SUPPORTING MIXED-GROUP LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND BOUNDARY CROSSING

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ABSTRACT

Tertiary teachers of Japanese are able to observe the outcomes of school Japanese language education in the students who enter their courses after completing Year 12. However, there are few similar opportunities for school teachers to see what their students will learn if they continue their studies at university. This paper has two purposes: one is to inform secondary school teachers of what awaits their students after they leave school and enter a university Japanese program, as well as their potential graduate destinations. The other is to share with school teachers and other general readers details of the UNSW Japanese program, which aims to connect students and others using Japanese, and to illustrate how the concepts of Communities of Practice and Boundary Crossing can be applied to language programs.

INTRODUCTION

The authors of this paper teach Japanese at UNSW Sydney (the University of New South Wales, Sydney). We receive a number of students who have studied Japanese in secondary school into our university classes and see the outcome of school Japanese education embodied in these students. However, school teachers of Japanese do not usually have opportunities to see what their students learn once they graduate high school and continue their Japanese studies at university. This is especially evident in experienced teachers who have been teaching for a number of years and may not be familiar with current university practices.

This paper has two purposes: one is for secondary school teachers to find what awaits their students after they leave school and enter a Japanese program at university (in this case, UNSW). The other is to inform school teachers and other general readers about the concepts of Communities of Practice and Boundary Crossing used within the UNSW Japanese program, which aims to connect students and others using Japanese.

BACKGROUND

THE UNSW JAPANESE PROGRAM

At UNSW, we offer a full range of Japanese courses from absolute beginner to professional level courses. High school leavers with HSC Japanese experience enter directly into intermediate-level courses. They may study Japanese as elective courses while carrying one or more majors in different disciplines, or they may major in Japanese studies as a single major or in double-major/double-degree structures. A typical student for us will enter our program after completing HSC Japanese, and major in Japanese studies as part of a double-degree program. These students often go on exchange to Japanese universities for one semester in their second or third year. At the end of their university career, they enrol in the Japanese Capstone course, the final course for those who major in Japanese studies.

Our Japanese program at UNSW aims to foster students who can connect with each other and with other Japanese speakers by using Japanese. Underpinning this aim is the theory of sociocultural understanding of languages and learning; that is, we learn languages as we make social connections. Our program is envisaged as a network of Communities of Practice (Wenger 1998, Thomson 2017) where each Japanese course forms a community and our students engage in Boundary Crossing; that is, they move between multiple communities (Aoyama 2015, Ishiyama 2018). This paper takes the Capstone course as an example to show how we operationalise these theoretical constructs in our program.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE (COP)

A CoP is a type of community where members regularly and interactively engage in participatory practices to achieve shared goals. In the UNSW Japanese CoP, students use the Japanese language in networked communities, within and beyond the classroom and the course. This approach breaks down the walls between teachers and students across courses, and sometimes between the university and the Japanese community in Sydney. In teaching Japanese in Australia, we design our program to provide students with a clear purpose for using Japanese. Students are given opportunities within the program to use their Japanese skills in real-world contexts by meeting with a variety of people. The concept of CoP works well to achieve this type of learning environment.

In this CoP, students regularly engage in interactive activities using Japanese with other members of the community, who are their peers, classroom teachers, senior student supporters who regularly attend junior classes, postgraduate student supporters, and native-speaker supporters. They form a 'community' (Wenger 1998) of people who share a 'domain' (Wenger 1998) for purposes of learning and supporting the learning of the Japanese language. They engage in shared 'practices' (Wenger 1998) of pair-work role plays, interviews and so on. Our students learn as they participate in these practices, with support from various types of scaffolding from other members of the community. Every student can draw support from the unique strengths of their peers. The roles of supporter and the supported are interchangeable depending on the strength of the members and the tasks they are engaged in. Participation of more capable senior students and native-speaker supporters brings yet more variety to the practices. In other words, our students never learn alone. Concrete examples of how the UNSW Japanese CoP operates are illustrated in Thomson (2017). Our Japanese program CoP is illustrated in Figure 1.
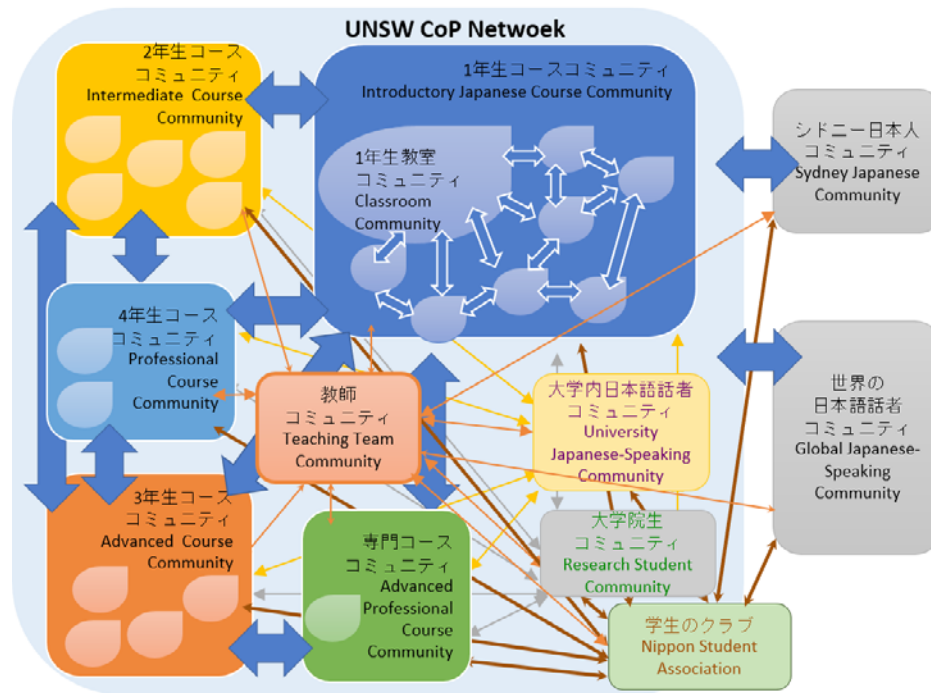
Figure 1: UNSW CoP Network

BOUNDARY CROSSING

While our students participate in a variety of practices in their own CoPs, they also engage in Boundary Crossing by moving between multiple CoPs. Cross-boundary Learners (CBLs) are those who move between two or more situations and, through that process, connect the communities. CBLs learn as they move to a new community and by participating in the different and unique practices of the new community. Furthermore, Boundary Crossing mutually transforms CBLs and all the communities they are engaged with (Ishiyama 2018).

CBLs typically experience two types of learning: 'vertical learning' and 'horizontal learning' (Aoyama 2015; see Figure 2). Vertical learning refers to mastery or acquisition of knowledge and skills, such as new vocabulary and using new grammatical structures. While vertical learning can be seen in a single community, horizontal learning is particularly characteristic of Boundary Crossing. It refers to noticing new ideas and gaining new perspectives, as we compare how, what and why two communities do things. An example of horizontal learning could be the personal development of a senior student who participates in a beginner Japanese class community as a teacher's assistant. The senior students can assess their own Japanese ability against beginner students. Simultaneously, they are perceived as advanced speakers by both beginner students and their teacher. As a result, they develop a new identity as an advanced-level user of Japanese. This boosts their confidence and motivation for studying Japanese, whilst also developing a greater sense of responsibility and care for their *kōhai* (juniors).
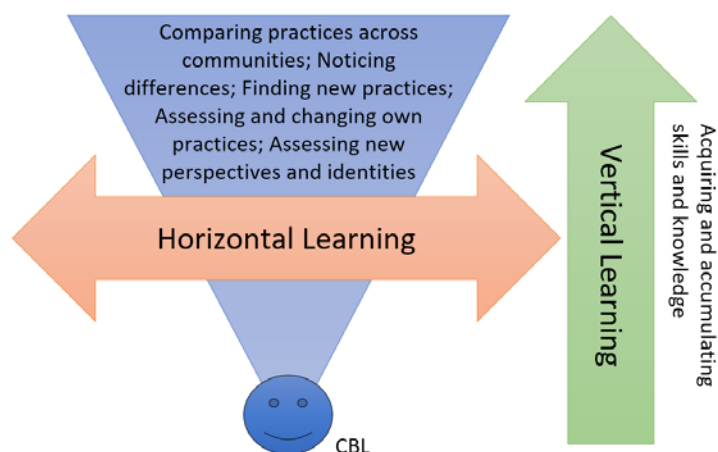

Figure 2: Learning by Cross-boundary Learners

PROGRAM

The Capstone course is the last course for those who major in Japanese and consists of three hours of face-to-face classes per week for 13 weeks. The course offers the students an opportunity to conduct a small group-research project on various aspects of Japan, and then present their findings in Japanese to members of the UNSW Japanese program CoP and to the members of the Sydney Japanese community at a student conference. The student conference is managed by the students of the Capstone course with support from the students of other courses who enter the Capstone community as they cross the course boundary. The roles of Capstone students in relation to the conference include contacting Japanese media, advertising the event, creating the conference program booklet and corresponding with guests, while the roles of students from other courses include acting as MCs at the conference, managing the registration desk and setting up the venue.

The backgrounds of our students are quite diverse in two different ways. Firstly, they have a variety of expertise in addition to Japanese studies; the majority of our students take double degrees combining the Arts and Social Sciences degree with another undergraduate degree. Many students are taking an Engineering, Commerce or Science degree simultaneously with their Japanese major within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS). Some of our students are majoring in both Education and Japanese within FASS to pursue future careers as Japanese teachers at high school. Secondly, the Japanese language proficiency levels vary among the students. Some start learning Japanese with us, which means they have been studying Japanese for only two and a half years, while others have completed the Japanese HSC subjects and have been studying Japanese for almost nine years. We also have quite a few heritage-language students.

Students in the Capstone course are placed into small groups of 4-5 each. The teachers carefully form these groups by considering each member's Japanese language proficiency level, their gender and ethnic backgrounds, their interests, their expertise, and their requests. Typically, in one group there will be 2-3 students who have completed HSC Japanese at their high schools alongside 2-3 students who started learning Japanese with us at the university. Once groups are formed, students liaise with other members in their group to define their research topic and commence their research. Different students possess different strengths in a group and they utilise those strengths for achieving their common goal. Those who have stronger Japanese language skills help other students' Japanese, while those who have strong research skills can lead the group research. We often see that one or two students in each group have excellent organisational and interpersonal skills and they are great assets for sustaining the collaborative group work effectively and minimising frustrations encountered by the group members.

The students also organise the conference by themselves with the support of the teachers and students of other courses. They are allocated to different groups for these tasks. For example, one group works on public relations by contacting local Japanese media such as Nichigo Press as well as officials and companies such as JETRO and the Japanese Consulate to request to advertise the conference in their newsletters. A different group may work on creating the program booklet for the conference. They organise a photoshoot day for the class and discuss with their peers about designs and photos to be included in the program, after which they create the whole program booklet.

The conference is a showcase of the UNSW Japanese studies community, not just of the Capstone students. The first-year students help out where non-complex Japanese usages are required, such as being a time-keeper and photographer, while ex-Capstone students take the MC roles. The advanced Japanese students are at the guest registration desk, asking guests' names and receiving their *meishi*. These tasks are mostly performed using Japanese. Also, many other students from our Japanese courses come to the conference to listen to presentations and support the Capstone students.

During an intermission and a small party after the conference, the students have an opportunity to talk with the guests and other students. Those opportunities are great for socialising as well as for discussing their research findings.

The Capstone conference itself forms part of course assessment for the students. The audience evaluates each group's presentation and how they handle a question-and-answer session. They also evaluate the conference overall, and those marks are used as formal assessment. The teachers evaluate the progress of each student and give their feedback to students individually, to the group, and to the whole class constantly during the semester. In addition, the students also evaluate their peers and themselves at the end of the semester.

A short clip of our 2017 Capstone conference can be viewed at https://tinyurl.com/UNSWCapstone2017.

BENEFITS AND PITFALLS

INSIGHTS

The concepts of CoP and Boundary Crossing are working in our Capstone course. The group research projects are mutually supported by the students of the Capstone course who regularly comment on each other in the process of preparation. This course encompasses a social practice that enhances the students' engagement with the Japanese language and boosts their motivation. The students apply Japanese in a real-life context, practise by peer collaboration, enhance their Japanese communication skills, and subsequently find and become role models of the UNSW CoP. Our students develop a sense of belonging to their course community, and to the overall Japanese program community. In the process, the students cross the boundaries between multiple communities within the UNSW CoP network, to support and be supported by each other. They also cross the boundaries into the Sydney Japanese community and engage in various practices using Japanese, while members of the Sydney Japanese community join us at our conference and undergo their own new learning experiences. Cross Boundary Learning happens at both ends (Ishiyama 2018).

The experiences of the Capstone course give the students not only the joy of connecting with others and crossing boundaries to see and experience new communities, but also enhance their graduate capabilities. Some of our Capstone graduates are currently working locally at high schools, at the Board of Studies, at universities in Japan, in the JET program, at Japanese enterprises in Japan, or for international firms.

PITFALLS

The motivation of students varies in any course, and our students are no exception. As a result, some students put less effort than others into the course and create an uneven workload. We have created both peer- and self-assessment systems for evaluating how much everyone contributes to the project work. This evaluation system has been effective in understanding whether any unbalanced work contribution occurs within groups; however, it has been unable to change the situation.

Furthermore, the course requires high commitment and is time consuming. Students take other subjects at the university and have other commitments in their lives. We need to consider their lifestyles and might have to reduce the workload to meet their needs.

CONCLUSION

This paper showcases one of our Japanese courses, providing an example of how the Japanese program is designed at UNSW. It is intended to give school teachers an understanding of what awaits their students after they leave high school and enter a university Japanese program. It also demonstrates how the UNSW Japanese program aims to connect our students with other Japanese users, and how the concepts of Communities of Practice and Boundary Crossing can be applied in a language program. We hope that language practitioners will find this paper informative and helpful in understanding the benefits of practising these new approaches in language learning.

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