Creating Classes in International Education from Familiar Topics

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1. Introduction
By establishing a time for general learning, an increasing number of schools are actively working to adopt international education as an educational activity for dealing with modern issues, and a variety of practical efforts have been reported. However, comprehensive educational content is rare, and real-world "international education" generally involves inviting foreigners living in the area into the classroom, having children sing foreign songs or play foreign games, or learning English from an ALT who comes to the school once or twice a month. This kind of learning may be interesting for the children, but it does not derive from familiar things in daily life. There is no need to learn it, and it ends up being just an "interesting experience".

We want children living in the global era to regard contact with foreign countries and other cultures as something more than just fun. We want them to follow these topics, including any related problems, and regard these issues as personal and relevant to their own selves. One technique for developing such international education is to begin with things which are familiar to the children. Another technique is to begin with things which appear at first glance to be distant, and then focus in to show how those things relate to what is close is familiar. The two approaches share a common approach in that the children focus their thoughts on issues familiar to themselves. By raising and considering familiar issues, the children become capable of "questioning themselves" and "substituting learning experiences".

"Questioning themselves" refers to meta-thinking about their own understanding of foreign countries and other cultures -- reflecting back through learning activities on any bias or misunderstanding in their own perspective, and why they look at things in that way. "Substituting learning experiences" means to take the experience itself of learning about a certain country or culture, and transform it into a method of understanding the next country or culture being studied. By learning using familiar issues as examples, children become able to face those issues on their own when they actually arise in their daily lives.

The following discusses the meaning of "familiarity" for children, cases of international education from the standpoint of human migration and acculturation in the global era, and the results of curriculum development research by the Japan Association for International Education.

2. Recognition of other cultures by children -- What is "familiar"?
The school curriculum in Japan is based on a principle of widening concentric circles, where learning begins with familiar things. The content of the curriculum for living and social studies widens as the student moves up in grade -- starting from oneself, and proceeding to one's family, school, local area, region, Japan and the world. Real learning about foreign countries begins in the 6th grade with the living and social studies unit "Countries closely related to us". To put it another way, there are no opportunities prior to the 6th grade for students to learn about foreign countries or other cultures, and even in the 6th grade, they only learn about "closely related countries".

However, in our information-intensive society, children are blessed with many opportunities to learn about events and conditions in far away countries through the television and other media. Through news and travel programs, they have knowledge, albeit patchy, about international problems and foreign cultures. Due to the
dissemination of media, the world of learning for children is not constrained by the principle of widening concentric circles, and in a certain sense, the conditions and cultures of distant countries have become familiar for today's children.

There is an interesting phenomenon regarding the understanding by Japanese children of native Americans. When children are asked about the word "Indian", almost all of them know the word, and when asked to draw an "Indian", they draw the same sort of drawing -- a man wearing a feather headdress, holding a spear or other weapon, with a skin color closer to black than brownish-red, primitive clothing, and a fire next to a tent. The picture is almost the same for children in lower and higher grades. Surprisingly, even university students and instructors draw the same drawing.

If you ask them if they have ever actually met an Indian, they have no such experience. Although there are no actual native Americans close by, they are so "familiar" that everyone from Japanese children to adults draws the same image. If video and messages are used to show the current way of life and diverse culture of native Americans, children are surprised at the discrepancy with the world they have drawn.

In the classroom, we have the children think about why this kind of phenomenon occurs. We have them talk about how they regard other cultures, whether that perspective is correct or not, and where that perspective came from. By encouraging meta-thinking regarding their understanding of other cultures -- i.e. why they understand other cultures in that way -- it becomes possible for them to question themselves. Whether something is familiar or not, is not a matter of physical distance; it is a question of whether or not it is an issue which can be seen in the children's ordinary lives.

3. Migrating people -- The global era and migrants --

As internationalization advances and globalization progresses, movement of people over borders is increasing. Migrants arrive in regions from various countries and regions, and the development of regional multicultural societies is accelerating. At the end of 2005, the number of aliens registered in Japan exceeded 2,010,000 -- a 47.7% increase compared to 10 years before. Amidst this trend, there is an increasing number of children of foreign nationality in Japanese schools, and the schools are becoming more multicultural. At present, the population of foreigners (who the Japanese call "new comers") is increasing, and many of these are persons of Japanese ancestry (nikkeijin).

Here let's consider the migrants to Hawaii as an example. Many traces of the Japanese migrants can be seen in Hawaii.

Hawaiian shirts and spam musubi are forms of culture created by Japanese migrants. From June to the end of August, "Bon dances" are held on the weekends throughout Hawaii, and there are lively Bon dances of the sort which can no longer be seen in Japan (Photo 1). Migrants from China and the Korean Peninsula came to Hawaii before the migrants from Japan. There are Korean graves in the cemetery of Hilo on the island of Hawaii, and the homes of Korean migrants still remain in the plantation village of Waipahu on the island of Oahu (Photo 2). In the town of Lahaina on the island of Maui, there is a house of Chinese migrants and the Wo Hing Temple which was built in 1912 (Photo 3). Migrants also came to the plantations from Portugal and the Philipines. When working on the plantations, each worker brought a box lunch and the migrants from different countries exchanged the foods in their box lunches. As this process was repeated, the "mixed plate" combining the cuisine of many countries on one plate became a fixture of the menu of the common people. Even today, it is possible to eat a "mixed plate" in Hawaii (Photo 4). This clearly shows how the migrants acculturated to suit the environment of Hawaii, while at the same time preserving the cultures they brought from their mother countries.

By studying these things, children can develop a perspective which doesn't regard culture as fixed, but rather sees it as something which changes while being preserved. The children become capable of a perspective on other cultures which is not the essentialist perspective that "culture X is Y", but rather the constructivist perspective that "culture X is Y in some respects and Z in other respects".

In international education it is crucial to develop the skill of "substituting learning experiences" where the experience of having learned from a certain real-world case, and the framework developed for that purpose, are transformed into the next international understanding or understanding of different cultures. We want to educate children who have a constructive understanding of the ethnic groups which comprise the multicultural society of a given region.
4. Framework for creating a curriculum for international education

The Japan Association for International Education received grants-in-aid for scientific research for 2003-2005, and conducted "Theoretical and Practical Research on Curriculum Development for International Education for the Global Era" (Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B)(1)). There were three goals of this research:

1. To classify/review various discussions relating to the curriculum, deepen knowledge and relate this with the developmental level of small children and students, and while doing this, clarify the distinguishing characteristics of a curriculum for international education
2. To collect/analyze the current curriculum for international education on a nation-wide scale, consider it in detail, and develop an understanding of problems and issues
3. To develop curriculum plans for international education. This research aimed to develop draft proposals, conduct practical validation, exploit those results, and develop/propose various models for each school level etc. Consideration was also given to issues such as basic concepts for curriculum development, curriculum design skills of teachers, and communications abilities as a basic skill. (Based on an excerpt from the report)

The research was conducted over 3 years by splitting into a theory group and a practice group, and the results were described in a report. The practice group provided a basic framework of curriculum development for international education, dividing the field of study into the following four areas A-D:

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<th>A) Multicultural society</th>
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<td>B) Global society</td>
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<td>C) Regional issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>D) Choices for the future</td>
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<td>Cultural understanding</td>
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<td>Historical awareness</td>
<td>Civic awareness</td>
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Almost all of the many case studies (32 cases total) provided as model curricula for each field of study (A-D) are such that a class is conducted relating the topic to a familiar viewpoint of the child, and the experience of that learning continues to apply in the next study topic. For example, topics proposed relating to B) "Global society" include: "Why are You in Japan?”, "Interdependence with Global Society -- Viewpoints on International Peace”, "The ‘Ethnicity of Kobe’ -- Considering Internationalization in a
Familiar Region", and "What is Globalization?" Proposals relating to D) "Choices for the future" included: "Japan in the World", "Educating Children to Create New Civic Society -- Efforts over Three Years to Foster a Culture of Peace based on the Local Area --", and "Overcoming Differences in Historical Awareness (Pros and Cons of Dropping the Atom Bomb)".

Through the experience of working with children to create classes in international education from these sorts of issues which are familiar to children, the children themselves should develop skills enabling them to notice and follow issues relating to international understanding.

5. Conclusion

The author is currently involved in a project where about 50 teachers, mainly junior high school social studies teachers from Japan and the U.S., gather at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, and develop instructional materials and conduct classes together. In this area, there are different types of historical awareness, and different ways of thinking, between the two countries and between individual participants. One good point of this project is that lesson plans are formulated while respecting multiple perspectives -- with the Japanese and U.S. teachers spending a week together, doing lectures and field work, having thorough discussions, and considering class content while cooperating on the spot. By spending one week together, a relationship of mutual trust is born, resulting in a readiness to develop classes with the aim of mutual understanding which transcends differences in thinking and understanding.

If two countries (or multiple countries) have different historical awareness or memory of the past, it is not easy to create classes to foster mutual understanding. However, mutual understanding in the true sense cannot be achieved if teachers from one country unilaterally make and use instructional materials for understanding the other country. Rather than one-way international education, I believe it is important for teachers from both sides to join hands and create classes together. I feel this is the best way to develop education for mutual understanding in Asia, which is the theme of this symposium.

When considering education programs for mutual understanding in elementary and secondary education in the borderless era, rather than teaching the fixed perspective that "Japan is a country that ...", I envisage a future where the teachers in the classroom join hands to create classes from perspectives which are familiar to the children, and encourage the children to question their own perspectives.

(References)
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