

In April 2019, Japan launched a new visa system to ease restrictions on accepting foreign workers. Under the new system, more than 340,000 workers are expected to come in the next five years. This once so-called ‘mono-lingual country’ seems to be rapidly turning multicultural. What is required for immigrants to become integrated into their communities?

One small suggestion is to conduct a Digital Storytelling workshop between immigrants and locals. Digital storytelling is a grass-roots, workshop-based practice where people are taught to use digital media to create short video stories, usually about their lives, with a voiceover. Originating in 1990s California, it has been spreading all over the world. Stories told in this format are focused on everyday life, and depict important memories or routine feelings they encounter. Created by combining photos in a slide-show format using simple images and voiceovers, it allows audiences to visualize lives in countries different from their own and connect with each other.

Two workshops were conducted among university students both from Japan, and with mixed roots in Kani(2008) and Matsusaka(2009), in areas where local residents had already been exposed to multiculturalism. In 1990, at the time of “the bubble economy” in Japan, the government revised the immigration law to allow foreign descendants of Japanese (Nikkei-jin) and their families to be “long-term residents” to answer the demands of the work force. Since Latin America was suffering economic depression at that time, workers were employed and resided in specific satellite cities of Nagoya, such as Kani, and Matsusaka. The areas are home to a large number of Brazilian and Filipino workers, yet their lives and thoughts are rarely covered in local media or understood by local residents.

Generally speaking, a disadvantage these workers faced was learning Japanese, which is said to be the most difficult language in the world. Communicating with locals was hard for newly arrived workers. According to data from the Ministry of Education, the number of foreign and Japanese students who need additional language class in elementary and middle school is increasing, reaching 43,000 in 2016¹. This year, a new law has passed the lower house in the Diet, providing extra support for students with foreign roots. The ministry and municipalities are attempting to provide more extra-curricular classes, whose support has been conventionally offered by community volunteers who wanted to help out children in their community. On the other hand, although the government permitted the children of foreign workers to attend Japanese schools, they were not obliged to do so. Lessons taught in Japanese added further difficulties. Research reports show that not only did the children with foreign roots have difficulty in academic tasks, but also lacked “Ibashi”, somewhere you can feel protected and accepted. Ochante=Murray

¹文部科学省「日本語指導が必要な児童生徒の受入状況等に関する調査(平成 28 年度)」の結果について http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/29/06/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2017/06/21/1386753.pdf (Accessed on 23, June, 2019)

concluded that all seven of her research interviewees experienced bullying (Ochante=Murray, 2016).

For the foreign teenagers, who lacked confidence, the culmination perhaps of a paucity of praise or positive feedback from their peers and schools, creative storytelling appeared to be an enjoyable experience overall. For this reason, university students were expected to listen to the children carefully, to retrieve the buried seeds of their stories, such as dissatisfaction, worries, humour, and happiness. At first, language and cultural barriers prevented workshop participants with mixed roots from expressing themselves, however, through conversation with senior students, they gradually opened up and became motivated. Showing photos of families, pets, and others as a means of expression can encouraged and helped them to express themselves compared to a conventional classroom environment.

In the end, the participants, for whom at first we thought the task would be too difficult in terms of their Japanese language ability, were all able to create video stories using their own voices, and their works were impressive².

Most of the seeds of the stories were discovered in seemingly unimportant chats about familiar people. Hereby referred to as the "Pre-story space (Ogawa and Ito, 2010)": A space in which only small fragments of ideas, experiences, unspoken complaints, and simple questions... so-called "story seeds" are jumbled up together, prior to their verbalization. From the Pre-story space, stories are woven through conversation between participants and facilitators, adding alternative views on the children's lives and thoughts. By producing stories, participants took a fresh look at their own lives and identities. As they were asked various questions by the university students, the participants looked ahead to the future, and re-examined the perception of their identities, occasionally borrowing the viewpoints of the university students to examine the dissatisfactions and failures in their lives from a meta perspective and transform them into humorous, touching, or heart-warming episodes. In sum, Digital Storytelling proved useful in helping children with mixed roots integrate with their Japanese peers. Participants said the workshops helped them gain an insight into the lives and upbringings of others in a way that would have been of otherwise unavailable.

This summer, we are launching a new Digital Storytelling project for children with mixed roots in Toyohashi, aimed at integrating these children into local communities. They speak their mother tongue at home with their parents, who sometimes show negative attitudes towards speaking Japanese at home, although they have to speak Japanese at school. This is in collaboration with "Pekey's Little Author³": an app that creates digital and print books, and a local

² See Media Conte stories

Kani https://mediaconte.net/theatre_list/?cat=8

Matsusaka https://mediaconte.net/theatre_list/?cat=9

³ Pekey's Little Author for iPad <https://www.pekay.jp/pkla/ipaden>

non-profit organization that helps marginalized communities, including foreign workers and their families. We are planning to highlight typical difficulties faced by them through stories with fictional characters. Some themes will include; annoyances, treasures, adventures. We will then move on to their real stories with photos. The aim is not only to improve participants' Japanese, but also to encourage dialogue between children and their families, those outside of their communities, and how they can express their feelings when they are caught between their parents and Japanese customs.

Digital Storytelling may remind some Japanese people of "Seikatsu-Tsuzurikata", or "Seikatsu Kiroku" movements, educational writing practices where people would gather to share what was on their mind. These movements promoted free expression, further understanding among their group, and social participation. "Seikatsu Tsuzurikata" started before World War II in Japan, driven by progressive teachers in rural districts who taught composition skills, dialogue and community problem-solving through writing expression. Teachers encouraged students to examine their lives to find seeds of compositions, such as anger, shame or joy. Students then discussed the causes of their problems and worked together to find solutions. These highlighted common problems and brought participants together. "Seikatsu Kiroku" meanwhile was started among laborers after WW II, alongside Kazuko Tsurumi, a sociologist inspired by "Seikatsu Tsuzurikata" and Dewey's pedagogy. These movements also shared many similarities with the literacy education of Paulo Freire, a founder of critical pedagogy.

As Dewey stated, dialogic process and communicative expression is essential in a democratic society where differences, dissatisfaction or disagreements exist among community members. With the internet in Japan becoming increasingly polarized, Digital Storytelling can provide opportunities to engage with grass-roots democracy.

Ochante=Muray, R.M. (2016) 「公立の小・中学校の不登校・不適應における生徒指導の課題—外国人児童生徒の困難な体験からの考察」 奈良学園大学紀要, 5, 27-35.

小川明子・伊藤昌亮(2010) 「物語を紡ぎ出すデジタル・ストーリーテリング実践—メディア・コンテ・ワークショップの試み」 社会情報学研究 第14巻2号 115-128.

小川明子(2016) 『デジタル・ストーリーテリング —声なき想いに物語を』 リベルタ出版, 2016.