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## The Learner Development Journal Issue 7: Challenging the Conventions of Learner Development Research

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# Collegially Exploring Engaged Meaningful Learning: Stories, Perspectives, Dialogue, and Issues

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In this article we (two university teachers in Japan) collaboratively reflect on our teaching experiences and practitioner research to do with what we have come to call “engaged meaningful learning” approaches such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Learning through Discussion (LTD). We use autobiographical stories, our responses to each other’s stories, different teacher and learner voices, as well as a reflexive dialogue, to develop personal and local perspectives about what engaged meaningful learning means for ourselves and our learners. Akiko shares her story of becoming socialized as a Japanese teacher and examines why she found that LTD promoted students’ engagement and critical understanding, whereas she had mixed experiences with using PBL. This led Akiko to puzzle long and hard over what successful practice means for her. Andy reflects on project work in his own education and past teaching, as well as in a recent curriculum reform process introducing PBL classes in which students research global issues and look at how such issues impact local communities and people that they know. He presents the story of one learner doing a project into ethical consumerism to illuminate the complex interplay between learner creativity, learner criticality, and learners’ translingual practices in PBL. In this unconventional patchwork multivocalic reflection we (Akiko and Andy) come to recognise the importance of acknowledging internal and external ideological constraints and of creating new discourses to foster critical awareness and agency in students for engaged meaningful learning.

この論文では、プロジェクト型学習 (PBL) やディスカッションを通じた学習 (LTD) のような、私たち (日本の大学教員2名) が「関与ある学習方法」と呼ぶアプローチに関する自身の教育経験と実践研究を共同で振り返る。私たちは、自伝的な物語、互いの物語への応答、教師と学習者のさまざまな声、そしてリフレクティブな対話を用いて、私たち自身と学習者にとって意味あり関与ある学習とは何かについて、個人的かつローカルな視点を発展させた。中山は、日本語教師として社会化するまでのストーリーを語り、PBLを使った経験が彼女にとっては評価が分かれるものであったのに対し、なぜLTDが学生の関与と批判的理解を促進することがわかったのかを考察する。そして、中山にとっての実践の成功とはなんだったのかという問いを投げかける。バーフィールドは、自身の教育や過去の指導におけるプロジェクトワークの経験とともに、学習者が国際的な問題について調査し、それらの問題がいかに学習者の身の回りの共同体や人びとに影響を与えているのかを考察するPBL授業を導入した最近のカリキュラム改革の過程について振り返る。PBLにおける学習者の創造性、学習者の批評性、学習者のトランスリンガルな実践の間の複雑な相互作用を明らかにするのに役立つ、倫理的消費主義についてのプロジェクトを行った一人の学習者の話を紹介する。この型破りでパッチワークのような多声的な内省の中で、私たち (中山とバーフィールド) は、内面化されたもの、外的なもの双方のイデオロギー的制約を認識することの大切さと、意味あり関与ある学習に取り組む学生らに批判的意識と主体性 (agency) を育み、そのための新しい言説を創造する重要性を認識するようになった。

## Keywords

teacher narrative, teacher socialization, local context, Project Based Learning (PBL), engaged meaningful learning  
教師のナラティブ、教師の社会化、ローカルな文脈、プロジェクト型学習 (PBL)、意味あり関与ある学習

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Representations and especially academic representations came to be criticized because, in and through the context where they appeared, they laid claims to truth. In the wake of this critique, representations were recognized to be context-dependent, always embodying interests, politics, and power. Yet much of the postmodern, feminist, and constructivist literature continued to employ genres characteristic of modernism. That is the critiques, lacking self-reflexivity, merely wrote new truths.

... These attempts used a variety of means to break the voice of the dominant narrative to the point that the different voices intersect, overlap, resist, and contrast one another. It is a form of writing that resists language, all the while making use of it. (Roth, 2005, p. 13)

## I. Introduction

**HIROSHIMA & TOKYO March-August 2023** – We each work in different parts of Japan, Akiko in Hiroshima, Andy in Tokyo, and have different areas of work and disciplinary interests. Akiko's background is History and Japanese Language Education, and she used to teach international undergraduate and exchange students. Andy's disciplinary areas are Applied Linguistics and English Language Education and he teaches mostly Japanese undergraduate students. Despite these differences, we share interests to do with learner development, which we discovered by chance a few years ago when we were in the same response community for Issue 5 of the *Learner Development Journal* (LDJ). With its theme of challenging the conventions in researching and writing about learner development, Issue 7 of the LDJ offered an interesting opportunity for us to collaborate further. In the beginning we had no fixed idea about what we might explore and write about together. Over time, through our collegial dialogues and discussions every few months or so, our focus shifted towards how we and our learners understand and engage with Project-Based Learning (PBL) and other non-conventional approaches to learning, and what questions come up for us about this. We also became interested in writing our account in a non-conventional way by co-authoring a personalised, reflective, and interactive exploration of our practitioner concerns with engaged meaningful learning.

The two of us believe that practitioner research is highly personal, subjective, and that it is driven by teachers' own puzzles and interests within their practices with their learners (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Hanks, 2017; Jarvis, 1999; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Our practitioner inquiries often spring from our inner conversations with ourselves, as well as from our spontaneous interactions with learners, colleagues, and close others with whom we talk and reflect about our work. We find that our practices are deeply embedded in our own biographical trajectories (past, present, and future), as well as in the very local contexts of our lives and work, including the institutional discourses, affordances, and constraints that impact our daily work. These fundamentally important contours of practitioner research figure strongly as we delve into our experiences of being socialised as teachers, working with PBL in our own local ways, and reflecting on what meaningful engaged learning signifies for us and our students in our particular contexts.

It is however difficult to reconcile writing from these personal and local positions with the distancing, objectifying, de-voiced writing that much conventional academic writing and publishing mandates. Although there is no commonly agreed way to write reflexive practitioner research accounts, we try to write here in a context-dependent, personally

voiced fashion. Rather than starting with an extensive literature review and adopting a conventional universalizing stance, we each begin with an opening autobiographical story about significant experiences to do with PBL that we have had in the past. We then share reflections about each other's stories before focusing on particular puzzles that we each have around PBL and other non-conventional approaches to learning in our different contexts. Looking at how some of our learners have responded to these approaches, we consider what we have gained from contemplating our learners' activity and work. We do this in a dialogue, before raising, in the final part, questions for further consideration and inquiry.

This way of writing includes multiple voices, stories, and student artefacts. We have tried to do this in such a way that these intersect and overlap, and also resist and contrast, with one another, as Roth proposes in the opening quotation to this article. What follows, then, is not a conventional piece of academic writing: It is more a patchwork multivocalic reflection that narratively—and in places contradictorily—explores engaged meaningful learning from several different perspectives. We begin with our two autobiographical stories side by side. As they are parallel, please read them in any order that you choose. We then briefly respond to each other's stories, before continuing our narratives sequentially, with Akiko looking for alternatives to a prescriptivist approach to language education, and Andy navigating new PBL discourses in a collaborative curriculum reform process.

## II. Starting Autobiographical Stories

### *Akiko: Setback in Becoming a Conventional Japanese Language Teacher*

**HIROSHIMA June 12th, 2022** – “I would like to share an old story from my early days as a new Japanese language teacher, which eventually led me to graduate school as a kind of escape. Back then, I cherished the moments of laughter with my students in the classroom, despite the daily struggles of class preparation. Narrative is the way I can convey my voice and context in all its complexity.

My socialization as a Japanese language teacher started in Korea in the 90s. I met basic language teacher knowledge and skills for the first time and learnt them over there. It was exactly like the “Practice makes perfect” experience. I learnt the differences between grammar syllabus and situational syllabus, and basic Japanese verb conjugation from the teacher's guide attached with the textbook.

At the same time in Korea, I was also learning Korean without any formal classes. I learnt Korean through reading grammar books and talking with Koreans in my daily life. I tried to understand announcements on the bus,

### *Andy: Recovering the Themes of Project-Based Learning*

**TOKYO June 6th, 2022** – Apart from one spectacularly hazy memory of a project on Roman roads in primary school, I don't recall project-based learning (PBL) in my own school years. Now, in conversation with Akiko, recollecting bygone experiences of school and university learning helps me puzzle over what PBL means in my present work.

An art teacher in secondary school encouraging us to express ourselves freely, and who was never anything less than accepting and enthusiastic about our ideas and artistic work. An inspiring German teacher who would discuss and laugh with us in class and always invited us to use our basic German to express our ideas as best we could. Newspaper articles, current affairs magazines, radio recordings, films, and later a wide range of German literary works, all helping us make connections with new worlds, both contemporary and historical. Such moments of educational freedom, empathy, and connection seem almost subliminal and enduring

advertisements in the newspaper or the shop windows. I listened carefully to what my students said and copied them. I can give you the moment I understood “뭐라고? (mweo-ra-go) What did you say?” as an example.

It was in May or June a couple of months after I came to Korea. Two junior female students were sitting on a big stone near my office building. It was early afternoon, so I asked them “Have you had lunch?” in Japanese, which is a very common “How are you?” in Korean. Then two girls looked at each other with confused expressions and said, “뭐라고? (mweo-ra-go).” At that moment, I understood that it meant “What did she say?” Wow, I can’t tell you how excited I was.

I had so many experiences picking up words and phrases in my daily life. I also studied very hard at home with grammar books. The more phrases and vocabulary I could study, the more my world in Korea expanded. I enjoyed studying a foreign language for the first time in my life.

But I could not integrate those very exciting experiences in my classroom.

After I came back to Japan, I was lucky enough to teach at two different institutions. One was following a strict grammar and sentence-pattern syllabus from beginner to intermediate. Another one was using a situational functional syllabus and was more open-minded for experimental teaching. In the former one, I was shocked about the volume of knowledge other teachers had. They seemed to know everything written in the textbook; the vocabularies, elements of grammar, and the order of submissions. They used their knowledge and their sense of “native speakers” to check students’ written homework. At first, the grammar-centered textbook was very new to me and I realized my lack of knowledge, both about the textbook and the grammar. Even though I prepared a lot for the class, students sometimes got confused or I could not answer students’ questions. What I could do was

influences on me as I look back.

As an undergraduate, no “project-like” learning experiences spring to mind, either. Yet, a few years later, in postgraduate teacher training, a drama teacher using drama projects in a workshop approach to teacher education had a lasting impact on me: It was a new and much deeper way of learning than I had ever experienced before, and it made profound sense.

Soon afterwards I tried extra-curricular drama workshop projects in Yugoslavia at Novi Sad and Belgrade universities where I taught in the early part of my teaching career. At Belgrade University, over several months, the drama workshop had 30 to 40 first- through fourth-year students of English Language and Literature and met once a week for 2-3 hours. The students created together through improvisation, discussion, and reflection two plays, each about an hour long. The workshops featured minimal frames for improvised work, with students discussing their improvisations and feeding ideas back into the scaffolded development of each play week by week. Never scripted, the evolving plays were constantly re-negotiated, then performed in public, and shared with a wider audience (initially inspired by [Dorothy Heathcote’s](#) educational drama work (Farmer, n.d.), later [Boal’s \(2004\) Theatre of the Oppressed](#)).

Some years later I worked with students at the University of Tsukuba on what I came to call “drama-mentary.” An early conversation with Akiko led me to start searching for more concrete connections: Where were those photocopies of student work from that class? Finding a long untouched folder of notes and student writing, I started recollecting more sharply how this advanced class had involved students from different faculties in exploring contemporary issues in society. For one project we had decided to take the theme of raising public awareness of HIV/AIDS. Using “drama across the curriculum” methods, I then guided the students to do improvisations

blindly follow what was written in textbooks so that class went a little bit smoothly.

After teaching there for a few years, I became familiar with their strict prescriptivism and I could gradually afford to include sentences that seemed relevant to students' lives and composed sentences on topics that I was interested in talking about in my handouts.

In the latter one, I had a chance to teach intermediate exchange students with another full-time teacher. The course consisted of a situational syllabus, and, for different lessons, I made handouts reorganizing the text book and had students practice sentence patterns and dialogues. Sometimes I and another full-time teacher invited Japanese students who were interested in exchange with international students and organized some events which were related with themes in the textbook like introducing Japanese New Year's games or doing some sports together. We planned those events in the hope that exchange students could get off the "English island," in the university where Japanese was the mainstream. Exchange students came from all over the world, and they were lively and frank. I felt like they were my younger friends.

When I look back on myself, I was learning and teaching in a conventional way, at the same time, looking for a chance to give students an opportunity to use Japanese in an authentic situation like I had in Korea. Moreover, I learnt the joy of chit-chatting and even making jokes with my students with their limited vocabulary and phrases. When I had a laugh and a good time with my students, I felt teaching Japanese was rewarding, and finally I could admit to myself that I am a language teacher.

Slowly I began to accept offers for other classes, and just as I was gaining a little confidence in my ability to teach through trial and error, I hit a wall. Some students did not understand, no matter how well I explained the grammar and vocabulary in the textbook.

around particular situations to do with HIV/AIDS, before they reflected through discussion and writing about what they had experienced. Next, in pairs and small groups, the students created their own drama-mentaries. These were public awareness dramas in which they acted out different situations (drama), in addition to freeze-framing or interrupting scenes at certain points to present information, contradictory perspectives, and commentary about HIV/AIDS (commentary) to let the (imagined) audience step back and reflect.

One particular set of notes stood out as I delved through the folder. These handwritten reflections picked up on the fieldwork interviews the student had done at two nursery schools in her local area about school policies for accepting an HIV positive child: "I was really surprised these two had different point of view towards accepting of HIV positive child. One thinks it is the privacy right. The other says it is the responsibility to tell to everybody that there is HIV positive child." She further reflected: "But it was really good chance to deepen my knowledge. I talked a lot with my friends of other classes and especially with my boyfriend. I will be a doctor someday and when I become doctor I would be the one who tell about the disease." I am struck by how talking with others outside of the class was meaningful for this student, as well as how creativity and criticality dovetailed for the students in what they did.

Reflecting on these past project learning experiences, I grasp more clearly key leitmotifs of dialogue, creative commitment, and a quest for critical engagement and connection with a wider audience outside of the class. Working with others, solo activity, and later sharing also come into view, together with self-directed individual and group action.

In a recent blog post about project-based learning, a writer (Aida, 2017) refers to a key dimension of such learning as "この「夢中になった経験」 / "kono 「muchū ni natta keiken」 / "this 'engaging/engrossing experience'."

And also, some university students, perhaps tired from their part-time jobs, gave me a cold look as I explained how to write an academic report using the academic Japanese textbooks that had just been published. “Oh, come on teacher, we are fed up with your meaningless instructions. It is no use learning those posh phrases.” I felt as if they said that to me.

I started to question myself. “Is a prescriptive approach to language education truly beneficial for learners?” There were many ways to blame them: They were unmotivated, they didn’t have enough experience reading and writing in their own country or studying foreign languages, they came to Japan to earn money. I didn’t want to accuse them using those phrases, but I could not find an alternative way of teaching. I started to feel my students were the enemy to be defeated. Fortunately, only one or two classes gave me that feeling, but that was enough to break my joy and confidence for teaching.

As if bad things happen to bad people/悪い時に悪いことは起こるもので/waruitokini waruikotoha okorumonode/, right around that time, things were going wrong with the international and Japanese student events which I organized in a situational syllabus course as well. Even though those were small events, it required a decent amount of coordination with a full-time teacher who was in charge of the courses or Japanese students who saw the call for event participants. Despite our efforts, it seemed like my students didn’t use Japanese as much as we expected or their relationship with Japanese students was just on the site. Compared to the amount of preparation and coordination, the fruit I got was quite small. I was running around behind the scenes and felt I did not get much of a chance to see what the students were doing, how they were feeling, or what they were talking about. The students were the guests. What broke my heart was the time of cleaning. After the events, a few girl students from Asian countries helped me clean, but other students left the site without saying thank

The complete involvement of learners in what they do in project-based learning is often highlighted, as are individual creativity and personal engagement, in the way that PBL gets discourses. These elements certainly feature in the past experiences of PBL that have come back into focus for me. Yet, something is absent in that picture, and the missing link for me is the theme of developing a critical relationship to the world, exploring that critical understanding with others, and, in some way, raising others’ awareness of the issue at hand. Trying to develop criticality was undoubtedly salient in the drama project work in Yugoslavia and, later, at the University of Tsukuba with drama-mentary projects. It is also a key concern in my current teaching and has been an important part of curriculum reform discussions with colleagues in the past few years, as well as with teachers at other universities interested in PBL. The critical dimension is a significant interest in my current PBL work—a puzzle and a challenge that I keep coming back to.

My students continually teach me that neither “the local” nor “the global” has any fixed senses. Their perspectives, positions, and understandings are constantly shifting as they develop a project. For one student the local may start with doing visual research in their neighbourhood, observing and taking photos, for example, of recycling points. For another, the local may have a stronger transnational sense and involve talking to people they know online and discussing what a particular issue such as overconsumption means for those individuals where they live, whether they are in Japan, South Africa, Thailand, or the USA. For another student it may mean first finding out basic information about gender (in)equality at a global level or in other local contexts, and then considering which people close to them they might discuss their lived experiences of gender inequality with.

Just how the mediation of the personal, the local, and the global might be realised in practice is something that I continue to be

you. Eventually I withdrew from these events because I felt like a servant. I decided to get a PhD which seemed necessary to get a full-time job and I wanted to pursue the mystery of why my different selves emerged when I spoke different languages. Starting a PhD was empowering for me, and at the same time I used my PhD studies as an excuse to reduce my teaching load and stop making my teaching practice the center of my life.

### III. Responding to Each Other's Autobiographical Stories

**TOKYO October 2022/March 2023** – Hi Akiko, That initial period of prescriptive thinking and action as a teacher reminded me of how like you I looked for basic secure pedagogic routines when I started as a teacher (and still do when I take on new types of courses)—and of the endless hours of lesson-planning that I would do in my early years of teaching. I can remember too the sense of authority that teachers' textbooks conveyed, and how linearly certain teaching needed to be before any ostensible learning was thought to take place.

Perhaps for early-career Akiko, fixed methods (and textbooks and teacher manuals) let you teach in an explicit and predictable way, so you inevitably reached a point where you needed to find out how you wanted to teach *in your own way*. You started experimenting and focusing on your learners and using language in different spontaneous ways. And then you hit a wall. An image of four walls comes into my mind, without any ceiling or roof. It could literally be an exercise yard (!) that you return to and are trapped in. The image makes me notice that prescriptivism is so difficult to question and see beyond. At the same time, opting for more open(-minded) learner-centred pedagogies brought with it its own risks and challenges for you.

You mention that in some classes you felt like you wanted to blame your students and reproach them, although you didn't want to. As teachers we don't often *write* about how we relate emotionally to our learners and to

puzzled by. In what ways do students make connections between global issues and their own lives and local communities? Why? How do they go about developing their critical awareness? And do they see doing their projects as a creative process or not? Why?

**HIROSHIMA July/October 2022** – Hi Andy, Reading your short opening story, which gives a picture of what you have been pursuing as a teacher, I was struck by the joy of learning that young Andy felt. It was one of the roots and the compass of your teaching.

And I thought it was so awesome that that experience led you to pursue creative learning, using collaboration with others, drama acting, and improvisational dialogue, rather than focusing on "knowledge" that can be measured by tests. I was amazed because I can imagine how difficult running a classroom without the tests and the teacher's authority is, and it requires teachers to carefully listen to their students' voices and learn from them also.

What you wrote made me reflect on my own experiences. Did I have a learning experience like Andy's in any classroom? I grew up in a Japanese educational environment dominated by scores, pecking orders, and entrance exams. And what was my goal in teaching? After World War II, Japanese language education resumed focus on language skills, not learner development, as a reflection of the use of the Japanese language as a symbol of national unity during the prewar colonialist era. I feel that we are now faced with the challenge of overcoming the ghosts of a belief that covers the teaching of Japanese: Language is just a skill, and there is a right way to use the skill.



ourselves as teachers, although we may well *talk* about this with workplace colleagues or close others. For me those feelings of frustration come up for different various reasons when I am teaching. My learners are “present but not engaged” (for whatever reasons) in what I want them to focus on (or *they want me* to focus on!), or I don’t see clearly where each of them is, or even: They are not being the learners I want (or imagine) them to be.

That sense of “not seeing” the learners and not connecting with them came through for me very strongly when you described coordinating the different events and being rushed off your feet in serving the students and making sure things ran successfully. And then your priorities moved from teaching to your PhD studies. What happened next?

Best  
Andy

## IV. Continuing Our Stories

### Akiko: Looking for alternatives

**HIROSHIMA March - August 2023** – In my opening story I wrote about the first decade of my life as a language teacher. As a Japanese language teacher, my socialized environment was filled with traditional teacher-centered prescriptivism, but when I referred to my own language learning experiences as my standpoint for teaching, I realized I wanted to pursue an alternative way of teaching. So I organized some events where international students and Japanese students participated together. They gave me a sense of excitement along with the feeling of “I am doing a new thing,” but I was not sure that was what I wanted to do. After completing my PhD, I realized that I had been longing to have a teaching practice where I could encourage my students to have a positive Japanese speaking self, like my Korean speaking self. To continue my story, I would like to share two of my practices in the following decade.

After completing my PhD, I was fortunate enough to be offered a full-time teaching position at a local university in the Kyushu area. Initially, I was assigned to a class of undergraduate international students. The class was for non-native Japanese students who had chosen it as an alternative to English or as a second foreign language. Most of the international undergraduates had studied Japanese for one or two years at a Japanese language school and had obtained JLPT N1, but their Japanese language skills were not precise enough to be considered effective when writing academic reports or participating actively in university classes. On the other hand, they had spent a lot of time studying standard Japanese at a Japanese language school, and I did not want to impose more

One more thing: only native speakers know the right way to use it. And create a new goal of teaching and learning language.

In reflecting on my history as a teacher, I reaffirm that I, too, have been attracted by the collaboration and creativity of my students.

You have given me homework trying to fit student creative learning into the history of Japanese language education. I hope I can submit my summer homework, like my son drawing pictures for the new semester.

Sincerely,  
Akiko

“correct” Japanese on them because they were already highly proficient Japanese users to make their lives on their own.

### ***Learning through Discussion***

There were three classes, and it was my job to coordinate with the other teachers. As was decided before I came, the first semester would focus on reading comprehension and the second semester on presentations, leaving it up to each teacher in charge to decide on which materials to use. From the second year, I decided to use for the first semester a collaborative learning method I had learned at a workshop held in a nearby university. The method was called LTD (Learning through Discussion). I chose reading materials from several anthologies published on the subject of 大学活用法/ How to Make the Most of University (e.g., Iwanami Shoten Editorial Department, 2000). I had in mind the students who had given me those cold looks before I joined the PhD course, and, in particular, a student from China who dropped out because he could not find a purpose or goal in university life. I wanted them to spend their four years of college in the most meaningful way possible, because if they did not find their own purpose, the time would go by aimlessly.

In the original LTD textbook (Yasunaga, 2006), students were supposed to read one whole paper whatever the length, before the class and follow designated steps, like “definition of terms and concepts” or “integration of material with other knowledge.” In the classroom, students should break into small groups to discuss the reading materials following the same steps they had done as preparation. I was attracted to LTD because through those steps the teacher could make sure students had read the materials before the class. Also, using one of those steps, each student needed to articulate how the reading materials related to them personally. In short, by using LTD, students are supposed to read deeply and personally engage with the texts, key ideas in the texts, and the challenging questions that they raised.

As I hoped that reading about college life would give students a chance to reflect on their own lives, I specifically arranged LTD with the hope that reading would give students a chance to reflect on their own lives. I decided that students would read only two essays per semester, and I also created a simple worksheet and assigned it as homework.

There was one class that still remains in my memory: it was a small class of about 10 students, all Chinese, Taiwanese, and Korean. They were not “model” students at all. They took Japanese courses as the easiest choice. Some of them told me, “No more studying language!” At least, they were very frank and honest to tell me that without hesitation. For this class, I chose to read an essay that argued that university students should spend time making the best choices for their future, so that students should not take on part-time jobs or club activities. The argument was clear; the author recommended dedicating yourself to your studies and finding a specialty, thus, *“Don’t optimize now, optimize in the future. If you can find your favorite speciality while you are in university, you will have a better life in the future.”* However, agreeing with this perspective in the Japanese context was somewhat difficult. Many Japanese university students had a limited understanding of society prior to entering university. As a result, taking on a part-time job was often viewed as a way to “learn about society” rather than just a means of earning money. Similarly, I believed that participating in club activities could be an effective means to make friends and have a more active university life. This was especially true for international students who needed part-time jobs in order to finance their studies and enhance their understanding of Japanese culture. If things went well, they might make lifelong Japanese friends.

As the week progressed, their discussion grew more heated. How quiet and yet passionate their discussion was over the single word “最適化/ saitekika/ optimization.” I was impressed that they could be so serious in class and respond to their classmates in such a non-superficial way. I was almost moved as I watched the discussion and felt that although it was a “Japanese” class, learning was involved in their lives. In other words, they engaged meaningfully in their learning; then, their engagement led them to critical understanding of the word “最適化/ saitekika/ optimization,” rather than simply memorizing the dictionary meaning of the word. I felt I witnessed them giving their own meaning to the word, trying to express it to classmates, and negotiating the meaning with each other. I heard their voices echo in Japanese.

To this day, this remains one of my most unforgettable teaching experiences. Even after my Japanese course ended, these students visited my office from time to time and fondly reported on their recent activities when we met on campus.

### *Try PBL again*

However, the number of full-time international undergraduate students entering the university began to decline, and instead, a large number of exchange students, staying for at least one semester/6 months, enrolled in Japanese language classes. (Undergraduates here means students who graduate from the university over a four-year period, whereas exchange students refers to students who come to Japan from partner institutions to study for six months or one year.) I then began to feel that this method using LTD was not suitable for the many exchange students who were majoring in Japanese in their home countries, because they were more the type of student who cared about test scores. They preferred to avoid classroom discussions where there were no definitive answers. Before I could explore other options, there was a curriculum reform and I stopped teaching this course. I suspect that this curriculum reform, ostensibly designed to introduce active learning into general education, was in fact intended to reduce the number of foreign language courses which hired many part-time instructors and put pressure on the budget. As a full-time Japanese faculty member, it was necessary to create an attractive program to attract international students to choose this university in order to protect the employment of the teachers.

Due to the curriculum reform around 2013, I and another teacher were required to make a class for short-term international students and Japanese students' project work. Although we did not know much about how to conduct project work, we were aware that the short-term exchange international students had a hard time finding opportunities to use Japanese in their lives. Also, the Japanese students had never spoken with international students before, even though they were interested in foreign countries. I wanted to give international exchange students chances to interact with local people in Japanese since they had spent at least a couple of years studying Japanese in their home university. I also wanted to puncture the small comfortable cocoons that local Japanese students lived in.

The area where the university was located, like other regional cities in Japan, was suffering from an exodus of young people and the hollowing out of its industries. The local government was hoping that foreign students would bring an international perspective to the area, and provide some ideas about bringing international tourists to the area. My colleague and I worked together to organize the projects for the students. I was in charge of this project work for several years, and we organized groups with half

international students and half undergraduates as much as possible because we expected that would create continuous interaction in the groups.

In the first year, there were 4 groups and, two or three years later, 5 or 6 groups due to more students enrolling in the course. We set the goal of the project as making brochures to attract domestic and international tourists to the local area where the university was located. For each project, students visited sites related to their chosen theme. In the first year, they chose themes and explored bike-friendly locations, including the best restaurants and spots with beautiful autumn leaves. One year later, students were more ambitious and tried to go farther looking for interesting places such as hot spring areas and power spots (places where people believe you can feel a spiritual or healing energy and come away refreshed and rejuvenated). We didn't set any limits or frame what they had to do other than making a brochure. Since we could not get any funds for these projects, they had to use their own money to visit the sites in a group. We printed out the brochures they made and distributed them at the international student center office or municipal international exchange associations.

In reviewing past materials, I noticed that the quality of the brochures varied from year to year and group to group. I can still feel their passion and energy from some brochures even now, but I could not help but think at the time that some were just copies of municipal pamphlets or websites. The differences probably came from the themes, leadership, and/or ideas. Some groups chose interesting themes, and the cooperation in the group worked very well, while others were, even though they tried very hard, suffering. When I had the chance, I was curious and asked them "How is it going?" Some of them confessed to me, with sad, tired faces, that they didn't have any idea what to write or they could not find anything interesting.

This is my experience with PBL, if you can call it that. I know every teaching is always "trial and error," but something didn't sit right with me. I still can't find the reason why I couldn't be satisfied with my PBL compared to the reading-discussion class which I had. Why did it seem like it didn't work for me? Was it because I did not have a chance to observe students' conversations and discussions? Or was it because I could not see how much students developed by doing projects? Perhaps I had passed too much responsibility to students? PBL is like a black box. You can read many reports which write about how wonderful PBL is, but there must be many hidden tips and structures. One reason I can identify is that I didn't try to make a dialogue with students. Rather, I was focused on trying to respond to the local needs of the university. I didn't conceive carefully who they were, what they needed, and what I wanted them to be. Maybe I also felt some external pressure to create a good program to make the university more attractive, so more international exchange students would choose the university for their studies. That distracted me from thinking about the students in front of me. I needed to think about who is the most important person for me as the teacher.

# ここがオススメ!!!!

「子雀」  
45年もの歴史を持つ老舗。  
昔は雀を焼いてお店にだしていたために、その名がついた。  
今では優しい「おばあちゃん」が1人で経営をされている。  
焼き鳥はもちろんのことながら、雰囲気を楽しめるお店だ!

「手作りぎょうざ専門店」  
もちもちの皮が旨い!  
中のネタもニンニクが効いていて、ガツツリな感じがするけど嫌な臭みがない。  
こじんまりない雰囲気やゆっくりに餃子が楽しめる。  
韓国の男子学生イチオシの雰囲気一度味わってみては?  
中国からの学生も大満足日本のキョウザの味です!

# A Bite of Saga

**AGJC**

## 佐賀の秋 見つけた!

<b>メタセコイフ</b> 11月中旬 12月上旬 並木道	<b>落羽松</b> 11月中旬 12月上旬 並木道	<b>アメリカツツ</b> 11月中旬 12月上旬 並木道
<b>ナンキンハゼ</b> 11月上旬 12月上旬 一本	<b>アメリカツツ</b> 11月上旬 11月下旬 並木道	<b>銀杏</b> 11月上旬 11月下旬 一本
<b>銀杏</b> 11月上旬 12月上旬 並木道	<b>ナンキンハゼ</b> 11月上旬 12月上旬 並木道	<b>銀杏</b> 11月上旬 11月下旬 並木道
<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Mixed</b>

Artefact 1. Student Brochures

## Andy: New Discourses & Learner Story about PBL

### *New PBL discourses*

**TOKYO July/August 2023** – Like you, learning from my students and trying to follow their development has long been important for me, and, at a time of curriculum reform, that provides some kind of counter-balance to dominant institutional discourses of teacher-centred, exam-oriented, non-interactive classes. In the past, as my opening story about doing drama workshops and drama-mentary highlights, I did projects with students *by my own choice*, and that was strongly connected to the creative potential that PBL involved for me. The development of critical awareness was also a significant theme in that earlier work, following through for me now, years later, around the driving question of how students make connections between global issues, local communities they belong to or identify with, and their own lives.

Three years ago in 2020, with a forthcoming curriculum reform on the not-too distant horizon, I was part of a working group of several colleagues responsible for conceptualising and introducing PBL, for the 2023 academic year, into the English curriculum that my colleagues and I teach in and co-coordinate.

As a general observation, I find it tempting to think of a pedagogic change as a “new” approach, so it is humbling to keep in mind that PBL was originally proposed by Kilpatrick (1918) and others for new progressive education in the early twentieth century in the United States. Kilpatrick put “project” in these terms, “If ...we think of a project as a pro-ject, something pro-jected, the reason for adopting the term may better appear” (Kilpatrick, 1918, p. 4). He argued that projects involve “wholehearted purposeful activity in a social situation” to solve a problem through “purposing, planning, executing, and judging” (Kilpatrick, 1918, pp. 17-18). Soon after the Second World War, project work figured in contemporary school education in Japan and was explicitly promoted within official guidelines. At other times it slipped out of official view (Nomura, 2017). Nomura points out that PBL was incorporated in the “New Education” period (1946-1957) as 自由研究/ Independent Research, “where each individual student was expected to find his or her own problems and inquire them proactively” (Nomura, 2017 p. 632).

The reform process that I took part in also had a major impact on my thinking about what PBL means. In this continuing story, I will include quotes from members of the working group (see the box opposite) and from guideline documents to bring out the multivocalic evolution of this new institutional discourse about PBL. Where I represent the working group’s collective thinking, I use a “we” voice. When members of the group share their own perspectives, they are individually named (with their agreement). To give my own views about different PBL principles and practices that I identify strongly with, I switch to “I” in certain places.

Although the working group had no initial template for deciding what new PBL courses

#### Collegial reflections on creating new PBL courses

**Mike:** ... We (the Working Group) initially hit on the idea of projects in a kind of brainstorm of possibilities for making the new course different from the existing courses based on cycles of (individual) research and presentation/writing, as we felt students would appreciate and benefit from a different kind of process/engagement with content in the third section of the curriculum. I recall we weren't really very sure ourselves for a while what "projects" meant or what they would include, but the idea opened up space to imagine things in a new way, and within that space we were able to consider and further brainstorm the kinds of 'principles' and practices we wanted to base PBL on (both new approaches and ones taken from emerging practice in existing courses) ...

(M. Nix, personal communication, August 12, 2023)

would involve, we were clear that any new content-based learning course needed to have a distinct profile from other required English courses that students would take in the new curriculum. This point is taken up by my colleagues Mike Nix and Peter Thornton in their recollections of how the reform process evolved. Over time, the overall aim became more distinctly articulated as

**Peter:** ... For myself, my concern with the old English curriculum for Kokki (International Business and Law) students was that they were doing almost all of their research online, and it was very difficult to get them away from the mindset that "issues" exist "out there" in society and not in their own lives. ...

(P. Thornton, personal communication, August 5, 2023)

students carrying out projects, individually, in pairs, or small groups, into global issues and problems that interest them, and how the issues impact local communities and people they know; then planning and doing (different kinds of) research into those issues or problems, before "creating some kind of product at the end of each project cycle to report on their research to others" ([Chuo University Faculty of Law 3.4 Working Group](#), 2021, p. 1); see also Appendix A for the generic PBL course description that we later created). We imagined that these products might include different real-world genres such as blog posts, campaign proposals, opinion pieces, and project narratives, or multimodal products, for example, webpages, videos, visual narratives, as many of these genres were already part of existing Research & Writing (R&W) courses.

Discussing these principles with full-time and part-time colleagues in January 2022 helped us frame the idea of local research more explicitly. We had originally called this "fieldwork," but we found that some teachers (both full- and part-time) almost exclusively associated PBL fieldwork with students contacting and visiting NGOs to do interviews. *Would we be providing a list of appropriate NGOs and organisations for students to contact? What kind of protocols would be appropriate for students in arranging formal interviews? Would teachers need to check and keep track of students' email correspondence with different organisations?* We realised that, if fieldwork became predominantly concerned with students seeking out expert opinions from staff working in civil society and other types of organisations, this would encourage students (and teachers) to see issues as "out there" and disassociated from their own lives. So, we came to put much greater explicit emphasis on students talking with those around them in their own lives, local communities, and networks.

One other important part of this story concerns re-thinking the prevailing view of academic literacy within the wider English curriculum. For a good many years, this had been expressed as becoming "able to engage with content and to use English to learn about social, political, legal and global issues" ([Chuo University Faculty of Law Taught-in-English Program](#), 2012). That was now changing through the collaborative dialogic curriculum reform process among full-timers and around 25 part-time teachers: Academic literacy was becoming more focused on students' participation in society through being engaged with the world around them, talking with people as well as gathering information, and making a critical analysis. I found this both exciting and intriguing. PBL was pushing us all to break further away from conventional understandings of academic literacy. Within the new PBL framework, this was now being constructed as "active informed citizenship literacy," closely echoing a critical language pedagogy position as "teaching for social justice, in ways that support the development of active, engaged citizens ..." (Crookes, 2013, p. 8):

... the kind of citizenship literacy that you need to:

- be an active informed member of society
- be engaged with the world around you
- talk with people, gather information, and analyse it critically
- share it in many different ways just as people do in the real world, rather than the literacy you need to do conventional academic studies ... (Chuo University Faculty of Law 3.4 Working Group, 2022, p. 5).

To reach towards this, students (and teachers) would need to seek out new ways to link what they learnt in their projects to their lives and participation in society, or, as my colleague Peter Thornton put it, to gain some “sense of ‘projecting’ new ideas into the world, of thinking about what is possible, and hopefully feeling more invested and confident about participating in society” (P. Thornton, personal communication, August 5, 2023).

As I look back at the reform process, I notice how this made me, as well as other teachers, consider more specifically how to guide students to mediate personal, local, and global connections and “understand the issues in their own lives in terms of wider conditions and factors in society” (Chuo University Faculty of Law 3.4 Working Group, 2022, p. 3). We had no set pathways to follow here. We would each experiment with putting this into action. Other aspects such as student translanguaging and creativity in project work (particularly in making final products) were also coming to have greater salience for me than in the previous R&W classes. This is highlighted in the following story of Fumi, as she carried out a local-global project within the broad parameters of the unfolding reform.

### ***One learner’s experiences with PBL***

**TOKYO March-July 2022** – I had known Fumi (pseudonym) since the beginning of the pandemic when she joined my second-year seminar that year. In the spring semester of the 2022 academic year, I talked with Fumi outside of class as she carried out a one-off individual project in May and June 2022. I wanted to step back from partially experimenting with PBL elements in my transitional R&W class, and see how a relatively experienced near-peer learner (similar in age, experience, and other ways; Murphey, 1996) would organise a whole project. Talking with Fumi in weekly/fortnightly Zoom discussions over 8 weeks or so would, I hope, let me see things differently than would otherwise be possible within the busyness of the R&W class itself. The box on the right gives a brief summary of how I tried to shadow Fumi as she organised her project. On the left I continue the narrative by presenting Fumi’s experiences with PBL.

Fumi was interested in looking at ethical consumerism in her own life. She began by looking at her everyday consumption habits and consumer products that she couldn’t help buying, like loose-leaf paper for making notes, and fast-fashion clothes. Although she tried to recycle her used clothes, she often ended up throwing them away. Fumi next had conversation-discussions with other people she knew to develop her understanding. Active on social media, Fumi

#### **Following Fumi as she organised her individual project**

**Andy:** In the first discussion I asked Fumi about her experiences of project work and about her ideas for her project. It turned out that Fumi had no direct experience of doing any project-like work in her earlier school education, so the main connection that she made about doing a project was to half-day and whole-day “internships” that she had been recently doing in her third year while job-hunting. These group-work sessions involved several undergraduates from different



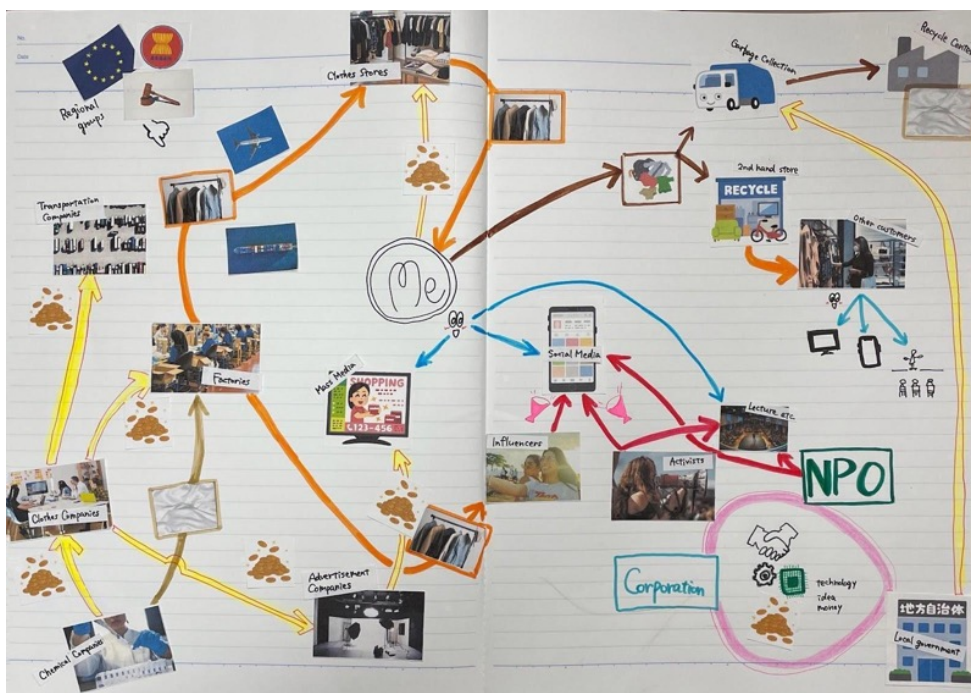
talked in English with several Instagram friends in different localities around the world (in South Africa, Thailand, and the USA) about their views on consumerism, before looking at YouTube videos and TEDTalks to learn about minimalism. She quickly gathered multiple perspectives and started thinking about the end-product that she would make from her project. Her first idea was to make a video commercial to encourage people to consume less. The audience, she imagined, would be Japanese. She would share stories from her project to raise their awareness of overconsumption. This took her to finding out about consumer advertising, and thinking about how she would design the video.

The key question that Fumi became focused on was: *What can I do to be a more sustainable consumer?* She next found out about environmental impacts and widespread labour rights violations in fast-fashion global supply chains. In a “bad-things-happen-to-bad-people” moment, Fumi had a crisis of confidence: She felt that she was doing bad as a consumer and blamed herself. After this crisis she started to understand her own consumer footprint in new ways. First, she mindmapped her growing understanding of the web of local and global factors around her personal consumption (as shown in Artefact 2).

universities working together on a set task under a time limit, such as creating a new product, or coming up with a new business plan.

For this pilot project, I explained that she should aim to understand the issue that she chose in her own everyday life and also develop a more global interconnected view. Making clear that Fumi could withdraw from the project at any point, I talked through further information about the research and asked if she had any questions. Fumi then signed an informed consent sheet. In the following discussions I invited her to share what she had done for her project since our previous meeting, then followed up with further questions to understand different points in more depth. As it was my intention to follow Fumi as she developed her project, I held back on making specific suggestions to her. Towards the end of each session, Fumi would outline her next steps and actions.

The story of her project that is shown to the left is reconstructed from her online project notes, notes that I kept, and video-recordings of the Zoom discussions that we had.



Artefact 2. Fumi Mapping her Understanding

Mapping let Fumi look beyond her own individual consumption and locate herself locally in a chain of interlocking actors that reproduce the wasteful consumerism that she was also part of. Second, she looked for ways to make a critical appraisal of certain brand sneaker companies. She checked their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports in Japanese, and also found a citizen network, Citizens' Network to Build a Sustainable Society through Responsible Consumption (SSRC) / 消費から持続可能な社会をつくる市民ネットワーク (n. d.), which surveys and evaluates companies in terms of sustainability so that it can issue ethical report cards. In this stage of her project, Fumi developed a simplified set of evaluation criteria (environment, work environment, inclusiveness, and contribution to local communities) for three leading sneaker companies (see Artefact 3).

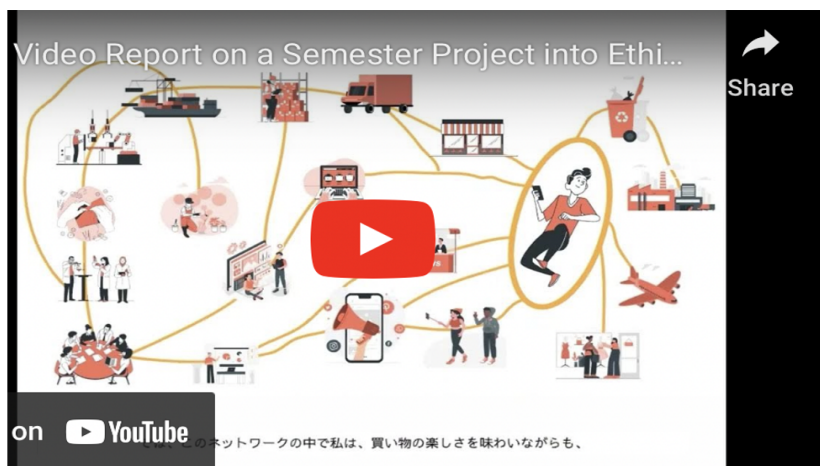
**Artefact 3. Fumi's Evaluation of 3 Brand Clothing and Sportswear Companies**

**1=Poor 2=Average 3=Good 4=Excellent**

	Company A	Company B	Company C
<b>Environment</b>	2.5	3	4
<b>Work environment</b>	1	1	1
<b>Inclusiveness (LGBTQ+challenged+gender equality+no ageism)</b>	2	3	3.5
<b>Contribution to local communities</b>	1.5	2	2

Evaluating specific brand companies enabled Fumi to re-work in a more critical way her understanding of how she might become a more ethical consumer.

The final part of Fumi's project involved the design and production of a short video (3 min, 23 s). She first wrote the script in Japanese, then translated it into English, and edited it over three further drafts in English. To protect identities, Fumi digitised her voice and the voices of other people whose views she includes from talking with close others at the start of her project.



**Artefact 4. Fumi's [Digitized Video](#)**

The slides in the final published video present strong visual images with concise summary points in Japanese, while the digitised voice-over in English elaborates each slide ([Chuo University Faculty of Law PBL Resources, 2023](#)).

Looking back over her whole project, Fumi saw PBL in these terms:

PBL definitely expanded my interests and broadened my horizons. For this reason, it was difficult to focus on and I easily jumped on different topics. In that sense, I needed a guide. However, it was fascinating to explore an issue while looking for a way to improve my PBL. Since I was free to decide what I research, how to research, as well as how I end this project, I could deepen my understanding about the issue from a variety of perspectives and how I can cultivate a better understanding of the world. (Fumi's project notes, 4 July 2022)

While Fumi drew satisfaction from freely deciding the focus for her project, she found the open choice challenging and felt she needed some guidance to carry out her project successfully.

### *Understand PBL again*

**TOKYO August 2023** – Fumi's experiences helped me understand PBL from new perspectives. Her sense of the local was strongly influenced by her use of social media: Talking with close others did not necessarily mean those in her immediate community and networks in Tokyo. For this project Fumi drew on an internationally dispersed set of close others for her local research. Second, Fumi's project was initially driven by her personal interest in sustainable consumerism rather than by a "central driving question" which different accounts of PBL (e.g., Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Condliffe, 2016; Mikouchi et al., 2018; Thomas, 2000) tend to propose as a defining criterion that should guide projects from the start. In Fumi's case, the issue of sustainable consumerism had strong personal interest and value, but was also challenging (features emphasised by Blumenfeld et al., 1991, pp. 375-378). She struggled to find a specific focus in the initial weeks of her project. Once she did, Fumi could begin to formulate a guiding question, which helped her imagine her project through to the video that she planned to produce at the end. Another salient moment in Fumi's PBL experiences was the crisis of awareness that she had as she located her own everyday consumption in relation to inequalities in the global flows of consumerism that she is part of. Mapping the network of consumerism actors let her position herself in a new personal-local-global way to the issue that she was researching. This re-positioning seemed to act as a reflexive prelude to Fumi developing a more critical view. In turn, her critical awareness grew as she worked translingually in Japanese and English on creating and finalising her bilingual video.

From this I understood that creativity and criticality were running in parallel in Fumi's project. Their interaction was closely related to her translanguaging practices in producing a bilingual product for a near-peer audience of young adults. Following Fumi as she developed her project also let me appreciate the need for flexible scaffolding with PBL in two particular ways. First, I now explicitly guide students in the first weeks of a project to plan their projects in a global-local frame and imagine how they might make personalised connections through (a) conversation-discussions with close others and (b) choice over their project products (see Appendix B for an example of such framing). Second, I have come to use a minimal set of guidelines for students to narratively journal the development

of their projects week by week (see Appendix C). My intention here is to open up spaces for students to document their projects in their own self-directed ways. Both of these practices were strongly influenced by the pilot project with Fumi.

## **V. A Dialogue: Akiko and Andy August 2023**

**Akiko:** After reading Fumi's PBL, I realized that your PBL is very similar to the image I have of a bachelor's thesis (卒論/sotsuron). It is new to me and great that you can do individual PBL instead of group activity, which can open up more spaces for individual choice and agency. But one thing I am curious about is how much and what kind of feedback you gave to Fumi. Did you find it difficult to understand her English? How did you deal with that? How long did it take to give feedback? I think these constraints and workloads determine the quality of teaching. It seems like Fumi is very positive about her PBL. How about other students? Did your students enjoy the PBL?

**Andy:** I prefer to start with students working on individual projects, often in pairs. Later the students work in different collaborative formations, although I don't go for large groups. Working individually with Fumi on that pilot project was an ongoing conversation-discussion with her as I wanted to understand her decision-making and actions, and how she was making sense of doing a local-global project, so our interactions were more exploratory than evaluative. We talked, I kept notes, but I didn't provide any written feedback. The project was definitely challenging for Fumi, but it was driven by her interests, and she was able to engage with what it means to become a sustainable consumer. She could also connect the personal, the local, and the global in her understanding. So, if students can do that in their projects, documenting their work in reflections and mindmaps, and bring those three perspectives meaningfully together, then create and share final products with others, I think they can enjoy this kind of PBL a great deal, but it takes time and their development gathers over time.

I want to add that very few of my students have done project work in their previous education. They may sometimes mention projects they did in elementary school such as finding out about local food production or environmental issues. A handful of students in each class may have done individual or group-based inquiries or projects in high school, but they are still the exception.

**Akiko:** I see. I think it is great that the students can exercise their agency, not just as homework for class without teachers. And I like the way you find student creativity in the process of learning. That is a very important theme for you which I don't have.

**Andy:** In your story the contrasting experiences that you highlight and reflect on really caught my interest. The way you learnt Korean for yourself was completely at odds with the prescriptive teaching methods that you encountered early on in your career. At the same time, I was struck by how those constraints eventually propelled you towards exploring more learner-centred creative pedagogies, including LTD and PBL, and to puzzling over why you still feel that PBL didn't work for you. Looking back, was there anything positive you gained from PBL?

**Akiko:** On this point, I felt that the PBL I wrote about here was a kind of failure because I couldn't feel my students' sense of accomplishment. I want to make clear for their honor that the students who did PBL in my class worked very hard, but something

was missing. Of course, not all groups did. Maybe I didn't appreciate my students' creativity enough compared to you. Or maybe I failed to guide them to see the world differently, to be critical.

**Andy:** You say you couldn't feel their sense of achievement. Did the students keep learning diaries or reflections about what they were doing in their projects, so you could follow their activity?

**Akiko:** No, I didn't. I could not find their feedback on the projects from my old files, but most of them were positive as far as I remember. Maybe it was not their sense of achievement but mine. In this dialogue with you for this article, I have noticed the reason why I could not be satisfied with PBL. I wanted to see my students find something new and meaningful in the world, thus I wanted them to see the world differently through their activity. Finding something new means creative and critical maybe for me.

**Andy:** I'm constantly pondering how the two processes of creativity and criticality interact and work together for learners, and what I can do as a teacher to bring them into interaction. Take your experiences with "Learning through Discussion": LTD created new possibilities for you about teaching and learning. It became a significant point of reference for you. That's what the drama workshops in Yugoslavia and the class at the University of Tsukuba let me see too. They almost prototypically embody meaningful student engagement, creativity, and criticality for me: Important landmarks, not always visible, yet pointing the way at different times: Am I close to this or moving away from it? How might I/we get closer to that? What might I/we do differently? Why?

**Akiko:** I had been wondering what criticality is. It's intriguing that you've highlighted the interplay between criticality and creativity. In your PBL experiences and my LTD practice, we both appreciated learners' engagement to learning and that led them to create their own views of the world. As teachers we could perceive their creativity and criticality as they did this, in your case especially the connection between global and local. If the native speakerism and prescriptivism are still pervasive in language learning teaching, as I think is still the case, we need to think about how to nurture teachers who have an ability to find and appreciate the learner's creativity and criticality.

**Andy:** Yes, guiding students to develop their critical awareness about their views of the world is an ongoing challenge for me. In the PBL frame I'm working with, interrelating the local, the global, and the personal is central. As I must also do, my students have to break through the cocoons of habituated thinking and assumptions about the world that have become normalised for them. I notice that students might articulate the local in a binary contrast to "the global" as if the global is some disconnected other, outside of their personal lived experience (Appadurai, 1996) in which a process of othering (powell & Menendian, 2016) is common. Students might, for example, scale up the local to seeing this in terms of "Japan" in relation to other societies in the world, so that they take a generalised nation-state perspective on connections between the local and the global ("Japan is .../We are ... but X country is .../They are ..."). At other times they might frame the local in terms of a problem that stereotypical groups or minorities within Japanese society have, i.e., the problem becomes essentialised as a property of

the group or minority, and disconnected from particular unequal conditions, systems, or structures within society that underlie and reproduce the issue in people's lives, by, for example, assuming that poverty in Japan is limited to the homeless and/or immigrant workers and refugees, whereas "real" poverty can be found only in "Africa" or is not an issue for "us" in Japanese society. I find that "we/they" categorical views of the world run through these global-local entanglements, making it difficult for students to connect issues to their personal lives and wider conditions and factors in society. I'm still trying to understand how to help students get beyond those normalised binaries, so to speak.

**Akiko:** I would also like to emphasize the importance of the teacher's criticality in being aware of the constraints under which our practices are carried out. Without an awareness of these constraints, it's all too easy to fall into the misconception that our practices are occurring in a vacuum, not in the real world with economic, political, and cultural constraints. I realize now, recognizing and understanding these constraints is an important aspect of criticality, isn't it? As before I mentioned, the absence of this critical perspective can inadvertently lead teachers to unwittingly reproduce and prolong oppressive conventional discourses and practices. I am sure that I've likely fallen into this trap multiple times in the past.

**Andy:** Yes me too, and I still do. Although native speakerism didn't come up for me so much in my thinking about PBL, Fumi's story helped me notice translanguaging from new perspectives. It's interesting that in our collaboration you and I have nearly always discussed in English, and we've written this article in English too. Beyond these overtly English-centric practices, we have used translation software to work with Japanese and English—you for writing and also reading our article at different points, and me for reading some blog posts and articles in Japanese about PBL. Did we address language and power questions in our collaboration?

**Akiko:** You encouraged me to write in Japanese a couple of times, but I didn't choose to. Probably because each language has particular readers... And no one can escape the issue of language and power, and it's not fun to think about. But you can see the power and ideology that each language has in our stories. In my example, I suddenly had a university teaching position with no training as a language teacher, or in your case, all the students had the ability to do PBL in English before they entered the university. And behind these episodes, there was native speakerism or language imperialism, and also many non-native teachers who are not working under the same conditions.

**Andy:** Yes and no ... We could have examined more explicitly our use of Japanese and English, and our experiences of power around this. We did at times, but it was not a constant theme for us. Questioning that more might push me to explore further how my learners can translanguage in different ways for their own purposes. What we are thinking through together here makes me reflect about the complexity of co-constructing and creating alternative norms and discourses, not just in a curriculum and among the teachers who enact that curriculum, but with each class, and with the individual students in each class, too. Questioning our internal and external ideological constraints is part of becoming a critically minded teacher. It is a never-ending struggle. But it is not everything. Creating alternative norms and discourses is important too.

**Akiko:** I think so too. It is necessary to create new discourses for them and for us ...

**Andy:** On this I'd like to come back again to the theme of criticality in PBL. When we were talking online about PBL, you mentioned that you were struck by the emphasis on critical, informed citizenship in the new discourse around PBL. The frame was not just about learners or students in the classroom, but explicitly connected to their participation in society. That caught for you the sense of agency that learners might develop through PBL, and/or the potential for learners to exercise their agency in PBL, and to understand themselves and what's happening in society in new ways. From this perspective the curriculum reform was as much about enabling/empowering PBL practices and principles as putting forward a political aim for such education. Bringing this back to our collaboration, I find that, through our stories and dialogues, we have been pointing towards a critical view of education that aims to empower and help students become conscious and critical of multiple inequalities in society around them or in their lives. That political emphasis is important for both of us.

**Akiko:** Through your words, I can have a glimpse of your educational ideals. I hadn't directly addressed controversial issues in my classroom before, but that also reflects my stance on education, which is a matter of politics. I might need to ponder this aspect a bit more.

You may not want to go back to this point, but I still can't shake the suspicion that PBL and LTD are appropriate for people who already have competency. You have told me that there are great practices that have been adapted for beginning students, and I have seen examples of very old critical applied linguistics practices such as literacy workshops. But I wonder how it can be done.

**Andy:** It's a great question that you are raising about content, skills, and language proficiency. I guess part of my response is that it can be addressed in different ways—I see it as trying to imagine/imagining ways, appropriate for the learners that I work with, where I can involve them more in what they are doing, around topics and issues they are interested in, and where they/we work collaboratively in the classroom, make decisions about their learning, and bring in their "content" to what they are focusing on in a class, take ownership of it, so to speak, as well as reflect on their progress, and plan their next steps. To some extent I am more focused on content and learners using language rather than explicitly teaching language. For me "it" starts from there, whatever proficiency level(s) the students have.

Another part of my response is that a significant point of reference is the work of Leni Dam, who is probably the most-recognized and widely published classroom practitioner of learner autonomy. Much of her work is concerned with Danish learners of English at beginner level, where they work from the start on different kinds of projects. Dam's work is very strong on the teacher's role in structuring and scaffolding learner activity, and on the learner's role in being pushed into action and taking ever greater responsibility for their learning (Dam, 1995, 2018). I'm not claiming that you or I need to slavishly follow Leni's Dam approach. What stands out for me is that her work involves practice-driven theorisation about a particular approach to meaningful engaged learning (i.e., learner autonomy), so it frankly provokes the reader to reflect on their own practices in unexpected ways.

**Akiko:** Wow, that sounds interesting. But one thing that caught my eye or ear in what you said is Dam's emphasis on the teacher's role in structuring learner activity. For a long time PBL was like a black box to me. There must be some trick or format, or I don't know how to say it, but you can't leave everything to the students, is that what Dam said?

**Andy:** Absolutely. For Leni Dam the teacher's role is crucial. It changes as the teacher progressively lets go, and learners take greater hold of their learning in becoming more autonomous. She is very clear about this.

**Akiko:** In LTD there are strict steps on what students should do. Although this made me suspicious about restricting the students' freedom when I first heard it, the steps made the format and gave direction to the students. The format also conveys the purpose of this discussion to the students. Now I'm going back to the beginning of our dialogue. Creativity. Appreciating learners' creativity is very important for teachers who want to do PBL. If you think your student project is very ordinary, you can't appreciate their effort. You have to find value in the learner's products, which is still a challenge for me, and I feel like it takes skill, like appreciating an art form. So that quality of teacher is very important for the successful PBL.

**Andy:** I guess what we are saying is that the ongoing dialogues and quality of appreciation is important in our interactions with learners as they engage in discussions, undertake projects, and create products. Even if it's about something very ordinary, it is all part of trying to follow learners and support them in what they do, and raise different options for them about what they can do further. Seeing examples of other students' work can be a great support here as it may let them imagine how they can apply their own creativity.

But what do we mean by learner creativity? Within the specific approach to PBL that I have been exploring here learner creativity involves re-working different artifacts of a project (e.g., notes from conversation-discussions with close others, images from local research, journaling, notes from web resources, mapping, notes from in-class discussions), and re-constructing them in new ways to create an original product for a particular audience in society (based on Janks, 2010). Fumi, for example, does this with her digitized video. She creates her own personalised and critical understanding of sustainable consumerism.

In our stories another really important consideration is the audience that students have in

#### **Another view of the creativity-criticality nexus**

**Ellen:** These stages are really interesting. It seems different from the usual meaning of creativity, as these stages involve patience, the ability to take an overview, the ability to work methodically. I have had a question in the back of my mind as to whether academic creativity is different from artistic creativity and I think the answer is to some extent yes. When you were writing about creativity and criticality I thought that criticality creates a kind of limiting condition which keeps academic creativity under control. Artistic creativity has more options, to control itself using tradition, or not to control itself.

(Ellen Head, editor, 6th September 2023, personal communication)



mind for the products that they create. For Fumi this was other young Japanese people, like her.

**Akiko:** ... producing something to present to others?

**Andy:** ... yes, creating and producing for an outside world, a non-classroom world, right? As students focus on the end-product, that's when criticality starts to come into play ... and interacts with creativity much more. That has been a key part in all the projects that we have been exploring: some kind of public display and sharing of work within the class, as well as to an audience beyond the class itself, and something that most practical accounts and theorisations of PBL strongly recommend (Alan & Stoller, 2005; Anderson, 2021; Güven, & Valais, 2014; Mikouchi et al., 2018; Sheppard & Stoller, 1995; Stoller & Chandel Myers, 2020). Oddly enough, the outside world is more often than not an imaginary audience, isn't it? In your projects the audience was specific and definite—the International Student Center Office and Municipal International Exchange Association. How did the students see this?

**Akiko:** The students in my projects? I'm thinking about a group who tried to do that famous hot spring brochure. For them the audience would be an abstract tourist. They wanted to make it very, very professional, like a brochure that some professionals make. So that's the one reason they had a hard time, but the teams who didn't have so much abstract audience in mind — for example, they imagined other international students coming to the university next year as their audience — they enjoyed their projects more, I think. Yeah, they were more ...

**Andy:** ... focused on people close to them, an audience who was familiar to them?

**Akiko:** Yes, that's one possibility. ... Through writing this article we want to convey what we learnt from our practices and learners. At this point I think I have said everything I wanted to say.

**Andy:** Let's move on.

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## VI. Our Concluding Thoughts & Questions

In this article we have attempted to write in experimental narrative-dialogic ways that are close to how practitioner-researchers talk, question, and reflect about their work with learners, colleagues, and others in their local contexts. We have also made connections to work in the wider field as we have theorised from practice and drawn on key works that have impacted our thinking and evolving understandings. To do this, we have been on a long collaborative journey over the last 18 months. At times we found it difficult to continue, but then we would talk again and start seeing our stories, practices, and puzzles in new ways. What is important, it seems to us now, is that, on purpose, we did not set out to find common ground. We wanted to talk about our different practices, but we did not force ourselves to focus on a common theme from the beginning. Rather, we each shared our interests, practices, and puzzles, then our stories and reflections.

As we did this, over time, we realised that we were in many ways talking about the same phenomenon, "engaged meaningful learning," and what that means for us and the students that we work with. Engaged meaningful learning emerged from our collaboration and directed us to a fundamental rethinking of what matters to each of us with our students. As we look back together, we now see that our collaboration has led us towards three new

discourses about (a) what engaged meaningful learning means for us and our students, (b) how we may understand our practices through talking and writing collaboratively, and (c) how we can write about our learners, local contexts, and practices in new ways, and why. And at this point we think we have now said everything that we wanted to say, so we turn again to you, the reader: What do you make of this? What intersections, overlaps, resistances, and contrasts do you find with different themes and issues that we have covered in this article? Which ones are engaging and meaningful for you? Why?

## Review Process

This paper was open peer-reviewed by Katherine Thornton and the Learner Development Journal 7 editors. (*Contributors have the option of open or blind peer review.*)

## Author Bios

**Andy Barfield** PhD teaches in the Faculty of Law at Chuo University, Tokyo, where he helps to coordinate an English curriculum in which students do self-directed research projects into social, political, legal, and global issues. His current research interests include multilingual issues in society, critical literacy, and Project-Based Learning (PBL).

アンディ・バーフィールド(博士)。東京の中央大学法学部で教鞭を執っており、学生たちが自己指導型の研究プロジェクトを通じて社会、政治、法律、グローバルな問題に取り組む英語カリキュラムの調整をサポートしてる。彼の現在の研究関心は、社会における多言語の問題、批判的リテラシー、プロジェクトベースの学習 (PBL) など。

**Akiko Nakayama** PhD is an associate professor in the Teaching Japanese as a Second Language program at Hiroshima University, Japan. She is currently interested in learners' stories, L2 learner identities, and teacher development.

中山亜紀子(博士)。広島大学人間社会科学研究科日本語教育学プログラム准教授。学習者の物語、学習者のアイデンティティ、教師教育などに関心がある。

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## Appendix A

### PBL Course Description

In this course you will carry out projects, individually, in pairs or small groups, into global issues and problems that interest you, and how they impact local communities and people you know. Problems might include investigating fairtrade products in local businesses, exploring local government support for minorities, looking at people's attitudes and concerns about artificial intelligence in daily life, finding out how local organisations are putting into action Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and so on. You will do a minimum of 3 projects in one year (at least two in the spring semester and one in the fall), with journaling a key continuous process in each project.

Your research will include gathering information and making notes from both material (e.g., books, library, documents, audio-visual materials) and online sources (e.g., web searches, databases, other e-sources, including online videos and podcasts) in order to develop your understanding. You will also talk with "close others" (other students, family members, people in local communities, or local networks that you belong to). At the end of each project, you will create a product (e.g., an academic essay, blog posts, an opinion piece, visual report, or webpage) that can reach an audience beyond your class (e.g., with other classes, in public spaces, and/or in web-based products) so that you can share results from your project with other people.

この科目では、個々の学生が関心を持ったグローバルな諸問題に関してプロジェクトを遂行し、それらが身近なコミュニティや周囲の人々にどのような影響を与えるかについて、ペアやグループワークを通して探究します。プロジェクトの例として、地域に根差したビジネスとフェア・トレード製品をテーマに調査したり、地方自治体とマイノリティ支援策、日々の生活におけるAI活用の課題、地方自治体が主導する持続可能な目標の実践例など、他にも様々なテーマが考えられます。1年間のコースでは、3つ以上のプロジェクトを遂行し(春学期2つ秋学期1つ、以上)、調査の過程や結果などを逐次記録することが求められます。

調査では、資料(書籍、図書館、文書、視聴覚資料)やオンライン(検索、データベース、ビデオやポッドキャストなどのその他電子資料)を活用した情報収集とノートテイキングを行います。加えて、「身近な他者」(学生友達、家族、近隣住民、や所属する地域ネットワーク)へのインタビューも行うこととなります。プロジェクトの終盤では、調査結果を成果物(学術論文、ブログ、意見書、ヴィジュアルレポートや、ウェブページ)にまとめ、教室の外の人々(他クラスの学生や、公共の場、ウェブなど)に向けて調査結果を広く発信します。

## Appendix B

### Two Example Global-Local Frames for Initial Project Planning (Outline – Problem – My question – Project goals)

*Presented and discussed with students at the start of Project 3 in the 2023 academic year. Students are guided to develop a similar overall frame for their own projects.*

**Example Guideline Frame 1** for a project on “Making Connections Between Local Groups or Communities in Japan & Other Countries on the Right to Education for Foreign Children”

**Human rights** -> The right to education -> foreign children in local communities

**The problem** —> **Education of Children with Diverse Backgrounds** (n.d.): “An estimate of over 700 foreign children in Hamamatsu are not going to school.” Hamamatsu aims for a “zero out-of-school rate (or a 100% enrolment rate) of foreign children and promotion of the enrolment of children of foreign residents ...” ([Hamamatsu Voluntary Local Review Report](#), 2019, p. 13)

**My question:** How can the right to education for foreign children be locally protected and promoted?

#### *Project goals*

1. **Find out more about the situation in Hamamatsu**, and research the policies and actions that are being taken to support foreign children’s right to education there. *What? Which actors are involved? What is working? Why? What are the problems? Why?*
2. **Find out about the approach taken in a local community in another society**, for example support for refugee children in Australia. Local community view => Adelaide: [Women’s group supporting refugee children](#) (ABC, 2023 April 9)
3. **Conversation-discussions:** Share my research with people in my local community/ network, and find out what they think about the right of foreign children to education, and what their ideas and views are.

**Project product:** [Advocacy Letter?](#) [Campaign Proposal?](#) [Opinion Piece?](#) [Video?](#)

**Example Guideline Frame 2** for a project on “Making Connections Between Local Groups or Communities in Japan & Other Countries on Local Food Production”

**Biodiversity / Food Supply and Waste** -> Sustainable living -> Local organic food production

**My question:** Who and what makes local organic food production possible? What is working? What are the problems? Why?

#### *Project goals*

1. **Find out about the cultivation and consumption of organic vegetables and food in my local community:** *Who? What? Where? When and how did this start? What is working? What are the problems? Why?*
2. **Search for information about growing organic food in a local community outside Japan** => Example: [Making cities organic food gardens](#) (Deutsche Welle, 2018 February)

16): *How does this work? Which actors are involved? What is working? Why? What are the problems? Why?*

3. **Conversation-discussions:** Share my research with people in my local community/network, and find out what people in my local community think about organic food, and whether this matters to them or not.

Project product: [Campaign Proposal?](#) [Magazine article?](#) [Video?](#)

## Appendix C

### Minimalist Frame for a Project Narrative

*Presented and discussed with students at the start of Project 3 in the 2023 academic year: Students are required to create individually their Project Narratives for a 6-7 week project in a Google Doc within a Shared Drive for the PBL class.*

#### ***Build Your Project Narrative Week by Week***

1. In this document week by week be sure to:
  - **write the narrative of your project**
  - **add JPEGs of your notes**
  - **build your reference list.**
2. Document your work by putting the date each time you add to your Project Narrative, for example:
  - **2023/09/26 Project Narrative**
  - **2023/10/01 Project Notes**
  - **2023/10/01 References**
3. **Write in English**, and use Japanese or other languages when it helps you to express your thinking and ideas, then continue writing in English.
4. Write **at least 180 words** each week, but please feel free to write more, & put **the word total** at the end of your project narrative each week, e.g., **(Total: XXX words)**
5. **Add the sources of information to References week by week** to build your Reference list.
6. **Include the following details for each one:** Author, Date, Title, Organisation/Publisher, URL etc.

#### **References**

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