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CENTRALIZED SYSTEM IN JAPAN MAY SUFFER FROM ADDITIONAL FACTORS LIKE THE LANGUAGE DIVIDE: COMMENTS ON HALVERSON & COLLINS

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Japanese schools may start using technology to benefit education, though the shift itself would happen in a culturally bound way. In addition, Japan has unique problems like the language barrier she has to solve if she recognizes the possible "inequity" foreseen and feared by Halverson and Collins.

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As for receiving the benefits of new technology in education, Japan may enjoy a steady shift toward the better end, even at the core of its educational practices, because of its tightly centralized government control. But this shift would take a lot longer than expected, much longer than the proponents would like. When I see Japan in the broader context of "educational internationalization," or "globalization," Japan has unique problems she has to solve if she recognizes the possible "inequity" foreseen and feared by Halverson and Collins.

The authors claim that the main core of the conventional teaching-learning system is very robust against change, because it is institutionalized socially. Thus, they also claim, the new technology or the new technology-supported practices will not dominate or take over the core practice of schooling, but they will provide learners at large with ample chances to enjoy alternative forms and goals of learning, some of which they list and examine in the article. Based on these claims, they express their fear that if the new technology remains only as a provider of such alternatives, there could be a divide between people who benefit from them and those who do not. This could increase inequities in chances of receiving higher levels of education, possibly leading to inequities in the quality of life in the real world after graduation.

The logic is clear, and I share the fear. It may, of course, take a different shape in different contexts, where there could be other contributing factors educational

researchers might need to consider. To comment on this fear, let me take two perspectives, one narrowly focusing on what is happening and what would be happening in Japan, and the other, wider perspective on taking Japan as one component in the Asia-Pacific, or in the entire world.

1. The Trends of IT in Japanese Schools are Slow and "Acculturated"

Japan shares some of the IT-driven changes depicted in Halverson & Collins. There were ten times more applications than anticipated in the graduate course of the University of the Air (Open University equivalent) when it was opened in 2002, reflecting rapid growth in the interests and needs in distance education. Extension courses at colleges and alternative schools from elementary to high-school levels are increasing in number and in variety. Many preparatory courses and English as a second language classes are offered on the Web. Yet such trends are at a much lesser degree when compared to the US. The number of virtual universities is still quite low. Students can take Cisco and other IT companys' online qualification courses, but they are regarded yet as highly specialized, minority courses. Vocational courses are certainly getting stronger, indicated by the increase in the number of college drop-outs who transfer to more vocationally oriented schools. Those drop outs are often more successful in society, at least for the beginning periods of their career, because they are more specifically oriented to what to learn and how to make their living. But they are still "drop-outs," with college's status remaining intact, when it comes to selecting jobs. A college diploma is still the only certificate needed to apply for a job in mainstream, established companies. Getting a qualification through e-learning and "selling" oneself for promotion is not a cultural practice yet.

At school, because of the centralized educational system, as well as of the orientation toward conformity still prevailing in modern Japan, the educational shift with the use of technology would be a lot less dynamic, less divergent, yet steadier in Japan than as described in the paper. Technologies are quite slow to be appreciated by public school teachers as a tool for change. The percentage of e-Japan reform stays about one half of what was originally expected at its onset five years ago. There is of course a top-down, governance lead for the change, which gradually desensitizes the teacher community to the use of technology. Yet the lead is very much rooted in established standards, avoiding dramatic changes. NICER (National Information Center for Educational Resources; http://www.nicer.go.jp/), for example, is a portal where teachers can find many still images, short video clips, teaching plans, and even some interactive simulation systems, all categorized according to grades, subjects, and to the contents of approved texts within the nationally approved curriculum.

There are also grass-root movements, by industrious teachers who see possibilities in technology of the chances to "make their practices better," by "enhancing," or "pushing just one step further" what they have been doing, and what they believe to be most effective right now. Because of this kind of move, there is a steady increase

in the use of wikis and blogs by teachers, of TV conferences among schools, and of the Internet as an extended "library" by the students. This does not drastically change the fundamental style of teaching-learning, say from teacher-guided plus textbook-dependent classrooms to learner-centered, collaborative classrooms. The latter kind of new practices are still experimental, taken up by schools attached to university departments of Education. Some fundamental shift will happen in public schools someday, but it will take a long time. Alternatives may or may not prevail, depending on the socio-historical change in the core part of the school system in Japan. A recent study done by the National Institute of Multimedia Education compared successful and less successful e-learning practices at Japanese universities, and concluded that they generally lack an explicit, long term vision, or direction of reformation to enforce the implementation cycle (Yoshida, 2005). More successful universities tend to have short-term goals for achievement and assessment, but even so, they do not differ from less successful universities in terms of their long-term directions of change. The universities do not appear to have a clear goal for changing the quality of education, though they may be interested in garnishing their classrooms with the most recent IT gadgets.

It is well documented by now that the mere introduction of technology does not shift the course of educational practices. Similarly, the mere introduction of a pedagogical term does not necessarily influence teaching practices for change, particularly when it could easily be "acculturated," or interpreted differently according to the more traditional norms of the culture. The term "collaboration" may make an interesting case. The Japanese are known to be good at collaboration, I believe, and researchers in the US, Europe, or some other place may take it for granted that the Japanese teachers can teach "collaborative" classes naturally. It is true, to some extent, but the real problem resides in the fact that there could be several different meanings in, or forms of, collaborative learning. Some collaborative classes focus on convergence of learners, aimed at all participating students coming to the same outcome. Yet there are other forms of collaboration, where each participant thinks in a different way from others, contributes to the group by bringing in different ideas, individually tries to integrate divergence created by the entire group, and reaches a different outcome at the end of the learning. Recent learning science studies show that it is the latter collaboration that has more potential for successful learning (Hatano & Inagaki, 1991; Shirouzu, Miyake & Masukawa, 2002). However, it is the former interpretation that the Japanese teachers form when they hear that collaborative learning is the current trend. This kind of "culturally bound" interpretation could slow down the appreciation of IT as the tool for the true reform of education for better results, with higher goals.

2. Japan's Unique Challenges

When I take a wider perspective to see the current situation of Japanese schools, I can identify two additional factors that work against the IT advancement in education, particularly when it comes in the form of an alternative. One is the problem

of low motivation of students to learn in Japan. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment and other international comparisons have shown unusually low motivation not just among students but also in teachers (OECD/PISA, 2003). The society appears mostly stable, with no strong needs felt by youngsters to change. A new term, NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) has been borrowed from the UK to refer to the graduates from middle-school to college, ranging in ages 15 to 35, who neither work nor are enrolled in educational institutions. It is reported that there were 520,000 NEETs in Japan in 2003 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2004). Learning is not much fun, anyway, and no particular effort is required to graduate. School success does not assure what you would be able to do after graduation. There may be much to explore on the web, but in a society with little need felt to "deeply understand" something, there is not much use of the vast knowledge externalized on the web, or alternative forms of spontaneous learning. Cognitive studies may have shown that human beings are intrinsically motivated to learn, but Japanese education has not used IT much to take the best advantage of this basic human nature.

The other problem is the language barrier. Good command of practical English is absolutely necessary to take advantage of the rich contents of the worldwide web. The current focus of English education in Japan is largely on everyday communication for everyone. This level is not sufficient for letting high-school students spontaneously browse through the web, find sites relevant to the topics they care to learn, compare and make intelligent judgment on selecting the worth-learning site, dive into the materials, put their opinions back for discussion, and ultimately learn. The alternatives described in Halverson and Collins come in English, mostly, and are beneficial only for those who somehow acquired English at the level usable as a learning tool. The centrality of English cannot be "mended" easily on the current web, and it is an urgent problem for non-English web users to solve. Otherwise, the "alternatives" expressed by Halverson and Collins do not even materialize as alternatives, much less for us to start worrying about the divide.

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