is going to give me anything"). (Brown, 1997)

Today's university student in Japan has grown up under similar conditions. Matsumoto (2002) asserts that the changing learning styles are inevitably leading to curriculum reform. University bulletins in Japan quickly attest that such reform is in progress, with the trend toward pragmatic content courses which lead to specific employment areas and departments focused on information systems.

Awareness of the learning styles which students have developed in the technological age is perhaps the first consideration. Generation X are visual learners. They have grown up with television and computer games. This single fact suggests teaching techniques which rely not so much upon the theory which modernity took for granted, as upon concrete models and examples. Students perform better when they have graphic examples of what is to be accomplished, be it a presentation or an academic paper. Information on a screen commands their attention more effectively than that in a text. Generation X students are adept at skimming and scanning for information rather than reading in depth. They are practical and pragmatic. Teachers find that promoting a task or activity by explaining in advance the

purpose and possible outcomes of such a study is necessary and commands attention. They have developed random, or so-called mosaic learning styles, and are independent workers, suggesting more reliance upon computer-based teaching. Since the advent of the personal computer, some teachers have successfully transformed their methodologies and techniques to take advantage of modern pedagogical models which rely on machines. Others have chosen to stand their ground and retain a more classical stance. However, Matsumoto (2002) suggests that according to his paradigm of two cultures functioning simultaneously, the Japanese education system is still operating according to the collectivist model, while students are quickly shifting to the individualist model, and it is to this dichotomy that he attributes the chaos occurring in Japanese institutions of learning today. He argues that it is the teacher's role to bridge the gap between home and institutional learning environments.

In the case of English education, many educators agree that English training needs to shift its focus from reading and writing to conversation, an observation which the Japanese Ministry of Education has begun to implement in middle school and high school curricula. ("Ministry ..." 2001). Kawai Hayao (Ihara 2001) emphasizes that if Japanese students are to be active in global affairs, they need to be fluent in spoken English. In addition, as Matsumoto (2002, 187) points out,

"research has demonstrated convincingly that language skills alone are not sufficient to ensure cultural sensitivity. What

is necessary is the development of a core set of psychological skills that enable us to live flexibly and effectively in a dynamic, multicultural environment."

He states that language training without training in cultural sensitivity often causes offensive behavior in a multicultural setting.

Brown (1997) advocates student-centered learning, and stresses that students need to have a range of options, flexibility and autonomy. She suggests encouraging students to create their own learning environments, giving them a role in establishing learning goals and evaluation criteria. While this may be viable in the West, traditional Japanese education has not prepared students for such tasks, and they are less likely to accept a challenge to set goals and establish independent learning venues. How then can course goals be set and met? Perhaps clear goals can be established by the teacher, and a wide variety of suggestions offered as to how to attain them, taking into consideration students' computer abilities, their familiarity with multiple formats, and their tendency to work problems out independently. In this case, the steps a student follows, or the actual learning process, should have as much emphasis as the outcome.

The speed of change which has created Generation X has not slowed, and therefore educators may often be at a loss regarding the paths to communicate effectively what they have to offer today's students. Many educators maintain a "bottom line" in terms of compromising their own standards, and then search for ways to reach and motivate students within those parameters. Wash-

burn and Thornton (1997) raise the point that since the 1960's, "much of what has passed for curriculum reform has unintentionally reflected vast cultural decline. . . . Meanwhile, seductive images with greater force in (students') lives than any curriculum dance across video screens." They discuss the question raised by critic William A. Henry III, of whether or not civilization wants to reclaim the values of commitment to rationalism and scientific investigation, upholding of objective standards, and "most important, the willingness to assert unyieldingly that one idea, contribution or attainment is better than another." (Washburn and Thornton 1997 :). Such issues are at the center of school controversies in Japan and in the West today. Each teacher has to deal with such questions independently, then attempt to find the flexibility, creativity, and resolve to commit oneself to educating today's students. It is perhaps the biggest challenge to confront educators since the beginning of the modern age. As globalization has brought technological societies closer, so many problems are shared by those cultures in the realm of education. Collaboration among cultures in finding solutions is now becoming a distinct possibility, and may become even a necessity. Generation X offers challenges to the former generations which created it, and specifically to their teachers, who are in a position to help preserve the aspects of the modern age which underlie their own education while seeking to adapt to the post-modern world and its inhabitants. Japan's Generation X faces possibilities which former generations never envisioned. Teachers have a great responsibility to learn from, and

learn new and effective ways to teach, today's youth.

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ABSTRACT**「X世代」の特徴と学習様式の比較研究**

— 北アメリカと日本のケースから —

エリザベス・アン・キング

キー・ワード：X世代、北アメリカ、日本、学習様式、電子化時代、集団主義、個人主義、社会化過程

本稿では、北アメリカにおいて「X世代」（およそ15歳から35歳）と呼ばれる世代グループの基本的な性格と学習様式を検討することを試みた。北アメリカと日本のこの世代を比較すると、社会のありかたと教育システムは著しく異なっているにもかかわらず多くの類似点が指摘できる。日本の「X世代」は、長期にわたる集団主義的な伝統から個人主義的な社会への変化の過程にあることが見受けられた。これら二つのタイプの「文化」（集団主義的および個人主義的）が日本では同時に機能していることによって混乱がもたらされている、と主張する専門家もいる。

教育者たちは、教育システムの改革を検討している。技術革新による電子化時代の到来と情報過多は、学生の学習パターンおよび学習態度の双方に深く影響を与えており、東洋西洋を問わず過去数十年間「ジェネレーション・ギャップ」を増幅させてきた。真実は解明しうるものという近代的思想の基盤も、ポストモダンの時代には確定的なものではなくなっている。伝統的な方法と技術では、教師たちももはや学生の必要に応じることができない。日本では、いじめや不登校などの問題が増加していることもあり、かつて第一に家庭、そして学校および職場で広く担われていた社会化過程に関し再考することが不可欠である。一段と速度を増しつつある変化のもとで教師たちは、学生たちとコミュニケーションをはかり、新たな社会の未来の構成員となるよう次世代の者たちを導く方法を見出すことが求められている。