

Rethinking the Three Pillars of Academia

Jonathan AUGUSTINE

Kyoto Institute of Technology, Kyoto

Both in Japan and in the United States, the three pillars of academic duties for professors have included teaching, scholarship and administration. Of these three responsibilities, the most weight has always been placed on scholarship. The “publish or perish” system has become so pervasive in the United States that nobody has seriously questioned its effectiveness since the 1970s. Japanese universities have not adopted the system yet, but there are rumors that some universities are considering changing professors’ employment status to three year renewable contracts. This may seem practical from an administrative perspective, since professors need checks on their authority, but it will most likely produce a harmful effect on the quality of scholarship. In this short essay, I would like to offer some personal insights based upon my experiences in Japanese educational institutions since 1979 and my most recent ten years spent in American universities to challenge the “academic correctness” that is preventing people from speaking up. Hopefully, by breaking the ice, academics on both sides of the ocean might begin to step outside their complacent cliques and boundaries to engage in a more liberal discourse.

The Tenure System

In the United States it is not unusual for untenured professors to be laid off for lack of “critically acclaimed” publications, but academics are rarely penalized for unsatisfactory teaching or insufficient participation in their administrative duties. Most people have had the disappointing experience of attending a vacuous lecture by an “eminent” scholar. This phenomenon continues to recur, because there are no strict standards that are applied to teaching in the universities. While students are asked to evaluate the teaching of their professors, the data collected seldom has an

effect on the final evaluation in the tenure process.

Enthusiastic professors with innovative teaching methods sometimes lose their jobs even if they inspire students, since their publications are not considered to be “critical” enough by the tenure committee of senior professors.¹ When one examines the tenure process in the United States, it will become evident that those who finished their doctorates and post-docs enter a liminal period in which they are expected to perform the duties of full professors even though they have received little or no instruction on how to teach. One finds that college graduates, who spent a year or two getting their teaching licenses, know more about effective teaching methodologies than the Ph.D.s who directly enter the academic job market. Very often these young scholars simply imitate the teaching style of their professors. Their quality of teaching is often compromised because young scholars know that it is their publications that will ultimately determine their tenure. With pressure to publish books that receive good reviews, young scholars submit revised versions of their doctoral dissertations to prestigious publishers as “new works.” The tenure committee then sends these works to outside reviewers, who usually know the person being evaluated, since they are in the same field. In such tightly knit communities, politics is the crucial determining factor of any academic standard.

Thus, the making of a specialist often becomes a process of conformity rather than an opportunity to expand one’s horizons by testing ideas developed during the years as a doctoral candidate. Perhaps the worst thing about the tenure system is that it does not give scholars the time necessary for careful deliberation and creative thinking. Today, many academic books in print are written simply so that young scholars can keep their jobs. Dynamic projects and ideas that specialists hope to write about get pushed aside and sacrificed to increase the quantity of their publications. In Japanese universities this is particularly notable since evaluating candidates becomes mere “bean counting” of numerous short articles. A mature study cannot easily be produced under severe time restrictions and the need to

¹ The word “critical” has been put in quotations, because in the past decade or so its usage has become increasingly subjective and arbitrary. Most often the term simply refers to the latest academic trend or whatever is considered fashionable.

conform to “academic correctness.”

The Japanese *joshu* 助手 (research assistant) position offers some interesting alternatives to the American tenure system. Most *joshu* in the sciences have finished their doctorates and are given fairly light teaching loads in order to improve their research and teaching skills. Although promotion to associate or full professor (*jokyōju* 助教授 and *kyōju* 教授) is not guaranteed, these scholars are not likely to be fired in a few years because of their publications. Many of the *joshu* in the national universities have the opportunity to conduct research in foreign countries under the *wakate* system. In other words, the present Japanese system to some extent allows scholars to take time in perfecting their skills before moving up in the ranks. In fact, some *kōshi* 講師 and *joshu* have been known to consciously avoid promotion in order to concentrate on research and avoid the increase in administrative responsibilities. In Japanese national universities, it is not unusual to find full professors who devote more time to administrative duties than teaching itself.

Transplanting Educational Values

When foreign academics are first hired into Japanese institutions of higher learning, there are many unwritten rules, complex dynamics and cultural values that they must become familiar with.² Since most universities are undergoing reforms in curriculum development, testing and financial administration, foreign academics are sometimes consulted for their insights on alternative perspectives on education. Regrettably, many “foreign specialists” have been known to try to impose the educational values that they acquired in their native countries without considering whether they are compatible with Japanese educational agendas.³ Fortunately, as the number of scholars who have been educated in multiple countries and institutions increase, the lingering vestiges of this post-colonial mentality is becoming less prevalent. Nevertheless, recogniz-

² For the complexity and implications of the term “culture,” see Barzun 2001, pp. xviii-xix.

³ Spurr 1997, pp. 20-21.

ing some of the basic weaknesses in non-Japanese higher educational systems will perhaps enable Japanese educators to be more selective in basing their reforms on Western models.

Overspecialization

When “foreign specialists” join Japanese institutions of higher education, they often find that they are required to teach subjects and address issues that they are quite unfamiliar with. These challenging experiences require flexibility and a willingness to step outside their technical field of expertise. Although professors, who have written books in technical fields, may like to think that their works will produce ground-breaking results and trends, it is just as likely that in a few decades their studies will become dusty books in forgotten archives.

It is quite common for departments in American universities to engage in disputes about the superiority of one field over another. For example, psychology is often accused of being a groundless science, while the field of literature is attacked for lacking credible methodologies. Consequently, it is quite difficult for young scholars to decide which field to join. However, these kinds of academic battles have been fought for centuries with more recent examples being Kelvin and Darwin’s debate over the age of the earth, which tried to establish the superiority of physics over geology and evolutionary biology. But thanks to expansive subjects like paleontology which examine a wide range of data from biology, geology, chemistry, physics, oceanography and archaeology, we know that overspecialization only accentuates the ignorance of those who refuse to step outside their own boundaries.⁴

One of the advantages that foreign scholars who teach in Japanese universities enjoy is that they are not restricted to work exclusively in the fields that they obtained their degrees in. Since most foreign experts are asked to teach language classes in addition to their field of expertise, conscientious scholars explore a range of areas outside their major such as

⁴ Gould 2001, p. 22.

sociology, psychology, anthropology, religion, literature, and history. In fact, some Western scholars have attested that they learned more about Euro-American values after coming to Japan, because concepts and perspectives that they took for granted were not always accepted in their new surroundings.⁵

The *bungakubu* 文学部 of Japanese universities includes such a wide sphere of subjects that foreign specialists do not have to feel that they are unqualified to conduct research in a entirely new field in a neighboring faculty within the humanities. Some people may wonder how versatile Japanese scholars like Umehara Takeshi and Kawai Hayao manage to write books on subjects as far apart as history, environmentalism, and psychology, but the ancient Greeks and Renaissance scholars also wrote works on biology, architecture and poetry without being regarded as dilettantes. It is time that scholars recognize that there are no deep gulfs separating the humanities, natural sciences and social sciences.

Although it is quite difficult to provide a reasonable conclusion in this limited space, perhaps the middle path between the Japanese and Western systems is to separate scholars into researchers and teachers, while making sure that administrators do not place unreasonable requirements on those who do not fit into either of these categories. Scholars who are not oriented toward teaching should concentrate on research, and professors who are inclined toward teaching should cultivate their teaching methods without the constant pressure to publish articles and books. Naturally, researchers would still have to be involved to some extent in teaching, and teachers would still occasionally report their findings, but neither type ought to be compelled to the degree that they are required today. Students would probably be the ones to welcome such reforms. They could participate in the works of competent researchers and attend the lectures of enthusiastic professors with less disappointment. But of course such things are much

⁵ For a good analysis of European travelers' motivations for leaving their native countries since the nineteenth century, see Porter 1991, pp. 10-15.

easier said than done. More realistically, Japanese universities should perhaps first find ways to become financially independent, so that they can make reforms at their own pace without outside interference. Accepting more adult students, individualizing the college admission process, increasing the number of times a professor meets his or her students every week, replacing quantitative tests with essays and reports, and creating opportunities for in-class debates could potentially transform Japanese education, but only if universities can become truly independent institutions.

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