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TRANSFORMING EDUCATIONAL CULTURE: FROM TEACHING TO LEARNING



By ALRCS Q Team

Professor
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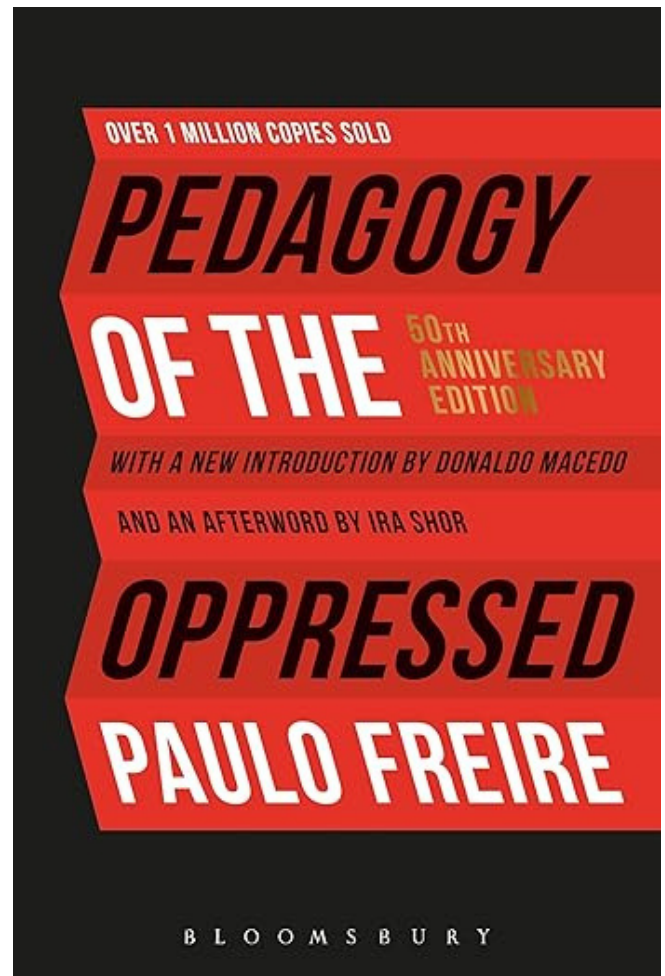
What was your favorite subject during your student years, and how did it influence you as an educator?

The subject that left the strongest impression on me during my student years was a graduate-level course called “Personal History”. During my time as an undergraduate student in the Faculty of Education, I spent my years without a clear understanding of fundamental questions such as “What does it mean to learn?” or “What is education?” However, through this course, I unexpectedly encountered “Personal History”.

The seminar was led by Professor Yusaku Ozawa, who is known for being the first person in Japan to translate Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”. This course had no textbooks or theoretical readings. Instead, individuals from diverse backgrounds spoke about their own life experiences. There were no grades and no correct answers. At first, I was confused and questioned whether this could truly be considered a university course.

However, as the sessions progressed, I gradually came to feel that listening to the lives of others and trying to understand what they were thinking and feeling at particular moments constituted a profound form of learning.

You are currently working as a University professor. If you had not chosen a career in teaching, what kind of profession do you think you would have pursued?



To be honest, I once dreamed of becoming a professional skier, but I clearly lacked talent!

During my twenties, when I studied abroad in Vietnam, I strongly aspired to become an NGO worker. I believe I would have pursued a career in international cooperation as an NGO staff member. In particular, I would likely have worked on projects supporting people in Vietnamese society, a country to which I feel a deep personal connection, or engaged in international cooperation activities based in Vietnam and neighboring countries.



You are known to have a wide range of professional experience. Could you briefly describe your career path before joining APU?

After completing my graduate studies, I worked as a consultant involved in JICA's educational cooperation projects. In the early 2000s, when I began this work, JICA was just starting to engage seriously in technical cooperation in the field of education. Within this context, I was involved in projects related to teacher education and pedagogical support in Vietnam.

Subsequently, I worked primarily in teacher education in countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Palestine, and Nepal. Actually, I also attended a photography school, and at a certain NGO, I spent a year producing educational videos related to development education.

One especially memorable experience was my work in teacher education in Vietnam.



In typical JICA projects, training is often conducted through large-scale workshops targeting all teachers. However, our team instead selected a small number of experimental schools and worked closely with them on a daily basis.

Through this approach, I experienced many conflicts and struggles with local teachers. In one instance, a teacher strongly insisted that all students understood his lessons and refused to consider alternative perspectives. However, when he watched a video recording of his own class, he could not deny the reality that some students were struggling.



While training local teachers in developing countries, were there any particularly memorable episodes? How did such experiences influence your educational philosophy?



This experience led me to realize that teacher education is not about externally changing systems or curricula.



Rather, it is a process in which teachers' inner perspectives are shaken, leading to awareness and transformation from within. This insight later became a central theme of my doctoral dissertation.

You have researched educational models in various regions such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and the UAE. What differences and similarities did you observe in educational reform and classroom practices across these contexts?

Although I have worked in many regions, my fundamental view is that the essence of education does not differ significantly across contexts. In many countries, we see a tension between a teacher-centered, top-down instructional culture, what I call a "teaching culture," and a learner-centered "learning culture."

The former emphasizes lectures delivered by teachers and compliance by learners, often reinforced by policymakers who attempt to regulate teachers' practices.

The latter prioritizes what learners think about, explore, and express.

The psychologist Jerome Bruner described these two orientations as the *paradigmatic mode* and the *narrative mode*. The paradigmatic mode values rational propositions, believing that "if X is done, Y will follow," and tends to be prescriptive and command-based. In contrast, the narrative mode focuses on human action and the process through which individuals assign meaning to their experiences, emphasizing the "here and now."

These two cultural structures exist in educational systems worldwide, regardless of whether they are in developed or developing countries. The key to reform lies in deciding which stance to adopt. A critical problem is that many teachers and policymakers fail to truly see learners. This is precisely why the process of teachers changing through awareness and reflection is so important.



Could you express your educational motto in one sentence?

My motto is “Open up a learning culture.” Learning is not about individuals arriving at correct answers in isolation; it is a collaborative process of encountering something together with others and giving it form.

I want to expand a learning culture rather than a teaching culture. That said, I often wonder why teaching cultures are so pervasive. What teachers believe they have taught is often not what learners have actually learned. Rather than focusing on what was taught, I want to discuss what was genuinely learned.

Regarding your classes at APU, what do you consciously focus on when teaching students?

To be honest, I do not have a definitive strategy that guarantees success. The one thing I truly value is “waiting.” Just because students learn something today does not mean they immediately make it their own tomorrow. Learning should be viewed over the long term, gradually becoming embodied over the course of several years.

During my own university days, I repeatedly asserted my opinions without realizing my own self-centeredness or reflecting on how I wanted to live with others. At APU, I see many students who remind me of my former self. For students who have not yet learned how to reflect on



themselves, scolding or forcing direction is ineffective. Instead, I try to watch them over patiently, hoping that a gradual change will occur.

Although institutional constraints make it difficult, I want to acknowledge what students truly wish to express and pursue. I therefore try to provide as many choices as possible, telling students that they have the freedom not to act or not to act yet, and encouraging them to work within their own timelines.

When designing courses such as the Student Success Workshop (SSW) and Multicultural Cooperative Workshop (MCW), what principles guide your approach?

I consider SSW to be an inherently advanced course. Its aim is to provide academic training, even for students who may struggle with writing.

however, I believe there are ways to achieve this. The key is to align with students' interests, even if they are not explicitly academic. Any interest can be connected to existing academic disciplines.

Transforming everyday concerns into academic questions requires a significant cognitive leap for students. I support this process through dialogue. Socrates referred to this as maieutics, or the art of midwifery. When such dialogue exists between instructors and students, students are willing to make the effort. When I tell students, "Write about what you genuinely want to know," they begin to move.

Student autonomy is particularly important in first-year education. How do you encourage student engagement in your classes?



While the role of instructors is important, I place particular emphasis on the role of Student Assistants (SA). In the Foundation of Global Leadership course (FGL), students were most candid during reflection sessions facilitated by SAs after class.

For students, SAs represent a “near future self”— someone slightly ahead of them and whom they can realistically aspire to become. By leveraging admiration for senior students, we can create a more positive learning environment. Rather than relying on instructors, I believe that a system in which students grow by observing and interacting with respected peers leads to deeper and more empowering learning.



You have used “philosophical dialogue” as an icebreaker in SSW. What are your thoughts on this approach?

Philosophical dialogue is like a game in which a small group reexamines everyday concepts. It originated in the United States and has been widely practiced in Japan by scholars such as Akira Nagai.

Example topics include “What does ‘yabai’ really mean?”, “Why is gossip enjoyable?”, or “What does it mean to be ‘unfair’?”

These topics often elicit honest responses. Traditional icebreakers in SSW tend to focus on sharing recent experiences, but such sharing requires an existing level of trust. Philosophical dialogue, by contrast, allows students to discover the unexpected perspectives of others, which helps build trust. As students reveal their true thoughts, a chain reaction of openness emerges, and their authentic selves become visible.

How would you define a “high-quality class” in one phrase?

I believe that a high-quality class is one that includes “jump tasks.” As educational scholar Manabu Sato argues, learning occurs through “stretching and jumping.” Simply tracing what one can already do does not constitute learning; it is merely task completion. In many educational settings, students are asked to solve problems with predetermined answers. True learning, however, arises when students grapple with the unknown and engage with questions that have no single correct answer. Precisely because such questions lack clear answers, discussion emerges among students, allowing them to deepen their learning without constant instructor intervention.



In FGL classes, I go beyond confirming textbook content and instead present open-ended questions that encourage debate. When given such jump tasks, APU students quickly become proactive learners. Inquiry begins with unanswered questions, in which ideas are exchanged, and collective exploration unfolds. This, to me, is the hallmark of a high-quality class.



A MESSAGE FOR APU STUDENTS

Many students arrive at APU unsure of what they should be doing. You will face various assignments in your classes, but I encourage you to discover what you genuinely want to know. It is easy to think, "This answer will get a high score." I know how busy students are. However, if you continue down that path, learning will eventually feel empty. Didn't you come to university to pursue what you truly want to know?

Some students say they do not know what interests them. For such students, I suggest not being swept away by the present moment, but instead acting honestly on small, current interests. If a professor's words resonate with you, tell them. If you become interested in art or sports, write an email to a relevant organization. If you meet someone intriguing at your part-time job, ask them to speak with them individually. If a book captures your attention, call the publisher. My own interest in Vietnam began with a simple phone call to a television station about a program I had watched.

Interviewer and Writer Comment



Aine Ishikawa

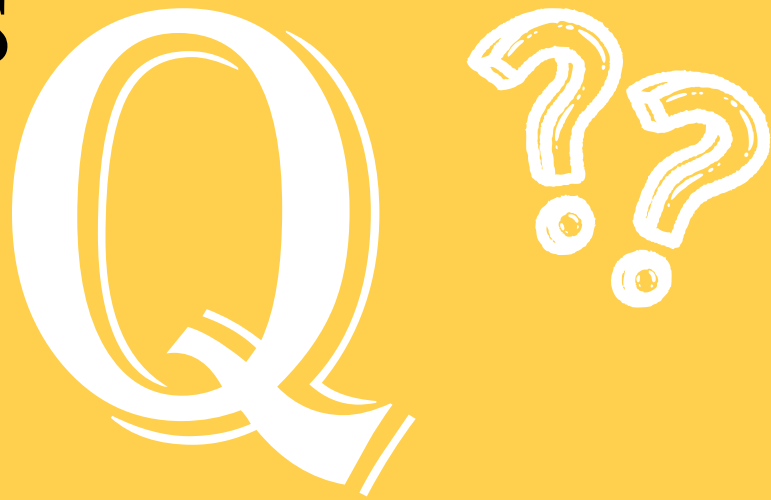
Through this interview, I was deeply inspired by Professor Tsukui's passion for education. Though he's only been at APU for a year, he's already actively interacting with students and enjoying life in Beppu to the fullest. I felt that this is the very essence of his charm: a professor who takes the challenges before him seriously, no matter where he is. I hope this article inspires readers to reconsider what it means to "learn" and take a new step forward.

Yutaro Shibata

Through your words in this interview, I was strongly impressed by your approach to education, always placing importance on "facing others" and "knowing their inner selves." Furthermore, your classes, reflecting this philosophy, offer many insights for us, who are both students and learners.

As a first-year student, I still only had a vague idea of what "learning" meant, but I feel that the way you think and your values, which I learned about during this interview, will serve as important guidelines for my future research.

What is



At APU, there are many professors who put together wonderful classes, and if we could get to know how these classes are planned, it would contribute to the improvement of other professors' classes. For that purpose, we have begun doing interviews in order to learn about class planning. These articles have been entitled [Q], comprising a variety of meanings such as: increasing the [Q]uality of classes, answering [Q]uestions to increase quality, and forming a [Q]ueue, or line, of class improvements. We would be very happy if these articles could contribute to the [Q]uest of APU professors' class quality improvement