

# Designing for Growth: Honest Reflection, Meaningful Collaboration, Tiny Transformations

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University seminar courses are constantly being taught, revamped, or newly designed, to meet the emerging needs of students. Using sound educational design strategies allows educators an opportunity to gain perspective from multiple angles and deepens understanding of power and politics inherent throughout the process. Considering course design beyond easily measurable academic outcomes can create space for classroom interactions which consciously support dignity, joy, and meaningful collaboration. Additionally, educational design thinking demands better understanding of relevant learning theories which in turn plays a role in aiding educators in ensuring alignment of course objectives, theory, and practice. Naturally, educator beliefs are strengthened and classroom facilitation techniques are more varied, when learning theories are thoroughly understood.

Norman (2013), a design expert, emphatically stresses that “a brilliant solution to the wrong problem can be worse than no solution at all: solve the correct problem” (p. 218). Ensuring that educators are indeed solving the right problem is perhaps the most fundamental challenge, but through revisiting personal assumptions and reframing the problem in a cyclical ongoing process, it becomes possible to step closer to achieving that goal. For the purposes of this paper, it will be assumed that the problem is: how to design meaningful, memorable, transformational, and reflective curricular activities for higher education students in Japan. What will become apparent is that, rather than being frustrated with the lack of definitiveness in the design process, accepting and embracing flexibility, and leaving space for the unexpected, leads to growth and unimagined possibilities for both educator and pupils. For this design project

the problem has been loosely stated; the process of determining that problem and designing a seminar course in response to it, is what constitutes the remainder of this paper. The main questions being addressed are: Who is the course designed for? And, against which structures or educational foundations is it in response to? Which theories inform the decisions, what risks are involved, and how does theory translate into practice?

### **Participant Overview**

Designing an innovative, creative, challenging, and reflective elective seminar course for university students is the subject of this design topic. The students are primarily in their 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> years of study and will have a range of English language abilities ranging from near fluent to capable but struggling with precision and nuance (Levels B1-C2 based on the Council of Europe's CEFR). The majority of the students are Japanese with a subset of students who have lived abroad. A handful of the students are not genetically Japanese but might identify as Japanese, and still others may have one Japanese parent and one non-Japanese parent. Identity markers, educational background, core values, and English language proficiency are more variable than would be typically found in a Japanese university seminar class. These elements in combination are consequential for how the seminar course is approached and designed.

Informal discussion with non-seminar students from the same university regarding their university experience predominantly validated this researcher's assumptions about creativity, motivation, identity formation, and rote learning. Reassuring was the range of responses that supported these views, but equally welcomed were the mild to strong oppositional responses which were generated from a minority of the students. Most importantly, the tentative inquiring brought about an essential and obvious element that had thus far been blatantly overlooked. When broadly asked what would enhance the students' university experience, almost unanimously the students replied that developing connection with other students, or in their words, opportunities for "making friends" (personal communication with students, 2021), had so far been sorely lacking. As a result, the survey participants' self-identified need for social interaction notice-

ably shifted the design agenda.

Observation from many years of teaching has shown that many highly academic students employ a ‘cautious path of excellence’ approach to their studies which eventually seems to stunt participation and creativity, and in the worst cases makes students unable to find the meaning or joy in learning. The word ‘excellence’ is purposefully used here as there are as many points to commend as to critique in the Japanese education system, such as the outstanding national literacy levels, mathematical aptitudes, and school lunch and sports programs. However, in the 2021 Spring semester (online due to pandemic) an astounding lack of motivation was witnessed at the university level which seemed to overwhelm many students; excessive workload combined with greatly diminished social, sport, or club activities on campus were most often mentioned. In a cursory assessment, the intellectually challenging and abundant yet sometimes redundant academic assignments completed in isolation without the social benefits of campus life seemed to have caused some students to lose their motivation and joy for learning. The full range of consequences due to the pandemic in general and exclusive extended online learning are yet to be fully understood.

Compounding the issue, the education system, especially if you are ambitious and intellectually able, can be a cruel game of success and shame from as early as kindergarten. Getting into the right school can literally change your opportunities in life, and in many cases, there are no second chances. Takahashi (2017) states that “intensive competition among students taking college entrance exams was labelled the ‘exam war’ or ‘exam hell’” (p. 142). One only has to scratch the surface of the cram school business to appreciate the cut-throat nature of the education system. Quite often, the unapologetic teaching to the test involves a great deal of memorization and speed, and is noticeably devoid of critical thinking, flexibility, or original thought. In some high schools, teachers give students “specific instructions on how, what, when to do, and examples of ideal answers. [...] Students who are able to enter competitive universities are very well perfecting and giving these expected answers” (Sato, 2017, p. 8). Furthering the problem, the fear of failure is often oppressive and

sociocultural and historical contexts are relevant elements in understanding the situation. Rohlen & LeTendre (1996) state: “absolutes are rarely attainable in the human realm; yet in Japan, in many realms, with continual actions directed at perfection (kaizan), this is viewed as always possible. The process of learning continuously is normal. There is no final end point” (p. 375). With perfection being the end goal that is essentially eternally incomplete, learners are often persistently striving without ever arriving. To support these strides toward perfection, families invest a lot emotionally, temporally, and economically to ensure that their children are suitably educated and as a result have access to stable or high paying employment in the future. The pressure to consistently succeed from a very young age is played out in education but is tied to wider societal contexts; a child’s educational success can even be directly connected to parents’ security in advanced age.

To pass the entrance exam of prestigious universities, it goes without saying that the students are high-achieving expertly trained test-takers. Sato (2017) a student at Akita International University similarly highlights the conflict between goals and reality and the immense disparity of expectations between high school and university learning, she states:

Japanese students [...] are taught to be very passive throughout their primary and secondary education in Japan. Education in Japan is still focussed on translation and memorization without much emphasis on critical or logical thinking training. Students are discouraged from asking questions or expressing their own creative ideas. (p. 8)

Whereas at university, students are constantly being asked to share their own ideas, to critically examine media and their experiences, and to move beyond their comfort zones (Sato, 2017). Most students are ill-equipped to tackle these challenges based on their test-focussed educational experiences prior to university. Passionate debates between students are essentially unheard of in the classroom and even gentle disagreements between students are cautiously navigated. And while there is often excellence and precision in assignment

submission, only a rare few students take real risks, push boundaries, or surprise their teachers with original ideas or passionate responses.

Cultivating a joy of seeking, learning, and applying, along with a desire to explore identity and personal transformation is a considerable design challenge when taking into account that past educational training and cultural norms have typically rewarded replication and memorization. It is with this goal in mind that educational design is being envisioned and undertaken.

### **The Problem: Current and Alternative Framing**

Traditional instructionist tendencies (Stigler et al., 1996) and deficit thinking in terms of globalization or linguistic abilities (Lehner, 2009) remain common for both students and educators in some university classrooms in Japan. In general, the design of the Japanese school system is heavily criticized for its “overbearing uniformity and conformity” (Takahashi, 2017, p. 142). Some of the brightest, most capable students are hampered by the undesirability of stepping out of line, being different, or even making mistakes. Fear of failure additionally stunts academic potential by draining curiosity and thirst for knowledge. However, there are pockets of young scholars who are ready to explore beyond the curriculum, who have maintained or ignited that curiosity and desire to learn, not only for excellence in grades but for their personal growth as well. Reframing a university seminar class that explores the whole person, that encourages more leaps of learning without perfection or failure tainting the possibilities, is an exciting and daunting prospect. The seminar course being designed actively invites the students to participate, experience, co-create, and reflect rather than passively receive teaching. Trust is key, a genuine willingness for the educator to learn alongside the students is vital, revealing an authentic self is essential, and modelling moderate risk-taking also plays a role.

The seminar design is based on a mosaic of overlapping complementary components derived from experiential and transformative learning theories and coupled in part with participatory design methods.

## **The Design Project**

The goal is to design and carry out a 15-week elective English language university level seminar course. There is one block of 3 hours per week to work with the students. Neither specific guidance nor limitations have been set by supervisors in terms of content, assessment requirements, or educational theory. Overall, unwavering support and trust has been present, and initial feedback based on the initial proposal, is optimistic. Having no limitations imposed is an incredible privilege that has allowed for unique and creative possibilities to be considered in the design.

## **Converting Experience into Knowledge**

Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) has been chosen to shape the content of the course which "is intended to be a holistic adaptive process of learning that merges experience, perception, cognition, and behavior" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 132). Affect, consciousness, and subjectivity are key elements in the theory that allow for an array of responses, tangents for exploration, and points of connection or refusal from the learners. According to Kurt's (2020) discussion of ELT "memorization or recollection of ideas taught does not equal learning, as no value has been added to the learner" (para. 5). For the purposes of the seminar course, stepping away from traditional educational binaries of correct and incorrect, true and false, right and wrong is deliberate. It is expected that this will initially be met with resistance by the learners but is necessary for dismantling the students' desire to replicate ideas, answers, and outcomes and to encourage students to think for, about, and beyond themselves.

For optimal knowledge building in the ELT learning cycle learners should ideally pass through the four interdependent stages which include: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The process is cyclical, can be begun at any of the four stages, but should be completed in its entirety for the development of new knowledge to occur (Healey & Jenkins, 2000; Kurt, 2020). *Concrete experience* can be a new or reimagined experience, task, or activity that learners actively engage in or

become involved in. Reading about or watching an experience is not sufficient. *Reflective observation* follows the concrete experience and involves communication with others, asking questions, and discussing similarities and differences in experiences. Stepping back and reflecting, understanding, and observing are part of this stage. *Abstract conceptualization* follows where the learner attempts to make sense of the experience by classifying ideas, incorporating past experience, discussing possibilities, and even drawing conclusions from the experience. Finally, *active experimentation* takes place where learners test their ideas and predictions and analyze the learnings (Healey & Jenkins, 2000; Kurt, 2020).

### ***ELT in Practice***

The concrete experiences for the proposed seminar will in part be executed during the scheduled class time and will include activities such as taking and being the subject of photographs, going to a museum, meditating, drawing, writing poetry, conducting a legacy interview, practicing yoga, performing a monologue, and organizing a meal. Place will vary depending on the activity as the physical classroom cannot always accommodate the tasks. Discussion with classmates will precede and follow the concrete experience to partially fulfil the reflective observation component of the ELT. The next step, abstract conceptualization, will be moderately guided by questions that are posed by the teacher and the collective observations, all of which are intended to encourage students to further develop their understanding of the experience. At this point, the students will be asked to record their thoughts, feelings, conclusions, and experiences in general in an informal journal writing session. To complete the ELT cycle and satisfy the active experimentation element the students will be given a related task to complete during the week for homework. A follow-up discussion will be held in the subsequent class to share the learnings, understand the experiences, and to conclude the activity. By the end of the course each student will have created an identity portfolio comprised of visual and written material which represents, reflects, and reveals the person who created it.

### **Reframing views, Reflecting on Assumptions, and Redefining Self**

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) also influences the seminar design project by centering epistemic questions regarding the limits and certainty of knowledge. What people know and believe, value and feel, is inherently connected to the biographical, historical, and cultural context in which they are embedded (Mezirow, 2012). TLT offers learners the opportunity to recognize the uncritically-assimilated values and meanings they have acquired in their lifetimes and aims to shift the learners into "socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers" (Mezirow, 2012, p. 76).

Discourse is the main process used in TLT. For rich dialogue to transpire an environment of safety, inclusion, respect, and trust needs to be established and prioritized. Only then can personal and collective frames of reference, assumptions, and habits of mind, be scrutinized and possibly reimaged and greater personal autonomy be promoted. TLT reminds educators to foster what the learner wants to learn and to become collaborative learners rather than maintaining traditional authoritative roles and responsibilities.

### ***TLT in the University Classroom***

Initially, simply recognizing, then gently isolating beliefs, values, and assumptions, and eventually examining and questioning them is where the students will be led in their learning journey. Discussion groups, personal reflection, journal entries, and a portfolio compilation are the means through which this transformation and awakening can be cultivated. The learning group will have some agency in both design and assessment of the course but due to the nature of taking university courses for credit the imbalance of power between teacher and student will inevitably remain. While admittedly not altogether sufficient in dispersing the power, the teacher's role is to become a genuine collaborative learner alongside the students and participate in the experiences, and when appropriate, also share personal learnings. Providing stimulating activities, developing rich questions that address real issues of relevance to the learners, and creating an atmosphere for safe exploration, will all need to be continuously monitored and adjusted throughout the course.

## **Participatory Design**

Participatory design fundamentally addresses questions regarding sustainable and transformative social change. Integrating participatory design elements into curriculum development demands that the educator pay “explicit attention to what forms of knowledge are generated, how, why, where and by whom” (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016), which for the purposes of this design project, complementarily aligns with the tenants of both experiential and transformative learning theories. Power dynamics within and amongst students, teachers, institutions, and society are questioned and disrupted when needed and relationality, reciprocity, and accountability are designed for explicitly. Students and their multiplicity of views, ideas, and beliefs are valid and full of potential and teachers recognize the students as intellectual resources and are invested in their growth and well-being (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016).

### ***Participatory Praxis***

Involving stakeholders in the design of curriculum is intuitively beneficial; yet, is logistically complicated. However, by including the learners in certain aspects of the design the seminar is more likely to adequately address their needs and remain consistent with the culture of the community (DiSalvo et al., 2017). Participatory design elements are incorporated into the course in three ways. First, the students are co-designers of the course content. They will be invited to choose from the themes available and work in groups to present their interpretation of the theme. There will be guidance provided but the boundaries will remain soft to avoid unnecessarily influencing the direction or content of the students’ work. Second, students will be involved in self-assessment for the participation element of the course. Preferably the participation assessment would be eliminated altogether; however, feedback from students in the past has shown me that it increases motivation to attend class on time, maintain focus, contribute to discussions, and respond fastidiously when called upon. It is important to note that students participate differently in obvious and subtle ways and that louder does not mean richer participation and profuse engagement does not equate to more valuable contribution. As a result, to partially

satisfy the desire to increase participatory design elements the teacher will engage the students in collectively deciding what should be the criteria for evaluation and then privately discussing with each student how they appraise themselves in regards to the participation score. In prior experience with self-evaluation and peer evaluation students have shown humble honesty in referring to themselves and inspiring levels of kindness when evaluating their peers. The third way in which participatory design will be incorporated is through feedback of the course itself and generating ideas for future experiences. The first run through of the course necessitates that the designer make the decisions about which tasks or experiences are attempted throughout the course, but students will be asked to suggest other possibilities that might be showcased in the following years. As Hoadley (2017) suggests deliberate and genuine learner co-participation in the design is about empowering learners. Recognizing the strength in this political act, as students are actively engaged in framing some of their own learning opportunities, is exciting but also feels risky from the designer or educator perspective.

### **Personal Reflections on the Frame**

This unconventional design for a language seminar course has been percolating with minimal measurable action for close to a year. By approaching the design problem from a reframing perspective I was able to progress and clarify the theoretical underpinnings, justify the experiential choices, and solidify the objectives. Unexpectedly, I also recognized a personal rise in confidence knowing that this course has been elevated from frankly experimental to one that is sound and rooted. Much of the development of the course remains unfinished but I sense it will flow more smoothly now that I have clear goals and strategies that align. Exploring the literature, discussing with my academic cohort, and reflecting on my learnings while actively designing this seminar uncovered a few matters that either surprised me, raised more questions, or warrant further consideration.

### ***Designing for Connection***

To my chagrin, I had not initially taken into account that the potential seminar students have entered university during a pandemic and that at half way through their second year of studies they have experienced a measly 6% of their classes taught on campus. For the most part, these students have extremely limited social lives beyond the classroom as well. While small group work and discussion-based activities are being planned for the seminar, centering friendship building opportunities had not occurred to me. The simple accommodation of creating space and opportunity for increased social interaction can be made in the design and would be a direct response to the needs of a key stakeholder.

### ***Participation***

Including students in the design and execution of the class was initially incorporated to satisfy the assessment needs of the seminar class. After reading the many chapters, articles, and perspectives in design theory I have come to rethink the importance of including the stakeholders in the design and to emphasize it even more. I hope to uncover my students' unique funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and to have them co-create the course with me. I feel this co-ownership might be one way to keep the seminar relevant, exciting, and engaging for the students and myself. To genuinely achieve this objective, there is a letting go of control that I am not accustomed to that I will need to learn to embrace. Letting my students have some measure of control over their conditions for learning, group sizes, topics for exploration, and even assessment seems like primary steps toward flattening the power structures and supporting student agency. However, bearing in mind the sociocultural context of the learners, what if this shift in responsibility is just too novel and the students are resistant? Preparing myself and my students for incremental steps toward this goal rather than dynamic leaps in this direction seems befitting.

### ***Incremental Transformations***

Transformative learning can be threatening or cause emotional upheaval (Mezirow, 2012). While I believe the experiences that I am preparing for the

course are not particularly volatile, I am aware that the discussions that arise may trigger interesting, difficult, and perhaps even uncomfortable moments of realization. As the facilitator it is important that I remain fully attune to the classroom dynamic and balance the ferocity, should it unexpectedly arise. Trust and dialogue are essential for honest explorations so fostering safety in the classroom is paramount.

## **Conclusion**

It takes a tremendous amount of time and effort to launch a new seminar course in higher education. By approaching the course using well established learning theories and design models, there is a strong foundation for educational excellence laid. The seminar, however, aims to also fulfil different learner needs and has undertones of playfulness and self-discovery. As has been iterated throughout each of the sections of this design project, returning laughter and joy into learning, building confidence and fearlessness, encouraging reflection and quality of learning over quantity, inspiring original thought, and even initiating some individual or perhaps eventually institutional change, are some of overarching goals. In some ways I am inviting my students to slow down and carefully observe, to listen to their bodies and minds as they explore with their actions, feelings, resistances, and truths. I intend to focus on deeper learning that inspires and to create safe spaces for identity exploration. The challenge is to identify those activities or triggers or 'lift-offs' (Vossoughi, n.d) that push boundaries but maintain safety, that encourages my students to "think about [their] thinking" and become more aware of their intellectual reasoning (Gutierrez & Vossoughi, 2010, p. 106). With carefully crafted experiences and intentionally designed curriculum, I imagine the students beginning to question their values, beliefs, and perspectives in dialogue with themselves and their classmates. I have truly thrown my soul into this project and am anxious to see if even one young scholar will trust me enough to abandon comfortable ways of knowing and learning and leap together with me into the unknown.

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