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In Search of an Ideal Curriculum

弘前大学はやぶさカレッジの3年間を振り返って

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Abstract

Creating innovative curriculum is a complicated work comprising various considerations on how the participants should be cultivated on the program. In 2013, Hirosaki University started the HIROSAKI Hayabusa College, a sort of honors program to foster future leaders with cross-cultural abilities. Hayabusa participants can join the two short study-abroad programs, backed up by the sponsorship of the college, in an English speaking country and then, in an Asian country. Their goals are to nurture; 1) language communication abilities, 2) skills to coexist in harmony in diverse cultural environments and 3) critical thinking skills that enable one to reflect on one's culture and how this culture influences one's attitudes, behavior, and thinking. Taking part in its working group of the program, the author will describe its curriculum, how it was formed, how it was carried on, and the issues that had to be tackled with along the way. The original program has lasted for three years, proceeding to the fourth stage in the fall of 2016. With this changing period, the author hopes to reflect on the program by summarizing the program and contribute to the further development of the entire program.

Keywords: curriculum, study-abroad programs, cross-cultural skills, foreign language education

1. Background

Hirosaki University implemented an intensive study program called Hayabusa College in 2013 with the goal of broadening the international outlook and developing the English communicative abilities among a group of selected students who enrolled in this program. I started working at the university about the same time this new college was launched and joined a team of instructors who manage this program. A “*hayabusa*” in Japanese means a peregrine falcon, and with the image of the bird being swift, free, able to fly all over the world, the group of students was named after this bird. The image of this bird truly expresses the goal of this program and the aim of developing students who have the skill, experience, and knowledge to participate on the global stage.

The goals of the program are set up to foster; 1) language communication abilities, 2) skills to coexist in harmony in diverse cultural environments and 3) critical thinking skills that enable one to reflect on one's culture and how this culture influences one's attitudes, behavior, and thinking. To accomplish these goals, the students are required to 1) reach TOEFL iBT 68 or equivalent, and 2) make a 15-minute presentation, and 3) write a final research paper in English on a topic that combines their academic interests with their newly gained cross-cultural competency.

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The president of the university is the head of this college, and with his support, based on the memorial fund of the University, Hirosaki University International Exchange Fund was established to be its financial resource. Also, it received a JASSO scholarship (one of the government-affiliated organizations to help international activities for students) from the government also in its second year.

It was set out based on a plan written by a professor of Japanese Language/Culture and soon was extended to an all-out project part of the International Education Center, involving all the teachers and staff in the department. Five teachers in the English education group called the English Lounge, and four teachers in the Japanese Language/Culture education group worked together on the formation of this program. This includes such activities as developing its curricula, recruiting students, teaching respective courses, leading students to the two study-abroad programs, as well as, advising students on their research papers and oral presentations as part of the students' final requirements to complete this program.

In this paper, the author first provides a descriptive analysis of this program over the past three years. Then the author identifies a few areas of concern that emerged over these ensuing three years. Finally, the author discusses possible future directions for this program to make it more sustainable, effective, and efficient for all those involved in administering and managing it on a day-to-day basis.

2. Curriculum formation

The program was not rigidly constrained from the start, and over the first few years, it went through some early adjustments. For instance, after the members decided the outline of the initial program, some changes to the curriculum happened and continued to occur on an ongoing basis. These changes aimed to address various unforeseen needs of the students, teachers, and staff. Therefore, meetings and email interactions among the group members were essential in creating and adjusting the outline, goals, and direction of the program. In short, it was a program that required continuing efforts all the time.

2.1. Overview of the curriculum

The purpose of Hayabusa College was defined as fostering "global citizens" who can contribute to society productively through excellent language and cultural skills gained through the program. The number of selected students in the first year was five, then six in the second year, and six in the third year. Under the strong commitment of the university president himself, this number was going to increase each year gradually.

In order to become one of the selected students to participate in this program, each student was required to take an English proficiency test first, followed by an interview. It was a two-year program beginning in the students' second semester of the first academic year. When selected, the students began the program by first taking English communication courses and cross-cultural courses. After this initial semester in the program, the students then moved on to the first short-term study-abroad program in an English-speaking country during the spring break.

A second short-term study-abroad program in an Asian country took place during summer break. Both of these exchange programs were free of charge for the students and were funded by the college. On these short-term overseas programs, the students pursued research in their academic field or area of interest. Their final class included an academic English writing course. Also, to fulfill one of the requirements of this program, the students gave an oral presentation on their experiences abroad, as well as, submitting a final paper based on their own area of academic interests and findings from their research that they conducted during the two study-abroad programs (see Figure 1).

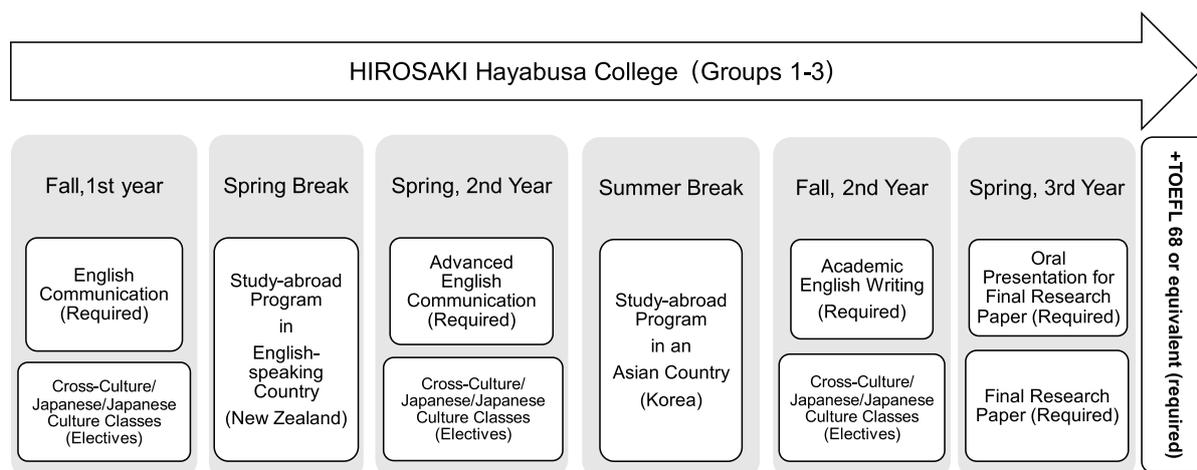


Figure 1

2.2. The program goals

As stated above, there are three target goals in this program. They are to nurture students' 1) language communication abilities, 2) skills to coexist in harmony in diverse cultural environments and 3) critical thinking skills that enable one to reflect on one's own culture and how this culture influences one's attitudes, behavior, and thinking. These target goals were defined as three academic columns of Hayabusa program.

For the purpose of 1), the curriculum included a) a short study-abroad program in an English-speaking country, b) English communication classes in the English Lounge and c) a requirement for a student to achieve the equivalent of TOEFL iBT 68 through Academic English course in the English Lounge.

For 2), through two short study-abroad programs in an English-speaking country and an Asian country, the students experience the issues of coexisting in the variety of cultural circumstances through discussions and interactions with the counter-part students. In various courses of intra-college cross-cultural classes in the International Exchange Department, which are required-elective classes, the students are expected to integrate the above-stated experiences crossing over an English-speaking country, Asian, and Japan. For the purpose of 3), the students put together their acquired skills to work on final presentations and research papers on the issues of coexistence in a cross-cultural environment.

Therefore the features of the program are English communication and cross-cultural classes; for example, the students might take classes on communication and cross-cultural competence in English, as well as international exchange courses such as Japanese Literature, Japanese Society, or International Studies, etc. together with international students. After going on to two study-abroad trips, they make presentations and write final papers in English in the students' respective fields of expertise.

After successfully completing the program, students should be able to;

- 1) achieve TOEFL iBT 68 or equivalent,
- 2) discover themes, research, and work out the tasks on their own,
- 3) look back and understand their own culture compared with other cultures,
- 4) establish cooperation or trusting relationship with people who have other sense of values and with the different cultural background,
- 5) find their own career paths free from evaluating others or traditional sense of values.

3. Study-abroad programs

Two study-abroad programs were planned for an English-speaking country and an Asian country. From the first through the third groups, they were conducted in New Zealand and Korea.

3.1 Two study-abroad programs

New Zealand was selected mainly because of its ethnic diversity and yet comparably prejudice-free society, which matches the college's aim of developing students' abilities to adapt to new and unfamiliar situations and maintain an open mind to cultural differences. Geographical location also influenced the choice of New Zealand. For instance, since it is located in the southern hemisphere when the students go on the trip during the winter/spring break, it is summer in New Zealand.

One of our sister universities (the Auckland University of Technology, aka AUT) in New Zealand helped us create the schedule for the students and made some suggestions through emails about what the students could do during their stay in New Zealand. Some of these suggestions included a field trip to a local museum, as well as, having students' do presentations on Japanese culture or participate in the Japanese tea and talk in the university's Japanese Club, and so forth.

Japanese Language/Culture teachers took on the planning of the Korea trip. The first one took place in the summer of 2014 after the first New Zealand study-abroad program. Based on their experiences in the New Zealand program, the students were expected to find themes that interested them and collect data on this topic while visiting both of these two countries.

3.2. Student reflections on New Zealand trip

Here are some examples of the students' reflections of the five students in the first group, taken from the interviews after their New Zealand trip. They went there in March 2014, and the interviews were conducted in June 2014. There were five questions, according to the college's three main goals, exploring the students' evaluations of the study-abroad program itself, how the pre-programs including the English Lounge seminars contributed to it, how it helped change students' language abilities, cross-cultural understandings, and their own identity or awareness of Japanese culture. In order to protect the students' individual information, the students are described as HS1 to HS5, comprised of one male and four female students.

To the questions which asked about good things and things requiring improvements about the study-abroad program in NZ, students put forward the advantages of the overall high quality of the program itself. They also put forward the monetary support from the university, language classes in the English Lounge, teachers' support and advice (both from Hirosaki U and AUT), selection of New Zealand as a host country, and being there as a Hayabusa College student (given a chance to make a presentation, etc.) Regarding the necessary improvements, two out of five students said that the length of the program (four weeks) was too short, and three out of five talked about the lack or scarcity of information about their homestay families or sudden changes to their assigned families.

When asked about their language abilities, all of them said that they believed that they had improved their English skills. HS1 no longer translates from Japanese to English and began to think and speak in English. Three out of five answered that they recognized the diversity of English; *the World Englishes*, so to say, and they felt that they can be more positive about their English as well. HS4 pointed out that her listening ability went up because of the constant exposure to English and she had gotten used to the speech speed of native speakers.

All in all, they felt the joy of making themselves understood in English and said they improved their communication abilities. About the communication classes in the English Lounge, four out of five said that the English classes helped them build basic skills required in New Zealand, learn better in New Zealand, establish

courage to speak out and freely speak to people who they don't know. HS4 said she needed more reading activities in the Lounge for deeper learning and to build vocabulary. The others appreciated their abundant chances to have discussions in the Lounge, and it helped remove their anxiety of going abroad.

The most interesting things happened when they were asked about cross-cultural recognition. All of them talked about New Zealand's ethnic and cultural diversity. HS1 no longer felt an inferiority complex about using English because of the wide background of speakers who were also learning this language. HS2 said that the notion of the "people" in New Zealand was totally different than she had imagined (meaning she was surprised that no matter where people come from, they were all considered New Zealanders.) HS3 communicated mainly with Chinese and Korean people in New Zealand, and HS4 was able to develop a positive image of the country (the country's positive attitude toward its ethnic diversity.) Most of all, HS5 was interested in and researching about gender equality, and she was surprised because the awareness towards gender equality was so high that it was somewhat hard for New Zealanders to understand the questions she prepared for her research. Also, she was impressed by the fact that the native New Zealanders' culture is accepted as it is and the immigrants' backgrounds are also being accepted as they are.

Images of being a Japanese or their awareness of identity was also very interesting. Two of them said that they didn't even feel like they were foreigners or so to say Japanese, even though they were in New Zealand, so they came to realize that in New Zealand, the ethnic background does not make a lot of difference in determining nationality. Another two of them talked about having pride in being a Japanese. HS3 felt that she was proud of being a Japanese because people in New Zealand have positive images of Japanese. HS5 said that she recognized the positive image of Japan, looking at it from outside of the country. HS4 said that she thought Japan was a good country to live in, but she felt the need for Japanese people to open up their minds more and be willing to accept diverse cultures more. HS4 appreciated that she was welcomed and accepted warmly in New Zealand. Despite this, she still believed that Japan is a good country because it's not easy for a different culture to come in, and therefore it helps maintain its unique identity. On the other hand, New Zealand has more tolerance and flexibility to accept other cultures.

As you can see in the narrative reflections from the students, the New Zealand trip made a tremendous effect on the college's students thinking about their own identity and made them more aware of other cultures. The author was impressed and pleased to see that the students were able to build better images of themselves, look at themselves differently; take a positive view of both their country and the host country, and furthermore observe the diversity of the world itself objectively. Further research is necessary to deepen its educational effects on the program, and I hope it is going to be deepened even more to make improvements and to make the better program.

4. The role of the English Lounge

The English Lounge, which during the initial development of Hayabusa College belonged to the International Education Center, was responsible for all the English education in this program. This educational responsibility included designing the curriculum, recruiting students, and selecting students, giving proficiency tests and interviews, providing orientation before the study-abroad programs, and teaching the English Communication classes. In this section, the author describes in detail the English courses offered in this program and the ongoing mentoring that the English Lounge teachers have orchestrated during the exchange programs.

4.1 English Communication courses

It was part and parcel for the students to become proficient and efficient in speaking, writing, listening and reading English. Not only did they need to accomplish the specific target score of TOEFL, but they also needed

excellent communication skills to be able to talk to people on the streets of Auckland to do their assignments, and make a final oral presentation and write a research paper in English.

Therefore, the program kept being revised along the way with minor changes so the students could maximize their chances of improving their English abilities. For example, there were English classes dedicated to Hayabusa students only, for the first group of students. Since these Hayabusa students came from five different faculties, this class had to meet either in the early morning or evening outside the regular class time frame to avoid schedule conflicts with their other classes.

Two native speaker teachers met the students twice a week and carried out the Advanced English classes for ten weeks. After the second and third group, with the increase of students, it was impossible to have a common class among Hayabusa students. So they started to take English Communication classes available in the English Lounge. Also, it became mandatory for the second and third groups to take one of the Advanced English courses available through the Liberal Arts program at the University, even after they returned from the first study-abroad program in an English speaking country at the start of their 2nd year, to increase their English exposure.

4.2. Writing courses

Two teachers from the English Lounge acted as writing guides and assisted the Hayabusa students by meeting with them in the English Lounge to discuss their writing topics. These meetings usually lasted for about an hour once a week. Later this turned into a regular Academic English course in the English Lounge which concentrated on the same purpose of directing the students' writings toward the final research paper. Therefore in a few months, students made quite a big leap in their first academic writings, and the teachers who engaged in this extra effort made a big contribution to the program itself.

4.3. Mentoring program

According to Berman and Tada (2016), the mentoring program for Hayabusa students played a major role in the overall college program. Because of its small size, mentoring was an effective method to interact closely with students, instill core values toward the language, and encourage them to maintain a daily English habit. During the study abroad program, Berman had contact with the students regularly by having them write and email her journal entries, having Skype meetings online, and administering the tasks she assigned to the students during their stay.

5. Issues to be addressed

Despite the success of Hayabusa College in developing students with global skills, talents, and experiences, some issues need to be addressed. In this section, the author will point out three main issues that emerged, as this program progressed over the initial three years.

5.1. Roles and workload

When we look back, the launch of the Hayabusa college program has been put into shape by the strong leadership of the section chief who supported the program. The originator of the program was a Japanese Language/Culture professor, but it was this section chief who had put all the people – teachers and staff – in place and made it sure for everyone to have a role, sometimes more than one, in the program, and it was very articulately done. Without the cooperation of all the teachers in the department, as she put it, such program that involves all the university departments, cannot be successful.

To run this program successfully, some responsibilities had to be distributed among the teachers involved. These included specific classes like cross-cultural classes and English classes. Moreover, students needed to go

through some consulting before they embarked on their two study-abroad programs in New Zealand and Korea. Also, teachers provided advising for the final oral presentations and theses.

The roles and responsibilities of the teachers changed dramatically over the course of this program. Initially, in the first generation of students in this program, the Japanese Language/Culture group assisted them in developing their final papers. The students were told to consult with the English teachers to check their writing. As it turned out at the end of the first generation, the amount and quality of content guidance that students received varied by each teacher, and in some cases, students ended up consulting and receiving advice on the topic of their paper and ways to develop it from the English teachers only.

In the second group, the curriculum followed the same pattern, which involved dividing the roles between content guidance and language assistance. Within the Japanese Language/Culture group, only one teacher guided the students' papers, which ended up being minimal guidance and consequently most of the content education, as well as, the language were placed under the responsibility of the English teachers.

One critical area that has been overlooked within this program is the difficulty of scheduling classes and meetings with the Hayabusa students. Since this program aims to be inclusive and open to all students at the University, students come from a wide range of faculties. This wide range of selection provides diversity to the program but also scheduling difficulties. Hayabusa students are required to take an academic English writing class in the second year of the program to develop their writing skills and prepare them for writing their final thesis for the program. This Academic Writing is a required course, but it is not integrated into their schedules at the start of the term, which therefore requires the teachers and students to adjust their schedules and hopes to find a common open period in the day, which does not usually happen. For instance, at present in 2016, the class meets at night since this was the only available time slot everyone could meet. In fact, one student could not accommodate this time slot into her schedule and is conducting the class remotely through emails and one-to-one meetings with the teacher. So this adds a layer of complexity to the program that was not anticipated and should be considered as the new Hayabusa program evolves. This is especially relevant now since the Hayabusa program has made substantial changes to its overall structure from the 2016 academic year. Reflecting on the past program to improve the current program is an essential process to the development of any effective program.

5.2. Non-achievers

Despite the fact that this program describes itself as an "honors" program, which aims to develop future global leaders and provides students financial backing to participate in these overseas programs. Nonetheless, some students in this program struggled and failed to complete all the necessary requirements.

For example, student A in the first group had been exerting leadership all the way during the first group program; he played a big role in leading public presentations but did not submit the final paper and completely dropped out of contact with the teachers at the last stage. Student B in the second group submitted the final paper but hasn't achieved the required final score for the TOEFL test. Since there are no penalties, there is nothing to prevent such students from quitting the program after receiving free overseas trips.

There was some criticism about the honors college students' losing their motivation on their way. If the cultural perspectives on both sides of the teachers' groups had a similar set of values and goals, it would have been easier to deal with such less-motivated students. However, policies between the two groups of teachers were quite different. Since one group was taking a *laissez-faire* approach, while the other was taking a close coaching style approach, a coherent policy throughout the college did not seem to exist. While education is a painstaking process, which takes a lot of time to see the results, we cannot decide what would be the best way to take, but one thing that should be pointed out would be, as Whitehead (1929) suggests as "a golden rule of education";

... The mind is never passive; it is a perpetual activity, delicate, receptive, responsive to stimulus... Whatever interest attaches to your subject-matter must be evoked here and now; whatever powers you are strengthening in the pupil, must be exercised here and now; whatever possibilities of mental life your teaching should impart, must be exhibited here and now. That is the golden rule of education and a very difficult rule to follow (Whitehead, 1929, p.6).

It is always easier for people to give in to laziness. Even the brightest people sometimes tend to be overwhelmed by inertia. Moreover, students with highest hopes could be tempted to take an easy road here and there. It is, of course, necessary to let them take the initiative but is it not the teachers' responsibility to encourage, back up and support students all along their steep, mountainous, bumpy road, especially when they are trying to achieve something difficult. At the same time, we would have to be careful because it would be detrimental when it is done excessively. However, at least frequent regular meetings with students and feedback for them should be done by supervising teachers, to consider the nature of this program.

5.3. Communication among the faculty

As mentioned above, the Hayabusa College was launched accepting students from all of the six faculties in the university; because it was an all-university project, it required every one of the members in the International Education Department of Hirosaki University to engage in planning and to implement the honors college program. As the author described, the whole project went through a complicated process of forming its curriculum. Therefore ongoing communication among the department members became essential to carry out the project.

However, in the middle of the first generation's first year, the general meeting bridging the two groups (the English Communication group and the Japanese Language/Culture group) was suspended by a decision from the management. Naturally, since this meeting served as an information sharing opportunity, consequently contact between the two groups dissolved. Individual talking to each other, teacher to teacher, or teacher to staff, still continued to take place, but it became very difficult to have a common understanding between the two groups.

DeVito (1994) defines three types of organizational communication as upward, downward, and lateral communication. Upward communication refers to messages sent from the lower levels of the hierarchy to the upper levels, while downward refers to messages sent from the higher levels of the hierarchy to the lower levels. Lateral communication refers to messages between equals. Lateral communication facilitates the sharing of insights, methods, and problems. It helps the organization avoid some problems and to solve others.

When we think of the group of teachers working together to achieve the common goal, the lateral communication, whereby everybody is treated as being equal, is the ideal one and it should be the way to go forward because of the nature of academic achievements. It respects sharing of insights, methods, and issues. We should share the ultimate goal for the students and have to work together to show it to the students. The discrepancy between the teachers should be avoided because it would generate students' anxiety and they tend to lose their focus.

Also, it all happens for a specialized organization to view their area as the one that is most important to the success of the company, as DeVito describes, and it applies to the case within a university. This attitude prevents us from seeing the value in the work of others and often precludes a meaningful exchange of ideas, according to DeVito. In order not to jeopardize the students' learning and progress, we should avoid such cases in the university.

6. Conclusion

We have seen and discussed the honors college program, its curriculum creation, how it was formed, how it

was carried on, and the issues that still needs to be addressed. The original program was discontinued in 2016 and subsequently has been replaced by a new program. The Japanese Language/Culture group now fully manages this new Hayabusa program. Whatever policy the college decides, we certainly wish it works in a way where students have the chances to maximize their learning experiences and we, as teachers, also have the chance to contribute and add its value to this new program. The difficulty of forming curricula still exists, but communication must be enhanced to target the successful completion of each generation in this program and for each to fulfill their personal, academic achievements and goals. With this changing period, the author's reflection of the program may be able to serve as a chance to make the program even better.

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