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English Education and Social Activism in Japan: The Nagashima Project and English Translation as Praxis

Kathryn M. Tanaka, John L. Jackson, Tomohisa Tamura, Kōji Ozaki & Yoshiaki Shikata

Abstract: This paper aims to demonstrate the relevance of educating university students through direct participation in projects promoting social activism and documents how a service-learning project to Nagashima Aisei-en set and successfully achieved goals. This project provided authentic opportunities for students in translation and community service and this paper reports the difficulties, successes and lessons learned - in addition to the moral and educational merits. The visit to Nagashima was instrumental in building problem solving, and critical thinking skills in addition to developing teamwork. Furthermore, students assisted Nagashima Aisei-en, Japan’s first national Hansen’s disease hospital, in their mission to gain UNESCO World Heritage Site Status through the translation of documents and brochures into English, encouraging English speakers to visit Nagashima and learn of its history, relevance and global importance.

Keywords: Hansen’s disease, Nagashima Aisei-en, Social Activism, Service Learning

Origins of the Project

Nagashima Aisei-en is Japan’s first national hospital for Hansen’s disease. It was established in 1930 as a quarantine hospital for the treatment of people diagnosed with Hansen’s disease. The institution has a long and important position within the history of Hansen’s disease and human rights not only in Japan, but globally as well.

1 This project was funded by the President’s Special Research Grant at Otemae University.
The history of the institution has been well documented in Japanese, but little is available in English (see, for example, Kokuritsu rōyōjo Nagashima Aisei-en, 2011 and 1998).

In Japan, there is a sense that the problems of Hansen’s disease were resolved after a group of survivors of the illness sued the government for violating their human rights. Yet, as recent scholarship has demonstrated, the process of reconciliation is ongoing (Araragi). Former quarantine facilities remain home to survivors of the illness, though these survivors still face prejudice and discrimination. Indeed, while the illness was curable in Japan with the drug Promin after 1947, a 1931 law mandating quarantine for people diagnosed with Hansen’s disease was not repealed until 1996. Although the law was never strictly or evenly enforced (Hirokawa, 2012), its existence served to increase awareness of the illness and heighten discrimination toward sufferers and survivors.

With the average age of survivors in the mid-eighties, some resident groups have established movements to articulate and ensure the legacy of their stories of struggle with illness and discrimination. Many see this as a mission of global importance, and with the question of legacy a driving force, some residents of Aisei-en launched a movement to earn the island UNESCO World Heritage Site recognition.

The movement for the institution’s remaining buildings to be registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site began in 2013 with Nagashima Aisei-en, Oku Kōmō-en, and Oshima Seishō-en, three Hansen’s Disease sanatoria in the Inland Sea of Japan. The recognition, if realized, would be an important step in the creation of a society where human rights are respected; it would also serve to display the strength of life in the residents, be an appeal to general society, presetypo the landscape of the institution, and demonstrate the nation’s position on human rights issues.

As the museum at Nagashima Aisei-en declares: “Through creating an interest and gaining a correct understanding, discrimination disappears.” This is the lesson of the problems of Hansen’s disease that are inherited by the next generation. Through this, in the future, it is possible to create a society where rights are respected. This is consistent with the spirit UNESCO advocates for its World Heritage Sites, that they must be of “outstanding universal value.”

Therefore, in the spirit of the value of human rights not only in Japan, but as a globally important issue, we need to bring awareness to people all over the world. In order to do this, information cannot only be shared in Japanese; it is necessary to use a more global language, such as English. Nagashima Aisei-en Rekishikan (Aisei-en’s Museum and Historical Building) uses authentic artefacts, such as oral history videos, commentary on panels, pamphlets, and other materials to tell the story of the island and its residents, all displayed in Japanese. The first priority was to translate the things anyone could access—the pamphlets that were easy to take home, and the tools to the guided tour of the facilities, such as the script used with the guided GPS tour, instructions, and the map. With these, it is possible to introduce the history of the facility to English-speaking people.

The discrimination against people with Hansen’s disease is described in the Old Testament. The only effective cure for such prejudice is the development of a human race that has the wisdom to respect human rights. If this is possible, then we create the possibility to overcome conflicts about race, religion, or other human rights issues that trouble our world now. As Tamura Tomohisa, the curator at Nagashima Aisei-en, remarked, “Through
learning about Hansen’s disease, we have the ability to change the world. For that reason, we want the English translation of our materials and our message to reach as many people as possible.”

Thus, in order to be recognized by UNESCO, Nagashima Aisei-en needed to make their facilities and stories accessible to the global community. While the debates about the benefits and negatives of English as a global language continue (see, for example, Mizumura), translating some of the introductory materials at Nagashima would make the site more accessible to non-Japanese visitors.

With the goal of providing English translation, Otemae University partnered with Nagashima Aisei-en in the summer of 2015. A group of ten students participated (nine undergraduates and one graduate; a total of three boys and seven girls), and five faculty members led different areas of introductory study to the project to ensure its breadth and ultimate success. One of our primary goals was to establish a globally-minded service learning project that was locally based, with the goal of building students’ global awareness through English language use and work in their own communities. In that sense, we were inspired by the goals of international service learning projects (Crabtree) that seek to build global citizens, but at the same time wanted to demonstrate the relevance of global activism in their own country and community.

The project was designed to be fundamentally a service learning project. Here, we understand service learning is experiential and reciprocal. It is an educational and community philosophy as well as a pedagogical approach (Al Bawani et. al., 2013). It combines community or social service with formal education. In our case, we combine community service work with English as a Foreign Language education (see also Sheridan and Ando et. al. in this volume). Finally, service learning is incredibly effective because of the skills it weaves together: “guided community service encompassing the application of skills and knowledge, critical reflection, decision making and problem solving capabilities and collaborative working skills” (Al Bawani et al, 2013, 111).

Underpinning the entire project was our firm belief that the goal of university education should be to give students skills and knowledge to critically think about social structures and values, in both their personal and professional lives (Berry and Chisholm, 1999). Through this project, we sought to create lifelong learners with a commitment to active social engagement at many levels of society—local, national, global (ibid).

The goals of service learning are to place students in a context-rich situation to apply what they learn in the classroom to a real-world situation (Latulippe 1999). This real-world work is then brought back into the classroom, thus creating a circle of learning and application. Through this process, we aimed to bolster students’ civic awareness and bring positive change to an entire community.

In fact, service learning is especially relevant in English as a foreign language education. Practical use of classroom tools can be a powerful language teaching style. It provides practical, meaningful contexts on language use as well as active engagement with language. The question, however, is how to create an English-based service project program in Japan, where English is not the main language? For us, the answer is social activism. In order to reach a broad base and create meaningful change within Japan, social activists need to reach a global audience. This can be achieved by using English to get their message out to the world. This was our aim with the Nagashima Project, but we can see parallels in other forms of social activism such as the Students Emergency Action for
Liberal Democracy-s (SEALDs) group. That group and other forms of social protest have begun using English to draw global attention to pressing social and political issues in Japan, and their policy of using English is articulated across their social media, internet sites, and published histories and manifestos (Takahashi × SEALDs, 2015; SEALDs, 2015).

In the case of the Nagashima Project, we designed the course to include both classroom and social dialogues. The project opened on September 14, 2015, with a day of intensive study at Otemae. Students arrived at school at 9 AM and stayed until 6 PM, and took notes diligently in their notebooks (see Tanaka in this volume for the importance of notebooks in this project). These notebooks allow students to take notes, write draft translations, and process important information as well as keep a diary. The notebooks not only allow feedback and information consolidation, but they are an assessment tool when service learning is implemented as part of an EFL course.

The day started with a lesson in the history of health and Hansen’s disease, led in Japanese by Professor Ozaki Kōji. In particular, Ozaki discussed the ideas and the activities of the first director of Nagashima Aisei-en, Mitsuda Kensuke in the lesson he conducted on September 14. Mitsuda was among the key persons who passionately advocated for an isolation policy targeting Hansen’s Disease patients before and after World War II. Assessments of his achievements, however, are divided even today. His flagrant violation of human rights are criticized by many people, but on the other hand, not a few people praise him for his studies on pathology and what many saw as his compassionate actions on behalf of sufferers. For example, a Japanese-language version of the popular website Wikipedia explains that Mitsuda’s segregation policy was rather useful during an era in which discrimination against leprosy patients was prevalent and the Japanese government did not take any other effective measures to protect them (“Mitsuda Kensuke,” Wikipedia). Ozaki later reflected on his lesson with the students, wondering if the view presented on popular websites such as Wikipedia was truly correct. Above all, he sought to urge students to develop careful and nuanced ideas about what Mitsuda did.

Kathryn Tanaka then gave an additional history lesson in English. This was followed by a discussion of Hansen’s disease and human rights, with Professor Shikata Yoshiaki discussing his experiences volunteering at Tokyo’s Zensho-en in the 1960s. He talked about the changes in the institution immediately after the introduction of Promin. His experiences in volunteering in an institution where many of the residents were close to his own age impacted many of the students, who wrote in their notebooks about the new insight they gained through his stories. Shikata himself reflected on his time with the students, noting that their enthusiasm and interest in the subject delighted him and gave him new energy. Like Tanaka, Shikata expressed how inspired he was by the students and the time he spent with them. Shikata’s lesson ended with a discussion of human rights and social activism, led again by Kathryn.

After a break for lunch, John Jackson introduced the question of the former quarantine facilities and dark tourism. Drawing on work by Stone and Sharpley, Nagashima Aisei-en’s curator, Tamura (2015), and Iide (2015), Jackson introduced students to the concept of Nagashima as an important cultural and historical destination in terms of domestic and possibly international tourism and its potential as a UNESCO world heritage site. In his lesson Jackson introduced the term “dark tourism” and encouraged the students to decide if this label was
applicable to the island of Nagashima and all it represented. Students gave their personal interpretations of dark tourism, remarked frankly on their misgivings and preconceptions and shared opinions and outlined reasons for their motivation for participating in the project. It confirmed to Jackson, the primary motive was a desire to participate in a project that would educate and promote understanding, compassion and reconciliation among members of society – which upon reflection, reinforced in Jackson the same belief.

The next lesson was an introduction to translation theory and practice. Tanaka introduced students to common translation theories and practical techniques, as well as a discussion of specialized language at Nagashima. She also covered questions of social discrimination and linguistic power; foregrounding language issues students would need to keep in mind. One important lesson that was reiterated throughout the course of study was to not feel pity for the people who reside on Nagashima, but understand their story and its importance.

Tanaka led several units during the day of intensive study at Otemae, in addition to leading the students at Nagashima. She noted that language sensitivity training was especially important, as language often reflects social prejudice. In her lessons on translation, human rights, and survivor activities, she sought to highlight the importance of linguistic sensitivity in the translation project. Through detailed discussions of the interconnections of history, language, and social stigma, Kathryn sought to make students aware of the interconnections of language and society and the power in their project.

The final lesson of the day was an introduction to what to expect over the next three nights and four days while the students stayed on Nagashima. Students learned the rules for respectful behavior there and went over what would be expected of them. Aisei-en has a guesthouse for visitors, and while we were allowed to stay there, students were responsible for cooking and cleaning. Thus, the expectations and responsibilities of the students, in addition to the final review of their materials was led by Tanaka at the end of the day.

On Nagashima

On September 15, students and three faculty members departed Otemae to Nagashima Aisei-en in the morning.

Upon their arrival, students unloaded the bus and went to join a tour of the history museum and the grounds of the hospital. During these tours, students began to learn the history firsthand. This was important because some of the terminology and content of the materials that students aimed to translate could only be properly understood by studying the history and experiences of people who suffered from the illness.

After the tour, students returned to the guesthouse and made dinner. They then met to map out the translation goals and the practicalities that needed to be met in order to achieve their goals. Students were in charge of dividing up tasks and managing the translations. Kathryn gave them the material that needed to be done and the deadline by which she wanted the translations. The students were then responsible for coordinating their work and meeting the deadline. Their first goal was to translate a map of the island, a GPS tour guide script, and a brochure and map so that foreign visitors can learn the history of the island and its landmarks.

Students naturally divided into pairs or decided to work alone. Some students who were less confident in their English abilities worked in a team, while more confident students worked alone. In the end, the group had to work as a team to produce a completed final draft. The relative freedom seemed beneficial to most students. Those that needed it took advantage of faculty guidance and asked for help when they needed it, and students all visited the sites and used the archives to hunt for material when they needed more information in order to accurately translate.
Seeing the history and studying life in the hospital firsthand was very important for the translations to succeed.

**Challenges and Successes**

One of the obvious challenges of the project was securing institutional support and funding to make the project possible. The nature of the project meant that students had to pay a nominal course fee so that faculty could purchase food, arrange for transportation and secure insurance for participants. Part of these costs was covered by an educational grant, Otemae University’s Presidential Special Research Grant. This lessened the burden on students and streamlined the logistics of the project, as we were able to use Otemae’s shuttle buses for transportation to the island. Without university support, such projects become more difficult. It would not be impossible to partner with a local museum or archive but overnight travel and on-site working translation camps would become impractical.

At the same time, this type of project is open to criticism because of its unorthodox education style. While many recognize the value of such experiences, other scholars have expressed concerns about the ethics of poorly planned community-based service learning projects, the false ideals and worldviews underpinning such projects, and the possibility of exploitation in the local community (Butin, 2006; McKnight 1996). Similarly, some scholars and activists have expressed concerns with the movement to push for UNESCO World Heritage Site status for the Hansen’s disease hospitals. The promotion of the sites as part of the increasingly popular field of dark tourism has also met with severe censure in some circles, a point that was brought forward by Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation representative Kay Yamaguchi during the October 24th symposium discussed below. While acknowledging and respecting such criticisms, our hope is that projects like this can become the start of a productive dialogue about the benefits and demerits of social activism, tourism, and Hansen’s disease in Japan. We were frank in acknowledging and even highlighting sensitive or controversial topics in our conversations and lectures to the students.

A more practical problem involved not controversy but the logistics of the project itself. Due to diverse English levels and differences in motivation, students found the workload to be uneven. Although they decided who would be responsible for what, in the end the stronger students and natural leaders found themselves doing extra work for their peers. This led to frustration and dissatisfaction on the part of some students (see Tanaka, in this volume); students frankly complained that their peers did not take the project seriously enough or on occasion their mood was too light-hearted for such a serious topic. The biggest challenge by far was therefore trying to create a balance between enjoying the island and appreciating the home the residents had built there, and the serious and often sad nature of the work we came to do. There was no clear or easy resolution to this issue.

**successes**

Despite the challenges, overall the project can be considered successful based on three main criteria. First, and most importantly, our goals were met and exceeded. Not only did students translate the map, tour brochure, and GPS audio script, they also managed to complete an additional translation of rules and guidelines for the use of the
GPS. All documents were submitted to the curator, Tamura Tomohisa, before we left Nagashima.

In addition, students overwhelmingly had a positive experience and all recorded measures of both academic and personal growth in their journals. Even the less motivated students actively engaged with the material and came away with new ideas and a changed idea about discrimination in Japan. This must be considered a success. Finally, in addition to the journals, students themselves were exceptionally positive about the experience. In fact, nine out of the ten students have asked to go again, despite the fact it costs them money and a week of their summer vacation to participate.

**Continuation: Sharing**

A main tenent of service learning is the cycle of education and sharing. What starts in the classroom goes into the community before coming back into the classroom. After our return from Nagashima, on Oct. 24th, the Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation and Otemae University jointly hosted the international symposium, “Families Speak: Ties to the Future –From Malaysia and Japan~” (家族が語る―未来への絆〜マレーシアと日本より〜). Students from several classes were required to attend the bilingual symposium, and in an informal lunch event prior to the symposium, students presented their work at Nagashima and shared messages they felt were important. These presentations allowed them to consolidate their thoughts and receive feedback from our international participants. It also helped students develop confidence in their English-speaking ability. The posters they created for the session are reprinted below.

About 25 teachers, symposium participants, and symposium organizers participated in the presentation. Our students’ work was met with great enthusiasm and the panelists from Malaysia and Tokyo in particular expressed great interest and asked many questions. In presenting their work to an international audience in English, students began to think about the importance of their local work on an international level, as is clearly demonstrated in the student reflections that follow this article.

![Image 4. Students share their posters with international guests](image4.jpg)

In addition, their posters and their work were displayed in a special exhibit within our library. This allowed other students to ask them questions, and for faculty members unable to attend the symposium to see their work as well. The exhibit was very popular, with more than 100 exhibit brochures printed and distributed to interested
members of the public. The exhibit as well as the symposium proved to be a great success in continuing the dialogue beyond the classroom.

Finally, students also took the core lessons they learned after the symposium and addressed them in courses. In particular, in the classes that were required to attend the symposium spent a lesson doing wrap-up activities that

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<td>Don’t discrimination.</td>
<td>We have to action.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Government laws could change the entire life of person.</td>
<td>Don’t take life for granted.</td>
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<td>Don’t forget the history of Hansen’s Disease.</td>
<td>We have to know about Hansen’s Disease</td>
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<td>We should know Hansen’s Disease history</td>
<td>If you have strong feeling, anything can be possible.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hansen’s Disease is a serious problem.</td>
<td>It is important time to spend with our family.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don’t forget this tragedy.</td>
<td>I thanked my health.</td>
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<th><strong>Group 3</strong></th>
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<td>We must take over the legacy of Hansen’s Disease</td>
<td>Love can cross borders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Everyone have some rights, so we must not have a biased.</td>
<td>Family love is an irreplaceable.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We must know (or learn) about people who suffer discrimination</td>
<td>Love is everything</td>
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*Figure 1. Group responses to lessons from the symposium*
helped students articulate the main points. In these classes, the majority of the students had not participated in the Nagashima Project, yet they still benefited from the presentations of their peers and the symposium itself.

In one reading class of about twenty mixed-level students (their TOEIC scores ranged from 400 to almost 600), for example, students were required to attend the symposium. During the next course period, the class went through their notes and made a list of keywords. Using the keywords, in groups they then wrote three main social lessons and three main personal lessons from the symposium. Student comments in this lesson are collected in Table 1, and demonstrate the ways in which students made the social lessons learned from the symposium relevant to their own lives.

Similar exercises were done in other courses, integrating course study with the symposium and student presentations. To give another example, in a Japanese literature course, students read “Life’s First Night,” a 1936 novella by a sufferer in the Tokyo institution, Hojo Tamio (1912-1937) (Hojo, 2015). Students reflected on his work and the symposium together, creating a very productive dialogue between literary texts and social activism.

While integration into classroom dialogue made the symposium a richer educational experience for the

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I think some people already knew, but I want to write about this weekend, too. My school had a symposiums about Hansen disease in the world in this weekend.

I went to Nagashima Aisei-en national sanatorium in this summer and I learned about Hansen disease and listened to the story of people live in there. So, I know what Hansen disease and what they did and feel in there at that time. We can never say we can understand or image their feeling, I know. But we can image these much easier than feeling of people who were left obligation.

I never thought about it. When I listened that story from guests of this symposium, I was really impressed by these story. I couldn’t stop crying.... And we are young generation have to keep to learn and share with many people and younger generation what happened in Japan. Because if we wouldn’t share or keeping sharing anymore, more young generation live without knowing about it.

And we won’t be able to listen to the story from people who have experienced them directly anymore.. So museums are really important for us to know about Japanese history.. If I have some opportunities to visit, listen or learn about not only Hansen Disease but also Japanese history, I really want to join some project or go there!!!

I appreciate to give me great opportunities to learn and listen about Hansen disease...!

I will try to do my best to share about it!!

*Figure 2. A student post on social media*
students, it is important to note that the symposium also became the beginnings of new dialogues with their friends and families. As educators, we could see this valuable next step appearing on social media, where students posted about their experiences. It was particularly impressive that many students chose English to articulate their thoughts about the symposium, although discussions quickly became bilingual. Examples of social media student reflections are shown below and are reprinted here with student permission. All of these representative posts were quite popular, with many comments that we are unable to reprint here. Such engagement outside the classroom demonstrates a further way in which students reflected on the material and made it personal to them.

Figure 3. A second student’s bilingual post

Last Saturday, I joined Hansen disease symposium in Otemae uni. The story about separated two sisters, because Hansen couples weren’t allowed to raise their children by law in Malaysia, was so sad and moving. Then I realized what a terrible thing Japan did. Couples weren’t allowed to have a baby in Japan. A castration and abortion... That is cruel. How many future were killed by wrong knowledge and discriminations. However, patients lived strongly under the harsh situation and survived. There’re houses, shrines and art works which created by human in Nagashima former hansen disease sanatorium. Survivors still live there. Their average age is over 80. We all must listen to their voice to never make same mistakes again and understand what human right is. That’s the way to inherit the legacy of Hansen disease.

Figure 4. A third student’s post
Conclusion: Benefits and Challenges

This article has highlighted the importance of social activism and service learning in an international university education course. The benefits of such projects far outweigh demerits and the experience becomes an invaluable educational tool and continuing dialogue. While the Nagashima project was unique in the institutional support we received for the project itself and the help from the Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation to host the symposium, smaller-scale projects, such as volunteering at local museums or archives, could be a possibility. Many institutions would support small-scale presentation events featuring student work as well. While there are difficulties involved in such projects, the rewards for both students and teachers are immense and ongoing.

Student Posters, Presentations, and Reflections

Nagashima UNESCO project 2015
Harlene Amaquin

In 2015, in the middle of September I joined the Nagashima UNESCO project to translate Japanese to English information about a sanitarium for Hansen’s disease. Before I went to Nagashima Aisei-en, there was a day where teachers from my university gave lessons about the basic knowledge of HD. Beforehand, I had already heard some information about the disease so I already had an idea of what is HD. But through this one day lesson I had learned more things in detail, such as history, words choice and awareness of the surroundings. This information was very important because people who have not been to sanitarium before will not know about rules and behaviors.

When the day came, from Hyogo prefecture to Okayama prefecture I went with my school colleagues by school bus. The first sign of quarantine was seen from the bus window. The main island was separated from Aisei-en. A long bridge made us able to cross to the island. After arriving at Aisei-en it was very quiet but at the same time a very noisy island. Just the small talk from tourist voices could be heard. Radio played different channel on every corner for resident of the island who were unable to see. It is played from 8am to 9pm. Soon as our arrival we joined the tour of the island. On it, we saw a huge wall that was about to collapse because of the growing plants.
going through it. That “wall” was not an ordinary wall. It used to be the jail for the former HD patients who went against the rules of the island. Today the jail had only one side so it does not look like a jail anymore. It was just a wall. Describing what it was before we heard it was a small size, with one room a box size without open windows, but only a small door and a small slot to slide food for the prisoners. Their toilets were also included inside. Once someone was thrown in there they spent days or months waiting. They stayed in the hot summer or the very cold winter without anything to keep warm inside. Before HD was curable, many people around Japan who were infected by the disease had to go to the nearest sanitarium to be hospitalized according to the government orders. It did not matter their age, young or adults were all supposed to be there. Not all people who went there were happy because they had to be separated from their family and so the saddest part was HD had a strong effect on discrimination. For some family members outside, they eliminated the sick person’s name to avoid discrimination. For the former HD patients who were hospitalized, there was no other choice but to stay at the sanitarium. Some people who were very lonely and wished to be together with their family again someday expressed their feelings by writing poems. A famous poet, Akashi Kaijin, is known by his art work. Some of his poetry expresses how life was like inside the sanitarium.

My objective of going to Nagashima Aisei-en was to do a translation work in Japanese to English. It is for people who cannot understand Japanese to know the history and the story of Aisei-en. What I learned from my experience was it is important to learn the facts about the problem before judging it in a wrong way. I also learned I am part of the legacy of HD and it is important to share what I learned with people around me. I want people to know that there were other people who had suffered from Hansen’s disease, not because of the disease but because of how it was treated before. Also I want people to remember the importance to respect other people who have the same experience with discrimination from the view of the public.

The experience through Nagashima Project
Megumi Iguchi

Hansen’s disease- this project became a start to know about the illness in my life. At the beginning, I hesitate
to join in the project. Because, fear from the dark history. I always try to escape from the knowledge about wars, natural disaster and sad story. But this project was different. Of cause, I felt difficulty to saw and heard about the story of Hansen’s disease from survivors. But, actually people who live in Aiseien, they are living there happily. They lost name, friends, home, family and many other things, but still they do not forget the hope. And the other hand, this project was really good challenge for myself too. I learned the difficulty of translation. If I want to translate Japanese to English, I have to know many English grammar and vocabulary, and I have to know Japanese more deeply. The translation became a big challenge for my English skill. This project was great experience for me and I am so glad to join in the project with the great members.

**Nagashima report for Hansen symposium**

A speech given at the “Families Speak” Symposium

Miho Okamura

Hello, everyone. I’m Miho Okamura, 1st year student, Otemae University. In this summer, I joined the Nagashima UNESCO project. Nagashima used to be a national Hansen quarantined sanatorium. Still, a lot of survivors live there. Our university students are working together with people in Nagashima to remind people all over the world mistakes caused by wrong knowledges and discriminations against Hansen patients through registering for an UNESCO heritage.

I learnt a lot through a lot of talk with survivors and people who work there. So I have been looked forward to share my experience in Nagashima with you until today, I’m going to talk about impression on me by people there today. Let me explain more.

I had been a little afraid of people in Nagashima before I go there. Why I was afraid of them? Because I have never been suffered from a discrimination. So I couldn’t know their feelings. Only thing I can is just guessing.
result of it, I imagined a lot of madness and sadness. The thing which I feel before meeting with them was a fear for their negative image created by myself. However, it was different from real. If you look at the top right of my poster, you can see the picture people are smiling. The sitting guy on the chair is Mr. Nakao. Second guy from left is Mr. Kamiya. Both of them are survivors. I had felt madness and sadness against the world through the conversation with them, and also I noticed how much they’re proud of themselves. There were houses, temples and graves which all made by patients. There was an administration which was operated by patients. There were baseball clubs and poem clubs which many patients joined. There are evidences human lived strongly. I was impressed their strength under the tough situation.

The impression which is given by people in Nagashima encouraged me to be best in the situation. I had never expected I get it there. It was right choice to choose pushing myself to join this project. Now, a lot of survivors are over 80 years old. Don’t make time swallow a legacy by Hansen disease. We can learn a lot from it. There is a strong reason to become Nagashima as a UNESCO heritage. I’ll be very appreciated if this speech encourages you to have interests in Hansen disease and our Nagashima UNESCO project. Thank you for listening.

The same student reported her further response after the symposium:

**Life with no name**

Miho Okamura

I realized how the Japanese policy against people with Hansen’s disease was cruel through this symposium. I saw sisters who had parents who were people with Hansen’s disease. I could not feel for their story before the symposium. Even when we were having a little conversation together, I did not understand. Because people like them, who were the children of couples in a sanatorium in Japan, were killed by prejudice and the agreement of many people. It is usually impossible to meet families of people with Hansen’s disease in Japan but I did, I saw and talked with survivors. After their speech, I really felt them. I recognized them as survivors, as a piece of the legacy of Hansen disease, and I understood that they are just same as me. Then I was shocked because of how huge our loss is. Numerous lives were killed in Japan because of prejudice. Many people of that stolen generation might be surrounded by their children like my parents were now if they had been allowed to live.

Sharing my mind with the stolen generation from Malaysia taught the value of life which has no name and how to love things that never exist. It is necessary to listen to silent voices to understand Hansen issue of Japan. They are not here anymore but they were.

It is Buddhist idea. The world is a big circle. If you died once, you come alive again because you are the part of the circle. My life might be not allowed to exist under the Japanese policy of a long time ago. Now, I am feeling the stolen generation in Japan and I love them like I love myself.
My answer of the first impression of Nagashima Aisei-en
Yukari Miyazaki

My first impression of Nagashima was it had beautiful scenery and survivors of Hansen’s disease who still lived in Nagashima Aisei-en had warm atmosphere. After I came back from there, I often remember the island. And it is a strange thing that my memory of the island makes me calm. Why I have calm feeling? I tried to have the answer.

I know they have had severe experiences such as prejudice and discrimination in addition to suffering their illness. But stories that I heard directly from survivors were beyond my imagination. They were forced to be separated from their family members and friends to come the island. They changed their birth name and removed or erased their name from the family register. In a word, they were treated inhumanly.

Although they are completely cured now, they remain using fictitious name and cutting off communications with their family members. Furthermore they were not buried in their family grave after death. These ways are their consideration for their family members. They care less for themselves and more for family members. What warm heart they have!

I realize one answer to my question that survivors have struggled against their grief, distress and misery, and then they must have overcame them or accepted the disease as Sacki said to Oda in Life’s First Night written by Hojo Tamio. When they overcame their struggles they would obtain peace of mind. And their mind probably create beautiful scenery of the island. This is the reason I calm down when I remember the island and the people.

Nagashima
Nanao Tsukuda

I joined Nagashima project. I had never known what Hansens Disease is. The purpose of this project was translation information of Hansens Disease and Nagashima Aisei-en to try to register world heritage and for foreigner. Japanese and English are very different, so it is difficult for us to translate Japanese into English. I
learned what Hansen disease and what they did and feel in there at that time in there.

These history is called “Dark History”, and the sanatorium is called “Dark Truism”. I had never thought or worried about them, because it is not familiar for me and I thought these do not relate with me. However, my thought changed after joining this project. I am a Japanese, so I have to know about them as Japanese.

My school had a symposium about Hansen disease in the world after that project.

We can never say we can understand or image their feeling, I know. However, we can image these much easier than feeling of people who were left obligation.

I had never thought about it.

When I listened that story from guests of this symposium, I was really impressed by these story. I couldn’t stop crying.

And we are young generation, we have to keep to learn and share with many people and younger generation what happened in Japan. Because if we wouldn’t share or keep sharing anymore, more young generation live without knowing about it.

And we won’t be able to listen to the story from people who have experienced them directly anymore.

So museums are really important for us to know about Japanese history.

If I have some opportunities to visit, listen or learn about not only Hansen Disease but also Japanese history, I really want to join some project or go there!!!

I appreciate to give me great opportunities to learn and listen about Hansen disease!
I will try to do my best to share about it.
I have three things that I learned and felt when I went to Nagashima Aisei-en.

First, I learned about Hansen’s Disease. It is a very serious disease, and for many people there are bad aftereffects. Then, because the symptoms alter people’s appearance, people with Hansen’s disease also suffered discrimination even though they had been healed.

Second, I learned there is a community of HD’s survivors. There are a lot of communities of HD’s survivors in Japan. There, healthy people had to live with each other to cooperate with people with disabilities. Healthy people had to assist people with disabilities, and people with disabilities had to be grateful to the healthy person.

I think that it is a wonderful community.

Finally, I felt that there was very deep humanity and a bright personality in the persons with disabilities. It was a short period of three nights and four days, but I was really impressed and could feel the warmth of the people Aisei-en.

I think that it will not forget a lifetime that I went on this project. It was a really great experience.

References


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The student participants of the Nagashima project were:

- Harlene Amaquin, 2nd year student; Toru Honda, 2nd year student; Megumi Iguchi, 2nd year student; Takahiro Kuwamura, 2nd year student; Miho Okamura, 1st year student; Misaki Mikawa, 1st year student; Yukari Miyazaki, graduate student; Nanao Tsukuda, 2nd year student; and Kazuki Umemoto, 3rd year student. Harlene, Miho, Takahiro, Megumi, and Nanao also participated in the symposium poster presentation session on October 24th.

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