Reinvigorating the Liberal Arts as Transformative Praxis in the Japanese University

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Introduction

This paper examines the current state of foreign language education in Japanese universities as illustrative of the troubling conditions facing the liberal arts (i.e. the *transformative* arts) in a globalized neoliberal milieu. While utopian ideals in education have long insinuated pedagogies that inspires personal agency, creative investment, challenge to power, and social change, this imagining of incalculable futures has over the past few decades been steadily eroded by the seemingly inevitable and confluent forces of a hyper-networked world, represented most forcefully by the socioeconomic reductionism of neoliberal globalist determinism. This paper proposes a reinvigoration of constructive and engaged pedagogies of resistance to these trends, encouraging a repositioning of Japanese learners within sustainable, self-creating discourses—those fostering critical engagement and enabling heightened possibilities for trans-generational transformation of cultures.

Education as a Rethinking of Knowledge and Memory

The liberal tradition in education (as in "the liberal arts") encompasses more than a conglomeration of academic disciplines that are now categorized as outside the bounds of the "purely" empirical sciences. Liberalism as a mental discipline derives from the Latin word *liberalis*, i.e., "worthy of a free person", and for centuries was inseparable from scientific inquiry. The liberal arts are in essence a search for "*first principles*", an examination of our *technical becoming*, past and future, a never-ending endeavor to situate ourselves in an eco-historical context that can lead to a *free* future for humanity.

Any legitimate educational goal is premised on the possibility of transformation, not only of skills or proficiencies, but also of individuals and cultures. This transformational potential must be framed by an understanding of our historical becoming—where we are now, how we got here, and where we may be going—as well as our relationship to the technologies that transform our ways of doing and our ways of living. The contemporary philosopher Bernard Stiegler (2011) demonstrates convincingly how the historical and the technical form the essence of our humanity. In short, humans differ from other animals in that along with a biological evolution of our species (a phylogenesis), humans are also bound up in a technical evolution that develops in tandem with us (an *epiphylogenesis*). All of human civilization is an inscription of our past, an exteriorization of our knowledge and memory (retentions) that is carried forward into the future (what Stiegler calls "protentions"). The future is a cultivation of the past.

The problem with the current milieu is that our technologies are developing so quickly that we cannot really properly consider where we are going, and what it is that we are really doing. Digital technologies are putting human civilization through a sort of radical psychosocial "rewiring". Constant connectivity and instant access to information are undoubtedly diminishing our capacity for maintaining "deep attention" (Hayles,2012) while short-circuiting long-term interests, supplanting such cultivation with what Stiegler (2013) refers to as a short-term "libidinal economy". At the same time technological changes occur at such a speed that they outpace social consciousness, creating a permanent state of what Douglas Rushkoff (2103) calls "present shock".

The pace of this technological change has meant that it is now much more difficult to maintain an adequate focus on where our knowledge comes from and where it is leading us. We have become increasingly stuck in the rut of the short-term, cut off from the past and from the possibility of passing on a healthy intergenerational dialogue. This opens up humanity to control by forces that are keen to manipulate this condition. Although education would seem an antidote to such a poisonous condition, it is nonetheless also deeply related to politics, i.e., issues of power, of who determines the meanings we make, the worlds we create, and the worlds that we will create. As Lemke (1995) points out, meaning-making either sustains or challenges

relationships of power. The current dominant discourse among education planners is one in which knowledge is metaphorized as a commodity, something that must be purchased—through economic inequality and struggle, through standardized tests, through constant accumulation of valued skills, and through adaptation to the presumed inevitability of economic, social, political, and technological changes. In response to such trends, conscientious educators must ask themselves to what extent current pedagogical practice invests in the long-term, protentional capabilities of learners. Are students simply semiotic consumers, or are they *semiosic* (meaning-making) co-creators of worlds that are not yet?

Stiegler (2015) describes the role of education as developing the individual's potential for "worlding" [*mondanéisation*], and as the cultivation of culture through thoughtfulness, or care. He proposes a radical return to first principles: "I think we have to … develop a genuine industry of knowledge, an industry of education, but totally revising the axioms of what knowledge itself is, what the transmission of knowledge is, starting the whole project over again" (in Crogan, 2010, p. 23). This involves, in my opinion, situating students and teachers within an expanding cycle of transformative pedagogy within which they can continually gain the inspiration, solidarity and awareness needed to fearlessly explore human potential, imaginatively bond with others, act for social justice and implement democratic practices that nurture individual expression, creativity and growth in their classrooms, institutions and communities.

Rethinking Language Education as a Liberal Art

Language education in the Japanese university is in the main following the general trend of proletarianizing and commodifying knowledge. Emphasis is placed on calculability, through an obsession with rankings and standardized testing. The current administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made economic competitiveness the central goal of English language education, and universities—whose "customer" students and their parents are naturally keen to achieve "empirically" measurable results—have largely taken the government's lead. English has become a part of the mechanism that separates winners from losers, not an exercise in the expansion of incalculable future psychosocial possibility.

The idea of English as a foreign language has likewise become affixed to the seeming inevitability of neoliberal globalism. Students are now routinely described as "global human resources", as if they were cogs in a machine whose momentum and direction is beyond anyone's control. In this environment, it is no wonder that English as a foreign language in Japan is often met with a fair degree of ambivalence. It is taken both as an inevitable ubiquity in daily life (as an curricular requirement and as a lingua franca in popular media) and as a medium in which most Japanese feel they have minimal investment. In its current state, English as a foreign language remains an ineluctable force that offers little in the way of psychic or social transformation.

This problem is complicated, I think, by the fact that English language pedagogy as a field has (ironically) suffered from an often artificial professionalization and compartmentalization, as though the very complex dynamics that comprise the learning a foreign language can be examined as one would any other human behavior, and as though language learning is an activity that can be separated from the many other things going on in an individual's life (see Van Lier, 2004 for a wonderful examination of this ecological complexity). My observation over the years is that it is not uncommon for language teachers to eventually come to the realization that what they do in the classroom involves far more than just language teaching. The lives of teachers are intersecting with those of their students, and it is at this juncture that transformation of people and culture can occur. If it is allowed to.

Stiegler (2010) argues that we are in "a combat for the politics of memory". What he means by this is that our current technological, economic, social, and political milieu makes it increasingly difficult for us to understand who we are and why our lives are meaningful and worth living. Education is on the front line of this battle for meaningfulness. Language education must not separate itself from an open imagining of future possibility. It must instead be part of a movement of contributory education, an investment in long-term social futures, in meaning-making, and a reclamation and reformation of thoughtfulness and care amid the seeming inevitabilities of neoliberal globalism.

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