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Why Japan Matters

Essays from

Elgin Heinz Outstanding Teacher Award Winners

From the Editor: *The Elgin Heinz Outstanding Teacher Award is sponsored by the United States-Japan Foundation and named for the late Mr. Heinz, who was a pioneer in Asian studies education. Winners receive this award based on their national leadership in teaching about Japan. The objectives of this online and print special segment are to stimulate readers to reflect upon why the study of Japan is critical for global understanding; to provide teachers and professors who are seeking new ways to teach about Japan with pedagogical ideas and resources; and—on the eve of the tenth anniversary of the award in 2012—to honor the master teachers who have been named Elgin Heinz winners. Past Elgin Heinz winners in two award categories—humanities and Japanese language—were asked to contribute a short essay titled “Why Japan Matters,” and to compose an abstract of his or her favorite commercial curricular materials or send along a self-created teaching idea. What follows are thirteen Elgin Heinz award winner essays. For more essays, as well as teaching ideas, please see the print version of this issue.*

From Leslie Okada Birkland (Japanese Language, 2005)

At 2:50 p.m. on March 11, 2011, my students at The American School in Tokyo, Japan, were engrossed in creating a dialogue for a skit in Japanese, when suddenly the building began to shake. The tremors grew in intensity as we headed for cover under desks and doorways. I was unable to stand and crawled under my desk on all fours, praying that the building would hold up against the eternal shaking. Since that day, life in Japan as we know it changed forever.

Words such as: “jishin” (earthquake), “yoshin” (after shock), “Tōhoku daishinsai” (Tōhoku Great Earthquake), “hisaisha” (victims of earthquake, flood, etc.), “hoshano”(radiation), “setsuden” (saving electricity) have become a part of our everyday vocabulary. People all over the world learned about Fukushima, Sendai, and Kesennuma as they watched in horror at the destruction caused in those cities by the earthquakes and tsunami.

Never before have I seen a natural disaster affect an entire country as this one has. And never before have I seen so many compassionate volunteers from all over the world come together, putting aside differences, to help the Japanese people in their time of need.

In the case of the Japanese, the worst has brought out the best of the people, and the world witnessed this in action. What better reason is there for “why Japan matters” than serving as a role model to the rest of the world, showing how respect, honor, loyalty, appreciation, obedience, and humility are characteristics that earn the admiration of other countries, especially in times of disaster?

Leslie Okada Birkland started the Japanese program in 1985 at Lake Washington High School in Kirkland, Washington, and then became involved in Japanese language education at the local, state, and national levels. She has been teaching Japanese at The American School in Tokyo since 2005.

From Sharon Corologos (Humanities, 2004)

In February 2011, it became official. China edged out Japan as the world's second-largest economy. China's 2010 GDP was greater than Japan's by \$410 million, and in the fourth quarter of 2010, China's GDP grew by 9.8 percent, while Japan's declined. Then, in March 2011, the Japanese earthquake-tsunami-nuclear disaster hit. Too much, the world said; it's all over for Japan. Economically, Japan will no longer matter.

But, wait! This is *Japan* we are talking about. Japan is more than a financial entity, more than a geographical entity, more than a political entity. Foremost, Japan is its people, and Japan's people are invincible in spirit.

For proof of this, we need only to recall Japan's struggles after World War II. After Japan's defeat, people had to redesign a place for themselves in the postwar world. At first, Japan came back into the world economy as the manufacturer of cheap goods, such as toys or souvenirs. But, while Americans blossomed with creativity, the Japanese learned to imitate and creatively improve on design. It took some years of persistence, but slowly Japan's reputation went from being a producer of cheap goods to being a producer of quality goods, such as cars and electronics. In a short forty years, Japan rose from a crushing defeat to become the world's second-largest economy.

"Perseverance" is the word. The Japanese people will always persevere. My Osaka friend emailed me this thought right after the triple disaster:

"Please say to your friends we Japanese must resurrection even if it takes for a long time. We effort about that"[sic].

She is speaking for her people.

Sharon Corologos retired from thirty years of teaching fourth grade in Vermont but remains active as a director for the University of Vermont-Asian Studies Program's Institute in Japan.

From John M. Frank (Humanities, 2011)

During the late twentieth century, with the ascendance of its economic power, Japan garnered great popular attention in the US. In recent years, with the decline of the Japanese "bubble economy" of the 1980s and the rise of Chinese economic power, Japan has received less American public attention. Recent Japanese natural disasters and nuclear plant accidents have further undermined American sentiments once expressed in the title of a 1979 bestseller, "Japan as Number One." However, Japan is still very important to the United States and to our students for these reasons:

Interconnected Economies

Japanese and US industries have developed a large presence in each other's economies. For

example, in 2010 Japanese automakers produced over 2.6 million automobiles in the US.¹ An unfortunate illustration of our economic interconnectedness is the recent shutdown of US auto plants resulting from Japanese manufacturers' supply shortages caused by the recent earthquake and tsunami disasters. A revealing example is documented in the May 16, 2011, *Wall Street Journal* story "Quake Throws Auto Nation into a Spin."² After Canada, Mexico, and China, Japan is the fourth-largest trading partner of the US. The US engages in more international trade with Japan than it does with Germany or the United Kingdom.³

Security Considerations

In Northeast Asia, in light of increased Chinese military spending and ongoing tensions on the Korean peninsula, the Japan-United States military alliance is important. For an insightful recent examination of US-Japan security issues, see "The United States-Japan Security Treaty at 50: Still a Grand Bargain?"⁴

Enduring Lessons of Japanese History

For those who teach Japanese history and culture, the lessons of the Heian period, Japanese feudalism, the Meiji Restoration, the rise of Japanese militarism in the 1930s, and the post-World War II Japanese "economic miracle" are as relevant and timeless today as ever.

Japanese Social Values

During the March 2011 Japanese earthquakes, tsunami, and ongoing nuclear reactor crisis, Japanese citizens displayed stoic and selfless behavior. The Japanese social fabric was not torn apart. The reaction of Japanese society to great adversity serves as an example for others to study and emulate. A particularly insightful piece on this topic by Nicholas Kristof titled "The Japanese Could Teach Us a Thing or Two" appeared on the *New York Times Op-Ed* page of March 19, 2011.

During the twentieth century, periods of understanding and common interests between Japan and the US contributed to the security and prosperity of both nations. Periods of misunderstanding between these same nations had catastrophic consequences. In the twenty-first century, promoting and enhancing efforts of mutual understanding and education between the US and Japan should be a continuing goal.

Notes

1. *Japanese Automakers' Overseas Production Statistics: Annual Total, Calendar 2010*, <http://www.jama-english.jp/statistics/overseas/2011/110428.html>.

2. Neal E. Boudette, "Quake Throws Auto Nation into a Spin," *Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704281504576324972233601388.html>.

3. "Top Ten Countries with which the U.S. Trades," US Census Bureau (for the month of March 2011), <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/top/dst/2011/03/balance.html>.

4. George R. Packard, "The United States-Japan Security Treaty at 50: Still a Grand Bargain?" *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2010, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66150/george-r-packard/the-united-states-japan-security-treaty-at-50>.

John Frank teaches social studies at Center Grove High School in Greenwood, Indiana.

From Sandra P. Garcia (Japanese Language, 2007)

For me, Japan matters because of the friendships I have built over the years. Friendship is something that takes time to nurture, but one reaps great benefits from it. Japan also shared with me their language, which I now teach, along with the rich Japanese culture, to high school students.

As in any community, there are weaker and stronger members. Even though one's status might change, each member is vital to the success of the community. Thus, it is in the world community where currently many people see Japan as being weak, especially since the economic bubble burst in the early 90s. Japan may seem to be a weaker economic power, but it has remained a vital part of the world community. The earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011, caused Japan temporarily to shut down plants that make semi-conductors and flash memory. If Japan were not a contributing member to the world community, work throughout the rest of the world would go on as usual. But there are many companies that are not able to meet their production quota because they can no longer get the Japanese parts. Japan does still play a vital part in the world economy. They do matter in the world community as a vital contributor.

Looking at the world as a whole, the US—Japan relationship is a stepping-stone to help build new relationships to other countries in Asia.

Sandra P. Garcia lived in Tokyo for six years and has taught Japanese at Forest Grove High School and Pacific University for over twenty years.

From Vicki Stroud Gonterman (Humanities, 2006)

Why Teaching About Japan is Still Relevant Today

Teaching about Japan is exceedingly relevant in the twenty-first century in terms of US-Japan relations, be they historical, political, or economic. The study of Japan also provides us the opportunity to enhance our own civilization by learning about an ancient society whose culture and worldview are so diverse and distant from our own.

- Japan serves as a valuable asset as both political ally and trade partner with the United States.
- Japan is the fourth-largest trading partner with the United States behind Canada, Mexico, and the People's Republic of China (PRC). We share a long economic history from Commodore Perry to *Hello Kitty*. Even my small state of Arkansas has numerous historical connections to Japan including two World War II relocation centers in Rohwer and Jerome, and Little Rock is the birthplace of General Douglas MacArthur. Arkansas has several Japanese-owned businesses and a small population of Japanese nationals and Japanese-Americans.
- Japan's geography and location in the "Ring of Fire" have significant educational value. Students learn about Japan's history of earthquakes and tsunamis with more recorded tsunamis than any other nation on earth. In addition, they learn about the resiliency of a people who rally and recover honorably after hardship and tragedy. "Fall seven times, stand up eight" is a Japanese proverb that is summed up in one Japanese word, *gaman*,

or uncomplaining perseverance. In recent months, astounded Americans have witnessed gaman in action as the Japanese have collectively striven to overcome not only the effects of the natural disasters, but also the nuclear reactor threat as well.

Indeed, there is still much to teach and learn about Japan and the Japanese people.

Vicki Stroud Gonterman, MEd, teaches international studies and Japan studies at Gibbs International Magnet School in Little Rock, Arkansas. She has been an exchange teacher in Sapporo and completed two study tours of Honshu, Japan.

From Jessica Haxhi (Japanese Language, 2008)

As an elementary school Japanese language teacher, I teach students how to go shopping, follow directions, describe themselves, make friends, sing, and celebrate various holidays and customs. Each day goes by so fast that my colleagues and I rarely have a moment to stop and ask students “Why does Japan matter to you?” or even “Do you like learning Japanese?”

The earthquake and tsunami in Japan gave us a glimpse into the answers to those questions. On the first day after the news broke, I wasn’t prepared to talk about it in classes. But the students insisted. They were full of questions and worries. It was the quintessential “teachable moment,” complete with interdisciplinary discussions of science, social studies, and life skills, all impromptu and very “real-world.”

We decided to launch a “Coins for Caring” campaign for Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Relief. Our goal was to raise US \$500. Our students (39 percent of whom are on reduced lunch) brought in US \$500 on the first day. Some bought their piggy banks to school! By the end of two weeks, we had US \$3,800. We asked them to color a Japanese flag and write why they had donated money. “I donated money because I love the Japanese people like my own family.” “I donated money because I saw what happened, and it made me sad. I know they would help us if we needed it.” As we read five hundred papers just like these, we were overwhelmed. We began to realize something: our students have a special connection to Japan because it has been a daily part of their lives since pre-kindergarten.

During the same two weeks, we made the difficult decision to cancel our school trip to Japan, for which thirty-eight parents and children had signed up. Immediately, the parents decided to hold our “Japan Trip Pasta Dinner” as an event to raise funds for Japan Relief. Teachers in our building donated most of the food items, and the event raised another US \$1,000 for the American Red Cross in Japan.

If you were to ask the students, parents, and teachers at my school, “Does Japan still matter?” I think they would answer, “Of course! After learning so much about it, I want to travel there, see the sites, meet the people, eat the food, and speak the language!” The very existence of this program has made Japan matter to them through pictures, videos, letters, and stories.

Japan still matters because the study of all languages and cultures still matters. The US needs citizens who have developed the language skills, deep cultural understanding, empathy, and compassion that can only come from K-16 language and culture study. As teachers, we should continue to promote the study of all languages and cultures as we expose students to the unique beauty and excitement of learning about Japan. Japan will always matter, if we are willing to do the work to keep it alive in the hearts and minds of students.

Jessica Haxhi teaches Japanese to grades Pre K-5 at Maloney Interdistrict Magnet School. She teaches world language methodology courses at Central Connecticut State University and is past president of the National Council of Japanese Language Teachers.

From Barbara Horowitz (Humanities, 2009)

Julia R. Masterman Demonstration and Laboratory School is a fifth through twelfth grade Blue Ribbon and Middle States accredited public school in Philadelphia. Students attending Masterman come from every neighborhood of Philadelphia and are of many ethnicities, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The majority of my students in our middle school, and many of Masterman's high school students, have participated in my Japan class over the last few years.

After the earthquake and tsunami tragically hit Japan, many students and staff immediately asked me, "What can we do for Japan?" I was touched and gratified that there was so much concern for the people of Japan. Within a few days, there was a school-wide plan put into place to show our support.

As an educator in a school with many Asian nationalities represented, it is important that my students are aware of the similarities and differences between Asian countries. After studying Japan, students are aware of the distinct role that Japan plays in East Asia. I want my students to know not only how?, but why?

Masterman students now feel a greater connection to Japan. My classes are set up to represent an authentic Japanese elementary school, focusing on group dynamics, responsibility for each other, sense of community, and putting students in charge of the class. My goal is to give my students a genuine Japanese experience, so that they will have a connection with the people, history, and culture of Japan.

After I won the Elgin Heinz Outstanding Teacher Award in 2009, there was a greater interest in learning about Japan. That interest has continued to this day. Many students asked to have a high school class on Japanese language. One of our parents volunteered her time to teach that class. Last year, twelfth graders built a beautiful Japanese garden on our roof. For an inner city school with no greenery, the garden has become a special place for students and classes to read, draw, or just relax.

I asked some of my former students what they learned from my class, and their response was overwhelmingly, "I feel that I understand the Japanese people." My hope is for my students to take their knowledge of Japan, along with their own values, and create a global society of peace, acceptance, and understanding.

Barbara Horowitz teaches gifted support classes at the Julia R. Masterman Demonstration School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

From Sachiko Murphy (Japanese Language, 2003)

“My dad tells me Japan's economy is growing so fast that someday I will work for a Japanese boss.”

“I have seen the tea ceremony and Japanese traditional culture is cool.”

“I like Ninjas!”

These are the responses of my students when I asked them why they wanted to learn Japanese when I stood in front of them as a newly-arrived Japanese teacher at Des Moines Public Schools, Central Campus twenty-five years ago.

Fast forward, twenty-five years later!

“I like Japanese video games. I want to create video games in Japan.”

“I read manga a lot! I want to read original manga in Japanese.”

“I grew up watching Japanese Anime. I am interested in learning about the culture and language of *Naruto* and *Dragon Ball Z*!”

There is no denying that this new culture of Japan is capturing young minds all over the US, Europe, Asia, and South America, and replacing the mythical view of Japan that attracted American students in the past. Mesmerized by stories and techniques presented in the form of video games, manga, and anime, my students are inspired to discover the mindset of the Japanese that are producing all of these. In addition, the extraordinary patience the Japanese people have displayed at a time of unimaginable catastrophe only added more respect toward Japanese in their minds. Yes, China has surpassed Japan in economics. However, have they published any popular culture materials so admired that teens treat them like jewels? A new episode of *Black Butler* does that to my students.

Sachiko Murphy, PhD, teaches at Des Moines Public Schools in Iowa. She recently created “Connections with Japan,” an online educational video series with Iowa Public Television.

From Masayo Nakamura (Japanese Language, 2010)

The Great Japan Earthquake was the biggest, most devastating blow Japan has ever endured. People in the world were overwhelmed by the magnitude of the damage. Now Japan faces the moment of truth. This may be the most challenging time for the country since the postwar period.

Meanwhile, I reflected on the Japanese mentality through TV and news reports. For example, Americans were impressed by the Japanese people’s composure and restraint in the face of the catastrophe. A reporter said that being patient is not passivity, but it is considered a virtue in Japan. In doing so, Japan has shown resilience. Japanese cooperated and started rebuilding their society, gradually but steadily.

Since the Japanese people have been living with disasters throughout history, traits such as resilience and cooperation have been forged in that history. Not only in Japan but in the world, resilience is an essential strategy because the modern world is hardly predictable, and everyone needs to know how to cope with unpredictable events. This Japanese trait must create and become an example of an innovative future society as it works towards enlightening the rest of the world.

Internationally famous Columbia University Professor Donald Keene is one who believes in

Japan's revival. At the end of April 2011, Keene announced his intention to move to Japan, permanently. As a Japanologist, Keene introduced the value of Japanese culture and literature to Western countries, and he is a person who indeed understands Japan and the Japanese people well. However, how many Japan advocates can make such a brave decision at this moment? In Keene's words, "When I returned to Tokyo eight years after World War II, Japan became a far different country from what I'd seen just after the war's end. I am convinced Japan will become an even more wonderful nation by weathering the hardships of this disaster."

Japan might need time to revive, but I believe Japanese ideals regarding appropriate states of mind, virtues, and the ability to overcome make Japan a great society.

Masayo Nakamura teaches Japanese at Calloway County High School in Kentucky.

From Michelle Pearson (Humanities, 2008)

In the eyes of many adults, Japan has been recently unseated as one of the next global economic superpowers in Asia. In the eyes of many students, Japan still reigns supreme. Why? Two words: technology and media.

Recent research shows that this is currently the most technology-savvy generation teachers have seen, and many students have a high technological skill set. Much of this skill base can be attributed to the global saturation of Japanese technology products and related media and the subsequent use of them by our younger generation.

Ask any ten year old, and they may not be able to tell you the capitol of Japan, but they will be able to tell you instantly what products the country makes, the movies they create, and the characters which have become popular in American pop culture during their short lives. Pokemon, Nintendo, manga, and anime have permeated American culture and continue to be craved by the younger generation. In a consumer society, the younger generations' need for the next Pokemon game, the newest set of Hayao Miyazaki anime movies, and the continued subscription to *Shōnen Jump* manga keeps Japan on the leading edge of innovative product and media development, and a major player in the global economy.

Students can understand the importance of US-Japan trade relations as soon as you ask them about technology and media products and who creates them. The common answer is, and continues to be, Japan. And yes, to one in every three children in the US, Japan does matter in a very personal way.

Michelle Pearson is the 2011 Colorado Teacher of the Year. She teaches middle grades at Hulstrom Options School in Thornton, Colorado.

From Adam Podell (Japanese Language, 2010)

A few days after the Great East Japan Earthquake Disaster, an e-mail titled "Ten Things to Learn from Japan" was circulated. Attributed to *SkyNews*, each point illustrated a reaction and response of the Japanese people, and for me it captured the essence of why Japan still matters. "The calm, the dignity, the ability, the grace (selflessness), the order, the sacrifice, the tenderness, the training, the media, and the conscience . . . With their country in the midst of a colossal disaster—the Japanese citizens can teach plenty of lessons to the world."

When I first went to rural Fukushima to teach English almost twenty years ago, I had no idea what I was getting into. I knew none of the language and little of the culture. If not for the kindness, generosity, and friendship of the people of Fukushima, I would never have ended up a Japanese teacher in an American public high school. Plain and simple, Japan changed my life.

Japan's impact on the global community must not be underestimated. Globally aware and environmentally conscious, the Japanese are leaders in international development and cooperation. The Japanese people have touched hearts and minds, inspiring people around the world. If one Japanese concept, embodied by one Japanese word, can spark an international grassroots organization like the *Mottainai* campaign, imagine what else Japan still has to offer.

As an educator in an IB school, I have discussed with students what it means to be a global citizen. The IB mission as stated in *The IB Learner Profile* is “to develop internationally-minded people who, recognizing their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world.” If that is the goal, then it appears that we should be striving to be more like the Japanese—and that is why Japan matters.

Adam Podell teaches IB Japanese at South Lakes High School in Reston, Virginia.

From Mamiya Sahara Worland (Japanese Language, 2009)

I was born and raised in Fukushima where the nuclear disaster happened on March 11, 2011. Today I live in the United States with my American husband and family. After I had my first child, I became very interested in bilingual education. This led me to my career as a Japanese Immersion teacher at Great Falls Elementary School, where I have been teaching for twenty years.

I believe language immersion beginning at the elementary school level is the best way to learn foreign languages. The knowledge and skills my students have acquired has prepared them to learn other languages and appreciate all cultures. My students have shared that when they grow up they would like to work in or visit Japan. Many have even said that they would like to teach Japanese. I believe that this is largely due to my students' appreciation for not only the Japanese language, but also the people and the culture.

After the earthquake, Japanese people showed resilience and grace. “Shikataganai” is a saying oftentimes expressed in these situations. Roughly translated, it means to accept the situation at hand while taking whatever steps you can to improve it. It means never give up. The Japanese people have already shown that they have what it takes to rebuild for a better future just as they have in the past. In these times of wars, natural disasters, and financial crises, I think that the world needs models like Japan. That is why Japan still matters.

Mamiya Worland teaches first and third grade in the Japanese Immersion at Great Falls Elementary School in Fairfax County, Virginia.

From Fumiko Harada Ziemer (Japanese Language, 2006 co-recipient)

Three hours flight south from Tokyo—or three hours flight east from Manila is the US territory Guam. The population of approximately 180,000 enjoys tropical weather and calm blue seas throughout the year.

There are five public high schools and numerous private high schools on Guam. All the public high schools, five private college preparatory schools, and one federal (Department of Defense) school offer Japanese as one of the modern language courses besides Spanish, Chamorro (native language of Guam), and Chinese.

In Guam, Japan and the Japanese language matter because our location and fine weather support a strong tourist industry. The island relies heavily on tourism, and roughly 80 percent of tourists are Japanese. In addition, quite a few Japanese professionals and Olympic-level athletes do training during the winter on the tropical island of Guam. The most well-known Japanese professional baseball team, the Yomiuri Giants, is one of them. As you can see, learning Japanese on Guam opens the door to tourism-related occupations for high school graduates.

At the last Guam Nihōngo (Japanese) Teachers' Association meeting, I asked nine teachers what the selling points are for learning Japanese. Anime (four), pop culture (seven), and food (eight) are the top three categories these teachers mentioned. Learning the Japanese language provides students with the knowledge to purchase Japanese-produced items of a healthy diet, such as seafood, sea weeds, soybean products—all sold in local stores. For Guam, “The place where America’s day begins,” Japan still matters.

Fumiko Harada Ziemer has an MA in Education (Language and Literacy). She has taught Japanese language and culture to grades eight through twelve, including IB, at St. John’s School in Guam since 1994.