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A FREE MONTHLY E-NEWSLETTER FOR FRIENDS OF JAPAN & TEACHERS OF JAPANESE



2016 SHORT-TERM TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAM BY MADELEINE GRAHAM

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Upon landing in Narita Airport in Tokyo on June 22nd, 2016, my body constricted in fear and anxiety the likes of which I hadn't experienced for some time. I've been out of college for over five years, and aside from the spurts of professional development in the form of language teaching conferences I can only sometimes attend, I've had to guide my own self-improvement. I believe firmly that teachers should be constantly challenging themselves to improve. There is no perfect class, no perfect lesson, and no perfect curriculum design. All we can do is strive to make the best environment for our students to learn. So why was I so scared to land in Japan and start a two-month program that would most certainly improve my teaching ability?

I shouldn't have been.

I teach at a private school that was founded in the mid-90's, a time when Japanese language was something that uppity parents wanted their prep-school children to learn because it was the language of future acquisition of power and money. My school's founder embraced Japanese culture as it earned him clientele, and, even after the recession and Japan's economic decline, my school still works hard to maintain relationships with two sister schools in Japan and teaches Japanese as its only foreign language. I was hired to replace a much Japanese man who left the school because he had complications with his visa. When I fi

came to the school, my principal was kind enough to tell me to throw everything away that was left over from that previous teacher and start anew with my own materials. It was excellent advice as there were enough random handouts and tests leftover that my office could be called a *gomi-yashiki*. I threw everything away and started teaching from *Genki*, the same textbook I myself had learned from.

My new coworkers appeared supportive, but from about half a year onward, I started feeling this air of doubt, especially from the history teacher, who had become a Japanophile thanks to working at the school, and taught large elements of Japanese culture in his class. Later, there were other teachers who reported doubts about me teaching correctly, and my class content. I think Americans who love Japanese culture can do this interesting thing sometimes where they doubt and bad-talk others who also know Japanese or Japanese culture. It's called "gate-keeping," and it's meant to build up one's sense of knowledge and self-importance while calling others fake for not being a member of the "in group." This practice is popular among comic book and anime fans, but has a particular stinging effect when applied to Japanese and Japanese culture. As all foreigners know, they will always be considered outsiders to Japanese people, so being called outsiders even by other foreigners has even more of a sting to it. Knowing how to deal with these "gate-keepers" is an essential part of a foreign teacher of Japanese in America.

My next four years after being hired were spent defensively. I live and work in Silicon Valley, an area where parents value success for their children above all else. In my district, it is not strange that the parents' salary is three times the amount of the teachers' salary. I endured several discouraging looks and inquiries from potential parents - especially those parents of Japanese descent. How could I possibly teach their child in an acceptable way? Not only am I not Japanese, but I simply do not get paid enough to register as an equal to them, let alone an authority in my subject matter. Other staff members were also not helpful in defending me, in some part due to the "gate-keeper" mentality.

But all this was understandable. After all, how could I expect others to have confidence in me when I did not have the confidence in myself?

All these factors affecting my morale as a teacher--the salary gap, the respect gap, and most of all, the idea that as a foreigner, I was unqualified to teach Japanese--were causing me to seriously consider alternatives to my profession. Before I left for Japan, I was certain that I would be spending the next year trying to quit as a teacher.

Upon landing in Japan and being picked up by the Japan Foundation's shuttle bus from Saitama Shintoshin station, my first interaction with another Japanese teacher who was in the same short Summer seminar (*natsu-tanki*) was to introduce myself. Even with a simple self-introduction, I was unsure if I had communicated myself appropriately. This is a feeling that repeats itself periodically for those who are speaking their non-native language. This time, however, it was with a Pakistani woman. I remember it being an odd adjustment - how can someone understand me if I completely don't understand their culture? I don't even know what any of the visual cues are!

What followed was the most fascinating two months of my life thus far. Fifty-two people from twenty-seven different countries, using Japanese as their common language, were able to communicate everything under the moon. From deep conversations about spiritualism and religion in the cafeteria, to actually hilarious class discussions about the merits and demerits of the practice of dog cloning, we in the Summer Seminar group were not shy to talk about anything on our minds. Using whatever Japanese tools we could, we unabashedly built bridges between our cultures. We got angry, consoled each other when we were sad, composed speeches of gratitude, recommended 100-yen shops to each other, and were ultimately able to say goodbye to each other with the unspoken promise that our souls were still going to meet again someday on this Earth.



Those precious friends I met in the Japan Foundation Cultural Exchange Center in Urawa, Saitama started new thoughts and feelings within me. For fifty-two people from twenty-seven different nations to communicate using Japanese as our common language--what an awe-inspiring thing. I can now proclaim proudly to my students, "Japanese is a world language! If you learn Japanese, you will be able to communicate with other Japanese-learners from everywhere around the world!" I can also feel a sense of connection between fellow teachers I had never felt before. No teacher there was judging any other based off of their assumed inability to speak fluently. Everyone there respected one another and encouraged each other to share knowledge.

At the Japan Foundation Cultural Exchange Center in Urawa, I studied Japanese, I lived in Japan, I studied teaching theory, I took many cultural courses. I signed up for a homestay experience and cried when I had to say goodbye. I even signed up for an educational tour of Kansai, during which I learned more about delicious food and historical places there than I had in the four years I had been visiting there myself. All this was promised by the Japan Foundation, and delivered through their dedicated staff, and all I am extremely grateful for. But I wanted to share my story as one that other foreign teachers of Japanese in America might relate to. If you are familiar with my story, I urge you to apply to study at the Japan Foundation in Japan. I am now not only infused with new ideas by the educational theory I have learned in my *kyoujuhou* classes, but feel like an entirely new individual--bursting with the confidence and inspired by challenges. Thanks to this experience, I have recommitted myself to my profession and am more proud than ever to call myself a Japanese teacher.

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