

# **“Soaking” Model for Learning: Analyzing Japanese Learning/Teaching Process from a Socio-Historical Perspective**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Analyzing how Japanese people learned in the Edo Period (1603-18670), one realizes that Japan had one of the highest literacy rates in the world in the 17th century. By studying this period, I will introduce traditional non-directive teaching and learning theories which still influence educational practices in today's Japan. I will further propose that, although most people are not consciously aware of these ancient learning styles it is important to understand and recognize them when designing teaching/learning process.

**Keywords:** culturally assimilated learning styles, folk pedagogy, Edo Period, Japanese culture, meaning, self-learning

## **INTRODUCTION**

Learning is a culturally influenced practice as different cultures have different ways of learning. These culturally oriented practices are rooted in history. In this article, I will review the Japanese culture of the Edo Period and discuss how people learned at that time in contrast to today's learning style.

### **How do mothers raise children?**

Comparative studies on child development and learning have gained popularity since cultural psychology became a topic for research among scholars (Cales, 1996; Kashiwagi, et al., 1997; Rogoff, 2003). First, I would like to introduce a comparative study between Japan and the United States in the 1970's (Azuma, 1994). This study compared the mothers' ways of discipline and education for young children. The researchers found that there were big differences in the way they raised their children between Japanese and American mothers.

In this study, both Japanese and American mothers were asked to teach their children to categorize wooden blocks by color and shape in a controlled environment. Observing the mothers' behavior it was seen that the American mothers explained how to categorize the blocks verbally in a step-by-step manner to their children, confirming with the child if they understood. On the other hand, the Japanese mothers did not teach verbally, instead they themselves tried to categorize the blocks in front of their children and had their children imitate their actions. If their children failed to categorize the blocks, the Japanese mothers repeated their demonstration until the children were able to do it on their own. The Japanese mothers encouraged the children with words, saying, “Ganbare” (do your best). The Japanese way of teaching was to first model the activity and then to allow the children to try on their own. The Japanese mothers avoided direct teaching.

In the United States, teaching is mainly based on verbal expression. The mother, as the authority figure, tries to transfer her knowledge to her children like writing on a blank slate. It is a one-way flow of instruction, not a two-way dialogue. On the other hand, the Japanese teaching method is less explicit than the American. Where does this difference in teaching styles between the United States and Japan come from? Bruner (1996) explained that people like mothers, teachers, and babysitters have a folk theory known as “tacit knowledge” which tells them how to teach and how children learn. Bruner called this

“folk pedagogy.” Folk pedagogy is heavily rooted in all cultures and history. These cultural assumptions survive in the modern school culture.

In introducing his comparative study, Tsujimoto (2003) called the American teaching style “instructing” and the Japanese “soaking.” It is obvious that the modern educational system in both countries is based on the “instructing” model. The “instructing” model makes the basic assumption that children learn because they are “taught.” In this model the one who teaches and the one who is taught are clearly differentiated. A mother, playing the role of teacher, intentionally instructs her child because the child, playing the role of learner, has no knowledge or skills. This model applies to today’s schoolroom setting. Since it is necessary that much knowledge needs to be organized and systematically presented to the learners, this model provides an effective and efficient way of teaching.

On the other hand, in the “soaking” model the roles of teacher and learner are not so clearly differentiated. The Japanese mother tends to avoid playing the role of teacher as much as possible. She avoids direct confrontation with her child. Instead, she tries to put herself in the child’s position. In other words, she plays the role of learner and becomes a role model for her child. Azuma (1970) explained that this “soaking” model is historically and culturally rooted in Japan. Comparing school cultures between Japan and the United States, Usui (2001) also found the same cultural differences in the classroom teaching/learning situations as Azuma had concluded. We might also observe a similar difference between the United States and other Western countries and many Asian cultures, but I am not familiar enough with these cultures to include them here. Therefore, I would like to introduce just Japanese examples in discussing the culturally rooted teaching/learning model. There are probably similarities among Korea, China and Japan, but I will not be discussing them here.

## **SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Firstly, I will describe briefly the Edo Period in order for the readers to understand some of the Japanese culture and society during the feudal period. Secondly, I will explain how children learned at the “Tera-koya” (temple schools), and thirdly, I will introduce Ekken Kaibara, a Confucian scholar and well known educator of that time.

### **“Edo” Period**

The Edo Period was the most stable time in Japanese history. The Tokugawa Shogunate government ruled for nearly 270 years and closed the country off from the rest of the world. This national isolation made the Japanese culture unique and sophisticated. Most of what is called “Japanese Culture” was developed during this period, such as Kabuki, the Geisha system, printmaking, and so on.

The Edo Period was a feudal time classifying people into four categories by profession: Samurai, Farmer, Craftsman, and Merchant. The samurai needed to control the farmers and since these villages were far from the cities where the samurai lived it was necessary for the villagers to be able to read so that they could be governed through written documents.

In order to control the many distant provinces the Shogun government required the local provincial lords to live in the capital of Edo every other year. Each year many lords and samurai had to move from their homes to the capital. People from many different areas in Japan gathered in Edo, but were unable to talk together because of their different dialects. Therefore the written language became even more important for them to communicate among themselves.

Also, during the Edo Period a postal system was developed and the people used letters to communicate between distant cities and villages. By 1900 all samurai were able to read and write. Merchants also had a high literacy rate because they needed to communicate with others in buying and selling and keeping records. Even the farmers had a literacy rate of 20%. Many people thought that illiteracy was a disadvantage so, from the age of seven or eight children were sent to the local “Tera-koya” for learning.

### **“Tera-koya” as a learning center**

The Tera-koya was a kind of school where children learned reading, writing and arithmetic in the Edo Period. (“Tera” means temple and “koya” means a small hut.) Tera-koya were mostly located in the temple grounds and children from the area came to study.

Children from the age of seven or eight enrolled at these schools. There was no specific time of year or age of child in the enrollment. Any child who got the permission of the teacher could attend. To go to the Tera-koya meant not only becoming a student at the school, but also developing a relationship of trust between the teacher and each child. The trust between the child and the teacher was important so the parents needed to consider the teacher's character as well as their ability in calligraphy and academic studies.

There was no fixed time of day to go to the Tera-koya. According to each child's situation, he/she was able to decide when to attend. Children learned by themselves at the Tera-koya. Since learning at the Tera-koya was through self-regulating activities the students could come and go at any time. There was no systematic curriculum designed by the teacher. The teachers provided models of calligraphy for the children to copy. There were no lectures where a teacher would instruct in front of many children. This meant that children were responsible for when and what they learned.

Learning at the Tera-koya was mainly calligraphy. In Japan writing is important in learning. The children in the Tera-koya imitated the samples of calligraphy by themselves many times and became familiar with the Chinese characters through practice. These children finally in the end internalized writing skills and knowledge through this self-learning.

In Western countries, on the other hand, the first priority is learning to read; especially to read aloud. The teacher in Western countries thinks that the essence of language is verbal so that the written form is of secondary importance. The teacher talked to the students in the classroom and the students repeated and memorized what the teacher said in old days. Examinations were also oral, not written paper tests.

The role of the teacher in the Tera-koya was not direct teaching. First of all the teacher's duty was to select appropriate textbooks for each individual child. Second, the teacher observed each child's performance in writing and corrected mistakes, coached and modeled good behavior. Third, the teacher asked each child to write their best calligraphy and after some practice the teacher would assess it. Even when the teacher was absent from the room, there was no problem for the children to learn because they were all self-regulated.

Learning at a Tera-koya was self-directed and there was no competition. Each child studied at his/her own pace. Children and their parents decided much they needed to learn. Children did not get any certificate or diploma at the end of their learning period. What they learned was important in itself, not a diploma. Therefore, children were not compared to other children in competition. Learning was based on each child's life schedule such as rice planting and harvesting.

Each child had his/her own small desk for learning. The desk arrangement at the Tera-koya was casual; it was easy for children to put their desk any place. As shown in Fig 1, the desks were not facing the teacher. Learning was flexible both in the location and in the content.



**Figure1: Scene of Tera-koya**

(<http://www.history.museum.city.fukui.fukui.jp/tenji/tenran/fukuijo.html>)

### **Ekken Kaibara, Confucian scholar**

Ekken Kaibara was one of the most famous Confucian scholars from the Edo Period. He published many didactic textbooks on Confucianism. During the late 17th century and into the early 18th century printing technology developed and books were produced from wood engravings. The printed media gained popularity and many people, even non-samurai, learned to read.

Kaibara also published a comprehensive book about learning. Scholars have said that Kaibara was the father of Japanese pedagogy. However, the concept of pedagogy came from the West and it may not be appropriate to try to fit him into Western framework. Anyway, Kaibara was the first scholar in Japan to discuss the teaching/learning process comprehensively. What he wrote about learning was not unique, but he explained the educational process and methods clearly to the ordinary people. This book gave a

theoretical background to the non-directive learning in the Edo Period. I will illustrate some of his main concepts.

### 1. Early learning

Kaibara insisted that early childhood education was important because once children have acquired bad habits it is much harder to change. In order to avoid this situation, education should be started as early as one year of age and no later than ten. When people are born they have different innate talents. Even if these innate characteristics are bad, education can change them for the good. Therefore, education can build a good person and save a bad person.

Kaibara introduced examples of training horses and birds which were familiar to people in the Edo Period. A savage horse can be trained to be obedient. A warbler can be taught to sing a pretty song through training. Infants are like a white sheet of paper without color. They do not know what is right or wrong. They gradually change their color as they grow. Once they become bad, it is difficult to correct their behavior. Therefore, he emphasized that parents should be responsible for their children's education as early as possible.

### 2. Imitation

Kaibara pointed out that the ability to imitate is a very important factor for human development. Especially in the early development stages, children learn by seeing, hearing and then imitating. If children imitate bad things, they may become bad. Once bad things occupy children's minds it is difficult to change them. Therefore, a good learning environment is important for children.

Since imitation is self-directed learning by children, teaching is not "direct explaining" such as transferring knowledge from the teacher's brain to the learner's. Learning is more an individual activity where children get involved. Parents and teachers should let children do this learning by themselves. Only when they notice something wrong in this learning should they warn the children about this.

### 3. Motivation

Kaibara emphasized that the responsibility for learning should be on the children's shoulders. It is not an issue of teaching, but it is the issue of how actively the children learn by themselves. Therefore, motivation is of primary importance in learning. The primary condition for learning is intrinsic motivation. The role of teacher is to encourage this motivation in the children and to support their natural enthusiasm.

### 4. Role of teacher

In early childhood, parents are as important for children as their surroundings. When children go to a Tera-koya, the teacher becomes a role model for the children to imitate. Therefore, a teacher should be a good person as a whole human being and not just a knowledgeable person. The teacher needs to be a trustworthy person so that the children can imitate his behavior. The children want to follow the teacher and to become like the teacher, so the selection of good teacher is of utmost importance.

Since learning occurs in self-directed activities, a teacher does not teach directly. A teacher teaches by example, he demonstrates how to live. The children observe and imitate the teacher's performance.

### 5. Learning as bodily actions

Confucianism is a discipline of the mind. The mind is of primary importance in developing and acquiring a higher spiritual level. However, Kaibara denied this primary importance of the mind because he was conscious of the instability and unreliability of the mind. Instead, he emphasized the importance of the body. Small children grow up by imitating and familiarizing themselves with the adults around them. Children repeatedly imitate behavior unconsciously in order to acquire a skill or internalize knowledge. This is the original and basic form of education where learning involves bodily actions through imitation. Learning and discipline are not taught by instruction but rather self-learned through "soaking" into the body via imitation.

## **Today's learning in Japan**

Tera-koya disappeared after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Japan's modern Western school system was introduced at that time. In this modern Western system, efficiency and effectiveness are the primary objectives. Curriculum is designed by teachers and students have become objects to be taught. The same age groups are put together in the same classrooms and have specific objectives, teachers make sure that knowledge and skills are transferred from the teacher to the students.

Even though there is no more Tera-koya in modern Japan, you can find the "juku" system (informal supplementary school) called Kumon which has taken up many of the characteristics of the Tera-koya. Kumon was established in 1958 and has proliferated all over the world. At present there are 4 million children in 44 countries who study at Kumon centers. This is the biggest "juku" in the world. Why has Kumon gained such popularity among people in the past 60 years? It is interesting to notice that the teaching methods of the Kumon are basically the same as the Tera-koya, using the "soaking" model.

In the Kumon classroom, there is no teacher as a knowledgeable authority. Instead, housewives open Kumon classrooms and become the facilitators for learning for children in the neighborhood. After enrollment, a child is given an appropriate level of handout and studies this sheet by him/herself. It does not depend on his/her grade level or age. It is important to provide the appropriate level of handout to start with so that each child can get the feeling of "I can do it." Once they have had a successful experience and the "teacher" evaluates them, each child will show astonishing improvement and advancement.

You can see a clear difference between the formal school classroom and the Kumon classroom. The school system ignores individual differences and provides a lecture to all the children equally. Education is a kind of mass production system in which all children study the same content together regardless of their ability, interest or skills.

Kumon allows the child to start where they can answer the questions without difficulty. They follow a step-by-step process using printed materials with gradual increasing complexity. One year's worth of printed material usually consists of 200 sheets. For example, mathematics materials have 29 levels from infant level to university sophomore level and consist of 5,650 sheets. Learning at Kumon is individualized and self-paced. Children work on printed materials in a page-by-page manner with successive successful experiences. These successful experiences give the child the self-confidence to continue further learning. They become able to concentrate and progress quickly. After repeated experiences of progress, their confidence becomes stronger and more solid. With recognition by teachers and prizes for success the children become eager to challenge even more difficult tasks.

When they fail to complete a sheet, they return several steps back to where they can succeed at a lower level. When children repeatedly work on materials they gradually gain knowledge and skills in these areas. Materials are always subject to revision based on the learner's feedback. In this way, children learn how to calculate addition of two digits without being directly taught by a teacher.

Looking at Western educational theory, Kumon materials are similar to the programmed learning developed by Skinner's theory of reinforcement. However, in Kumon, the emphasis is not on acquiring knowledge and skills presented in the material but rather to maintain the high motivation level of the learner. Learning in the Kumon classroom, children develop meta-cognitive skills which challenge and maintain concentration. These teaching methods are similar to the abacus and calligraphy classroom. There is no competition and no evaluation done by teachers. These Kumon juku are different from the exam focused cram schools also common in Japan.

## **Comparison between Western and Japanese folk theories**

The term "instructional design" (ID) may not be appropriate for describing the Japanese teaching/learning process, but the folk theory I mentioned in the Edo Period provided a kind of framework for the teaching/learning process. The teacher in the Tera-koya may have unconsciously applied the folk theory in designing their teaching/learning situation. In this sense, those teachers used the folk theory as an instructional design model. In other words, the Tera-koya system was organized based on the non-directive theory of education which Bruner (1996) called folk pedagogy and is rooted in the culture and history of Japan. The Japanese folk pedagogy is the "soaking" model which focuses more on learning because the responsibility for learning is not with the teacher but on the learner. The child's motivation is of primary importance for learning. A teacher does not explicitly teach, rather she

advises and coaches the children. In this teaching/learning process, the children develop meta-cognitive skills for how to learn.

On the other hand, Western folk pedagogy emphasizes the cognitive domain and designs learning content and teaching methods for the teachers, telling them how to teach effectively and efficiently.

Western folk theory as “instructing”	Japanese folk theory as “soaking”
teaching	learning
efficiency, effectiveness	learner’s motivation
extrinsic motivation	intrinsic motivation
explicit	implicit
short term goals	long term goals
cognitive domain	meta-cognition

**Table 1: Comparison between Western and Japanese teaching-learning folk theories**

## CONCLUSION

Bruner (1996) explained that our social activities are deeply affected by folk theories of how our minds work. These folk theories are tacit but omnipresent. Only recently some scholars have paid attention to these theories and subjected them to intensive study (Cales, 1996; Kashiwagi *et al*, 1997). Any mother, any teacher, any ethnic group has a folk theory which explains how children’s minds work and how they learn. Japan has a “soaking” model as folk pedagogy. This “soaking” model has been developed throughout Japanese history. Some scholars have recently introduced ID models to Japanese society from the United States. As e-learning has gained popularity, many researchers believe that ID models will be needed to apply to e-learning as well. Perhaps it is all right to apply the US ID model to the Japanese e-learning system to a certain extent. However, even though the Japanese have imitated the Western ID it may not work well unless we also consider the culture and history of Japan. It may not be suited to the Japanese context. We need to be more sensitive to cultural context in this area.

New ideas transported from one place to another must change to fit their new location and context. I would like to introduce the analogy of religious diffusion. When a religion such as Islam or Christianity is transferred to a new culture they may become combined with the local religion. Although they will still call the religion Islam no matter where it is found, the practice of the religion may change from location to location. The same thing can happen with ideas and thoughts. The ID model is no exception. When we introduce new ideas such as the ID model we need to consider how to fit it into the local context, suitable for the society and culture where it arrives. When we apply the ID model to educational practice, we need to consider our basic assumptions about how children learn. These assumptions are unconscious and culturally rooted. In order to make these assumptions visible we must look into our culture and history.

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