**The Impact of Student Philanthropy on a Japanese Drama Course**

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**Abstract**

This study examines how the incorporation of a philanthropy project into a language and literature course is beneficial to students’ understanding of the course content as well as global social issues pertinent to the country of their study. Survey data indicates that this teaching approach enhanced students’ curiosity about Japanese society and increased their desire for volunteerism. It also strengthened the bond between students and improved their teamwork skills.

*Keywords:* Japanese, service learning, community engagement, philanthropy, drama studies

**Introduction**

As active learning became a more popular pedagogy in the early 1990s (Bonwell & Eison, 1991), the terms “experiential learning” and “student-centered learning” began to appear frequently in language studies. The teacher’s role has changed from a lecturer who explains grammar to a facilitator who guides and motivates students to learn their target language firsthand. Nevertheless, the student-centered learning method in language classes has remained limited to the communicative (Hymes, 1972) or task-based learning (Prabhu, 1987) approaches. Experiential learning, especially community engagement projects such as service learning and student philanthropy, is often tied to courses such as sociology, psychology, social work, education, and business (Rosenkranz, 2012), and is seldom incorporated into language and literature curricula. In this paper, I examine how the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project (MSPP) was integrated into a Japanese drama course and how it enhanced students’ understanding of social issues in Japan and the United States. After completing the Mayerson project, students completed a survey to measure the benefit of philanthropy in increasing their awareness about social needs and nonprofit organizations, as well as their understanding of the course content.

**Introducing Civic Engagement Into Language Learning**

In order to improve the career readiness of college students, universities are promoting service learning (Kolb, 2014) because students’ experiences at nonprofit organizations, public schools, and community events are quite different from what they learn from their reading, lectures, and discussions in the classroom (Keeton & Tate, 1978). The pedagogical approach with experiential and project-based learning in higher education became popular in the 1980s. By the 2000s, it began to involve more community engagement (Harkavy & Harley, 2010; Warren, 2012). According to the Carnegie Foundation, institutions that are classified as Advocate for Community Engagement (or ACE) included 4,600 campuses by 2011 (Larson, 2016), and currently, 352 institutions are classified as Community Engagement campuses (ACE, 2023).

As more universities incorporated civic engagement into their curricula, more diverse disciplines began to embed it in their courses. Today, universities employ service learning as widely as possible to maximize its impact on their students and faculty. In addition to the common disciplines associated with service learning, such as social work, education, and political science, courses less familiar with civic engagement, such as math, biology, English, and art, also embed service learning within their syllabuses (Zlotkowski, 2006).

Promoting community engagement in various higher education departments reflects the idea that service learning applies to any discipline and that students in various courses can benefit from the community-based curriculum. One study states that “limited research has investigated how service learning benefits students across disciplines and how personal characteristics affect service learning outcomes among students” (Jarret et al., 2015). Despite the efforts to promote experiential learning across the disciplines, there are still few examples of language courses with a civic engagement component. Even among those courses that incorporate service learning, they are often limited to Spanish or other Western languages, in which students’ translation skills are utilized for civic purposes (Jarret et al., 2015; Zlotkowski, 2006).

In this paper, I explore the impact of student philanthropy on a Japanese drama class. The difference between philanthropy and service learning is that “the former provides monetary support to community partners while the latter may provide more hands-on support such as fundraising, donated time, or other creative assistance” (Larson, 2016). The class was given $2,000 in grant money to award one nonprofit organization. I demonstrate how the MSPP enhanced students’ understanding of the course content, including the social issues reflected in the Japanese drama and documentaries that were part of this course.

**Perceptions of Japan**

Many American students decide to study Japanese because of their interest in Japanese culture, especially pop culture (Abe, 2009). Indeed, the 2015 “Japan Foundation Survey on Japanese Language Education Institutions” reports that over 90% of Japanese language learners in the United States identified Japanese pop culture as their prime motivation for studying Japanese (JFLA, 2017). Due to the influence of Japanese anime, movies, TV shows, and music, American perception of Japan is relatively positive. A Pew Research Center report states that “To Americans, the Japanese are generally viewed in a positive light: Words like ‘hardworking,’ ‘inventive’ and ‘honest’ are what Americans use to describe them. In fact, more than nine-in-ten Americans say they associate ‘hardworking’ with the Japanese” (Stokes, 2015).

Japan is also seen as a homogeneous country that consists of “people who share a common language, culture, and traditions” (Dharitri, 2004). Because of the development of technology (Hu, 2022; Rikidozan, 2019) and the rapid economic boom in the 1970s and 1980s, the myth of “everyone is middle class in Japan” also still exists. Chiavacci (2008) states that “According to foreign descriptions as well as a dominant Japanese self-view, Japan was an exceptionally equal society regarding chances and outcomes in international comparison”. Moreover, the author points out that, “According to this societal model, Japan had a very equal income distribution per household and was a society with an outstanding degree of social openness.”

However, the experience with the MSPP changed students’ perceptions of Japan. Many students knew that Japan had social issues, just like the US, but were unfamiliar with the problems and their seriousness until they took this course. This class made them realize that racism and poverty were not just American issues but also existed in Japan. It helped them see their local issues from a global perspective.

***The Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project***

The MSPP was introduced to Northern Kentucky University (NKU) in 1999 and implemented in 2000. It can be incorporated into any course regardless of its discipline or format (in-person or online). Each class chooses a primary topic(s) for the project and receives $2000 from a donor to invest in a nonprofit organization. Students are divided into small groups, and each group selects a sub-topic such as “immigration issues” or “women,” then researches the topic. Students identify nonprofit organizations related to their sub-topic and select one they want to advocate for.

Each group is required to visit and interview the organization they select. Students work as a group to create a presentation on the organization, addressing how their experience with it is connected to what they learned from the class. Each group attempts to persuade their audience asto why their organization should receive the fund. After completing all the presentations, the class votes for the award recipient. The winning group, the awarded organization, and the professor from each class attend the Award Ceremony at the end of the semester. They all celebrate their [[1]](#footnote-1)experiences with the MSPP as the philanthropy funds are handed to the organization’s representatives.

The primary themes of the Japanese drama class were poverty and the definition of success. There were four sub-topics related to those themes: 1) child hunger, 2) mental illness and drug abuse, 3) homelessness, and 4) the Native Americans. Each group conducted research, selected their nonprofit organization, and made a presentation. The organization that addresses child hunger was the eventual recipient of the award.

Since its foundation in 1999, the MSPP has grown remarkably. In the last 23 years, a total of 8,400 students have participated, donating almost 2 million dollars to 511 different organizations in the world (Scripps Howard Center). The objectives of the MSPP component are to enhance students’ awareness of social needs and help them gain a greater sense of commitment to their community. Students also develop their research skills and deepen their understanding of the class materials.

**Case Study**

There were 15 students in the Japanese drama course. The class lasted for 75 minutes, and met twice a week. Students viewed one episode of a contemporary Japanese drama *Escaping from Poverty* (*Okanega Nai*) every week. They also viewed a short Japanese drama, *Born With It* (*Umare Tsuki*), and several short documentary films that addressed issues such as child poverty, poverty among older people, homelessness, people with disabilities, young caregivers who take care of their disabled family members, LGTBQ issues, racism, and social withdrawal (*hikikomori*). These documentaries and the drama were assigned to watch at home.

Since there were no English subtitles, students were given a vocabulary list before watching the videos and completed a quiz to assess their comprehension. They were also asked to answer weekly questions about the documentaries and translate some scenes from *Escaping from Poverty*. In class, the professor gave a brief lecture on the social issues in Japan, showed some parts of *Escaping from Poverty* or the documentaries that many students had trouble understanding, and used the rest of the class time for discussion.

The objectives of the drama and documentary component were to improve students’ Japanese language skills while broadening their perceptions of Japanese society by challenging their stereotypes and assumptions about Japan.

***Escape from Poverty***

*Escape from Poverty* is a Japanese TV drama that aired from July 6 to September 21 in 1994 (11 episodes). The story is about a young man, Kentarō Hagiwara, and his little brothers who live in extreme poverty in Japan. Their parents die suddenly in a car accident, leaving a large debt. Kentarō is responsible for paying the debt while supporting his brothers. After losing his factory job, Kentarō works as a janitor at a large insurance company. One day, he finds an opportunity to become a full-time employee in the sales department and gets the job. He works hard to acquire knowledge of corporate insurance, business manners, computers, and other office equipment, and he successfully gains new clients. He becomes the right-hand man of the company’s Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and contributes to taking over their headquarters in Los Angeles. Kentarō becomes extremely wealthy, but his younger brothers are less happy because Kentarō is never home. One day, Kentarō is falsely accused of bribery and is arrested. He later learns the CEO used him as a scapegoat for a corruption case. Kentarō loses his trust in the CEO and his business practice. He decides to quit and starts his own business in a garage- sized office.

Although the plot of this TV drama may seem like a conventional success story of an underprivileged man, *Escape from Poverty* is not a typical heartwarming drama. The comical tone of the show, as well as the complex character development, make Kentarō ’s success questionable. Kentarō is not just a caring and hardworking character who consistently acts in accordance with his moral principles. Indeed, he is full of flaws. For example, he teaches his little brothers how to “dine and dash” and parties with his friends while his brothers wait for him at home with empty stomachs. He exploits his friends to his advantage and lies to his boss to get a contract.

Many students liked this character because Kentarō is energetic, funny, and positive. However, they also recognized his flaws and understood that he is a product of social injustice and class inequality. Students were especially interested in Kentarō ’s relationship with his brothers. They discussed extensively whether Kentarō should be responsible for them. Some students said that he should play the father’s role, and others that he had the right to enjoy his life as a young adult. This drama gave students an insight into how poverty affects family dynamics and what success really means.

One of the groups selected a topic related to this drama: child hunger. They selected this topic because one of the group members was the mother of a toddler, while the others had themselves experienced childhood poverty. After conducting research, they selected the local nonprofit organization called “Go Pantry.” Established in 2012, Go Pantry provides free food for over 1,200 children in more than 80 schools in 6 counties of the Northern Kentucky region. The group visited the organization and interviewed one of its representatives. The group’s final presentation connected what they learned from Go Pantry with *Escape from Poverty*.

One piece of information that surprised them in the interview was that the organization preferred food that children could eat without adults’ assistance. Since children are often left alone in the house, the food children can prepare for themselves is better than the food adults can prepare. For example, canned foods that children can open without a can opener are preferable to regular canned foods. One student said that she used to think instant mac and cheese or oatmeal would be suitable for donation, but she learned that this was not the case since children have to boil water for them. Those students recalled the scene in *Escape from Poverty* where the little brother could not eat the food left in the house because he could not cook it himself. He might have been hurt if he had tried to open a can or turn on the stove. The students were reminded of the reality that our assumptions about poor children can be problematic and that what we think would be helpful for them might, in fact, put them in danger.

**The Hikikomori Documentary**

The Japanese term *hikikomori* refers to socially withdrawn adolescents and youth who can barely leave their house or room. This term first appeared in Tamaki Saitō’s 1998 book *Social Withdrawal* (*Shakaiteki Hikikomori*). It became widely used in Japan and beyond in 2000 (Bowker, 2022). Today, an estimated 1.46 million working-age people in Japan are *hikikomori* (The Japan Times, 2023). The documentary *Save Our Hikikomori Son!: A Grandson was Placed in a Facility in Another Prefecture—part 2. The Portrait of a Family’s Struggles* (*Hikikomori no musuko wo sukuitai! Kengainyūsho no sobo. Dai 2 dan, Shinkoku na Kazoku no Sugata*) features an elderly couple, Katsuhiro and Yoshie, with their 48-year-old son who has been a social recluse for 27 years. When the camera enters his room, there is not one inch of uncluttered space, and the wall next to his bed has been destroyed. The son stopped attending school in middle school as he became a victim of bullying and developed schizophrenia-like symptoms. He is always suspicious that the food his mother prepares for him has poison in it. This elderly couple also has a daughter with a mental disorder and a grandson who lives in a facility due to his severe mental and physical disorders. Moreover, Katsuhiro, who is 74 years old, was diagnosed with stomach cancer, and Yoshie suffers from pain caused by spinal canal stenosis. The entire family relies on Katsuhiro’s small income, but he may not live much longer.

The MSPP group that selected the topic of mental illness and substance abuse showed particular interest in this documentary. This group chose the nonprofit organization Madi’s House. Madi’s House was founded by the parents of Madi Raleigh, who died of suicide aged 24 after a long battle with drug addiction. Madi’s House provides free activities such as music, games, art classes, and wellness programs for young adults who struggle with mental illness and addiction. Through their MSPP experience, the group learned that, in many cases, the troubled youth are loners who greatly benefit from talking to peers with similar emotional issues. One student from the group also explained that after interviewing Madi’s House, she learned that parents of troubled children needed a support community as much as their children did. She connected this point with the Japanese documentary where the elderly mother says that talking to other parents helped her endure her hardships. Madi’s parents and the elderly couple in the documentary believe that sharing their stories contribute to easing the loneliness of other parents and their children. Helping others also gives meaning to the lives of Madi’s parents and the elderly couple.

**A Sense of Community in the Classroom**

One of the objectives of the MSPP is to cultivate students’ teamwork skills. According to Schlee’s group work study, Generation Z (those born after 1996) have a more negative attitude toward group projects than millennials (Schlee, et al., 2019; Kendall, et al., 2014). The study reports that this is due to school shootings, disasters, and social media that influenced Generation Z’s negative views on college life. Schlee points out that “Gen Z tends to be more anxious about working with others, especially in the university setting” (Schlee, et al., 2019, p. 2). The students in the Japanese drama class belonged to Generation Z. Although NKU’s Japanese language students frequently performed group projects, the number of skit assignments has been reduced in elementary Japanese courses because fewer and fewer students were willing to work as a group in recent years.

However, students in the Japanese drama class enjoyed working as a group because they shared the same desire to help their community. Students had to discuss many agendas, such as what sub-topic they wanted to research, which nonprofit organization they wanted to interview, role assignments for each group member, and presentation planning. They had to use social skills to reach an agreement and support each other. They also had to spend much time together outside their classroom, strengthening their bond. The friendships they built through the MSPP made it easier to open up and connect with their group members and classmates.

One student casually shared her experiences as a needy child in discussion sessions. She pointed out that certain school programs, including National School Lunch Program, made it easier to identify low-income children, thus humiliating those children. Another student who had a similar experience jumped in and shared his stories. He pointed out how well-intended programs could sometimes hurt children. He had been teased about participating in an after-school activity for low-income children. After this session, more and more students shared their personal stories, with occasional tears, and the discussion hour became something resembling a group therapy session.

This kind of intimacy and vulnerability had never emerged in other Japanese classes because of the students’ language barrier. Speaking English is often discouraged in most Japanese classes; thus, what students can express in Japanese is always limited. In the MSPP class, however, half of the discussion time was conducted in Japanese and half in English to allow students to better articulate their thoughts on their MSPP experiences. This also helped the professor recognize students’ individuality and insightfulness more than in other Japanese classes.

Through the MSPP, students connected multiple dots: the social problems in Japan and the US, the social issues in their community, their personal problems, and their classmates’ struggles with their own problems. This process made students more compassionate toward others, including their classmates. Students understood each other’s struggles intellectually and emotionally by placing themselves in each other’s shoes. A student wrote in the course evaluation that “It [the discussion] helped enhance my views by hearing about more viewpoints and experiences” and “seeing the experiences people go through as opposed to an abstract idea was very helpful.” While students were helping nonprofit organizations and their communities through the MSPP, they were also helping their classmates and themselves heal from their issues.

**Results and Discussion**

An MSPP survey was conducted to evaluate students’ experiences with the MSPP in the Japanese drama course. The NKU’s Institutional Review Board approved the survey. Fifteen students who participated in the survey answered 15 questions with a Likert-type response (5–strongly agree; 4–agree; 3–neutral; 2–disagree; 1–strongly disagree). Although the sample size is small, Table 1 suggests that participation in the MSPP positively impacted their interest in social engagement and the content of the drama course. Of the students who responded, all but one (93%) felt that the MSPP enhanced their understanding of the Japanese drama and documentaries they watched in class. The MSPP and the Japanese drama increased students’ awareness of social issues and compassion for others. One student commented in the survey, “It [The MSPP] helped me feel more active in my community and increased my desire to help others.” It is noteworthy that, in the responses to two similar questions regarding the desire for volunteerism, 60% of students felt that the Japanese drama and documentaries enhanced their desire for volunteerism, whereas 93% felt that the MSPP did. This indicates that students are more motivated to volunteer for their communities when the course materials are combined with the MSPP. The Japanese drama and the MSPP reinforce the idea that what students learned from their nonprofit organization were not just local issues but global ones, and that their small contribution can significantly improve their society.

**Table 1**

Survey responses: number of students who indicated that the MSPP class experience was “positive” or “very positive”.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Question | Count | % |
| The Mayerson Project enhanced my understanding of the Japanese drama and the documentaries that we watched in JPN 332. | 11 | 73 |
| The Mayerson Project enhanced my understanding of the Japanese drama and the documentaries related to the Mayerson theme that I researched | 14 | 93 |
| The Japanese drama and the documentaries enhanced my understanding of the Mayerson Project and the theme that I researched. | 11 | 73 |
| The Japanese drama and the documentaries in JPN332 increased my compassion for others. | 14 | 93 |
| The Mayerson Project increased my compassion for others. | 14 | 93 |
| The Japanese drama and documentaries enhanced my awareness of social needs, especially those related to the topics that the class researched through the Mayerson Project | 15 | 100 |
| The Mayerson project enhanced my awareness of social needs, especially those related to the topics that the class researched through the Mayerson Project. | 10 | 67 |
| The Japanese drama and documentaries enhanced my desire for volunteerism. | 9 | 60 |
| The Mayerson project enhanced my desire for volunteerism. | 13 | 87 |
| My interest in Japan was enhanced because of what I learned from the Japanese drama, documentaries, and the Mayerson project in this class. | 13 | 87 |
| My perspective of social issues has changed as a result of this course. | 14 | 93 |
| I would recommend a Japanese course with the Mayerson project to others | 11 | 73 |

**Conclusion**

While the survey data indicates that the synthesis of Japanese drama/documentaries and the MSPP increased students’ interest in civic engagement, the comments in the survey also demonstrate another impact of the synthesized approach on students. It changed students’ perceptions of Japan. In their answer to the question, “If your perspective of social issues has changed as a result of this course, please explain how,” one student wrote, “I knew about all of these social issues in Japan, but I think the documentaries helped me comprehend how prevalent and widespread these issues can be. It helped engage my thoughts and that can create more care for these topics,” or “I really learned a lot about poverty in Japan. It is not an issue that is apparent to the common outsider.”

Adding the MSPP to the course content also helped students make connections between the situation in Japan and the US. This is reflected in students’ comments, such as, “It [the class] brought perspective. Sometimes it’s easy to distance yourself from issues in a country like Japan that is so far away”, and added “but the Mayerson Project gave us a chance to see that those same issues are still going on even in our own culture, even if we don’t see it often. It helped me relate even more to the people in the videos that way,” and “This project told me that American social issues are connecting Japanese social issues.”

The data and the comments both suggest that this combined teaching approach enriches students’ education and their college experience while at the same time helping local nonprofit organizations to be recognized and appreciated for their work. While most comments in the course evaluation were positive, one student expressed their desire to use more Japanese in the MSPP component. Since students only researched and interviewed local organizations, students used English to communicate with them. Our next project is to extend the MSPP to a global setting and work with nonprofit organizations in Japan, increasing students’ opportunities to improve their Japanese skills. This project will enhance their understanding of Japan by allowing students to communicate directly with Japanese organizations and learn about the relevant social issues firsthand.

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1. Northern Kentucky University Scripps Haward Center, which administrates the MSPP, maintains the record and publishes a handbook. Since the new edition of the handbook was not yet available,the data used for this study was obtained from the Center on May 19, 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)