# Developing Critical Thinking Skills in The East and South-East Asian Regions

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## Abstract

This paper will test a multilevel "cultural" framework for conducting needs analysis related to the development of certain so-called "higher-level thinking" skills, or "critical thinking" skills, in university level service English programs in the East and South-East Asian regions. These thinking skills are associated with the modern intellectual and academic traditions of the West and their emphasis on fostering independent thought among individuals. The framework that is tested in this study is the "four dimensions of culture" framework that was developed heuristically by Flowerdew and Miller (1995) as a result of an ethnographic research project conducted in an English medium tertiary education institution in Hong Kong. The testing consists of setting this Hong Kong generated framework against data derived from secondary sources which deal with different aspects of the "four dimensions of culture" in Japan. The author will argue that Flowerdew and Miller's assumption that "ethnic" culture is both unitary and largely inseparable from "academic" culture may not be entirely true in the case of Japan. Two important signs of this "cultural" variegation in Japan are the relative lack of uniformity in the academic cultures of Japanese middle and high schools and an interesting contrast in Japanese responses to two equally important western academic traditions, one concerned with mathematics and the physical sciences, the other concerned with the social sciences and the humanities. The implications of these findings for syllabus design are discussed in the context of an actual "thinking skills" component incorporated in a pre-MBA English course run at the International University of Japan. Institutions with similar educational needs in other parts of East and South-East Asia are encouraged to test this framework and adapt it to their own needs.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although it has yet to be systematically documented, perhaps the outstanding characteristic of the current boom in the growth of tertiary level English-medium education in the East and South-East region of Asia is the clash in educational expectations between local students and imported western pedagogical systems and educators. While all members of these English-medium institutions can agree that English plays an important role as a "window-to-the-world", they can bring different assumptions to bear on the task of deciding how the world thus revealed should be understood (e.g., Flowerdew & Miller, 1995). In this century, Western educational theory and practice has placed great emphasis on understanding that understanding only begins with knowledge of theories and facts and really consists of complex mental operations on these same theories and facts. In at least some countries in the East and South East Asian region, however, this emphasis either does not exist or is much weaker than it is in North America and Western Europe. In view of the fact that most of the English-medium institutions in the region have a self-appointed role as forums for international understanding, this clash of expectations regarding what are conventionally known among

western educators as the "higher order" thinking skills or as "critical thinking" skills deserves to be treated as the most significant of all the clashes in educational expectations.

This paper will examine the feasibility of an EFL contribution to research into understanding the critical thinking expectations gap across the whole region and will provide a preliminary demonstration of how such understanding could be applied to help shrink the gap in one particular country and setting. The feasibility assessment will start from the assumption that any exploration of a gap in educational expectations that involves making distinctions among regions and/or countries has to have a framework which is broad enough to encompass "culture" and which is articulated enough to distinguish different levels of cultural and educational influences. The feasibility assessment itself will consist of a test of one EFL analytical framework that was recently developed in Hong Kong against a set of secondary sources that relate to a different country in the region, Japan. At this level of general feasibility assessment the broadest possible definition of "critical thinking" that can accommodate all disciplines and all views will be applied. The paper will conclude by providing a preliminary demonstration of how such a country-specific feasibility test could be utilized to provide general guidance for syllabus design for programs, whether "English" or "non-English", which perform an "orientation" function for the English-medium institution. At this application stage, "critical thinking" will be more precisely defined in the context of the academic discipline the students are being oriented to.

## 2. A BROAD DEFINITION OF "CRITICAL THINKING"

The broad definition to be adopted for the purposes of this paper does not belong to the "critical thinking" domain associated with critical thinking specialists because no single definition has been generally accepted within this domain (Perkins, Lochhead & Bishop, 1987). From the wider educational domain, however, Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives offers a definition of higher order cognitive skills which is widely cited in educational literature. The highest levels - four, five and six - of the taxonomy relate to analysis, synthesis and evaluation of information. These three higher levels contrast with levels one, two and three which relate to the acquisition and application of information. The lower order cognitive skills identified by Bloom appear to receive a lot more emphasis than the higher order skills at high school level and even at undergraduate university level within the educational systems of countries such as Hong Kong (Scollon and Scollon, 1994), Japan (Rohlen, 1983),Taiwan (Smith, 1991) and Thailand (Chansuthus, personal communication, 1995)[1]. For the purposes of this paper the broad definition of critical thinking also includes its public expression since in academic contexts unexpressed critical thinking has little value. The inclusion of public expression within a definition of critical thinking is particularly relevant to

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the regional focus of this study because the authors cited immediately above point out that within the formal education systems they have studied forms of critical thinking expression such as analytical essays and debates are generally practiced as infrequently as the higher order cognitive skills on which they depend.

## 3. SOME BACKGROUND: ESL & EFL NEGLECT OF CRITICAL THINKING PEDAGOGY

One major problem for an EFL approach to understanding the critical thinking "gap" is that the adult EFL and ESL literature and the L1 adult English literature contains little primary research on the "gap" and has generally ignored the pedagogical implications that a recognition of the gap's existence would entail. Critical thinking has, to a limited extent, been systematically incorporated into children's ESL syllabus design by Mohan (1986) and others who have been strongly influenced by the educational theories of Dewey and Bruner, but in the area of adult education, by contrast, there has been more talk than action. Neither the ESL radicals in the U.S.A., who advocate the use of critical thinking to advance the democratic political interests of their students (e.g. Benesch, 1993), nor their more conservative counterparts in native speaker college composition programs, who constantly extol the academic virtues of critical thinking, have developed systematic pedagogies for critical thinking. As Atkinson & Ramanthan (1995: 558) observe in a recent TESOL Quarterly article, there is a significant body of research that indicates that in the U.S.A. socialization into critical thinking processes such as middle-class essayist literacy begins at home in early childhood and is powerfully reinforced through the elementary/ high school years. They further conclude that tertiary level teaching in the U.S.A. does assume, often unconsciously, that this basic learning process has already taken place. Somewhat surprisingly, therefore, ESL in the U.S.A., a multicultural setting par excellence, has not yet generated any clear paradigms for tertiary level adult orientation to critical thinking.

The more specialized domains of EAP and academic ESP are sending out signals that they are becoming aware of the "gap" and its significance. EAP and academic ESP practitioners in certain contexts like British university EFL programs, for example, are starting to identify the enormous disadvantages faced by non-native speakers who are unfamiliar with the structures and intellectual conventions of western academic disciplines (Blue, 1993), but this awareness can as yet find no accommodation in general treatments of EAP and ESP (e.g. Widdowson, 1983; Hutchinson & Walters, 1987) which almost always assume that critical thinking problems, where they do exist, are just problems of transfer from the native language into the second language. Even genre analysis models (Swales, 1990), which explicitly recognize discourse community barriers to EAP students' academic progress, take it for granted that students enrolled in EAP programs are already well versed in the basic higher order cognitive skills.

## 4. FLOWERDEW AND MILLER'S "FOUR CULTURES" FRAMEWORK

In the absence in EFL/ESL of general theoretical treatments of adult critical thinking pedagogy the only practical point of entry into the "gap" lies within the domain of the few existing primary research efforts to understand the phenomenon. The best existing research in this area is that produced by Flowerdew and Miller (1995) in their ethnographic study of the clash of expectations between local students and western faculty about the roles of lecturers and students in relation to academic lectures given at an English-medium university in Hong Kong. At the heart of the authors' article lies the "four cultural dimensions" framework that the authors developed to analyze their Hong Kong data. The first dimension is "ethnic culture," which they define as "culturally based, social-psychological features" which affect behavior. The second dimension is "local culture," which they define as the "local setting with which students are familiar and which may be alien to foreign lecturers." The third dimension is "academic culture," which is defined as "academic features which require an understanding of the particular academic values, assumptions, roles and so on of a given society." The final cultural dimension is "disciplinary culture", which is defined as the "theories, concepts, norms, terms, and so on specific to a particular academic discipline."

## 5. WHY CHOOSE THE "FOUR CULTURES" FRAMEWORK?

Flowerdew and Miller make it clear that the "four dimensions of culture" they propose have emerged from the Hong Kong data they collected (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995: 350-352), rather than vice versa. They add, however, that "the framework we propose, developed out of Hong Kong data, is likely to be of interest to others working in L2 lecture contexts." It is, thus, intended to be of some interest to those working in other settings and cultures, but it is not expressly intended to be of interest to those working in L2 critical thinking contexts. At the same time, however, the authors introduce their study in broad terms by noting that:

> In situations where students from non-Western countries study in English-speaking countries (as they are doing in ever increasing numbers) or where expatriate teachers coming from Western universities and colleges are teaching students brought up in a non-Western culture (as, again, is happening more and more frequently), there is a danger of a clash of cultures.
>
> (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995: 345-346)

The position adopted in this article is that Flowerdew and Miller's framework may have some value as a starting point for understanding the clash of cultures in different settings, even though the framework was developed from data collected in particular geographic (Hong

Kong) and academic (academic lectures) settings. In the absence of other suitable analytical starting points, moreover, this framework is the only viable starting point short of conducting the kind of massive primary research project that Flowerdew and Miller themselves conducted in Hong Kong.

The framework appears to possess two important merits that might enable it to transcend its origins in the geographical setting of Hong Kong and in the academic domain of lectures. The first merit is that it explicitly recognizes that ethnic culture plays a role in shaping educational attitudes. This is important for an understanding of critical thinking because in the West critical thinking has long been embedded in cultural as well as in educational ideals. An examination of settings in which critical thinking received much less emphasis than in the West would thus have to consider the possibility that ethnic cultural influences had contributed something to the outcome. The second merit of the framework is that its separation of educational culture into "academic culture" and "disciplinary culture" provides a ready-made framework for consideration of critical thinking's status across and/or within particular academic disciplines. This status has obvious implications for any attempt to develop tertiary level critical thinking pedagogies for EAP and academic ESP.

## 6. A CRITICAL VIEW OF THE FOUR CULTURES FRAMEWORK

Flowerdew and Miller's study is admirable for the systematic way it illustrates the clash of expectations between the local Chinese students and Western lecturers in the areas of original thought, questioning and the expression of personal opinions, and in the areas of other behaviors. It is also admirable for its treatment of culture as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Nonetheless, it has to be recognized that the study contains two assumptions about "culture" in Hong Kong that may prevent a simple transfer of the four cultures framework to settings outside Hong Kong.

The first and more important of the two assumptions is the assumption that Hong Kong's ethnic culture is entirely uniform. While it is fair to make generalizations on specific aspects of Hong Kong's ethnic culture, such as achievement orientations and humor, which are backed up by solid survey data, there is less justification for making broad generalizations about the influence of such ethnic cultural categories as "Confucianism" and a "collectivist approach to human interaction" (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995: 356-359) which themselves cover a broad range of attitudes and behaviors. As Trompenaars (1994) demonstrated in his research into the attitudes of businessmen from various countries and cultures, responses to "collectivist" prompts vary greatly according to the precise context in which the prompt is presented. Thus, the responses given to Trompenaars by Hong Kong businessmen conform to ethnic cultural type in their answers to the specific questions of whether they prefer to be left alone to get a job done (no) and whether they would for opt for a universalist system rather than a particular social group (yes and no, but clearly distinguished from western businessmen who chose

"yes") (Trompenaars, 1994: 157 & 37). Yet the same Hong Kong businessmen do not conform to ethnic cultural type when they opt for individual freedom as the best way to improve the quality of life and when they emphatically prefer the notion that a company is a system designed to perform tasks to the notion that a company is a social group (Trompenaars, 1994: 52 & 19). Trompenaars draws from these paradoxes the conclusion that:

> Individuals are either self- or collectivity-oriented, though we must be careful in generalizing about which collectivity a particular culture identifies with. The high internal variation of scores in my research, I believe, has to do with the numerous collectivities with which different cultures choose to identify.
>
> <div align="right">(Trompenaars, 1994: 56)</div>

The second assumption is that the relation between ethnic culture and academic culture is a one way relation in which ethnic culture influences academic culture, rather than vice versa.

> ... a given academic culture is likely to be imbued with the values and practices of the ethnic culture in which it is situated ... and it may be difficult, in analyzing a given instance of behavior in an academic context, to ascribe such behavior to ethnic or academic influence.
>
> <div align="right">(Flowerdew and Miller, 1995: 362)</div>

In regard to the situation in Hong Kong, this characterization of the relationship between the two cultural dimensions may well be empirically sound. It may well be the case, as Flowerdew and Miller argue, that "Confucian values and a collectivist approach to social interaction can be identified as the source of ... the propensity of students to help each other" (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995: 363), though it would be interesting to know to what extent this propensity for mutual help is prevalent in non-academic settings in Hong Kong. In regard to settings outside Hong Kong, however, the general position that this author takes is that, in the absence of either good theory or hard evidence, it would seem best to keep an open mind about the *general* nature of the ethnic culture/academic culture relationship. One practical reason for doing so is to avoid the danger of regarding the ethnic cultural dimension as a kind of default explanation for various educational phenomena for which there are no readily available alternative explanations. As will be shown in the case of the secondary sources that relate to Japan's ethnic culture, the danger that ethnic culture can be assigned such a default role is a real one.

## 7. A JAPANESE CASE STUDY IN THE CLASH OF THINKING EXPECTATIONS

The International University of Japan (IUJ), where the author works, is a two-year English-medium graduate university which comprises two schools, the Graduate School of International Management (GSIM) and the Graduate School of International Relations (GSIR). The GSIM, which was set up in 1988 as a joint venture with the Tuck School of Management in the U.S.A., was the focus of an in-depth article by P.A. Langan in a 1990 edition of *Fortune* magazine, at which time the GSIM student enrollment was about 70% Japanese. The author of the article, who joined the campus community for six months and visited several of the GSIM classes, was struck by two things she witnessed in the MBA classroom. First of all, the traditional silence of the Japanese students contrasted sharply with the eagerness of a small number of American students to speak out and ill-matched the American professors' tendency to press students for answers or to encourage students to disagree with them. Secondly, the Tuck professors noticed a clear difference between the approach to conceptualization of their students back in the U.S.A. and the Japanese students at IUJ. One professor was quoted as saying:

> Tuck students love to strategize, conceptualize, think big picture. They hate computation. These IUJ students breathe a sigh of relief when we get to the computation side.

Another professor's comments were summarized in this way:

> In his first year accounting class, Clyde Stickney noticed that students had difficulty integrating ideas from different fields ...

The final quote appears to reflect both impressions:

> I've given up on how to get Japanese students to disagree with me.

There is also some evidence that American MBA professors have similar experiences with some of the foreign students in their U.S. classes (Christensen, 1982).

Somewhat mysteriously, Langan did not include in her article a survey of the attitudes of the Japanese students to this alien import. The author of this paper, who has been actively engaged the last five years in helping to prepare the Japanese students for the language and communication challenges they face in the same GSIM program, is in a position to fill some of this gap in information. In general, he has encountered two types of response to the American-style MBA among the (vast majority of) Japanese students who have not previously been exposed to the interactive pedagogies associated with Western education. The response of a significant minority of students has been a purely negative one which appears to be based on a clear perception of a clash of educational expectations. Referring to the emphasis that

American-style MBA education places on the case method and on student participation, one Japanese student told the author that he thought that it was a complete waste of time listening to the other students or wading through case texts since the only things that mattered were the answers to problems that only expert sources like professors and textbooks could provide. Other Japanese students, though not overtly hostile to the case method and other interactive pedagogical approaches, have expressed bewilderment or confusion about the aims of teaching methods that demote traditional knowledge sources like textbooks and lecture notes without at the same time defining clearly what has replaced them. In this latter case, it is not clear to what extent the Japanese students' comments indicate a true clash of educational expectations, to what extent they represent a failure to comprehend a new set of educational expectations they might otherwise be willing to adapt to or to what extent they express frustration with the possibly opaque way in which a new set of educational expectations are being imposed. For these latter students, clarifying the new expectations could well represent an important first step in dealing with the gap in expectations.

## 8. EXPLAINING THE CLASH OF THINKING EXPECTATIONS IN JAPAN: SOME BACKGROUND

Not much research has been conducted within the Japanese EFL field on the clash of educational expectations. What research does exist is often highly dependent on ethnic cultural models of explanation. Horler and Yamazaki provide one example of this dependence. In interpreting the results of a survey of college students in Japan, they begin with the incontrovertible statement that the Japanese are reluctant to express personal opinions openly:

> Their views are softened and often communicated implicitly rather than explicitly. This reluctance is attributed to a sensitivity to the feelings of others and a strong desire for harmony and group consensus.
>
> (Horler and Yamazaki, 1986: 84)

This view of Japanese interpersonal communication is strongly grounded in empirical observation and is supported by the near unanimity of the Japanese themselves that this is indeed true. But this well-founded generalization about the reluctance of most Japanese to express personal views openly is immediately followed by a flight into speculation about the effect of the ethnic culture on the underlying process of opinion formation:

> The *ability* [my italics] to express thoughts clearly, directly and logically, so much admired in the western world, conflicts with the Japanese understanding of courtesy. Characteristic ambiguities of the Japanese language foster the hazy, indefinite expression.

The full implications of this explanation are spelled out by the authors themselves:

> It has been suggested that the increasing contact with the western world will modify the Japanese response so as to resemble more closely that of the American subjects .... But the Japanese preference for the vague and indefinite statement, certain ambiguities of the Japanese language, and the avoidance of adversarial positions have been for centuries such an integral part of the culture as to be highly resistant to change.
>
> <div align="right">(Horler and Yamazaki, 1986: 88)</div>

In this vague all-encompassing explanation an incontrovertible generalization about the reluctance of most Japanese to express personal views openly is allowed to subsume a far more speculative essay on the source and nature of Japanese thinking. In terms of the four cultural dimensions, this type of overgeneralization could be characterized as dependence on a uniform ethnic cultural construct as a source of explanation.

Other examples of this dependence can be found in the work into the motivation of Japanese learners of English of Edmatsu (1978), Miller (1986) and Nakayama (1982), who all emphasized that psycho-social barriers rooted in Japanese culture inhibit the learning of English. As Berwick and Ross (1989) have argued strongly, however, these explanations have been based on cross-sectional analyses which ignore significant longitudinal variations in Japanese learners' environments and motivations.

## 9. JAPAN'S ETHNIC CULTURE IN THE LITERATURE

Given that in Western settings it would be unusual for general constructs of ethnic culture to be used to the same extent as an explanatory tool, the question arises why there is such a tendency to overgeneralize about Japan's ethnic culture and to attribute to this cultural construct quite strong explanatory power. One answer, of course, is that the construct is not exaggerated at all, but a good approximation of the truth. It is not possible within the confines of this paper to offer a properly developed critique of this answer. Instead, reference will be made to Mouer & Sugimoto's summary and critique of this position, which is contained in their book, *Images of Japanese Society* (1986). The main points of Mouer & Sugimoto's overview that are directly relevant to this discussion are: firstly, the impressive amount of academic weight that has been put behind a monolithic construct of Japan's ethnic culture; secondly, the rather extreme simplifications that derive from the construct; and, thirdly and most significantly, the poor methodological procedures that support nearly all of this work.

Mouer and Sugimoto (1986: 21-63) identify over thirty Japanese and foreign academics - - including world famous academics like Doi (1971), Nakamura (1967) and Nakane (1973) and ex- U.S. Ambassador Reischauer (1977) - - who base their analyses of Japanese culture on a monolithic construct (the "nihonjinron" construct) of Japan's ethnic culture. The main simplifications that emerge are summarized by Mouer and Sugimoto (1986: 192) in this way:

> With regard to the individual, it is commonly posited that the Japanese ego is underdeveloped and that the Japanese tend to conform to group norms or otherwise lose themselves in group activities, to be emotional and to have a weak sense of self-interest or of privacy. Interpersonal relations are seen as requiring frequent face-to-face encounters, and as being characterized by non-verbal communication and a loose give and take arrangement with the emphasis on giving and repaying. Finally, groups are seen as being bound together by some voluntaristic commitment or loyalty which results in there being very high levels of consensus and inter-group loyalty.

After an intensive critique of the methodological foundations of the body of research on which the "nihonjinron" construct rests, Mouer and Sugimoto (1986: 155) conclude that:

> ... [the construct] has a very shaky methodological foundation, if any at all. Although various traits are claimed to be uniquely Japanese and to have been produced out of Japanese cultural traditions, the proponents of nihonjinron do not seem to be concerned with the logical format generally accepted in the social sciences for demonstrating either that differences exist between two or more societies or that correlation exists between two variables. Problems in sampling are particularly obvious ....

In regard to empirical findings, the two authors make two criticisms of the construct:

> First, its emphasis on consensus needs to be reconsidered; conflict is too often ignored or simply dismissed with euphemisms. Second, the emphasis on homogeneity needs to be reformulated. A rather high level of racial homogeneity and the use of the Japanese language by all citizens of Japan is often confused with ethnic or cultural homogeneity (1986: 128).

Those who delve into this "nihonjinron" mass of work to find out something about the disposition of the Japanese towards logical thinking may encounter Nakamura's (Nakamura, 1967) essay titled, *Consciousness of the Individual and the Universal Among the Japanese* :

Concerning logical thinking, we can say that the mass of Japanese people have been limited to a language that was rather deficient as a tool of logical exactness ....

It is important for the Japanese people as a nation to develop the habits and language tools of logically exact thinking ......... industrialization, which is going on very rapidly in contemporary Japan, does not seem to change the above-mentioned features very much or easily ... (1967: 195).

If this author is to be believed, even the huge organizational and logistical requirements of industrialization do not seem to have encouraged the development of "logically exact thinking." The implications of this statement for the thinking skills teacher who takes it seriously should require no elaboration.

Two counter-examples drawn from Mouer and Sugimoto are provided to give an indication of the extent to which these "nihonjinron" generalizations can misrepresent a more complex reality. One example is that the Japanese, far from being deficient in logic, actually excel at certain abstractive logical activities such as mathematics. The second example is that, far from being always averse to precise and direct communication, the Japanese can on occasion be extremely precise and direct, as exemplified in the Japanese system of labor contracts that specify all benefits and obligations in minute detail (Mouer & Sugimoto, 1986: 231).

Where does this brief analysis of Japan's ethnic culture as an explanatory tool leave our understanding of critical thinking skills development? There is no doubt that Japan's ethnic culture contributes something to the educational culture clash that often occurs when western academic models are imported. This manifests itself most convincingly in the Japanese students' unwillingness to give voice to controversial opinions and their apparent preference for group forms of interaction in the classroom (e.g. Andersen, 1993). But Japan's ethnic culture as it is presented currently cannot be used convincingly to explain the paradox that the Japanese have had no difficulty in importing from the West and utilizing the logical systems and knowledge structures of mathematics and the applied sciences, but appear to have greater difficulty in coming to grips with other Western academic disciplines.

## 10. THE LOCAL AND ACADEMIC CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

The key to the paradox presented above has to lie somewhere outside the domain of ethnic culture, most probably within the other three cultural dimensions identified by Flowerdew and Miller. The first of these other cultures, local culture, does not appear to be a significant candidate since Flowerdew and Miller regard it as a repository of local references

and examples which it should be easy enough for the foreign teacher to substitute for his native repository.

Flowerdew and Miller note that a given academic culture is likely to be imbued with the values and practices of the ethnic culture within which it is situated. In the case of Hong Kong, they believe that the infusion in the forms of Confucianist deference to the teacher-authority figure and a collectivist approach to social interaction is quite deep. Furthermore, they present both the native ethnic culture and the native academic culture as monolithic entities which are not subject to any significant variation. This may well represent an accurate picture of the situation in Hong Kong, but it should already be clear just because of the complexity of its ethnic culture that any accurate picture of the situation in Japan will be different.

There is, fortunately, quite a lot of research on Japan's education system that has been published in or translated into English. This appears to show that while ethnic cultural influences, such as an emphasis on developing individuality in tandem with group socialization, operate fairly uniformly at the kindergarten and primary school levels (e.g. Peak, 1991; Andersen, 1993), at the middle and high school levels these influences are strongly modified by, and sometimes subordinated to, the overwhelming imperatives of the Japanese public examination system, at the apex of which are the legendary College Entrance Exams (CEE). In-depth case studies of Japanese high schools (e.g. Rohlen, 1983:11-44 and Shimahara, 1991) indicate that the key variables in determining not only academic policies, but also attitudes to the teacher and forms of interaction, are the quality of the students who attend the school and the school's policy regarding the degree of priority to be given the CEE. At one extreme, a high school that was totally dedicated to the goal of CEE preparation, but attracted less than outstanding students stressed

> ... such behavioral and attitudinal attributes as diligence, concentration,
> conformity to the group, perseverance prompt response to external
> expectations, and acceptance of the teacher as the unquestioned sources of
> academic and moral authority.
>
> (Shimahara, 1991: 128)

A high school with similar students, but with a less fanatical dedication to CEE preparation has "... a far more relaxed orientation toward authority. Bright students are expected to challenge teachers." (Shimahara, 1991: 129). At the other extreme, a high school with students who have little chance of gaining admission to a college is depressingly familiar to a westerner for the delinquent behavior of its students and the seeming lack of traditional Japanese behavioral traits (Rohlen, 1983: 37-43).

The Japanese examination system, indeed, appears to be the single best explanation of the paradoxical difference in Japanese students' ease in dealing with mathematics and applied sciences and their difficulty in adapting to the requirements of other western academic

disciplines. Rohlen (1983), who has studied the Japanese education system in depth, generalizes about CEE papers in this way:

Short answer and multiple choice questions prevail. Few, if any, essay or interpretive questions appear .... [Japanese universities] want to know how much has actually been learned and how well information and theory can be applied to problem solving. Emphasis is on mastery of facts, control over details, and practical skill in the application of mathematical and scientific principles .... Science and math fit the short-answer mode comfortably, humanities and the social sciences do not (pp 94-95).

Compared with social studies, the math and science part of the test is quite straightforward and impressive. The questions are difficult, to be sure, but the objective short answer approach fits the purpose of these subjects. Theory, problem-solving and logic are central to most questions, and the examination system buttresses this emphasis in Japanese education (p 100).

The pedagogical regime that results from this examination-based system comprises lectures, drills and rote memorization, with no room for classroom discussion (Rohlen, 1983; Shimahara, 1991). Nor do Japanese undergraduate programs in the humanities and the social sciences at Japanese universities compensate for the earlier lack of depth in the study of these subject disciplines. Large classes, poor teaching and surprisingly slack academic expectations are the norm for these programs (Christopher, 1983: 92-93; Kelly, 1993).

If any further indication were needed that the neglect of critical thinking skills development in Japan is a matter of educational necessity rather than a culturally imposed constraint, we need only ponder the fact that there is in Japan currently a boom in the sales mainly to young readers of translated philosophy books from simplified primers, one of which has sold nearly 700,000 copies, to really difficult works by Nietzsche and Hegel (Daily Yomiuri editorial, September 19, 1995).

The superficial but intense cramming that is typical of Japan's secondary education academic culture and the slackness and narrowness of much of Japan's university academic culture are poor preparation for any encounter with the sophisticated disciplinary cultures that permeate western universities.

## 11. THE RELATION BETWEEN JAPAN'S ETHNIC AND ACADEMIC CULTURES AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

To sum up so far. In the case of Japan, it appears that ethnic culture has a strong influence on modes of interaction and expression, but that underlying cognitive orientations are

mainly shaped by the largely pragmatic sub-cultures of the Japanese education system with their obsessive focus on evaluation and selection by means of discrete point tests. If this observation is correct, it follows that the emphasis on critical thinking skills development should be placed on academic rather than cultural orientation, which, in turn, suggests that the time frame for development can be relatively short-term compared to the longer time frame a broader and more intangible cultural orientation would necessitate.

## 12. ACADEMIC AND DISCIPLINARY CULTURES AND CRITICAL THINKING

The major question remaining to be answered is what sort of general approach to this cognitive orientation should be taken. In terms of Flowerdew and Miller's four cultures framework, there are two broad choices. One choice is based on the belief that critical thinking is essentially uniform across academic disciplines and thus belongs to academic culture as a whole. The other choice is based on the belief that critical thinking varies significantly across academic disciplines because it is bound to greater or lesser degrees to the knowledge structures and norms of different disciplines. Deciding whether to choose one or the other or a mixture of both should determine the general shape of any critical skills development program in Japan.

Put in this way, the question may appear to be a fairly simple one, but in practice it turns out to be enormously complex and expert opinion among those who think about thinking is divided around the two choices. A sample examination of a major collection of articles on the issue (Perkins, Lochhead & Bishop, 1987) reveals a range of opinions from those who basically support the traditional philosophical view that critical thinking is unitary and universal (Ennis, cited in Paul, 1987: 378-379), to those in the middle who believe that critical thinking skills development must at least start within specific subject disciplines because of their particular knowledge structures and norms (e.g. Perkins & Salomon, 1987; Swartz, 1987) to those at the other end of the spectrum who are more concerned with the realities of practical decision making than with the metaphysical claims of academic philosophy and are thus willing to accept that a large number of valuative assumptions must precede thinking (e.g., Adler, 1987). This distribution of opinions suggests that in the end the real choice is not between academic culture and disciplinary cultures as such, but rather between the different conceptions that different disciplinary cultures have of their relation with academia and the wider world outside. Meta-disciplines like philosophy function partially as the procedural watchdogs of academic investigation and tend to see themselves as the embodiment of academic culture. More professionally oriented disciplines like law, medicine and business are constrained to serve relatively narrow academic and practical ends and have thus developed disciplinary cultures which are more concerned with applications than with self-reflection.

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## 13. A CRITICAL THINKING SYLLABUS DESIGN APPLICATION

This section contains an illustration of how this feasibility testing of a cultural construct can provide some of the meta-needs analysis that informs a practical syllabus design for critical skills development. Given that at IUJ the content studies the author prepares his students for are an American-style MBA, which is an example of a professionally-oriented academic program, the primary needs analysis areas were identified as the norms that operate within the MBA area with regard to valuative assumptions and knowledge structures and as the discourse structures in which these norms are embedded. The secondary needs analysis area related to the sorts of cultural inhibitions the author felt that his mainly Japanese (with some Indonesian and Thai) students might feel about the MBA discourse structures and the forms of interaction and expression that these structures entail. Since the American-style MBA is in reality a composite of different disciplines ranging from applied statistics to business ethics, the focus is placed on a cross-disciplinary knowledge and discourse structure which is popular both throughout the MBA world and at IUJ and which appears to present Japanese students with the greatest challenges to their expectations - the Harvard case method.

In terms of the primary needs analysis component, the desired syllabus outcome was a presentation of the essential knowledge and discourse structures of the Harvard case method that could be done as early as possible and as clearly as possible. The orientation to the forms of interaction and expression typically required by the case method, by contrast, was designed as a fairly slow and systematic transition from forms the students were already comfortable with to forms that the author's experience suggested would be new and somewhat alien to them.

### 13.1   The Harvard Case Method

What are the knowledge and discourse structures of the Harvard case method? In short, the Harvard case method is based on "the belief that management is a skill rather than a collection of techniques" and that "the best way to learn a skill is to practice in a simulation-type process" (Shapiro, 1984:2). The simulative nature of the exercise means that cases not only require active discussion of a case problem, but also complete involvement in the case scenario to the point where participants develop plans of action and are called upon to defend their proposals against the criticism of other participants (Shapiro, 1984:2).

The deepest rationale for this simulative approach is that the abstract concepts and the quantitative formulas provided by textbooks are necessary but insufficient to deal with the complexity of managerial decision-making. Textbook simplifications of business reality "need to be complemented by a sense of the interdependencies of people, functions and decisions in an organization" (Christensen, 1987:34). The key to good case discussion, therefore, is to bring together participants who have different experiences and attitudes gained by working in different jobs. As one case method practitioner has written:

Cases, and the related case discussions in class, provide the focal point around which the participants' expertise, experience, observations, and rules of thumb are brought to bear. What each class member brings to identifying the central problem of the case is as important as the content of the case itself.
(Hammond, 1980:2)

In terms of knowledge structure, the MBA case method's characteristic features are: (1) its large number of valuative assumptions about underlying economic structures and their validity; (2) its measurement of utility not in the form of "correct solutions", but rather in the hazier form of optimal compromises among competing priorities; (3) its embrace of subjective experience as a valuable source of evidence; and (4) its highly flexible and dialectical view of the relation between theory and practice (Christensen, 1987; Hammond, 1980; Shapiro, 1984). Items (2) & (4) appear to present the greatest challenges to the expectations of Japanese students.

In terms of discourse structure, the MBA case method's characteristic features are: (1) the contrasting structures and purposes of textbooks and case texts; (2) the free-form case discussion interactions among the students and the case moderator; and (3) the roles of persuasion and criticism as the arbiters of decisions (Christensen, 1987). For Japanese students, all of these items present challenges to their expectations.

### 13.2    The pre-MBA course

As already mentioned, the "meta-needs" analysis had indicated a need to present the knowledge and discourse structures of the case method as clearly and as rapidly as possible while providing a slower transition to the forms of interaction and expression required by these knowledge and discourse structures. Combining this with the local needs analysis led to the modular design summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1:

    Developing "Critical" Skills
    The Sequence of Activities in one Case Cycle

    1.    Read "concepts & techniques" texts - identify rhetorical patterns/ skim read/ summarize main points/ discuss

    2.    Use summaries as guide to reading of the case text/ notes on convergence & divergence of texts

    3.    Small group discussion (a) of relationship between the texts

4. Small group discussion (b) - assume general texts are perfect - criticize the company's performance

5. Small group discussion (c) - assume the company's performance is perfect - criticize the general texts

6. Small group discussion (d) - problem identification & decision options

7. Open-class, formal case discussion

As can be seen, the main aim of each module or case cycle is to expose as clearly as possible the dialectical nature of the knowledge generation dynamic, so, at least initially, the students go through a somewhat artificial process of assuming first that the textbooks are perfect and then reversing positions and assuming that the company's performance is perfect. This should lead automatically to an awareness that correct solutions are not an inherent part of the Harvard case method knowledge dynamic. The cases are, of course, carefully chosen for their relative simplicity and familiarity so that incidental content distractions can be kept to a minimum.

As much as possible for the first two or three case modules, the students are permitted to discuss the issues in the relative psychological comfort of small groups and are encouraged to reach a small-group consensus. It is only in the final open-class discussion phase that the teacher tries to inject some controversy into the proceedings by pitting group against group. Thereafter, the speed of progression towards a more "realistic" simulation of the case study process depends entirely on the students' response to this new way of learning.

## 14. CONCLUSION

The modular "case cycle" design described above obviously preceded the four cultures analytical framework, which was only recently published. The important point to note, however, is that, in the absence of such a framework, it took several years to develop the final design by means of a combination of intuition, experience and trial and error. Had the designer been able to organize the development work within a clear and relevant framework, it is highly likely that the development period would have been shortened and that many of the false starts and wrong turns would have been avoided. For this reason alone, all tertiary level English-medium institutions in the East and South-east Asian regions should at least consider using such a framework, either by relating an existing framework like the "four cultures" framework to their own particular settings and needs or by contributing to the development of a new framework.

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