

# Communication Studies at Keisen : Past, Present, and Future

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*Abstract* Since Keisen Jogakuen College began in 1988 the author has been responsible for teaching the college's only 'communication studies' class. One year ago another class, a seminar in communication studies, was instituted. Students from both departments at the college are now allowed to write graduation papers in the field of communication. This paper discusses the history of communication studies at Keisen and why the author feels that the introduction of the possibility for students to write *sotsuron* means that the content of both the sophomore level class and junior seminar must change. Instead of focusing on interpersonal communication, the classes should focus on mass communication or media studies. Indeed, it will be argued, this classification should be further narrowed to Television Studies and Criticism framed within a critical approach to Japanese media culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

Course development within the Japanese university is perhaps best characterized as teacher-dependent. The classroom, the course, how it is designed and taught, is a private affair; a matter between the teacher and his or her students. School administrators, themselves teaching faculty members, assign teachers to the specialties they claim qualifications for and then back off, as it were, leaving instructors free to construct and define their fields of discourse in private and personal ways. I do not know whether this is to be applauded. In my case, it has meant, however, that in spite of the communication studies course at Keisen being first titled "Intercultural Communication" and then (presently) "Cross-cultural Communication," I have been at liberty to define the class in a number of different and I would argue, better, more relevant and appropriate ways. In this paper I will argue that past and present formulations of this course are deficient and that communication studies at Keisen Jogakuen College ought to mean Television Studies, broadly

and critically conceptualized.

## THE PAST

A proper understanding of the class(es) in communication studies that I teach at Keisen Jogakuen College must begin by noting that before the college began in 1988, I was employed at the junior college where, starting a year before, in 1987, I began teaching a class in “Intercultural Communication” (*ibunkakan komyunikeeshon*) With an enrollment of over 110 the class met in the school’s largest lecture hall and was conducted as a lecture with minimum teacher-student contact. The class was a traditional approach to the ‘intercultural communication field.’ I adapted Gudykunst (1984) and used these print-outs as the course text. The examinations were multiple-choice style.

I remember this class as being a grand opportunity. It was perhaps the first time at Keisen for a non-Japanese instructor to be given responsibility for a such a large class not directly concerned with English. The important point to make here is that when I moved to the college the following year it was decided that I would continue to teach a class in communication at the junior college as well as begin to teach the same subject at the four-year college. The college curriculum, however, dictated that the class would be open to students only after their first year, i.e., sophomores. This meant that during the first year of the college, I taught the class only to junior college students. It was later decided that one class made up of students from both schools would suffice.

My experience teaching a *semmon* class to over a hundred students was not very positive. Not a few students seemed to be in the class primarily because it was offered for four credits. This might be explained by the fact that at that time most electives for second year students at the junior college earned only two credits.

After moving to the four year college, I decided that I must try to limit the number of students to try to get students who were truly interested in the subject matter. With this in mind the course requirements were made much more difficult.

Much of my concern, however, was wasted. For various other reasons, the number of students radically and dramatically dropped to thirteen in 1988. As one can imagine, a teaching style appropriate to a class of over a hundred is not appropriate to a class of under twenty. I had to change the textbook and style of the course.

Instead of dealing with the theory of intercultural-interpersonal communication I thought it would be better to become more practical. A book written for students of English as a foreign language dealing with cultural issues was chosen (Levine, Baxter and McNulty, 1987). The class, in this way, became a mixture of English language study and the study of communication theory. Assessment was conducted by means of a final project.

It was perhaps at this time that the issue of whether this class should be conducted in English or Japanese (or both) became acute. Indeed, this issue was always hovering in the background, even during the first year of the class at the junior college. The issue is at once quite personal. I believe that if one wants students to acquire the content of a class, teaching in their native language makes logical sense. On the other hand, having native speakers teach specialized subjects in English is also needed and useful. Both opinions have their merits. Certainly, if one chooses to teach a specialized subject in one's native language to non-native speakers (and one is not able to 'screen in,' as it were, only students of advanced ability), accommodations must be made. Content must be simplified and many nuances ignored. One must ask, "Is the class primarily an English class with content added or a content class through and through?" If the latter, then teaching in the students' native language seems natural.

I am not a native speaker of Japanese, however, and of course find it easier to speak and teach in English. Choosing to teach this class 'primarily' in Japanese, in other words, has meant and will mean more effort and work on my part. For what are probably personality reasons, though, from the very beginning, I have used Japanese in this class. It was what students understood best. At present I speak primarily in Japanese while using an English-language textbook. This combination

has allowed me to use Japanese as a tool to explain concepts and ideas found in the textbook that are new and unfamiliar. The presence of an English-language text also reflects the fact that there are few Japanese language 'textbooks' dealing with communication studies in ways that I feel are both accessible to students and sympathetic to my basically humanistic and critical approach to communication studies.

Also of importance is the fact that in 1988-89, my own on-going studies of the intercultural communication concept led me to conclude that the concept was wanting in various respects. Instead of being a particular 'kind' of communication I came to see that so-called 'intercultural communication' was in fact a sub-category of interpersonal communication. Furthermore, I had growing feelings of dissatisfaction with the empirical definition of 'culture' used by scholars researching in this field. Instead of working toward the obliteration of the stereotypes that confound and confuse so many human relationships, research in this area, has first had to emphasize, indeed create, stereotypes to have anything to talk about. This is not the place to go into a detailed discussion of this matter. I mention this because without noting my disillusionment with the paradigms of intercultural and cross-cultural communication one would not understand my move into construing the content of my communication class(es) around other topics.

In 1989 I chose to teach the course as a general introduction to communication studies using a textbook by two British authors, Dimpleby and Burton (1985). Their concise and easy to read introduction covered basic communication theory, interpersonal communication, group communication, organizational communication and mass communication.

As noted earlier, it was at this time that the class came to include students from both the junior and four-year college. The turnout at the first few classes was a marked contrast to the year before when I had just thirteen. I was again worried that the class might become too big and so instituted a rather rigorous policy of having a quiz on the previous week's lecture at the beginning of each class. I have

doubts about the educational usefulness of this tactic. It did, though, serve to give the class a rather serious aura and send not-so-serious students elsewhere. I ended up with about forty students. Because I gave these quizzes I also did not need to take attendance. The quiz acted as an attendance record. Assessment was based on two end-of-term exams. At this time a problem arose related to examinations. It seems that the junior college and the college have different time schedules for their respective examinations. This has meant that I have not been able to give the first term exam at the end of the first term during the designated examination week. Instead, I have had to use the first class of the second term to give examinations. Of course, it would be helpful if this situation were corrected.

In 1990 I decided to focus the class on one of the areas covered the previous year. This decision was based on a desire to avoid leaving the students with a shallow understanding of each topic. One cannot cover very much with (at most) 24 ninety-minute classes over the course of a year. When various administrative events are factored in, the amount of class time is further diminished. Trying to cover too much ground can only result in doing an injustice to the topics and fields covered. It would seem to be wiser to attempt to go deeper into a smaller number of topics. With this in mind, I turned my attention to interpersonal communication. The textbook, though different, was again by Dimpleby and Burton (1988). The class also grew in size with more college students attending. I again incorporated weekly quizzes. Examinations, however, now included essay-type questions. Since the textbook did not deal with interpersonal communication in Japan, the textbook material had to be made meaningful to the students own life situations and experiences. This was not always easy. Interpersonal communication research is almost non-existent in Japan. What little there is finds its home in departments of social-psychology where a heady empiricism is dominant. As far as I am aware no textbooks on interpersonal communication have been written in Japanese for Japanese college students. It might be interesting to query why this is the case but I cannot do that here. In general, this class was quite successful and I had planned

to teach a similar class in 1991 when I found out the textbook I had been using was no longer in print.

Let me note at this time, that in the class I taught in 1989 one of the most enjoyable sections was that which dealt with mass communication. I suspect this was the case for two reasons. First, my own research at the time was focused on the media, namely Japan's English Language Dailies. Having 'lost interest' in intercultural communication, I was determined to focus my attention now on the media. Except for research focused on contemporary English and how to read English-language newspapers, Japan's English Language Dailies (JELDs) had not been the focus of any scholarly research. Secondly, and this will become important later on, students enjoyed this section. Clearly, they were interested in the media. Neither school, indeed, has any class concerned with mass communication.

For these reasons I decided to make mass communication or media studies the topic for the 1991 class. I had already begun to question the usefulness of weekly quizzes; they seemed more and more a class management rather than educational technique. I stopped giving these weekly quizzes. Instead of examinations, I had students keep a notebook in which they included lecture and discussion notes as well as answers to various tasks I assigned each week. Initially, I based the class on a rather advanced and critical approach to the media. It seemed to go over the heads of the students and so four weeks into the course, I changed directions (calling the initial beginning a 'false start' in my revised syllabus) and chose to focus on studying each kind of mass media in turn: books, radio, film, television, advertising, public relations, etc. Made up of about thirty students, half from each of the colleges, this class was, I think, a success.

## **THE PRESENT**

In a number of ways 1992 was a turning point for Keisen Jogakuen College. Having been in existence for four years, it finally achieved autonomy vis à vis the Ministry of Education. In light of this, the faculty, after numerous planning sessions,

meetings and much decision making, enacted a revised curriculum. As part of this curricular revision, and most relevant here, all faculty members were given responsibility for both a third year *zemi* and a fourth year *sotsuron shido* class. Both classes would deal with the professor's particular field of specialization and/or interest. Finally, the designation of General Studies or *ippan kyoiku* was abolished. All faculty members were incorporated into one of the two departments and classes that had hitherto been classified within the purvey of general studies—my communication class being one example—became *kyotsu kamoku*. Classes so designated were open to students from either department.

Because my *zemi* was designated *ibunka komyunikeeshonron ensyu* (Seminar in Cross-Cultural Communication) I felt internally compelled (incorrectly, I believe) to abandon my rather successful class dealing with mass communication and return to a class concerned with interpersonal communication. I also offered to help students write graduation papers in this area. Seven students chose me as their thesis advisor. Thirteen third-year students chose my *zemi* and seventy-three students from both the college and junior college enrolled in my introductory class on interpersonal communication.

Though some may disagree, I cannot conceive of not linking the introductory course with the *zemi*. Though making one course a prerequisite for another is an extremely common and accepted practice in the country where I received my higher education (the U.S.A.), this practice is uncommon in Japan. I think this is regrettable. From the first, I knew that I wanted students to take the courses in order. But since this was to be the first year and unless I refused to take any third year students (something I do not believe the school would have allowed), the only other option was to require those enrolled in my *zemi* to take the introductory course at the same time. I also felt that I should ask those signed-up to write *sotsuron* with me to take these two classes as well. At present this is how these various factors are configured.

I entirely expected that a good number of sophomores would enroll in the introductory course. These would then move into my *zemi*. An unfortunate schedu-

ling error on the part of the school, however, placed a class required of all sophomores in the Department of British and American Studies opposite my introductory course. In other words, the problem I knew I would have to endure this year, will remain next year. This is sad but cannot be avoided. In this sense, it will be another two years before I see the fruits of many of the ideas being discussed here, particularly that of having one class precede the other.

As far as content is concerned, I use the same textbook Adler and Towne (1990) for both the introductory course and for the *zemi*. Indeed, the classes follow one upon the other, fourth and fifth periods, on Tuesdays. In the *zemi* I go into more detail about the topics discussed in the introductory course. In the second term students begin to plan their graduation papers. As I noted earlier, my decision to teach interpersonal communication is one I now regret. Why? There are two reasons.

First, more than anything else, it is that I am now responsible for guiding students in the writing of a *sotsuron*. But what is this thing called a *sotsuron*? How I answer this question will determine how I go about preparing students to research and write. My answer is influenced by my sense that much of the study undertaken in the Japanese university remains superficial. Time limitations prohibit in-depth treatment of most topics. The one ray of hope in this can be, however, the *zemi* experience leading up to the *sotsuron*. I believe the *sotsuron* must be taken seriously. For this reason I believe that students should be encouraged to produce original research. Conclusions need not be ground-breaking. Originality means that the bulk of the paper ought to have students framing questions and answers for themselves. I believe students can and should be challenged to do this. I believe I must help students achieve these goals, that this is one of the most important tasks I have as a college teacher. It takes time to teach students how to do this kind of research, to inspire them, as it were, to the task, to get them excited about the possibilities for creative thought. In this sense, I cannot forget that some of the students who take my introductory course will go on to choose to take my seminar and then write



graduation papers with me. This seems to indicate to me that the introductory course and the *zemi* must have a vital linkage, indeed be considered one class. If the second term of the *zemi* is devoted to clarifying individual research topics, the first term of the *zemi* and the two terms of the course I have been calling introductory, should be seen as one class. (It goes without saying that since I always have a significant number of junior college students in the introductory class, it must also have a sense of closure by the end of the year first year.)

Secondly, given both my understanding of what a graduation paper should be and my experiences this year with students struggling to do research in interpersonal communication, I feel that students are not, in fact, prepared to do 'satisfactory' research in this area. Not only is interpersonal communication an underdeveloped field in Japan (the library contains few books written in Japanese concerning interpersonal communication,) it is also a highly empirical area. Experimental research is the norm. Keisen does not have the facilities for such research. Furthermore, and perhaps more contentiously, since Keisen is structured as a Faculty of Humanities, empirical research, often times narrow and reductionist, often times seeking isolated cause-effect relations, is inappropriate. Perhaps the school ought to be distinguished by a faculty committed to qualitative and critical research. We can emphasize the limitations of empirical research when dealing with human symbolic systems, when dealing with culture. We can teach students about the problems involved in taking representational forms for granted. In the field of communication, I can teach about the inadequacy of the old sender-receiver models of communication and reception and stress the importance of looking at the material qualities of texts.

## **THE FUTURE**

I have now arrived at the point where I must make clear my intentions. Instead of teaching interpersonal communication, I believe I must teach mass communication or media studies, to use one term common in the United States and another

common in Great Britain. See Lusted (1991) in this regard.

Though arguments stressing the importance of the mass media and by implication the importance of 'studying' these media perhaps no longer need to be made, let me make a few points.

We are saturated and surrounded by mediated messages. Our identity—who we are, who we have been and who we want to become—is caught up in a dance with media messages. We would not recognize, I dare say, ourselves nor our society were its 'mediatedness' somehow magically made to disappear. Our humanity has been both vastly extended and diminished. Our world is no longer defined primarily in terms of its secularization and rationalization. Rather, it is the mediatization of culture that now performs this defining role. Institutions of mass communication have proliferated at an astounding rate and continue to do so. The growth of networks of transmission through which commodified symbolic forms are made available to an ever-expanding band of recipients is the most significant aspect of our earth-culture. To ignore this is impossible. It is to ignore one's very self. We live on a steady diet of words and images, information and ideas, concerning people and events that take place far away from our own personal and private worlds. The people that populate Hollywood's films, the idols that cavort inside our television sets, the voices we hear on the radio, become common points of reference for people who never talk to each other, but who come to share, thanks to their participation in this mediated culture, a communal experience, a collective memory. Mediatization has entered into all areas of life. And this produces in us an extremely sharp ambivalence. Michael A. Real (1989) writes,

We love, enjoy, and look forward to television, movies, music, reading, but we also become disappointed and disgusted with them. All too often, we find them boring, banal, violent, exploitive; we flip the dial or the pages despairingly. This ambivalence, these contradictions are genuine and provide a starting point for engaging the dialectic stitched into the very fabric of...media (p. 8).

In other words, media do not simply present cultural products for us to consume and enjoy, to hate and criticize, to ignore and laugh at, to create and destroy, to

study and analyze. They are the very stuff of life for us, those 'things' through which we construct meaning and organize our existence. Media penetrate our lives, structure and create the contexts wherein we become. Our consciousness can be shaped by media products. We both allow this shaping and resist it. We are sometimes aware and at other times oblivious to it. Though we live surrounded by friends and family, we also interact with a wider circle of mediated meanings and experiences that encircle us as a larger frame of reference. The media deserve our attention. And more to the point, television deserves our attention. Why?

"For starters, because it is undeniably, unavoidably 'there.'" Allen (1992) goes on to write,

Today, around the world, 3.5 billion hours will be devoted to watching television....Ninety-two million homes in the U.S. have at least one TV set (98 percent of the total population). Nearly 70 percent of these homes have more than one set. More American homes are equipped with television sets than telephones. Those sets are on in the average household for more than seven hours every day. Between seven and eleven P.M., Americans of every demographic, social, and economic group are spending most of their time in a place where a television set is playing. Nearly 60 percent of U.S. households now have cable television, and nearly three in four U.S. households with TV sets also own videocassette recorders. The family with a VCR rents an average of eighty-seven tapes each year from one of more than 30,000 tape rental outlets. The total value of these tape rentals already surpasses the total U.S. movie box office receipts. One in ten American families owns a video camera. Most Americans cannot remember a time in their lives when television was not a part of it (p. 1-2).

Much the same can, of course, be said about television in Japan. Fascination with television and its attendant technologies is hardly a uniquely American phenomenon. If I am going to teach mass communication studies at Keisen, I cannot teach a general survey course. By the time a survey is finished there will be little time left over for students to begin to focus their energies. Better that I make a choice of what medium to study. In this regard, I do not think I will regret choosing to study and teach television. This isn't to say students will find TV easy to study. TV is so often simply part of our unnoticed domestic environment. We don't always regard the programs we watch as serious or worthy of attention. Scholars pursuing tele-

vision studies and television criticism around the world, of course, would argue otherwise. This isn't the place to develop these ideas. Another paper will have to wait for a discussion of how I think a class (actually two classes) devoted to the study of television can be organized within the context of a Japanese college.

## SUMMARY

In order to clarify the issues that have been raised in the preceding discussion a general summary of the key points might be helpful. When considering how to define communication studies at Keisen two sets of *options* present themselves. One relates to which topics will be taken up, the other concerns the general approach to be taken towards the material. Next, various *constraints* and *implications* can be enumerated. After considering these areas, the framework for some *conclusions* can be visualized.

### Topic Options

1) Communication studies in general. In 1988 this was the approach taken. With regard to *sotsuron* this would mean students would be allowed to write papers on any area of communication studies. The problems with this approach should be evident. Students would be required to go into some detail about a topic that they had only covered in cursory detail in the course of classroom discussions and lectures. That an introductory course in communication is needed goes without saying. At present, however, the limited number of classes offered at Keisen prohibits such an approach.

2) A large sub-category of communication studies. Though the boundaries between communication studies' two major areas of mass and interpersonal communication are falling (see Hawkins, Wiemann, and Pingree, 1988), the distinction still remains sound. Communication studies includes within it the study of mediated communication and face-to-face communication. One could thus focus on either of these areas. This was the approach taken in 1989, 1990, 1991 and 1992.

The general study of mediated communication, defined as, "public, rapid, and

transient communication through a complex corporate organization to a relatively large, heterogeneous and anonymous audience” (see Wright, 1959) can be studied in any number of ways. The important point would be to try and cover all the different media of communication in addition to theoretical issues. Traditionally, face-to-face communication is itself sub-divided into the study of interpersonal, organizational, and group communication. The general study of this area would require that one cover all of these areas.

3) A sub-category of face-to-face or mediated communication. With regard to face-to-face communication, the recent volume by Ting-Toomey and Korzenny (1991) makes clear that this is where the study of both ‘intercultural communication’ and ‘cross-cultural communication’ must be located. The study of either organizational, group, or small group communication could also be considered. The study of a sub-category of mediated communication refers here to focusing on only one medium of communication. Journalism falls in this category as does film studies, broadcasting, publishing, and television studies. Though I have glossed over much of importance in this description, I believe that the topic options for communication studies at Keisen will fall into one of the above groups.

### Approach Options

I simplify many issues in the following remarks. There are two general approaches to the study of human life and specifically human symbol systems.

1) I will call one Behaviorism. In media studies this would be the examination of media by social science, with an emphasis on measuring audiences and behavioral effects through controlled experiments and surveys. Studies would attempt to directly examine media experience and outcomes individually, especially those that can be measured empirically. The desire would be to seek unambiguous scientific results that could predict subsequent similar behaviors.

2) The other approach I will label Criticism or Cultural Studies. With regard to media this would be examinations of media through social and artistic theories with an emphasis on understanding the creation, content, and implications of media as

human expression and experience. It is 'culture-centered' in an expansive sense, looking at institutions, historical context, aesthetic levels, and collective outcomes. It criticizes for the purpose of appreciation and improvement, seeking understanding and change rather than prediction. The definition of culture within this approach is of obvious importance. John Fiske's definition (1992) is useful.

The term culture, as used in the phrase "cultural studies," is neither aesthetic nor humanist in emphasis, but political. Culture is not conceived of as the aesthetic ideals of form and beauty found in great art, or in more humanist terms as the voice of the "human spirit" that transcends boundaries of time and nation to speak to a hypothetical universal man (the gender is deliberate —women play little or no role in this conception of culture). Culture is not, then, the aesthetic products of the human spirit acting as a bulwark against the tide of grubby industrial materialism and vulgarity, but rather a way of living within an industrial society that encompasses all the meanings of that social experience (p. 284).

In contrast to work in the behaviorist tradition, to approach society from a cultural studies perspective is to assume that capitalist societies are divided societies. Society (Fiske, 1992) is seen not as an organic whole but as a complex network of groups, each with different interests and related to each other in terms of their power relationship with the dominant classes (p. 285).

### Constraints

1) Keisen Jogakuen College consists of a Faculty of Humanities and two departments, the Department of Japanese Studies and the Department of British and American Studies. Keisen has yet to establish a department of social sciences. It is significant for me that I must locate my communication studies courses within a faculty of humanities. Furthermore, it is significant that in recent discussions about the characteristics of the Department of Japanese Studies (of which I am a member), it was noted that the curriculum in the department ought to be characterized by an emphasis on Peace Studies, Women's Studies, and studies of the Image of Asia in Contemporary Japan. All of these areas are clearly politically or, at least, ideologically committed. Communication studies at Keisen must be framed within these ideas.

2) At the present I am the one teaching communication studies at Keisen. All of the discussions here assume that this will remain unchanged. Only two courses are thus available (excluding the seminars related to writing graduation papers.)

3) If nothing else is clear, it is certain that the constraint noted above means that the focus of study must be narrowed. If students are to write *sotsuron* and if these papers are to attain even a minimum of academic respectability, it is clear that the students must begin to focus their attention on one area of communication studies from the very start. As I have noted, there are various options in this regard. Choosing which approach to take becomes clearer in light of the next constraints.

4) I am committed to the cultural studies approach. I cannot defend this position here. I do feel, however, that this commitment is appropriate for someone employed in a faculty of humanities in a religiously-committed college. My approach can be defined as a relatively inclusive critical cultural studies approach which also draws upon particular findings and insights developed within the behaviorist tradition. The approach is to be distinguished from the cultural populism criticized by McGuigan (1992). This commitment on my part means I cannot guide students in traditional empirical studies of interpersonal and/or mass communication processes.

5) With regard to interpersonal communication studies there is one more constraint. Very little research in Japanese has been conducted in this field. The number of publications is limited. Students are forced to locate information in other disciplines, namely psychology and social-psychology. Most of this research, as is the case of most social science work in Japan, is highly empirical.

#### Implications

If the argument made thus far is clear, it should be understood that I believe that the communication studies class I teach at Keisen should be 1) narrow in focus, 2) centered on the study of the mass media, and 3) framed within the traditions of cultural studies. Television Studies and Criticism as presented in Allen (1992) and modified by the framework on mass media presented in Thompson (1991) would

seem to qualify. A detailed discussion of these issues must await a further paper.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This essay has been quite personal. In clarifying various historical issues I have made a statement about both where I see my own career progressing and where I hope the institution I am employed at is headed in the years to come. In-between we find the students who, one hopes, will benefit the most by the intersection of these paths and life trajectories. Course development, the next phase in the project I have undertaken, will take time. There will be no one watching over my shoulder. Student feedback will play an important role. In the end, however, I will be forced to depend on the ideas of concerned colleagues and my own sense of professionalism.

Teaching Television Studies, more specifically the study of television culture in Japan, will be challenging. I am not Japanese. I come to television in Japan as a minority. I rarely see my voice represented from within the medium. Students are apt to be challenged by my readings of Japanese television products and processes. Our readings will vary for many reasons. They are young and female. I am male and middle-aged. We will undoubtedly challenge each other because and in spite of our differences. In this sense, though I do not plan to have my communication classes at Keisen focus on intercultural or cross-cultural communication, the topic I was originally asked to teach, my classes do serve as experiments in intercultural communication. I have not completely abandoned my original mandate.

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