

Japan Studies and the Disciplines

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Curriculum is a plan to foster a student's academic development and to enhance an integration of various kinds of knowledge. The paper offers theoretical approaches to reexamining curricula of Japan Studies along the lines of area studies, cultural studies, language training, and interdisciplinarity. The problem of putting theory into practice is discussed on the basis of the Comparative Asian Studies programme at Vilnius University. This programme was designed to facilitate the goal of training individuals who combine thorough disciplinary and area specialization.

Comparative Asian Studies in Vilnius University

Vilnius University, founded in 1579, is one of the oldest universities in Eastern Europe and a significant player in European intellectual life. However, we never had either Japanese or East-Asian studies before a course of Japanese language was opened for university students in 1992 and Center of Oriental Studies was established in 1993. Later, in 1995, a Japanese minor diploma programme was introduced, and in 2000 the BA programme of Comparative Asian Studies was started, with Japan Studies as part of it. This is the first and the only programme in Lithuania, which offers BA degree in Japan Studies.

The Center of Oriental Studies of Vilnius University focuses on the academic studies of Asian languages and cultures and scholarly research of the region. Since 2000, all teachers of the Center of Oriental Studies have been involved at different stages of the course design process which resulted in the programme of Comparative Asian Studies. Although in the decisions on curriculum the scholarly interests of the faculty inevitably become evident, the purpose of the curriculum is that as many fields of relationships as possible may be seen and dealt within the given perspective. By building links between colleagues in Japanese, Chinese, Indian or even Arabic studies and constructing an Asian Studies identity we attempt to emphasize the existence of different "Asias", and to question the lines that are drawn between the local, national, regional, and global components. In this context, acquisition of a second Asian

language is made compulsory for each student of the Center of Oriental Studies (the students of Japanese have a compulsory course in modern and classical Chinese, and vice versa; all the students also train in English). On the other hand, the reason why our BA curriculum was named Comparative Asian Studies and mapped as such was not only theoretical advantages of the comparative approach but also practical aspects. The idea of the programme was to introduce different disciplinary courses so that the graduates could apply their knowledge in various fields even if such curriculum concealed a danger of superficiality. University has to face challenges of the decreasing attractiveness of the degree in 'traditional' humanities based firmly on the study of language and literature, and the increasing popularity of degree programmes containing elements of history, social sciences and other innovatory areas, e.g., media studies.

What we have produced by the programme of Comparative Asian Studies can be called context-sensitive area studies with interdisciplinary collaboration. By providing knowledge of practical value about Japan and giving students an awareness of cultural relativity we are striving to meet the key objectives of the area studies. Besides, the students of Vilnius University must also complete the basic courses that provide solid grounding in generally relevant language education. By learning a language students, firstly, identify their interests with a particular nation or nations. Secondly, the encounter with a new language and with a foreign culture through the language is of critical importance in forming attitudes and establishing study procedures. In our attempt to link international studies and language studies into a mutually beneficial relationship, we also make effort to bypass controversy between the area approach and a focus identified as disciplinary specific discourse. In general, students majoring in Japanese at Vilnius University are area-focused disciplinarians who remain committed to the particularity of Japan.

Area studies: advantages and disadvantages

The key objectives of the area studies are to provide knowledge of practical value about important world areas, to give students and scholars an awareness of cultural relativity, to provide an understanding of social and cultural wholes as they exist in the areas, and to further the development of a universal social science (Morris-Suzuki, 2000). This form of social science, although global in vision, arguments, and relevance, is local in its data, application, and humanity, and can be provided a place to meet with humanities – language and literature disciplines – in the framework of curriculum.

The body of knowledge, which is called "area studies" throughout the world, is dedicated to increasing our knowledge of the culture, history, and institutions of the world's major regions and countries (commonly non-Western regions and countries), but it was challenged by social sciences at the end of the Cold War, since it was argued that disciplinary social sciences are more universally applicable and globally useful,

and are more worthy of support than area studies on the level where both are regarded as political science. Area studies has little methodology of itself and is mostly supported by the theory of academic disciplines that compose it. It is based on factual information about the geography, demographic trends, or economic and political institutions operating in another part of the world. And when it addresses theory, its inquiries are concerned with comparisons and with theoretical speculation on the reasons for differences among countries and peoples.

Area-focused disciplinarians predictably remain committed to the particularity of a specific world region. The very nature of area studies makes it difficult to pursue investigation of the cultural commonalities that might link people in widely dispersed geographical locations of the basis of occupation, age or interest. Unlike other disciplines, which are temporally located and are rooted in a canon that is tied to no particular site, Japan studies is, by definition, fixed to a specific physical place. This sense of locality is further deepened by the fact that most students of Asia, and our students at Vilnius University are no exception, typically train in a language that is identified with a particular nation rather than the literature or culture of a particular region, as is more common in other modern language programmes. The language teaching narrows the scope of curriculum and presents yet another problem which partially arises from its secondary role in the syllabus: it usually involves the skill component and the development of the ability to use the language, actively through speaking and writing and passively through listening and reading, but it does not include linguistic and sociolinguistic analysis, translation, and general information about the language. In their language pedagogy, the teachers proceed largely by intuition, influenced by individual language background and experience, and, in many cases, by their academic interests.

Here, two approaches are seen: first, to support further the intensive study of particular languages, cultures, and histories; and second, to encourage innovative thinking and practices related to the field of area studies itself, through a variety of partnerships, as well as disciplinary 'border-crossings'. Language training is the necessary tool for understanding a foreign culture, and students want to study the languages as an indispensable key to another society, but they also want to combine this with disciplines far beyond the old core of history, politics, literature and anthropology, the disciplines that allow them to respond adequately to market signals. One cannot but agree to the opinion that scholars should treat Japan as a society comparable to any other society, with particularities and commonalities, and contribute to the mainstream within the social sciences and humanities. We are encouraged to generate the knowledge that might be interesting to people outside Japan Studies, since the spatial frameworks of understanding are in some respects obstacles which make the nature of the contemporary world system less visible and comprehensible.

Modern frameworks and interdisciplinary approach

In order to develop, it is often suggested for Japan Studies to more warmly embrace contemporary intellectual structures, such as postmodernism, post-colonialism, and cultural studies. The British cultural studies were born out to denounce general conservative climate and to make popular culture its central project. Cultural studies which is interested in how knowledge is constructed, produced, adopted and resisted is, therefore, not a movement with a designated area of study but rather an attitude, or a “structure of feeling” (Burgess, 2004). It does not presume to present a unified, privileged position as an interpretative strategy; it opens the possibility of dealing with a variety of strategies.

The notion of asking how boundaries are configured and how they can be deconstructed is of central importance in cultural studies. Transnational cultural studies attempt to displace the conventional “West-and-the-rest” opposition, and this may be the reason why cultural studies resists codification and disciplinarization, and why some of the best work in cultural studies has not been on national cultures but on comparisons among societies.

Those who advocate for cultural studies often tend to support one of the most widespread critiques of the Asian studies model, which says that it marginalizes the study of Asia by cutting it off from the major disciplines and producing graduates who have a great deal of knowledge of one or more Asian countries, often proficiency in its language as well, but are inadequately trained in one of the social disciplines, such as politics, sociology or economics, in other words, the disciplines that use statistical data, formal models, and positivist theory. Area studies is challenged to break out of old patterns defined by national territories in recognition of the increasing trend of internationalization within the scholarly community and research collaboration.

Nevertheless, the need for area-specific forms of knowledge is still present in social science and humanities themselves. Those engaged in area and Asian studies share the commitment to the serious enterprise of understanding a culture and tradition other than their own; social sciences like history and anthropology had also been deeply involved in the same enterprise and, in collaboration with the humanities and cultural studies, are more receptive to forms of knowledge from various world regions. Asian studies based on a variety of disciplinary techniques and language learning are, therefore, ideologically useful as a challenge to the dominant paradigms in the established disciplines.

It is true that real interdisciplinary programmes in ethno-history, comparative literature, women’s studies, Afro-American studies, ethnic studies, heritage studies, and other forms of international knowledge do not define themselves by area but rather by the intersection of disciplines. But it is also true that cross-disciplinarity is contained in the very core of area studies because an area focus offers immediate opportunities for

cooperation among disciplines (see, for example, Milner, 1999). The difficulty is that a region like East Asia is a vast and diverse one with few overarching commonalities. Containing half the world's population and the majority of its literary traditions and religious scriptures, Asia is too big a continent to be contained in any kind of discipline or represent a single area. Asian studies is, therefore, not only a case of cross-disciplinarity but also a cross-area case. It is this cross-area work which increases the vitality of one area studies project by drawing upon its relations with others, and the curriculum of Comparative Asian Studies of Vilnius University is a good example of it.

Area studies versus universalism

In this connection, it is important to resist one particular variant of the critique of area studies: the view that the entire legacy of area studies should be abandoned in favour of universalism based on the predominant disciplinary knowledge. The call to integrate the study of Asia into a generalized curriculum—a curriculum defined entirely by disciplines rather than area—was strengthened in the 1980s, and one might argue that this was partly a consequence of globalization. The fact that more and more Asian scholars do write perceptively about other Asian countries in English makes internationalizing of Asian studies an active process. However, the fact that globalization is now facing certain reverses inspires more cautious assessments. The globalization of values may be a very long-term process. Although the description “Asian studies” or “Japan studies” runs the risk of over-emphasizing “otherness”, it nevertheless tends to be effective as a “reminder of the need to be suspicious of categories and explanatory structures developed in European studies or European-based disciplines when we come to analyzing Asian societies” (Milner, 1999).

Among the reasons why Asian studies was compartmentalized in the first place is the tendency of the older social science and humanities to become more theoretical, self-referential, and impenetrable to outsiders. We live in the dense context of methodologies of humanities and social science. Vilnius University is a maze of departments, centers and institutions that often form isolated cells of honeycomb without circulation of ideas and even knowledge. There is no space for a public and open discussion. Inter-textuality created by the interplay of texts does not exist, and there is no interchange on the level of thinking, first of all because we are short of theoretical vocabulary and idioms. Each subject we start from the very beginning, from the basics and securing the elementary level of literacy. One becomes either a mentor or an isolated researcher who has no one to exchange dialogue with in Lithuania and therefore appeals to a fictitious reader. PhD candidates have no qualified staff to supervise when they need training in theories and methods adopted by other disciplines. If the students wish to approach Asia through law, architecture, business studies, health

sciences, psychology, or fine arts, the question is where to find specialists who would be able and willing to become advisers to Lithuanian students.

However, Asian studies, which combines universal theory with local substance, provides an alternative to the situation as intellectual space for the formation of global knowledge. Although “Asian studies” as an academic field is currently under attack, the lack of theory in area-specific studies is not always qualified as a minus. The Oriental scholars, who were predominantly textual scholars in the beginning, have shown that they are able at least to translate a text that has not been translated before, even if they do not refer to modern theories.

Furthermore, the old emphasis of area studies programmes on producing PhDs has been replaced with the central focus on undergraduate education. In the process, we provide practical skills to our students, but the question of research remains relevant because the expertise, generally grounded in experience rather than academic research, responds to students’ demand but is often marginalized in the predominantly faculty-driven processes surrounding curricular design at the universities. Can our students contribute to the research under such conditions and where is the place for research in our curriculum?

Problems of funding

It is one thing to identify the curriculum that, in an ideal world, should be offered. It is quite another thing actually to find the resources, both financial and human, that would allow it to be offered at an adequate level. The funding depends largely on what kind of specialists we are raising and if the country is interested in the supply. Since we have no Japanese corporations in Lithuania, the job opportunities of our graduates are bleak, and their studies are often based on sheer enthusiasm of cultural type. In Lithuania, we have neither correspondents in our dailies covering Japan nor politicians or parliamentarians who would be able to speak an Asian language, and there is no serious expertise on Asia at the highest levels of the private sector. Area experts often advise civil, military, and government actors, and receive funding from vested economic and political interests, but the knowledge of experts on Japan in Lithuania is only applicable to diplomatic, public and cultural affairs.

Lithuania as a new member of the EU can, however, consider how the membership changes its perspectives, particularly in the fields of business and services and industry and technology. Traditionally, European language policies have emphasized the role of languages spoken within the borders of the EU, but more recent formulations promote the so-called ‘mother tongue plus two other languages’ formula, ‘other languages’ being major ‘world’ languages such as Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Arabic (see, for example, Lämsä and Gaens, 2005).

The development of Asian studies shifts an emphasis toward an area knowledge of contemporary Asia, away from a concentration on the historical, “oriental” civilizations. This analysis of contemporary Asia, especially its political, social and economic dimensions, may predate the founding of centres, departments and faculties. Seeking transnational collaboration based on a common regional interest—Japan in our case—could develop further into exchanges with scholars focusing on other geographical regions along the lines of common thematic or theoretical interests. Maybe a possibility should be considered to engage in developing multidisciplinary and multinational research projects around certain themes.

As an alternative for the curriculum that puts emphasis on Asian Studies, reading courses for undergraduate students could be developed specifically for students who follow a degree programme based on social sciences or history, but who also wish to acquire a reading knowledge of the language. As their name suggests, the courses would concentrate on the ability to read the texts that are related to their subject disciplines. At the same time students would develop auxiliary skills such as dictionary use, reading for gist and information retrieval. Meanwhile, students who are already involved in foreign area studies by studying history, political science, sociology, geography, and anthropology could link themselves with language and humanities programmes. Although one might argue that the traditional concentration on reading skills in foreign language pedagogy shifted towards oral communication, the reading component of the study of a language remains the ultimate for those who wish to proceed further in the academic area-based research.

However, a problem associated with the project is contained in the frequent claim that language courses are not of sufficient academic caliber to be identified with “substantive” courses. Although the language instructors must have thorough familiarity with both the target language and culture and the base language and culture of the students, they tend to be the lower-ranking faculty members, not because they lack special qualifications, but rather because language courses are regarded as less demanding of scholarship. The quality of language teaching also suffers because of a requirement at Lithuanian universities that a language course can only be opened if there are at least six students applied. Since most of them start their lessons of an Asian language from the very basics without any previous knowledge of the language, it is difficult in such conditions to train students to the level at which one is able to translate a large variety of texts professionally and which should be considered standard for a graduate in Asian Studies. It is also complicated for a language instructor to advance to the stage of training that is specifically relevant to students’ individual needs. The foreign language curriculum should utilize live materials from the target culture including radio and television programmes, magazines, and books with substantive area content, but options are often minimized because of funding limitations.

Conclusions

At the Center of Oriental Studies of Vilnius University we still find it difficult to keep the balance between language teaching and the disciplines within the curriculum of Comparative Asian Studies, which is oriented towards area studies. Because of academic regulations our students are ethnology-major, but socio-cultural anthropology or other related subjects are taught by professors who have no fluency in East Asia or other Asian regions, and our graduates are provided only basic information on the subject. They have to use this information as an instrument in developing regional knowledge further by themselves.

The ideal way would be studies abroad as a prerequisite for area studies. When done well, they can help students view macro-level judgments about culture more objectively, and with the benefit of unprejudiced data they collect on their own while “in the field”. Philosophy, art, theology, history, literature and the traditional core subjects of the liberal arts education sometimes make better prerequisites for studying abroad than courses in area studies. However, such project is associated with funding problems and not easily applicable in Lithuania.

On the other hand, institutions confront their new challenges individually amidst a diverse set of local financial considerations which include market demand for the knowledge they offer. Though each institution does not need to provide the entire package on its own, there is currently no international mechanism for coordinating area studies programmes. Deep bilateral or multilateral relations can give rise to cross-cultural research of the highest order. And it would be up to the universities to formulate the collective image of themselves, so that each would contribute rationally to the national or even global process of knowledge production.

Networks, which more often than not are responses to the sense of crisis, are useful in addressing the questions of identity and survival since they are more than an interchange. Wider networks of communities and dialogues may be established across faculties and institutions, between academic and non-academic individuals, and between one country and another. The birth of the global knowledge-based society involves greater commonality and communicability among universities and throughout higher education; working out the network by extending contacts with scholars from the rest of Europe and from Japan is vital in order to design a competitive curriculum.

The steady development of technology seems to offer an opportunity to overcome, at least in part, the financial difficulties by allowing more independent study for the students and more co-operation between university institutions. I hope that students opting for Japan Studies line of specialization will have a chance to complement their curriculum by choosing courses not only from other departments and/or programmes, but also from universities in other countries.

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