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Intrigue, Intellect and Entertainment: The Creation of a Lecture Series to Foster English Language Use at a Japanese University

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Abstract and Rationale

Like many universities, Otaru University of Commerce is isolated. Located up a mountain side, along a road known as the *jigoku-zaka* (literally, “Hell’s slope”), the university is in a small city that up to half the year is covered in snow, on an island that evokes images of sparsely populated countryside. Added to this, the university can be described as a commuter school. 70% of the students and faculty commute to the university from Sapporo (pop. 1.9 million) 40km away. On most evenings, and as happens at many smaller university campuses around Japan, by 5pm the university campus becomes silent. As a faculty member educated in “college town” universities, where activities ranging from concerts to talks, exhibitions and debates were held with regularity on campus it was quite disconcerting to see a dead campus. What were students missing out on that their peers in some other countries were experiencing? Was it possible to create the intellectual environment similar to that found in universities in the U.S. or U.K. and to get students to stay on campus or to come to it when they didn’t have classes? And finally, could we increase the opportunities for not only the students, but also for the faculty, staff, and the public to gain access to English on a regular basis, with all of its varieties? As the primary business university in Hokkaido, this final point is important and a key to improving our students’ abilities and to continuing to elevate the profile of the university as one preparing competent and skillful students for their futures. To address these realities, the Otaru University of Commerce English Lecture Series was created. Started in 2010, the OUC English Lecture Series began with the belief, “Everyone has a story.” The goal was to bring to Otaru talented speakers to talk to our students, increasing their opportunities to be exposed to new ideas, and creating a more intellectual and entertaining environment at the university. And to do so entirely in English. Since 2010, we have hosted 40 speakers ranging from academics to artists, musicians to a living treasure pottery master. And each year, the Series grows. This presentation will focus on the creation of the Series, the problems involved, and the effect that the Series has had on the university and on our students.

Timeline

2000

An initial attempt to create a standing lecture series in Hokkaido is begun in the Institute for Language and Cultural Studies at Hokkaido University.

2001

After four lectures consisting of academics focused on linguistics and language teaching, poor attendance (the average attendance per lecture was 6) on the part of both faculty and students (at a university of 18,000 students) attempts to bring a lecture series to the *Gengobunka-bu* (Institute for Language and Cultural Studies) are abandoned.

2003

The author and founder of the English Lecture Series left his position at Hokkaido University to take up a tenured position in the Center for Language Studies at Otaru University of Commerce (40km west of Sapporo).

2009

The author requests clarification from the school regarding paying speakers from one's personal research budget (個人研究費) to present in classes at Otaru University of Commerce. The conclusion was that speakers could be paid to present from one's budget under the section known as 謝金 (honorarium). To test the system, speakers are invited to present in the author's graduate level course in research methodology class.

2010

In early 2010, the author began exploring the idea of trying once again to start a sustainable lecture series. He consulted with the university about bringing in speakers from the Sapporo area, from Hokkaido and off island.

In October 2010, the first lecture is scheduled and advertised to the faculty, staff, students and community. It is decided that all lectures will be up to one hour in length with an additional 15 minutes for Q&A. This was decided because it allowed for the entire event to be concluded within a single 90-minute class period. This is particularly important to prevent overlap with other classes and others scheduled in the speaking rooms. Sapporo-based writer and poet George Polley is the speaker. The first presentation draws approximately 45 students and faculty. Following a successful start, an additional three lectures are scheduled, with the speakers including a graduate student, an activist and local company president. The first four lectures were all local Sapporo residents. Funding was arranged using the author's personal research allowance. If the first four lectures failed, the Series was to again be shelved. Attendance for the first four lectures averaged 50.

2011

In spring of 2011, a full slate of 12 lectures was scheduled over the 16 week semester aided by a grant from Otaru University of Commerce's President and the addition of departmental funding through a 3-year E-learning grant awarded to the English Department at OUC. The additional funding allowed our reach to expand to bring in speakers from outside Hokkaido, as well as those internally. It also allowed for the continued videotaping and placement on YouTube of the lectures. The Series featured a Japanese-born living treasure potter from Hawaii, our first diplomat, several academics and our own graduate students.

In fall of 2011, eight speakers visited the university. The smaller schedule allowed for checking the receptiveness of students and faculty at times when the weather is bad. A 9th lecture was forced to be cancelled due to a snowstorm and low attendance (three people attended and the decision was made to cancel the lecture). It was the only lecture of the Series to ever be cancelled. The Series included all academics, but new to the Series was the encouragement of our part-time faculty to participate. Just as with the inclusion of our graduate students, encouraging the part-time faculty to participate in the Series was intended to make them feel that they are part of the university, that their research matters, and to encourage professional development.

2012

The Spring 2012 Series was the most ambitious yet, including 15 speakers in 16 weeks. New to the Series were speakers from other faculties within the university (again as a measure of inclusiveness), as well as our first military speaker, our first musician and the first foreign geisha in Japan. It also included the first speaker sponsored by a different department within the university. The Law Department sponsored a speaker who had recently completed a three year position in Japan's Mission to the United Nations, covering the associated costs with bringing the speaker to Otaru from Nagoya. This was important because the lecture series began to be viewed as an option for speakers visiting the university. One further development was that permission was granted by the university to begin seeking overseas speakers (with the stipulation that the cost not exceed the cost of domestic flights).

Summer 2012

To increase the visibility of the university, a university seal for the speaker's podium was created. The process of creating the OUC English Language Series website is begun.

Fall 2012

15 speakers are scheduled including artists, academics, diplomats, an Emmy-nominated cinematographer, our first professional sports figure and a world-renowned tattoo artist. A second internally-sponsored lecture is scheduled when the Faculty of Commerce offers the former CEO of British Midland Airlines as a potential speaker.

The Series continues to branch out in new ways, hoping to inspire and enrich the lives of our students, faculty and the community.

Problems

Weather, location, attendance, publicity, advertising, and fostering a system where the lecture series becomes part of the norm in the lives of students and faculty, not as something unusual. Over 40 lectures, the average attendance is around 40, and this varies greatly with three students on the low end and 150 at the high end. Attendance mainly consists of students. Getting faculty to attend, even those from the author's own department, is often a challenge, though there are occasional surprises in the audience. The most consistent group is the exchange students who find the lectures an interesting alternative to their classes. One additional problem is a lack of support staff. The English Lecture Series is solely the work of the author, with the help of one secretary whose time is often divided by other duties. The estimated time dedicated to the Series, which includes constant communications with speakers, creation of advertising materials, promoting the Series, meeting with speakers and hosting the events amounts to approximately 30-40 hours a week. This is in addition to the other duties of the author as a full-time faculty member. As a result, few people are interested in taking on the responsibilities associated with the Series. In 2013, the author is expected to go on a six-month sabbatical. The only option is to shelve the Series for the spring 2013 spring semester. This is not expected to affect the Series as a whole, which will begin again in fall of 2013.

A Note on the Payment of Speakers

It is the strong belief of the author that speakers in a lecture series should be paid for their time and the effort they put into their presentations. It may seem quite normal for academics accustomed to attending conferences to speak for free, but outside of academia, many people are giving up a significant portion of their business day to meet with our students. Therefore, it was decided that the Series would pay its speakers, within the national university guidelines. The national university guidelines for honorarium payments however, significantly limit what we are allowed to pay speakers. This often makes it difficult to draw top speakers who are paid much more elsewhere. The most we are permitted to pay is 50,000 yen as an honorarium and this is reserved solely for the most famous or important of individuals (something along the lines of a Nobel Prize winner). Nobel Prize winners, however, normally are paid far higher sums for their speaking appearances. One Japanese university with which the author has spoke has paid in excess of three million yen to bring a Nobel Prize winner to their campus. We simply can't do that. As a result, the author has made inquiries to the university about sponsorships.

Sponsorships, Greed, and a Potential Solution

Sponsorships have been a touchy issue between the author and the university. The author has repeatedly requested clarification from the university regarding outside sponsorship (i.e. corporate sponsorship) for the lecture series. Currently, it is the university's belief that any money donated to the university for any purpose should go into the general fund. It is the author's belief that this discourages private-public partnerships and that money donated to the lecture series should remain with the lecture series or at least should rest with the desires of the donating party. A possible solution presented itself to the author during the summer of 2012 when the author was thinking about the internally-sponsored lectures within the university. If it is possible for a department to sponsor a lecture, pay the associated costs, and for the lecture series to simply act as the venue, then it stands to reason that a similar sponsorship system could be developed where the sponsoring company pays the associated costs of the lecture directly to the speaker, bypassing the university and its requirements, and the lecture series again simply serving as the venue. In this way, the lecture series would have the possibility of attracting sponsorships without the worry that the money donated would go elsewhere. It remains to be seen if this will work in practice, and there is the question of liability in the event that something out of the ordinary happened. But, at present, this seems like the most logical solution to a most frustrating problem.

Effects of the English Lecture Series

A number of students have noted that the lectures have helped them to prepare for studying abroad. Others have mentioned that they are getting to hear from people who are much more interesting than their normal professors. I have personally noticed that more of my students were asking questions in the lectures as well as in their classes with me. Some professors from other departments (law, commerce, etc.) have begun to attend the lectures and the President has taken a direct interest in the Series (though so far has been reluctant to speak there). Some students are coming to school just for the lecture, on days when they normally don't have classes. On the speaker side, as a result of their experience

coming to Otaru University of Commerce, certain speakers have recommended additional speakers, speakers which otherwise might not have been available to the organizer.

The Future

The students who entered the university as freshmen in 2011 would be the first class exposed to a full season of the lecture series. Subsequent classes will be as well. The Series, it is hoped, will become part of the student experience, one that students will be more readily aware of, and more likely to want to attend without prompting or obligation. It is also hoped that the Series will continue to attract the best speakers and talent available. These may be speakers of high name value or unknown speakers with a great story to tell. Each has their own merits. But, what is apparent is that the English Lecture Series at Otaru University of Commerce is not only sustainable, it is the only English lecture series of its kind in Hokkaido, and probably one of the few (if not the only one) in Japan.

For those interested in starting a lecture series

Logistics is the biggest difficulty to setting up a series, seconded by attendance. Start with those speakers you know. Build up a reputation in the community and seek support (both financial and moral support) from within the university. Start with a small number of speakers and work into a full series. Encourage faculty, part-time faculty and students to participate and those locally. In 2013, it is anticipated that we will have our first undergraduate speaker, a student who wrote his first book when he was 15 years old. Always be on the lookout for potential speakers. As with anything that is really worth the effort, it takes time. But, it can be done and a lecture series such as that presented here can have an impact on the feeling of the school and among the students and faculty that are a part of it.

Shawn M. Clankie is Professor of Applied Linguistics and the English Department Chair at Otaru University of Commerce. He is the founder and host of the Otaru University of Commerce English Lecture Series and the author of more than 30 textbooks, self-study books and monographs. <shawn@res.otaru-uc.ac.jp>

Appendix 1

Previous Lectures in the OUC English Lecture Series

(*lecture available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/user/OtaruShodai>)

*1. October 18, 2010 *Curiosity, Observation and Questioning*, George Polley, Writer and Poet.

*2. November 1, 2010 *Otaru-Dying Port or Sleeping Beauty?* Simon Jackson, President, NorthPoint Network and former president of the Hokkaido International Business Association

*3. December 6, 2010 *The Otaru Onsens Case-Ten Years On*, Arudou Debito, Activist.

- *4. December 13, 2010 *What it means to be a real man: Comparing Male Images from Japan and Poland*, Ms. Agnieszka Pochyla, Doctoral Student, Hokkaido University Graduate School of Media and Communication.
- *5. April 15, 2011 *Get Moving With Moodle*, Professor Thomas Goetz, Department of Social Welfare, Hokusei Gakuen University.
- *6. April 22, 2011 *Language, Law and Our Life*, Professor Syugo Hotta, School of Law, Meiji University
- *7. May 12, 2011 *Prescriptivism and Descriptivism, Grammaticality and Acceptability, Language Education and Japan* Dr. Shawn Clankie, Associate Professor, Center for Language and Culture Studies
8. May 19, 2011 *Follow-up Turns in L₂ Talk*, Dr. Tim Greer, Associate Professor, School of Languages and Communication, Kobe University
9. May 23, 2011 *English Education in Laos*, Dr. Mark Holst, Center for Language and Culture Studies, Otaru University of Commerce
- *10. June 9, 2011 *Graduate Education in America*, Mr. Masanobu Nakatsugawa, Graduate Student, Department of Applied Linguistics, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale
- *11. June 9, 2011 *The Long Leftward March in American Graduate Education*, Dr. Pat O'Brien, Assistant Professor of American Studies, Hokkai Gakuen University
- *12. June 21, 2011 *The U.S. Role in the Global Economy*, Mr. John Ries, Consul General, United States Consulate, Sapporo
- *13. June 27, 2011 *The Multimedia Revolution*, Mr. Mark Austin, Visiting Professor of Print Media, India Institute of Journalism and New Media
- *14. July 1, 2011 *It Shall Be as You Shall Have It: Opportunities and Challenges to Studying In Japan*, Dr. Brian Masshardt, Director, East Asian Studies Program, Musashi University
- *15. July 4, 2011 *About my life: Path, Events, Faith and Purpose* Mr. Yukio Ozaki, Professor of Fine Arts, Chaminade University and Living Treasure of Hawaii.
16. July 13, 2011 *Bridging English through the Japanese Educational Curriculum*, Mr. Michael Kaneko, Graduate Student, Graduate School of Commerce, Otaru University of Commerce.
17. October 11, 2011 *Using the CALL Classroom to Improve English Communication Skill and TOEIC Preparation* Dr. Ibrahim Farouk, Assistant Professor, Center for Language and Culture Studies, Otaru University of Commerce.

- *18. October 24, 2011 *Designing online learning experiences for audio-visual language learning*, Dr. Goh Kawai, Graduate School of Media and Communication, Hokkaido University.
- *19. November 7, 2011 *Genes or culture? What babies, apes, dogs, savants and Alex the parrot can tell us about human language*, Dr. Daniela Caluianu, Professor of English, Otaru University of Commerce
- *20. November 17, 2011 *Intercultural experiences --- Reflected in Myself*, Emeritus Professor Osamu Takai, Department of Applied Linguistics, Otaru University of Commerce
- *21. December 2nd, 2011 *Word associations and second language vocabulary acquisition*, Mr. Ian Munby, Lecturer, Hokkai Gakuen University.
- *22. December 9, 2011 *Does task-based language teaching (TBLT) promote language acquisition?* Mr. Tim Blankley, Associate Professor of English, Kokugakuin Junior College.
- *23. January 12th, 2012 *Teaching Japanese in the U.S.*, Ms. Mayumi Hirano, Lecturer in Japanese, State University of New York at Binghamton.
24. January 27th, 2012 *A Foreign Learner's Nightmare - The Case of Rendaku*. Dr. Mark Irwin, Associate Professor, Department of Social and Cultural Systems, Yamagata University.
- *25. April 13th, 2012 *Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT): A New Solution for Old Problems?* Dr. John Thurman, Associate Professor of English, Center for Language and Culture Studies, Otaru University of Commerce.
- *26. April 23rd, 2012 *Ways of Using Moodle in Colleges and Universities* Mr. Peter Ruthven-Stuart, Future University Hakodate.
27. April 27th, 2012 *Inside the Flower and Willow World*, SAYUKI, Geisha.
- *28. May 10th, 2012 *Re-versing Dialogs on Progress and Complexity in Orality and Literacy*, Ms. Meghan Fidler, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.
- *29. May 17th, 2012 *The Road to Tomodachi – Reflections on the U.S.-Japan Alliance*, Mr. John Taylor, Consul for Public Affairs, U.S. Consulate, Sapporo.
- *30. May 21st, 2012 *Self and Subjectivity in Thought and Language*, Dr. Heiko Narrog, Associate Professor, Graduate School of International Cultural Studies, Tohoku University.

31. May 22nd, 2012 *The Role of US Army in Japan (USARJ)*, Major Eric Nebeker, Hokkaido Liaison Officer, U.S. Army.

32. May 24th, 2012 *The Fund Raising Game: How Companies Raise Money*, Takaaki Hoda, Associate Professor of Corporate Finance, Graduate School of Entrepreneurship, Otaru University of Commerce.

*33. May 30th, 2012 *The Role of Japanese Assistance in Trade to Developing Countries; How We Can Get Involved*. Ms. Misaki Kodama, Ph.D. candidate, Nagoya University and former representative to Japan's mission to the United Nations, Geneva.

*34. June 1st, 2012 *Investment Opportunities in Afghanistan*. Naseer Shafaq, Vice-President of Momand International, Kabul, Afghanistan.

*35 June 7th, 2012 *Fragile shelter: The Beginning of our Corner of the World*, Mr. Hidemi Nishida, Spatial Designer.

*36 June 14th, 2012 *A Luchtime Performance by Takashi Hamada*, Mr. Takashi Hamada, Ragtime Guitarist.

*37 July 5th, 2012 Tomozo, Artist.

38 July 6th, 2012 *My Experience in an Otaru Elementary School*, Minori Tanaka, Master's candidate, Graduate School of Commerce, Otaru University of Commerce.

*39 July 12th, 2012 *Commercial Dispute Resolution*, Mr. Hideo Nakamura, Professor of Law, OUC.

Appendix 2

Otaru University of Commerce English Lecture Series: Fall 2012 Schedule

40. September 26th, 2012 *The U.S.-Japan Alliance*. Mr. David Schlaefer, Chief of Political-Military Affairs Section, US Embassy Tokyo.

41. Thursday, October 11th, 2012 *The World Music Trip with Kenjah*, Kenjah, Singer and Musician.

42. Tuesday, October 16th, 2012 *A Talk and Roundtable Discussion with Nigel Turner*, Nigel Turner, Former CEO of British Midland Airlines.

43. Thursday, October 18th, 2012 *Purpose, politics, and practice of Teaching History in the USA*. Professor Ted Weeks, Department of History, Southern Illinois University.

44. Thursday, October 25th, 2012 *Tradition Taiji*, Simon Wearne, Emmy-nominated Cinematographer for Whale Wars (Season 1).

45. Friday, October 26th, 2012 *Japanese Hospitals: Trends and Challenges*, Dr. James Tiessen, MBA Program Director, Ryerson University (Canada).
46. Thursday, November 1, 2012 *Intercultural Understanding through Painting*, Jeremie Bouchard, Artist.
47. Tuesday, November 6, 2012 Scott Berry, Head Coach, Levanga Hokkaido Basketball Team.
48. Friday, November 16th, 2012 *The Art and Engineering of Umbrellas*, John DiCesare, Designer, DiCesare Designs
49. Wednesday, December 5th, 2012 Professor Toshikazu Aiuchi, *Social Business for Social Capital*, Graduate School of Entrepreneurship, Otaru University of Commerce.
50. Thursday, December 6th, 2012 *Japanese English Education is almost a crime: Lessons from my TOEFL Teaching Experience*. Shigeru Yoshida, President, SEA School for Educational Alternatives.
51. January 17th, 2013, Professor Lawrence Reid, Professor Emeritus of Linguistics, University of Hawaii and National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka.
52. January 18th, 2013, Dr. Ritsuko Kikusawa, National Museum of Ethnology
53. January 24th, 2013, Khan, Tattoo Artist
54. January 25th, 2013, Jeffry Duffy, Public Affairs Officer, U.S. Consulate, Sapporo.

<<http://www.oucenglishlectureseries.com>>