Using Anime as a Teaching Tool in US Undergraduate Courses

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Visual forms of pop-culture such as anime (Japanese animation), TV drama, manga, and video games have become the primary motives for US undergraduate students to take Japanese language and culture courses. Using these pop-culture materials as teaching tools attracts students and creates a fun learning environment. However, the persistent preconception of these visual forms as mere entertainment causes the instructors to face various challenges when these courses are implemented in a higher education institution. This paper discusses how we can use visual forms of pop culture, especially anime, as an effective teaching tool in academics and utilize them to attract students to Japan-related courses. To understand students’ motivation and attraction, an anime survey was conducted and the results are presented. Furthermore, based upon my successes and difficulties in using anime to teach US undergraduate students are also analyzed based on student comments on the course evaluations.

1. Previous Studies

Previous studies on anime discuss the reasons why anime is so popular worldwide from social and psychological viewpoints. For example, Napier (2005) discusses anime’s popularity by pointing out that anime is a fusion of technology and art, the perfect medium to capture today’s social issues. Kinsella (1995) analyzes the ‘cutie’, which is defined as a ‘cute’ element of pop culture in Japan that reflects the intense desire among young Japanese for escape from reality. Standish (1998) especially focuses on the anime Akira and explains its popularity as its ‘compensatory function,’ its mythologization of the marginalized in the society and its nostalgic portrayal of freedom from social constraints. These studies point out that the discrepancy between reality and the mystical world in anime provides the viewers with temporal freedom and illusion from reality, which seems to be the primary reasons for the attractions of the anime fans.

Globalization of anime seems to be attributed to intercultural exchanges that have overcome the linguistic and cultural barriers. Maniond (2005) argues that anime became ‘an integrated part of American life (p.20).’ Levi (1996) contends that Americans chose anime because it is uniquely difficult to appreciate. Hubka (2002) states that anime TV programs became popular in the US because they could be adjusted to meet the expectations of local consumers. Thus, the global popularity of anime is attributed to the contemporary issues that anime deals with and its flexibility to be modified according to the targeted audiences.

2. Survey Results

Then, how can we, educators in the US, use this anime boom to help teach Japanese language and culture? A survey was conducted to three distinctive groups of college students: 1) anime club members who expressed keen interests in anime, 2) those who are taking Japanese language courses, and 3) those who are taking Japanese culture courses. Group 1 and Group 2 overlapped to a great extent, but it seems that the intensity of anime zeal decreased in this order. The questionnaire used for this research follows Marion’s (2005) in many respects.

2.1. Data

Eighty-nine subjects participated in this survey: 14 anime club students, 26 Japanese language students and 49 Japanese culture course students. Their ages ranged from 15-40, but most were college students, Caucasians, and born and raised in the Midwestern United States. Because of the limited ranges of age, ethnicity and geographical background of the subjects, this study is not intended to generalize the anime trend in the US, but to serve as a pilot study for future research.

2.2. Data Analysis Results

The first question asked if the anime club students would like to study Japanese. The result shows that approximately 80% of the students want to learn Japanese. No anime club member responded negatively to this question. This result indicates that anime could be a great motivation for Japanese language learning.
Second, we asked the Japanese language and culture course students why they had chosen to take these courses. The result shows that Japanese language course students are taking the courses because of their interests in Japanese language and minor or general education requirements whereas the Japanese culture course students are taking the courses because of their interests in culture as well as fulfillment of general education requirements.

The third question asks those who indicated a desire to learn Japanese why they want to learn the language. More than one third of the students want to learn Japanese language to understand Japanese culture and one fourth of the Japanese language and culture course students want to enjoy Japanese pop culture such as anime.

The fourth question is, ‘what are the first things that come to mind when you think of Japan?’ All of the three groups show the highest percentages of responses for ‘anime/manga’, which shows the great influence of anime as a pop culture among the students.

The fifth question inquires about the students’ interests in pop culture. About 30% students are interested in video games and anime among others in Japanese pop culture. This result implies if we can cooperate with anime/video game industry to develop video games or anime that have many educational components, these forms of entertainment will be attractive and useful to the students learning Japanese culture.

The sixth question reveals the subjects’ preferences for the various genres of anime. Many students are interested in comedy and action. The anime club students seem interested in science fiction on anime, which may not be as interesting to non-anime club students. Although it might be hard to use anime that is interesting to every student, this information is helpful in choosing anime for anime courses.

In the seventh question, the students are asked why anime is attractive to them. The cartoon-nature of anime and Japanese components in anime are the two highest reasons why the students are attracted to anime.

The eighth question is, ‘do you think people are attracted to anime because it is Japanese?’ More than 60% of the Japanese language course students answer positively, indicating that Japanese language components in anime are attractive to them. This result might indicate that using anime in Japanese language instruction may increase their interests in the subject.

The ninth question concerns the stereotypes of anime fans, and most of the students answered that there are some negative stereotypes associated with anime fans, which are described as ‘creepy’, ‘nerdy’ and ‘weird’.

The tenth question reveals the students’ preferences for subtitles or dubbed anime. Eighty-five percent of Japanese language course students and 64% of anime club students prefer subtitled. Japanese language students seem to learn Japanese language more through anime using subtitles.

The eleventh question asks if the students learn anything from anime. The result shows that the students are learning various things, such as Japanese culture, language and institutions including the education system.

The twelfth question asks the students to name one thing they like about anime. They like the various plots in anime, which indicates that the anime plot is one of the most important factors for the students to appreciate anime.

Finally, we asked if they watch non-Japanese animation, and most of them answer positively, indicating that they like anime regardless of the language or country of the anime from which it originates.

2.3. Summary

The survey results can be summarized as follows: First, the students who like anime are interested in learning Japanese language and culture, and this result indicates that anime is the strong motivation to enroll in these courses. Second, those students who enrolled in Japanese language and culture courses are interested in learning about many aspects of Japanese culture like anime, so using anime in Japanese language and culture courses will enhance their learning. Third, students are specifically interested in video games and anime among Japanese pop culture, and they like comedy and action anime genres with interesting plots, so instructors should use these kinds of anime in class to attract students’ attention. Finally, the students are learning language and culture through anime, so anime can be a great teaching tool in Japanese language and culture courses.

3. Teaching an Anime Course

Three years ago, I have proposed a course on anime, which was approved by the faculty and has been offered four times thus far. In this section, the successes and difficulties in this anime course are presented, in hopes that this information will be helpful to those who are contemplating offering an anime course in the near future.
3.1. Proposal
To offer the anime course, I had to write a proposal. Detailed information about the course such as the title, level, and general education category were determined to develop the proposal. First, I had to find a title that is academic enough yet attractive to students and accurately descriptive. I chose the title, ‘Japanese Studies through Anime’ for this course. Second, I had to determine the level of the course. As this course was intended for freshmen, I offered this course at the 100 level. I offered one section on Tuesday evening and another on Wednesday evening. Classes were 3 hours each so that the course could include viewing and discussion of anime without interruption. Next, I had to decide if this course counted toward any of the specific general education credits. I chose the general education category called ‘Historical and Cultural Change’ since students can learn Japanese history and culture by studying anime. Students were expected to compare the history and culture in Japan depicted in anime listed below and those in factual documents.

1. Tale of Genji (Late Heian Period)
2. Yokoden: Wrath of the Ninja (1580 during reunification)
3. Princess Mononoke (Azuchi-momoyama)
4. Ruonin Kenshin OVA (Tokugawa / Edo)
5. Growing up (Meiji)
6. Wandering Days (Early 1900s)
7. The Harp of Burma (WWII)
8. Barefoot Gen (1945)
9. Grave of the Fireflies (post WWII)
10. Sennen Joyu (1920-1990)
11. Omohide Poro poro (Modern)
12. Laputa Castle in the Sky (Modern)

Two textbooks, one by Napier and the other by Reischauer and Jansen were used. The book by Napier discusses anime in general while that by Reischauer and Jansen includes the factual documents that are used to compare the anime’s depiction of Japanese history and culture with actuality.

3.2. Successes and Difficulties
The anime course was very popular. The first year it was offered, the two sections were filled with 20 students in each section. The students’ comments in the evaluation at the end of the semester were mostly very positive, indicating that the students really enjoy the course. However, students wrote some constructive criticisms. For example, I asked the students to come on Sunday evenings to view the anime of the week, which was not listed on the course schedule, and some students did not like this extra time requirement. Also, some students did not like some of the 12 anime. I realized that every student has a preference, and it was hard to choose anime that all students liked. In addition, the textbook discussion or lecture and anime discussions needed tighter association. Based on these comments, I made some changes for the following year’s anime course. First, I asked each student to bring a clip of their favorite anime to show and discuss in class. This worked very well since both the students and I were expose to new anime. I put the extra hour class time for viewing anime on the course schedule. Furthermore, I asked the students to use Wikipedia for the final project. The students did some research on the anime of their choice and went to Wikipedia to create or edit the anime page: in this way, they can share their final project publicly. This Wikipedia final project, however, caused a lot of frustration for the students. Although I invited a technology professional to class to explain how to use Wikipedia, some students uploaded information that did not fit the guidelines for Wikipedia. As a result, some of the information that the students had uploaded to Wikipedia had been erased at the time of their final presentations. Fortunately, Wikipedia can show a page’s editing history, so they were able to present the page before and after their editing, and their projects were evaluated based on the information they had put on Wikipedia.

4. Discussion
This paper consists of two parts: one is the anime survey, which was conducted to identify the reasons why students like anime and how anime can be used in Japanese language and culture courses. The survey results suggest that anime could be a great teaching tool since students are motivated to study Japanese language and culture through anime and vice versa. The second section, which discusses my own experience of teaching anime courses, shows that there are some obstacles that instructors have to overcome. To propose a course on anime and have it approved by the appropriate committee and faculty, we have to persuade our colleagues that anime can be sufficiently academic to be included in a regular curriculum. Assessing students’ progress in their language acquisition and cultural learning can also be challenging. I used Wikipedia to assess students’ understanding of cultural and historical
knowledge on Japan. However, I am still trying to find an appropriate assessment method.

Scollon and Scollon (2000) discuss two types of culture, high culture and low culture. High culture refers to arts that are sophisticated, intellectual and refined while low culture refers to pop culture, to which anime is often attributed, even though anime by some producers such as Yayao Miyazaki are considered to be high culture because of the esthetic and technical superiority.

To teach anime or use anime in a higher education institution, instructors have to transform anime from low to high culture by analyzing anime, appreciating it and articulating the analysis and appreciation to students. This teaching requires a lot of efforts on the instructors’ part as there are not yet many teaching materials such as textbooks, instructor’s manuals and quiz/exam banks. Thus, we have to cooperate with our colleagues to exchange information as well as work with others such as textbook publishers to develop teaching materials.

5. Conclusion

This paper discusses the anime survey that I conducted and my experiences of offering anime course in a university. Anime is an excellent teaching tool since it attracts students’ attention and creates a fun environment, but because of the preconceived notion of entertainment, instructors have to overcome various obstacles in teaching anime in a higher education institution. This requires a lot of effort on the instructors’ part, so it seems crucial to develop teaching materials and collaborate with colleagues so that we can use anime as a truly effective teaching tool for Japanese language and culture courses.

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