

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Self-Study Portfolios: The C-PLATS System in the EFL Classroom at Otemae University^注

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Abstract: In this conversation, we discuss Otemae University's groundbreaking educational platform, C-PLATS. We discuss the ways in which a portfolio-based learning system can be integrated into the classroom and the ways in which such a system promotes student participation. The notebook system raises student awareness and engagement with the material. Ultimately, it promotes independent thinking, problem-solving abilities, and motivation for learning. In our conversation, we talk about techniques we use with the portfolio system, its place in Otemae's educational philosophy, and the successes we have had with it in our classes.

Keywords: C-PLATS, student portfolio system, student participation

要約

以下の記録文は、大手前大学の先駆的教育方法である C-PLATS を題材として話し合われた対話のまとめである。ポートフォリオに基づいた学習システムが、講義においてどのように取り込まれているか、またこのシステムが学生の授業参加を促していることについて、見ていくことにする。またこれにより学生が教材をより深く理解することも可能となる。その結果、最終的には学生たちが自立的思考や問題解決能力を習得することになる。この対話においては大手前大学の教育方針の中でどのように本システムを利用するかについて、また講義内での成功事例についても述べられている。

キーワード : C-PLATS、ポートフォリオシステム、学生の授業参加

Introduction

Kathryn: Today we are going to talk about the C-PLATS (competency platforms) we have here at Otemae and how we connect it to problem-based learning in the classroom. We will going to cover the different bases that C-PLATS works to build: analysis and creativity, planning and presentation, action and social responsibility, communication, logical thinking, and teamwork and leadership (Ashihara, 2011). Problem-based learning works well with this system, as it is a student-centered, process-oriented classroom technique that makes the classroom more dialogic. The class is driven by open-ended questions that students must answer on their own. Students should reach consensus, but they can work at their own levels and approach the problem creatively in their own way. The self-

注 The self-learning portfolio system described in this article is drawn in part from an article that will appear in PASAA: A Journal of Language Teaching and Learning by Carlson (2015).

learning system should serve as the record of their journey towards the solution of their problem (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Thus, in our classes, each lesson is structured around a problem or question that students resolve together. One technique we use to record student progress is a notebook or portfolio system. Now, we would like to be clear that this is an in-class, paper-based portfolio. In my case, it is a collection of worksheets and assignments, but students can also use a diary-style notebook. The portfolio we focus on here, then, is different from the campus-wide, cloud portfolio system introduced in this journal, although both portfolio systems draw on the same student-centered, problem and ability-based educational philosophies (Ashihara et al, 2015).

Gordon: The self-learning portfolio is simply a name for a notebook or some kind of file system our students use. It's kind of a record of what they independently learn. That also means the notebook or portfolio should be personalized, something individual to each student. The reason it is best to use some kind of portfolio, or book, is because the students have something material to hold in their hands. It's not just a gadget such as an i-pad or i-phone. Compiling an actual book is like leaving ones footprints on a trail—there is a visible log of how far one has traveled. Despite all the user-friendly and popular technology that we find these days, most studies published since the early 1990s confirm earlier conclusions: paper still has advantages over screens (Ferris, 2013). Maintaining a real book has a profound effect on how they keep it, how they take care of it, how they use it. So I encourage people to personalize it, make it their own, design it the way they like it, put some art work in it, whatever they like. By doing so, they form a portfolio that is familiar to them as a favorite pair of jeans, psychologically setting the stage for quality content to be composed inside.

Kathryn: I agree that the materiality is very important, although I use worksheets. It doesn't have to necessarily be personal, but familiarity with the form is an important part of the process. Thus if you have a standard format worksheet, that works well.

Gordon: Right. The point I would like to make here is that it is important that the worksheets at least be put together in some kind of system so the student's work is not disorganized. They need to keep track of what they do. When it's all compiled in an orderly fashion, they have something to look back on and refer to.

Kathryn: Absolutely. Assessment can be a tricky subject in problem-based learning (PBL). Constant feedback from both the instructor and their peers is necessary, but self-evaluation is an important part of the process as well. The ability to have a notebook or folder of class work to look back on is a cornerstone of problem-based learning, as students can look back and assess their own progress (Bridges, 1996). Ashihara, Hata and Masada touch on the importance of self-evaluation for Otemae Students in their article, and we do self-assessment. Now let's look at the components of the self-learning portfolio, whether it be worksheets or notebooks.

Gordon: We use PBL as the foundation of our EFL classes at Otemae University. One of the outcomes we expect is increased language ability. To this end, we encourage language development

as part of the preparation process. Each class is centered around a reading assignment or something to research. It could be from the Internet, a text, or an article that we provide, but they need to work on it outside of class. The issues presented in the homework are the problems for the class to address. Now, this can depend on the class or the teacher, but personally, I ask the students to start their portfolio writing with ten or more new words or phrases that they picked up from the reading.

Kathryn: The base text can also be from a video clip, a movie, or a song. I've used newspapers, music and videos with this system. But there must be a base text that all students reference. And from that base text they go ahead and pick out, as you said, new words or phrases.

Gordon: The reason why I ask them to pick words out independently is because teacher-selected vocabulary places kind of a ceiling on how students are able to progress (Haggard, 1986). And more competent students might already know words that less-competent students struggle with it. It's easy to assume, therefore, that higher-level learners will exert less effort in the class than some of their counterparts who wrangle with the material. The balance in work and effort seems unfair. Some kind of equivalence is achieved, however, when more proficient students independently choose the most ambitious words in the text while lower-level aspirants prefer easier, higher-frequency words just to comprehend the text. If leading students already understand all of the words in the text, they're still able to select key words and practice them in various forms and contexts. They 're charged with writing original sentences, often changing noun, adjective, and verb forms of the words that they choose. Through this process, words that they once merely understood actually become used and internalized. In a nutshell, higher assumption is placed on more advanced students while strugglers work to the best to their abilities. In fact, it's often the case that the higher-level students end up devoting the greatest amount of time into their assignments. This cannot happen if all of the vocabulary is either book or teacher-selected.

Kathryn: It is also worth noting that despite different levels, almost every student will have at least one word in common, maybe two. Thus, you can still do vocabulary exercises together based on words in common even if student levels are different.

Gordon: Very important, because it gives more reinforcement with the words that they're learning. Some people might think it's risky to give them such independence, but when you give students the ability to exercise their own judgment, they start to grow as the teacher becomes a facilitator of learning rather than an imparter of knowledge. This enables learners to make informed decisions about how to move their learning forward and make better choices. With self-assessment students no longer have to depend on the teacher to tell them what they need to do next (Farrell, Thomas & Jacobs, 2001). The students take some of the lead in their learning instead of a teacher or book dispensing vocabulary. This is not to say they have total freedom in the words they use; I have a few criteria. First is that the chosen words must be relevant to the text and the meaning contained. Second, the words are preferably useful and applicable to every day use, and third, choices should generally be appropriate

to the level of the students.

Kathryn: I work in a similar way. Sometimes I give my students absolutely no limits or guides as to what they can pick for vocabulary, but sometimes if the students do need guidance, I require that they choose, for example, at least one adjective, or at least one phrasal verb. Then they must pay attention to the parts of speech and how the words are used. This allows students to engage with vocabulary in a variety of different ways – from having it very structured to giving students absolutely no limits.

The beginning of the portfolio system is words and phrases. The next part is to ask students to use the words in an original sentence. That helps them to reinforce the vocabulary. I often have them write sentences on the board in class too, and we correct them together.

Gordon: I've been criticized for having them write original sentences because they might take the words out of context. However, I find that as students come together in class and share their sentences and words, they tend to correct each other, which is student teaching. By sharing in pairs or small groups, the words are fortified rather than weakened. Students deepen their internalization as they discuss their selections and sentences with their counterparts in class. In essence, they actually advise each other on the vocabulary that they have acquired through their own research and thought processes. Through the act of teaching, students get to consolidate what they have learned, which leads to a deeper understanding of the ideas to be taught (King, 2002).

Kathryn: The next part of the portfolio is picking the main points from the base text. What is the author or director of the base text trying to demonstrate or show in that particular section or article we looked at? For newspaper articles this is typically fairly easy, and you can ask students to pick out several main points. A movie, or a literary work, or a song, can be more subjective. I ask them what they think that the song is about, or what's important about it rather than what is a main point.

After they articulate what they think are the main points, the third part of the notebook system is to write their opinions about what they read. I think that naturally building on the main points of the text and learning to formulate what you think about is an important skill, and one that doesn't come naturally too within any context. In a sense, this is part of the pedagogical scaffolding embedded in this PBL process.

The final part of this self-learning portfolio is asking students to prepare three questions to ask others in class—questions that are based on, but not about, the material. Here is an example from a course I teach called English in Media (Figure 1). In this class, we look at the way Japanese culture and society is represented in English-language media. I adapted the text from a Guardian newspaper article about the dark history of a popular tourist destination (Coldwell, 2014). The students read the text, then answer the questions on the worksheet. The worksheet then becomes the basis for our class discussion. Every week we read a new article, and the collection of worksheets becomes their final portfolio.

Gordon: My notebooks work similarly, as you can see from my examples (Figure 2). Here, no matter what the student level, the three questions are about content rather than the assigned text. For

**RABBIT ISLAND:
A JAPANESE HOLIDAY RESORT FOR BUNNIES**

Okunoshima, an island where Japan produced poison gas during the second world war, is now a haven for friendly rabbits.
Will Caldwell



As islands that are occupied by wild animals go, Okunoshima, better known as Usaga Jima or Rabbit Island, is probably the cutest.

Situated in the Inland Sea of Japan, the small island is occupied by hundreds of wild rabbits that roam the forests and paths, chase tourists, appear in viral videos and just generally lounge around. They also provide a much needed counterbalance to the island's otherwise dark history – as the production site for Japan's chemical weapons during the second world war.

Of course, Japan being the birthplace of kawaii – the distinct cultural appreciation of all things cute – the bounding herds of friendly rabbits are a much bigger attraction than the Poison Gas Museum. But although the source of the rabbits remains a mystery, it may be that the origins of the island's fluffy residents is intertwined with its history as manufacturer of chemical weapons.

Between 1929-1945, the Japanese army secretly produced over 6,000 tons of poison gas on Okunoshima, which was removed from maps of the area and chosen because of its discreet location and distance from civilian populations. At the time, an unfortunate colony of rabbits was brought to the island in order to test the effects of the poison.

While some claim the rabbits that live there now are relatives of the test bunnies that were freed by the workers at the end of the war, others are less convinced; it has been reported that all the rabbits were killed when the factory ceased production. The other theory is that eight rabbits were brought to the island by schoolchildren in 1971, where they bred until they reached their current population, which is potentially in the thousands. And with the island being a predator-free zone – dogs and cats are banned – if the number of rabbits hasn't hit the thousands yet, it's inevitable it will do soon.

Now the island, a short ferry ride from the mainland, is a popular tourist resort with a small golf course, camping grounds and beautiful beaches. Tours are also given of the now derelict poison gas facilities, while ruins of military outposts are dotted around the island.

In some ways the allure of the bunnies is similar to that of Japan's and, more recently, England's cat cafes. Most apartments in Japan forbid pets, so an opportunity to enjoy the company of a furry friend is a welcome one.

Visitors to Okunoshima can buy food for the remarkably tame rabbits, who became an online hit in February when a video of a woman being chased by a "stampede" of rabbits was posted online.

Adapted from:
<http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2014/jun/02/rabbit-island-okunoshima-japan-holiday-resort-bunnies>

Name: _____

Write down ten new vocabulary words and their definitions.

1. _____ 2. _____
3. _____ 4. _____
5. _____ 6. _____
7. _____ 8. _____
9. _____ 10. _____

Use the vocabulary words in an original sentence!

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Write down three questions you have after reading this article.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Write down three main points you found in the article.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Why do you think animal cafes or animal islands are so popular now?

Have you ever been to a tourist site that promotes tame animals? Where?

Do you think dark histories can be forgotten when places are made cute or pretty?

Finally, write down your opinion about the article. For example, you can write about dark tourism in Japan.

Figure 1: An example of an assignment from English in Media, adapted from Caldwell (2014).

example, you can see they don't ask "What does "exist" mean?" but instead they ask "When do you think it is OK to tell a lie?" or "What situation do you tell a lie?" This is a point that we will return to later, but you can also see that no matter what the level of the student, their work contributes to the class discussion.

Student A is near the top of the class. She has done two homestays in New Zealand and is able to carry a normal conversation in English. Since she has one of the highest level of English among her peers, she is encouraged to get the other members of her group involved in the dialogue that they have in class. Higher expectations are placed on her to do work according to her level.

The Art of Lying by Mark Twain

Key Words:

humorous (面白い) *My teacher thinks he is **humorous**, but nobody laughs at his jokes.*
(adjective) par. 1 *Also: humor, humorously, sense of humor

complaint (文句) *I continually make **complaints** against the noise next door, but it won't stop.*
(noun) par. 2 *Also: to complain

obvious (明らか) *It is **obvious** that my boyfriend is cheating on me.*
(adjective) par. 2, 4 *Also: obviously

sensible (賢明な) ***Sensible** people do not lie about their age on job applications.*
(adjective) par. 3 *Also: senseless

unbearable (我慢できない) *That movie was **unbearable**. It's the worst I have ever seen.*
(adjective) par. 4

chronic (慢性的) *I have a **chronic** headache from my teacher.*
(adjective) par. 5

deception (ごまかし) *My teacher is full of **deception**.*
(noun) par. 5 *Also: to deceive, deceptively, deceptively

on purpose (わざと) *I stepped on his foot **on purpose** because he was a jerk.*
(adverb) par. 6

thoroughly (完全に) *I **thoroughly** checked my bag, but wallet was gone.*
(adverb) par. 6

awkwardly (ぎこちなく) *He **awkwardly** put his arm around my shoulder and gave me a kiss.*
(adverb) par. 6

a great deal (とても) *I'm in **a great deal** of pain from lacrosse practice.*
(adverb) par. 7

1

Student B is a fair student who has completed all of his homework. He is not the best English speaker in the group, but not the worst either. You will notice that he makes some mistakes, however, puts forth some effort into his work. There is a lot of room for improvement, but what he writes is still usable in class.

The Art of Lying

Key Words:

humorous (滑稽) *My father is **humorous**, but his jokes is black.*
(adjective) par. 1

suggest (提案する) *Can you **suggest** a nice restaurant?*
(verb) par. 2

obvious (明らか) *She is **obviously** a good choice.*
(adjective) par. 2, 4

sensible (賢明な) *I try to be a **sensible** shopper.*
(adjective) par. 3

unbearable (我慢できない) *My mother's sinning is **unbearable**.*
(adjective) par. 4

exist (存在する) *Does love **really exist**?*
(verb) par. 5

gesture (ジェスチャー) *These chocolates are **gesture** of my love.*
(noun / verb = to make a gesture) par. 5

on purpose (わざと) *I forgot my homework. **on purpose***
(adverb) par. 6

gracefully (優雅に) *She **gracefully** skated on the ice.*
(adverb) par. 6

examine (調べる、検査する) *I **examined** my girlfriend's phone, but I found nothing.*
(verb) par. 6

3

Main Points:

"Mark Twain says that lying is something that humans have always done and will always do."
"People lie more poorly today than ever."
"Most sensible people agree that lying is something that we cannot live without."
"Truth should not be spoken all the time. It can hurt people and cause problems."
"There is no such thing as a person who doesn't lie. No such person has ever existed."
"Lying is universal and necessary. All human beings do it."
"Lying should be done for purposes of good, not evil."
"We can improve ourselves and society if we study how we lie. We need to improve this skill."

Questions

1.) When do you think it is okay to tell a lie?
2.) Do you think that the government lies to us? What kind of lies do they tell?
3.) Have you ever told a white lie? What was it?

Opinion

I believe that lies are usually used to control people and manipulate situations. Parents, teachers, companies, and even governments lie to manipulate people. They know that they can get people to do almost anything if they make people believe what they say is true. Even in everyday life, people use lies as a selfish way to get what they want. That's why I think that lying is wrong in most situations.

When I was little, my parents told me lies to control my actions to either control or protect me. For example, I remember my mother did not want me to get into her things in the basement, so she told me to stay away from there because there was an evil man lived there. If he found me, he would chain me, fill me with many babies and then eat them when they were born. I believed her and stayed away from the basement because of fear. Maybe she had good intentions, but it really taught me not to trust what she says to be true.

After the Fukushima nuclear plant was destroyed by the tsunami in 2011, the government has continually told us that we are safe from radiation. Now we know that cancer in people of all ages is rising quickly across the Kanto area. Four years later, the plants are still broken, and radiation continues to go into the sea and the air. Now nobody believes what the government or power company says to be true.

Trust is the most important thing to have in any relationship. It is very hard to live in a society and work with people who we cannot trust. Can I trust the government? Can I live with a lying boss? Can I live with a lying husband? I cannot. Therefore, I think that lying should be avoided at all times.

2

Main Points:

"Lying is something that humans have always done."
"People today are poor liars."
"Most sensible people agree that lying is something that we cannot live without."
"Truth should not be spoken all the time. It can hurt people and cause problems."
"Lying should be done for good, not evil."
"We can improve ourselves and society if we study how we lie."

Questions

1.) What is most recent lie you told?
2.) Have you ever tell a funny lie, like a prank?
3.) Would you lie to politician or criminal to protect your family?

My Opinion

I feel that lying is important to a life. I agree with Mark Twain. If we do not lie, we hurt other people's feeling. For example, my girlfriend saw some photo of me at the sea with another girl on my phone. When she asked me who it is, I told her it's my cousin from Okinawa. I only saw the other girl for about five weeks, so the girlfriend does not need to know about other girl. So we are happy now, but we might not be together if I told him truth. We are both happy now, so it's better she not know truth.

4

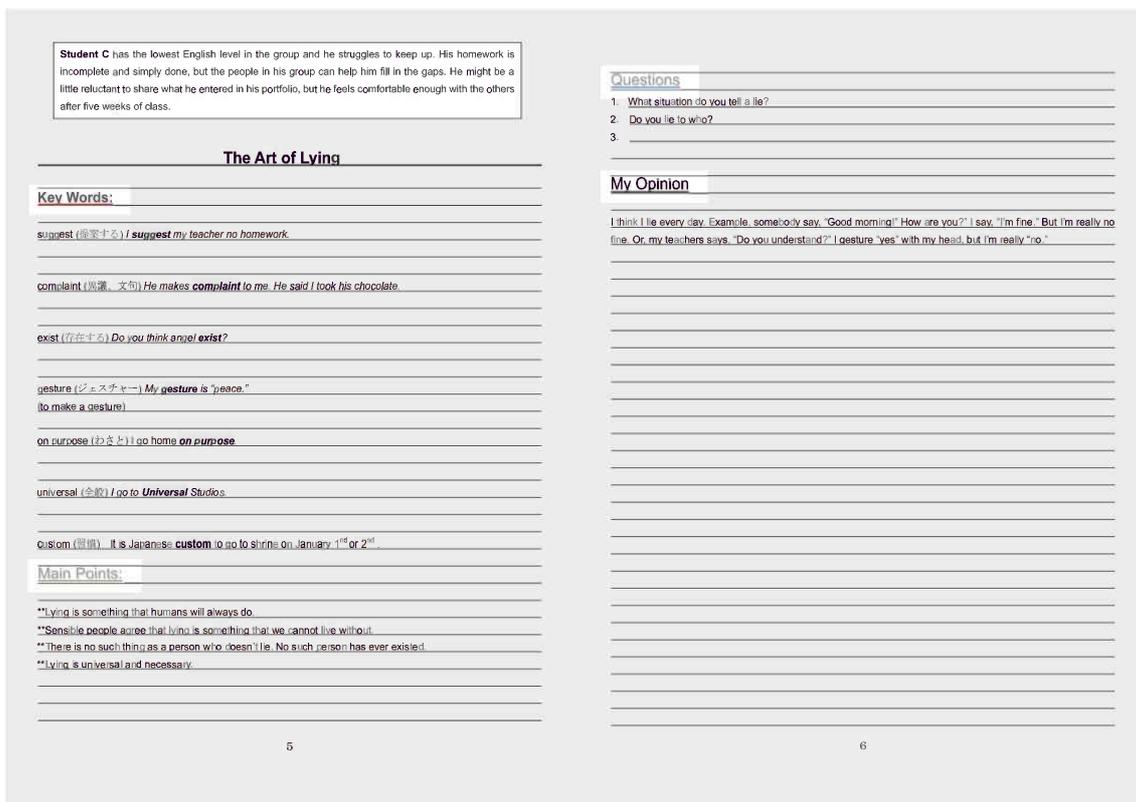


Figure 2: Three examples of student work from Advanced Vocabulary and Note Taking.

Gordon: These are some examples to introduce the notebook system, but now we would like to talk about how this system works within the larger framework of C-PLATS at Otemae University.

THINKING BASE

Creativity, Logical Thinking, Analysis

Kathryn: How does this system work in practice, and how does it support the goals of PBL and the competencies of C-PLATS? I think the best way to begin this conversation is to go through the C-PLATS bases and talk about the portfolio system and what it achieves. Let's start with the thinking base and creativity.

Gordon: I think the place we most often see student creativity is in the questions. I encourage this, and I'll sometimes have them ask hypothetical questions.

Kathryn: Students are very good at asking creative questions. I teach a course on Japanese literature in English translation, and in that class, many of the student questions are hypothetical. Students naturally extend their thoughts beyond the text. When we read a short story, half the students will ask, "What does the main character do after the story ends?" – a kind of imaginative exercise that extends beyond the text. This expansion is part of the active reading process. From my students, I've learned to embrace this creative extension of source materials, and I'm very grateful for that.

Gordon: Students are quite creative. They can also generate some very lively conversations based on what topics our texts cover. If the subject is about single motherhood, for example, a male student might say, “How would you feel if you were a stay-home dad and your wife went out and earned the money?” They really get into these kinds of issues, and that lays the groundwork for extended conversations.

Kathryn: I learn so much from the ways students use their creativity to elucidate the material. But if they bring creativity to their questions and the angles from which they approach the material, then they also bring logical thinking, or planning, into their assignments as well.

Gordon: One of the most important parts of planning or logically engaging the material is doing the homework and preparation before they come to class.

Kathryn: That’s a huge part of planning. But also as we said when we introduced the system, students also work at their own level. And that’s an important part of planning – to recognize your level.

Gordon: Students quickly realize that the class depends on their planning and involvement. Consequently, some students will excel and do above what is required or expected.

Kathryn: On the other hand, sometimes certain students won't prepare for class. Motivated students can really excel, but students who don't complete their homework are still able to participate in the class. You'll always have some students that just aren't as motivated, but this system allows them to participate and learn almost unwillingly.

Gordon: Right. The lower-level students are at least able to contribute according to their ability and often beyond their ability.

Kathryn: Under this system, when students don't complete the assignment, they are still able to participate but they rely heavily on their classmates to catch them up. The fact that if they don't do their assignment they must rely on their peers often motivates them to do at least a minimum amount of preparation. Students quickly learn there are consequences in not doing their work, not only for them, but for the entire class.

Gordon: And in real life that’s what happens. Students have to take responsibility for their own learning. For some of them, it’s the first time that they’ve had autonomy in their whole lives, and that’s great. It’s a whole new concept for them.

Kathryn: It’s not only in the questions, but also in the articulation of their opinions for the notebook system that we can see the impact of the thinking platform of C-PLATS.

Gordon: Before we begin doing this system in class, many, if not most students, really do not know how to express an opinion. That is why it’s imperative to invest time into teaching them exactly how to formulate opinions in various ways. For example, I first teach the students how to give a strong opinion, a moderate opinion, or even a mild opinion for times when they need to be a little more diplomatic. This is followed up by giving them a chance to exercise what they just learned by

throwing them some questions to solicit some mild, diplomatic, or strong points of view. When asking stimulating or provocative questions, this activity generates a great deal of fun, and lot of laughter results as we develop these skills. As you can imagine, it's really productive to actually teach them how to form and opinion before we ask them to express one (Carlson, 2015).

Kathryn: Yes, and the scaffolding that is inherent in the portfolio system really does allow the skill of stating your opinion to progress naturally out of engagement with the material. But students do need to learn how to articulate their opinions. I often assign incredibly controversial texts that they almost must oppose. I've used that technique in classes that have been particularly shy about expressing their own opinion. I will assign them material that would be very difficult to agree with.

Gordon: Right. And mind you, these opinions are supposed to be formed before they get to class. And so even students who struggle to expressing themselves at least arrive with something to contribute. And as we base the class off the notebook, I've found that when I start asking questions to the class I receive great answers because many of them already have some thoughts and ideas prepared beforehand. They've already thought about it, and so it's quick and easy to begin a productive class discussion.

Kathryn: And as a teacher, when you ask questions or the students ask each other questions, you're creating a more productive and inclusive dialogue than you would if you were just lecturing.

Gordon: It takes about half a semester, average, for this process to really take root. Then things start working the way you hope it will.

Kathryn: The next aspect of the thinking platform that we'd like to talk about is analysis. Students analyze the material when they expand it and find ways it is relevant to their own lives.

Gordon: Yes, I'd like to say a bit about personalizing the material. When students take on an assignment, they do not only try to understand the language in it, but they start to develop analytical or critical thinking skills in order to articulate what they think about it. I continually ask the students to connect the material to their own lives and form questions based on those affiliations. That's why the questions that they come up with become so important to their own development. And they start to think of how social issues relate to their daily lives as they transcribe their questions in their portfolios. They never fathomed that they could achieve such a feat in English! Even some of the more competent students say, "Teacher, I've never done this before. I've never had to come up with ideas like this, and it's hard!" Yet it's very gratifying to read the student's evaluations at the end of the course and see that every single one of them has come up with new ideas and new beliefs as a result of taking the class.

Kathryn: Fresh ideas and new approaches is, in fact, the ultimate goal of C-PLATS. It gives students new ways to approach material, new ways to think about material, and hopefully, it teaches them that there are different ways of including new ideas.

Gordon: In addition, they're doing it in another language, which blows their minds.

Kathryn: There's a freedom that comes with teaching content in English in Japan, I think. Certainly, articulating your thoughts in a foreign language requires an extra step of logical thinking, but you are also free from some of the associations that native speakers have.

Gordon: Could you elaborate on that? I think that sometimes when you speak in your native language, within your own culture, there's some kind of wall or barrier that kind of prevents you from saying or expressing certain things. But you're saying that when they're doing it in a second language, somehow, some of these barriers are removed?

Kathryn: Well, language is constitutive of culture, and vice versa. With culture comes social norms, social hierarchies, and things like that. Sometimes people feel a little bit constrained, especially in a language like Japanese where gender norms and social hierarchies are very much part of the language (Inoue, 2006). In fact, some students are drawn to the study of English specifically because they associate the language with greater freedom (Takahashi, 2012). For some students, there's a freedom that comes with learning a second language, and there's an ability, sometimes, to express yourself and say things you wouldn't necessarily say in your native language. This isn't only because of greater linguistic freedom, but also because part of learning a new language is learning to think more broadly. In short, if you're learning a second language, you're learning to think more deeply about the world in general. You see that not every society is the same, not every culture is the same, and you learn to think about things you haven't necessarily thought about before.

Gordon: I think that it is an important point to make, and I really want to highlight it because I don't hear anyone else talking about it very much. I would like to add that communicating in second languages can also allow people to be more direct. As they start to master the nuances of vocabulary, they tend to come across as a lot more honest because they may not have developed the skills to cloak words or meanings. They truly are not verbally able to skirt around a subject, so they learn to speak more directly because of it. There's an honesty in language learning as well, which to me is refreshing, because in Japanese culture, there can be a linguistic vagueness or indeterminacy, where it can be difficult to read cultural subtexts. Ultimately, my point is that some of those cultural barriers start to crumble as students express themselves in a language different from their own. Using logical thinking, students are able to think through the material and make it their own. They feel a sense of ownership that empowers them to express their opinions. In the classroom, we solidify the skills they need to know how to discuss and voice their opinions. Logical thinking occurs when students take the material we've given them and then relate it to their own lives.

Kathryn: Indeed, with this system, students learn how to critically engage with the content. They're not passive readers anymore. They become active readers, formulating their own opinions, actively engaging with the text. Although these are all thinking steps, they are in fact inherently active steps as well. Students not only learn to ask questions and share opinions, but they also learn to filter, summarize, and find key points.

Gordon: Right. And through doing it over and over they become better at it. Now, it's a little bit tedious, to be honest, in the beginning when they don't really have the feel for it. But the complaining about the homework recedes as they get the hang of it. And through doing it a few times, they become a lot faster at it, and they start investing less time in it. Why? Because they quickly develop the skill to filter and to summarize, and they didn't realize it's easier than they thought it was.

Kathryn: Excellent point—the thinking platform in this system becomes a subconscious skill. They don't even realize they're learning a new way to think. But that's what's so valuable about it. It becomes an active step that they can then use outside the classroom as well. C-PLATS is an on-going dialogue that is inherently active as students re-engage with not only the skills they're using and learning but with the materials as well.

ACTION BASE

Communication, Presentation, and Leadership

Kathryn: Let's move on to the second platform of C-PLATS, which is Action. The first step in Action that we'd like to talk about is communication. On the face of it, the ways in which this system fosters communication seem self-explanatory. The students learn concrete discussion skills, and they're getting communication tools to work with, which they make them their own. We should note that with this system, both written and verbal communication are fostered. They do the writing preparation before they come to class, and then this is verbally reinforced in class. Thus, they get verbal reinforcement of what they prepared on their own.

Gordon: And in the classroom, whether they be sharing key points or key words, there's some overlap. That repetition is really essential for them to absolutely absorb and remember it. That is to say, if they only read the text once, they are not going to remember it. They might write some things down, but that's not quite enough repetition to reinforce new vocabulary.

It's also important to note that the overlap is a process. Initially, students all come up with different ideas of what they think is relevant in the text. When they come together in class and review these points with a partner or group, they start to consolidate those points. Additionally, they find that one student might find an item that somebody else missed. As they develop the skills of abstracting the main points and summarizing, they start to consume less time trying to comprehend the essential parts of the passages. Furthermore, they are able to repeat, recall, and strengthen what they read and wrote with their counterparts when they meet in class.

Kathryn: We usually do the main points and go over them as a class rather than in pairs or with a partner, because I think that really brings out the diversity in how you can read in different ways. Going over the main points in class, as you say, is an invaluable technique for teaching them to read for content and pick up what's important in a base text. It is also an essential reinforcement of the

vocabulary and conversation skills embedded in the assignment.

Gordon: And when they come together and do this as a class or small group, what they do is have quick review and recollection of what they read. That helps in two ways. First of all, they can recall what they read from up to a week ago, and they can instantly come back to the topic. That way we don't have to tediously go through the entire text again with the whole class. It saves a lot of time for the teacher and takes up less class time. Sometimes on occasion, however, you might have students who haven't done their homework for one reason or another. Perhaps they were absent or lazy. So my second point is that when that occurs, such people are quickly brought up to date with what's happening as they go through the main points that their classmates created. They are then able to comprehend the discussion instead of being lost in a fog. It makes a big difference. It gets them caught up, and they are still able to participate and learn.

Kathryn: These are key points. I think the main ways communication skills are fostered in the action base is through concrete discussion. But, this system engages both verbal and written communication, and both are reinforced through the worksheets and their use in class.

The next platform of action that we'd like to talk about is Presentation. Of course, students present their opinions and their questions. This presentation encourages dialogue. Through this, students learn to consider the same issue from a variety of viewpoints that don't naturally occur to them. This is a particular strength of small universities with diverse student bodies like Otemae; you have students from so many different backgrounds come together and learn to listen to each other. They learn that you don't necessarily have to agree with everyone. You have to understand why someone has an opinion that's different than yours and why that is important. This is something that doesn't come naturally to a lot of people. But because students must present their opinions, they also learn to create a dialogue based on the presentation of those opinions.

Gordon: It is. And because everyone participates and presents their opinions, community is developed in the classroom. Some people start sharing some personal things which are pretty amazing, and this allows their peers to see a totally different perspective. They're hearing a point of view from somebody who, for example, comes from an abusive home situation, and they get a whole new take on life. Sometimes they can come to a consensus on certain things, but they don't have to. They really don't; it is often enough just to hear each other.

Kathryn: Learning to understand that not everyone has to agree all the time is an incredibly important skill. You learn to understand that as much as you talk or try to argue you will never agree with everyone. Many times the best thing you can come up with is a compromise. But through presentation of their ideas and their opinions all students do participate in class.

Gordon: As this process happens, as presentations are happening, and students are getting more and more involved, I've noticed that both the class attendance and student retention are high, especially in comparison to more book-oriented, teacher-centered classes that I teach. Text and

teacher-selected vocabulary and questions have value, but do not create the same level of student involvement as when students prepare their own vocabulary, questions, opinions, and answers. I believe a big reason is because they each become a valuable member of a community, and are therefore motivated to come and contribute with their portfolios.

Kathryn: Through sharing opinions, and discussing the material, community is created through everyone's involvement. All students learn that they have a stake in the classroom and of the direction of the discussion and what will be done in class today. As a teacher, I may come into class fully expecting that the article I assigned was about cultural appropriation, and I may have a discussion plan, but then the students will take the class in an entirely different direction. That's exciting for me. I learn as much from my students as they learn from me. We're all learning, and they learn from teachers and from their peers, which is the basis of problem and peer-based learning system.

Gordon: Yes. Peer-based learning is inseparable from the portfolio system and problem-based education.

Kathryn: Agreed! But we must move on: the last platform of action is leadership, and this again seems fairly straight forward, because of course you have natural leaders emerging in the classroom. But this system is designed so that quiet members still have to participate to the best of their ability, and their voices are also heard. We learn to take their opinions and voices into account. This in turn encourages students to think inclusively. As I said before, you don't have to agree, but that doesn't mean some one's opinion doesn't count.

Gordon: Yes. I would say that most teachers struggle to incorporate the more awkward, silent members in classes whose voices are rarely, if ever heard. Such people are difficult to include, but it can be done. I recall having a student with several disabilities. In addition to some physical handicaps, he was silent and stuttered. He was generally poor at communicating on any level. By the end of the course, however, he became the most-liked member of the class. Through total involvement with the portfolio system, the other students got to know what he was really like on the inside. That made room for him to become a leader in the class. Moreover, he was also included in other social activities, such as dinner and karaoke, with people whom he normally wouldn't have associated with.

Kathryn: Ultimately, students learn that everyone has something to contribute, and that prejudice can blind them to real contributions a student has to make. They learn to think inclusively.

Gordon: And they're learning and communicating in English at the same time. That's the beauty of it.

SOCIETY BASE

Teamwork and Social Responsibility

Kathryn: Our final C-PLATS platform is Society. We have two points that we want to discuss

in terms of society, one of which is teamwork. In a way this is a continuation of the points we just made, but the portfolio system allows students to learn how to listen and include voices of the entire community in their discussion. Thus, even voices of students who are shy or quiet are still heard and counted. Students also learn to value opinions from diverse perspectives even if they disagree. They learn you don't have to agree all the time, and that there doesn't have to be class consensus. The notebook system allows room for disagreement and for open-ended conclusions, which is part of working as a team.

Gordon: They're working with people they never would have imagined working with, and it's amazing to see what they can actually come up with together, even though they naturally don't like each other.

Sometimes there are personality conflicts. To illustrate, I've gotten emails from time to time saying, "Dear sensei, I can't work with so and so. I don't like him." or "He's too difficult to deal with." In one case a girl was going to drop the class, but I was able to convey to her that if she couldn't handle such issues in the classroom, she would have more difficulty in the real world. I emphasized that we need to learn to deal with people and accept each other for our weaknesses and strengths, and the classroom experience provides the perfect opportunity to do it. And the response I have gotten from students like her has been positive, basically saying, "You're right. I'm going to stick with it." I've seen some beautiful outcomes emerge as a result.

Kathryn: It's interesting to see how students bring out elements in each other that aren't always readily apparent.

Gordon: Well, they're learning to deal with other people.

Kathryn: They also learn that even if they do disagree, they can come up with collective conclusions, even if those conclusions are really basic. Maybe we can't agree how to save the environment, but we can all agree there is a problem that needs more discussion.

Gordon: That's an important skill to learn, and I sometimes force students to think outside their own ideas and convictions. I like to split the class in two groups and tell them, "You are going to take a certain side of an issue. Whether you are for or against it, it doesn't matter. You have to argue your point." So collectively they have to define and defend their positions. In following, they have to stand on their viewpoint and debate. It's wonderful. Through this process I have seen people either reaffirm their beliefs or change them.

Kathryn: The final aspect of society that we'd like to talk about is Social Responsibility. I feel very strongly that this system gives students a stake in society, and you've made the point that it becomes personal when they ask the questions and relate the material back to their own life. Students learn to see how social issues relate to their personal lives, and this gives them another level of engagement with the material inside classroom and outside of the classroom.

Gordon: One thing I'd like to add on to social responsibility is that people start applying what

we discuss in class to life the outside the classroom. On many occasions, I have seen students change their lifestyles or become socially active as a result of an issue that we covered in the course. To illustrate, one of my classes was recently considering environmental issues. As a result, both the students and I made conscious efforts to recycle, including a small project to recycle plastic bottles. A more extreme example would be when my class discussed the issue of role models and the influence that various people have upon our lives. One young woman, while contemplating this issue and working on her portfolio, resolved to dedicate her life to helping underprivileged children. At this moment, she's working as a volunteer in another country. Ideas like hers are conceived in the classroom, developed in the portfolios, and then spilled out into the real world.

Kathryn: Ultimately, the goal of C-PLATS is to go from the classroom to the broader society and give students a sense of social responsibility.

Gordon: Additionally, this system requires students to work with different groups. Students do not always work with the same people all the time. Naturally, there will be stronger groups and weaker groups. Often the weaker group will have to rely on somebody to get the ball rolling. That somebody will have to step up and lead, although he or she normally wouldn't do so. I love it when they surprise themselves by being able to initiate a discussion. As their confidence grows, they discover new abilities in themselves.

Kathryn: It ends up being an empowering experience.

Gordon: That's the aim. And those long-term results are the goal of the C-PLATS system as a whole. But by using this portfolio system on the very small scale of the classroom, I can honestly say that the work students do only improves over the course of the semester. It doesn't digress, it progresses, and that is a real, immediate, and measurable benefit.

Kathryn: That is an excellent point. The system works because it allows students to continue to challenge themselves, because not everyone is doing the same work; they're not all answering the same questions in the same way. The only person the student really has to challenge is herself, and that can be incredibly freeing. It's an important lesson, to learn to measure yourself only by your own standard.

Gordon: And they do exactly that. In fact, some of the best and most beautiful portfolios are made by those with the lowest competency levels. Some of them are just amazing. These students might not be the most eloquent speakers, but they're engaging with the material and they're compiling beautiful, delightful notebooks. On the other hand, there might be some more competent students who do not compile good portfolios, believing in the beginning that they can simply coast through the course. When higher expectations are placed on them, however, they are more than able to deliver and do what is expected.

Kathryn: The portfolio system is effective not only because it engages each level of C-PLATS competencies, but also because it does work so well for students on so many levels, from individual to

social.

Gordon: Moreover, students realize their own capacities to learn through independent learning. Such realization results in higher motivation and greater effort into their assignments. Through class discussion based on their portfolio entries, learners are able to put their own studies into effect, resulting in students who are fully engaged in the learning experience. It also has other desirable attributes such as communication skills, teamwork, problem solving, responsibility for learning, self-reliance and respect for others (Wood, 2003; Carlson 2015). To me, these are the elements that C-PLATS contributes to a student-centered class that is engaged with both the material and each other.

Kathryn: I'd like to conclude with a word about evaluations. We noted in the beginning that student self-assessment is an important part of the process. Equally important, however, is constant feedback from the instructor. When I use a worksheet system, I will return the sheets with detailed comments in the next class period. When we use notebooks, I collect the notebooks once every three weeks. My feedback is always detailed, and while grading is subjective, I do have a 5-point rubric that evaluates creativity, articulation of opinions, engagement with the base text, and the level of detail in the students' work. At the end of the semester, students are required to do a self-assessment. This helps make my expectations clear, and again, I make sure my feedback on their homework is as detailed as possible. That way, the dialogue continues beyond the classroom. I think you handle grading in a similar way?

Gordon: I might not follow the same rubric as you, but I will write two or three pages of feedback each time I check their notebooks. I believe that detailed assessment is one of the best ways to instill motivation in my students. There's a big difference between what they write before they get my evaluations and what they submit after my feedback. When they see the amount of work that I put into them individually, they no longer view me as someone who is setting the bar too high for them. They know that my class is not a joke. I should be clear, however, that I'm not promoting mere praise in order to boost their confidence and self-esteem. Above that, I'm advocating the need for letting students know how to do their work more effectively. My comments and suggestions contained within my feedback need to be focused, practical, and based on an efficient assessment of what the student is capable of achieving. Statements such as "you can do better," "get help with your grammar," "good job!" or "did you Google-translate this?" are unhelpful. My assessment of student work needs to be clear and personalized feedback. This gives something students to build on. In turn, it results in better work done on their portfolios, which ultimately translates into better class participation. Obviously, the students come better equipped to take part. I have never seen a class exert much effort when they know that the teacher never checks homework or truly assesses their work. Conversely, students tend to step up their work when they know that their instructor invests considerable time into his or her students. It's a lot of work, but it is more than worth it when my students respond by giving better output.

Kathryn: So in conclusion, for us, C-PLATS is a dialogue, and this portfolio system is a useful pedagogical tool for engaging and activating this dialogue. It starts as a dialogue with yourself before you come to class as you go through the material and you do your homework, but it forms its true foundation in the classroom. Many of the visual designs of C-PLATS depict it as a triangle, but we would rather imagine it as a spiral that moves to encompass larger communities, as students transfer their skills from the classroom to society. C-PLATS and this portfolio system don't just create conscientious students. They create students with personal stakes in a community, and this leads to questions of social responsibility and action, which leads to further questions. Then the process begins again and again on a different scale each time. You said you had a student who started thinking about issues in the classroom, and then did NGO work in another country. I'm sure she has more questions now and is coming up with new ways to change the world! So the system really begins in the classroom, then it goes on to social responsibility and action. And then ultimately, hopefully, global responsibility and global action.

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