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The Practice of Active Learning in a High School Japanese History Class

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Introduction

Japanese high school teachers spend a great deal of time giving one-way lectures to students. Students only copy what teachers write on the blackboard without thinking. Classes provide little opportunity for students to formulate, let alone ask questions. However, active learning lessons have been conducted in Japanese high schools recently. These lessons provide opportunities not only for teachers to give lectures, but also for students to work together proactively and reflect from various viewpoints.

In relation to high school teaching methods, Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is pursuing an "active learning style of lessons"¹ that is not simply "whole class lessons," "explanations from the teacher," or "copying notes written on the blackboard" in order to develop thought, assessment and expressional skills through the language activities in the High School Educational Guidelines revised in March 2009 (hereinafter, the "New Educational Guidelines"). Since 2010, the author has also practically tackled the active learning lesson style in ordinary classes within high school history, and continues to consider the relationship between history education and active learning².

MEXT defines active learning as follows:

A generic term for teaching and learning methods that incorporate the learner's active participation in studies as opposed to the style of education where teachers deliver one-way lectures. The aim is for learners to develop versatile skills such as cognitive, ethical and social skills, education, knowledge and experience through active studies. While active learning methods include discovery learning, problem solving learning, experiential learning and investigative learning, also valid are group discussions, debates and group work in class³.

Likewise, Shinichi Mizokami defines it, "as with active learning lessons, as a comprehensive term characterized by a lesson format (e.g. teaching methods and lesson design) that incorporates the active studies of the learner rather than classes in which the teacher communicates knowledge one-way (and the learner learns passively)"⁴. Furthermore, Mizokami recently defined active learning as "involving all kinds of active learning in the sense of transcending (passive) learning in which students listen to lectures that communicate knowledge unilaterally. Active learning is participating in activities such as writing, speaking, and presenting, and accompanies the externalization of the cognitive processes occurring therein", and he conceptually

¹ See for example, MEXT "Teaching Case Collection on developing language activities [High School Edition], Images of Improved Lessons through language activities", http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/gengo/1322283.html.

² Minagawa, Masaki "The Practice of the Active Learning Lesson Style within High School History" ("Bulletin (Senshu University Senior High School)" 33, 2013), "The Active Learning Lesson Style and the Development of Historical Thought: Considering the potential for a versatile history education through collaboration and association between high schools and universities" ("Bulletin (Senshu University Senior High School)" 34, 2015).

³ Glossary on the MEXT homepage.

http://www.mext.go.jp/component/b_menu/shingi/toushin/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2012/10/04/1325048_3.pdf

⁴ Shinichi Mizokami "Practical Issues in the Introduction of Active Learning" ("Nagoya Center for the Study of Higher Education" 7, 2007), "Comprehensive Development from Active Learning" (Kawai Jyuku, Ed. "Why do students develop through active learning? – Observations from investigations into economics and engineering at universities across Japan" Toshindo, 2011).

distinguishes active learning and the active learning style of lessons, defining the latter as “lessons that incorporate active learning”⁵.

In this report, in accordance with the author’s interests, practice and expertise, we will examine “active learning (the lesson style)” as a way of promoting the active learning activities of students in high school history lessons.

I . What is historical thought?

1 . Defining historical thought

The aims of Geography and History (which comprise a single subject under Japan’s school education system, but for our purposes, “Japanese History”) under the New Educational Guidelines are, “to encourage comprehensive consideration of Japan’s historic development in relation to geographic conditions and world history based on various materials, and through deepening knowledge of Japan’s unique traditions and culture, to cultivate the capacity for historical thought as well as the awareness and qualities as a Japanese citizen living independently within international society.” The New Educational Guidelines pursue a comprehensive consideration of history and geography and the development of “the capacity for historical thought”, but do not pursue “rote learning or the memorization of knowledge”. However, herein there is no specific explanation of historical thought⁶.

In relation to the capacity for historical thought, Takeo Toriyama points out that, “we often hear about the importance of cultivating the capacity for historical thought. However, it has not been clearly defined, nor often discussed as to what constitutes historical thought,” and he proceeds to cite two elements of the capacity for historical thought to be, “the ability to analyze and communicate information”, and “the ability to understand social trends historically”⁷. I will introduce these two skills below:

The ability to analyze and communicate information

- (1) Accurately interpreting the contents of information
- (2) Not all information correctly communicates the facts
- (3) Not all information is useful
- (4) The capacity for thought is acquired by giving explanations to others

The ability to understand social trends historically

- (5) Grasping correlations in social change
- (6) Comparing differences between eras and regions
- (7) Perceiving the present in light of past trends

⁵ Shinichi Mizokami “The Paradigm Shift from Taught to Active Learning” (Toshindo, 2014) p.7.

⁶ The development of historical thought was first raised as an “aim” of the high school educational guidelines in world history in 1956, has appeared in Japanese history since the 1970s, and in practice primarily takes the form of “topic learning” (Tajiri, Shinichi “Creating an Exploratory Study of World History: Lesson planning to develop thought, assessment and expressional skills”, Azusa Publishing, 2013, p. 6).

⁷ Takeo Toriyama “Issues Surrounding the Capacity for Historical Thought” (Toriyama T. & Matsumoto. M (Eds.) “Designing classes to develop the capacity for historical thought”, Aoki Shoten, 2012) p.149-152.

The “ability to analyze and communicate information” refers to understanding and sieving information (e.g. information in textbooks, literature, relics and unearthed articles as well as statistics, illustrations, maps, audio-visual materials, data on the web and explanations from teachers) ((1), (2) and (3)), and also to using that organized and analyzed information as a basis to accurately use social and historical concepts in logical explanations and acquire the capacity for thought (4).

“The ability to understand social trends historically” refers to demonstrating correlations within the process of social change (history) and comparatively analyzing the characteristics of eras and regions ((5) and (6)) as well as to an awareness of current issues through comparing past and present as well as to deepening understanding of the present through locating the causes of current issues in past facts (7).

The basis for developing each of these abilities is the student’s own awareness of the problems of the modern age and ability to find and assess the necessary information. In doing so, teachers must limit their provision of necessary information and supplementary explanation, and should take care to not inculcate. In short, training the capacity for historical thought leads to developing active learners.

2. How to develop the capacity for historical thought

Therefore how should teachers develop students’ capacity for historical thought?

In relation to the current situation of history lessons (primarily in high school) and the capacity for logical thought, Michitaka Matsumoto presents the problem as follows:

In order for students to study history themselves and experience the enjoyment of thinking, or in other words, “develop the capacity for historical thought,” teachers should think and should not guide students to the correct answer or inculcate their knowledge and views. Firstly, the teacher puts a question to the students, who then think for themselves, summarize their idea, and describe the thought process leading to the idea. The idea is then shared with others, and it is the learning that takes place during this sharing that I believe leads to the development of capacity for historical thought⁸.

According to this presentation, teaching historic facts efficiently and the teacher passionately inculcating the view of history they have learned does not develop the capacity for historic thought. On the other hand, the presentation proposes that when “the teacher puts a question to the students, who then think for themselves, summarize their idea, and describe the thought process leading to the idea. The idea is then shared with others, and it is the learning that takes place during this sharing that” develops the capacity for historical thought.

Likewise, in the Science Council of Japan’s (a sectional committee related to high school geography and history education that is an association of the Psychology & Education Committee, the Committee for History Studies, and the Regional Research Committee) recommendation “Creating a New High School Geography & History Education: Developing a Temporal-Spatial Awareness in response to Globalization” (Aug 3rd, 2011), in terms of reference materials, as “Essential points in developing the capacity for historical thought,” the five following points are cited⁹ which depict history studies as a chain: (1) Evoking curiosity and interest in the past, (2) development of skills to examine historical materials, (3) development of historical analytical and interpretational skills, (4) development of the capacity for chronological thought, and (5) decision making.

⁸ Toriyama T. & Matsumoto. M (Eds.), “Designing Lessons to Develop the Capacity for Historical Thought” Aoki Shoten, 2012) p. iii - iv.

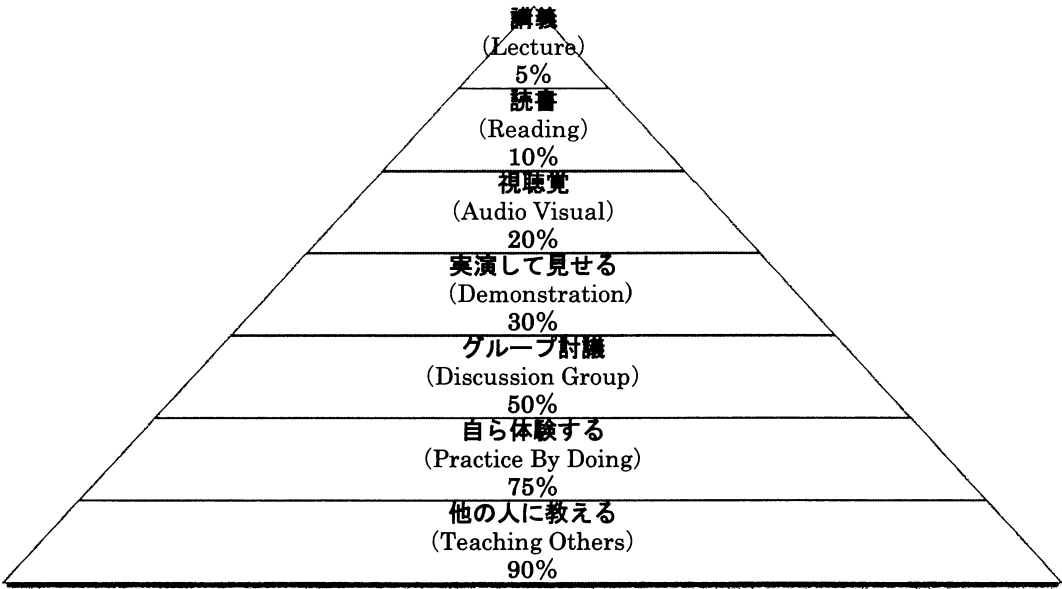
⁹ <http://www.geoedu.jp/GK.html>.

Given the previous problems with the Education Guidelines, regular examinations, and university entrance examinations, and given the current situation that lessons still adhere to persistent views on education, learning, and knowledge, can lessons be developed along the lines of Matsumoto’s proposal above or the Science Council of Japan’s recommendation on “Essential points in developing the capacity for historical thought?” (No doubt only a very small number of teachers will be able to do this).

II. The active learning style of lessons for high school Japanese history

1. What is active learning?

Put very simply, active learning (the lesson style) is a “lesson format that is more than a one-way communication of the teacher’s knowledge (where learners study passively)”. We can see that this lesson format is effective from a learning pyramid (the diagram below) developed from the results of a study of the average rate of learning retention (the extent to which learning content is memorized through the study format) conducted by the National Training Laboratories in the United States.



Learning Pyramid (Source: National Training Laboratories)

According to the above diagram, the rate of memorization through “lectures” (listening) alone is a mere 5%. Likewise, in the sense of passive learning, that of reading is 10%, audio visual 20%, and demonstration 30%, with rates of memorization comparatively lower than those at the base of the pyramid. On the other hand, “discussion groups,” “practice by doing,” and “teaching others” display memorization rates of 50% or higher and are clearly active forms of learning.

Therefore, the active learning style of lessons that incorporates activities such as “discussion groups,” “practice by doing,” and “teaching others” in an active learning format generates a major learning effect. Hence, in the author’s Japanese history lessons, he decided not only to utilize one-way lectures and audio visual teaching materials, but to also pursue an active learning style lesson format.

2. The practice of the active learning style of lessons

At the start of the semester, the author's active learning lessons in Japanese history firstly clarify the lesson aims and objectives and also prepare students to participate. The details are as follows:

Lesson Aims & Objectives

Aims: To not only to acquire a knowledge of Japanese history, but through Japanese history, to become a **"member of society", that is, a "scholar"!** (not a "tutee" who is taught through simply waiting for instructions, but a "scholar" capable of independent and proactive learning)

Objectives: - To find as many things as possible while studying Japanese history that considered with your own common sense make you think "that's strange..." (Having doubts and a keen awareness of things you don't understand) is the first step to becoming a "scholar"! (Better still is being able to resolve those doubts using your own intelligence!)

- Through communication (in study networks) with your classmates and colleagues (study friends), to become a "scholar" with a spirit of "gratitude" and "humility"!

Preparation to participate in lessons

★ **Don't be a slacker!** We need to be aware of how to stop ourselves "becoming slackers" or "creating slackers"!

★ **Don't be a freeloader!** It's a waste of time to participate in lessons as a "freeloader" (someone who relies on other members of the group for everything and simply reaps the results)!

First of all, the keyword of the lesson aims and objectives is "scholar" ⁽¹²⁾. A "scholar" refers to an active learner, and is someone in a position opposite that of the "tutee" (a passive learner) who is taught simply by waiting for instructions. So as not to become a mere "tutee," when preparing to participate, rules are established for participating in lessons in order to make ourselves and those around us conscious of "not becoming or creating slackers" and "not becoming or creating freeloaders." Furthermore, the above also presents the importance to being a "scholar" of "finding as many things as possible while studying Japanese history that considered with your own common sense make you think "that's strange..." (Raising questions), and in order to deepen learning, forming relationships with classmates and having "a spirit of gratitude" and "humility (accepting classmates straightforwardly)" towards others.

Next, the development (process) of each class period is as follows:

Lesson Development (50 min. lessons): The basic flow of a single class hour (active learning style)

(1) **Lecture:** Dialogue 1 with the learning content (KP Method & writing on the blackboard [15 min.]

... Presentation of "Today's question" and explanation of the content of the unit covered today

(2) **Tasks:** Dialogue 2 with the learning content (basic items)/dialogue 1 with classmates [10 min.]

...Confirmation of basic knowledge

(3) **Study:** Dialogue 2 with classmates [10 min.]

...Collaborative learning on the connections to today's themes

(4) **Test:** Dialogue with self 1 [5 min.]

...Practice exercises on the content studied in (1), (2), and (3)

(5) **Conclusion:** Dialogue with self 2 [10 min.]

...Checking test answers, point commentary and reflection (filling in reflection sheets)

(3): Teams of 3-5 students

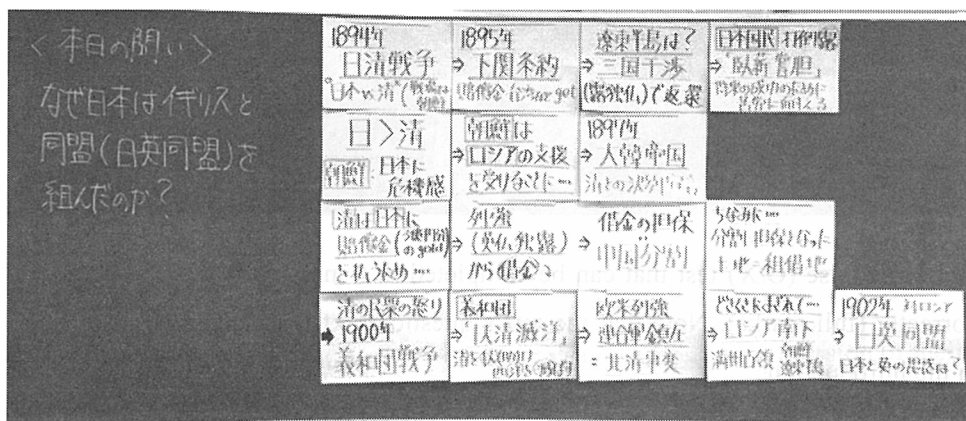
*Mutual teaching with study friends is OK!

*Individual thought is also OK occasionally

In ordinary lessons, printouts of overviews and worksheets are distributed. The overviews are provided in order to take the (1) **Lectures**, and are an information source that summarizes the overall unit content. The worksheets are for the (2) **Tasks** and (3) **Study**, and are to deepen understanding of the unit content. Furthermore, there are also sheets that combine “reflections” on the (4) **Test** and (5) **Conclusion**.

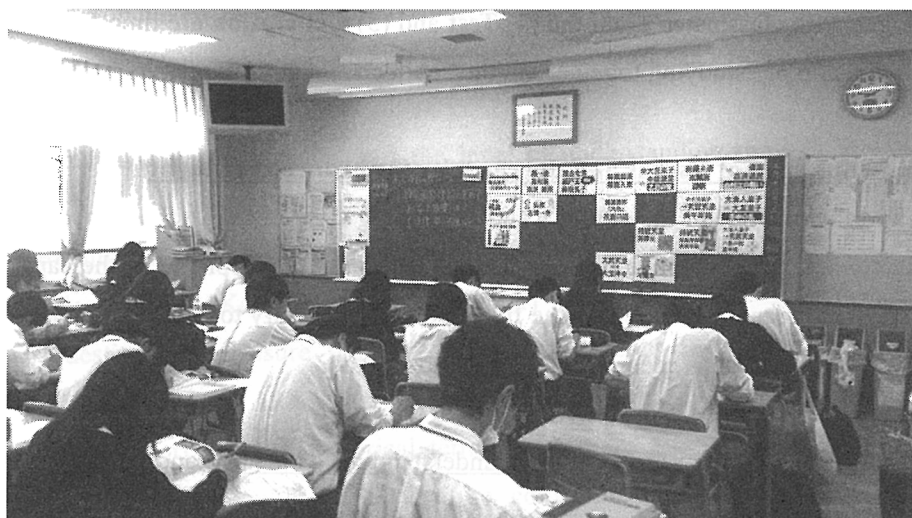
From this basis we will proceed to look at how the lessons develop specifically.

- (1) **Lectures:** The teacher writes on the blackboard “Today’s question” related to the unit content, and students fill in the specified column on the overviews. Using the KP Method¹⁰, the teacher explains the lesson content according to the details in the overview. This is basically a one-way lecture given by the teacher. However, the overviews are distributed in the previous lesson and are attached to a fill-in-the-blank style worksheet which students can use for preparatory studies.



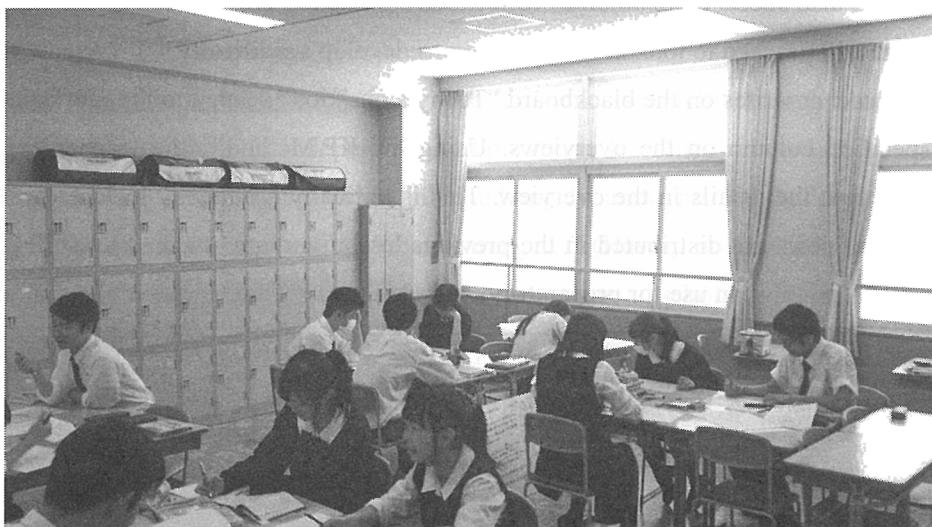
Example of an explanation using the KP Method

- (2) **Tasks:** Confirm the meaning of the “basic items” (the minimum required knowledge of history terms necessary to understand the unit content) set for the whole class using the distributed printouts and question and answer exercise books, and then fill in the specified column in their worksheets.



¹⁰ The “KP Method” uses the initials “K” and “P” which stand for “*Kamishibai*” (lit. “Paper drama,” trans. “picture card show”) and “presentation,” and is a presentation method practiced primarily by Tadashi Kawashima. Keywords and illustrations are written on several pieces of paper (KP sheet: 1 set of 10-15 sheets comprises a single topic) which are then attached with magnets to the whiteboard while giving a presentation of around 2-5 minutes (Kawashima, Tadashi, “The KP Method: Simple Communication through Picture Card Presentations” Mikuni Publishing, 2013, p. 62-63).

- (3) **Study:** Students form teams of 3-5 students, based on the content of (1) and (2), the students are made to understand the connections and correlations to the unit content using the printouts, textbook and collections of materials to teach one another by using the specified columns in the worksheet.



- (4) **Test:** A simple true/false (O/X) test that can be completed in 5 minutes is set. The target is to answer all questions correctly (full marks). Note that the test's question text is arranged so as to link with "today's question" in the introduction.
- (5) **Conclusion:** The teacher checks the test answers and provides a point commentary. Finally, the students fill in a reflection sheet. In the reflection sheets, students write about their reflections on their relationships with others amidst the problems and learning activities (process) in which they expressed their thoughts on the unit contents.

The (1) **Lectures** and (2) **Tasks** are time for "dialogue with the learning content," the (2) **Tasks** and (3) **Study** are time for "dialogue with classmates", and the (4) **Test** and (5) **Conclusion** are time for "dialogue with self", and follow the relationship of "studying together" in the "collective study" expressed by Manabu Sato¹¹.

III. The active learning style of lessons and the capacity for historical thought

Above I introduced the practice of the author's active learning style of high school Japanese history lessons. In order to ascertain whether the practice of these lessons led to the development of the capacity for historical thought, we will conduct an analysis based on the five elements necessary to cultivate thinking, assessment and expressional skills in history lessons according to Tomohito Harada.

A: Clear grasp of the teacher's aim (acquiring an understanding of history and a historical perspective and ideas)

(1) **Lecture:** The first "Today's Question" indicates the perspective and ideas of each unit, and students do not simply listen to an explanation given by the teacher. In the reflection in (5) **Conclusion**, in addition to

¹¹ Sato, Manabu, "The Teacher's Challenge: Creating lessons, changing learning" (Shogakukan, 2003), see "The Teacher's Challenge: Creating collective learning" (Shogakukan, 2006).

discussion tasks where students find the correct answers, there is also a column for students to write their own opinions (interpretations) that they think up based on correlations, etc..

B: The primary factor in inducing human thought, assessment and expression is “questioning” (the process of thought is a process of inquiry)

“Today’s question” raised in A above is a “question” presented by the teacher. Similarly, also when considering the connections and correlations with the unit content in (3) **Study**, students are encouraged to consider questions such as “Why did Japan enter the First World War?” The aim is for students to sift through their understanding of the information and explain such questions logically.

C: Generating dialogue and discussion between the teacher and students, and among students themselves

As mentioned earlier, (1) **Lectures** and (2) **Tasks** set up “dialogue with the learning content,” (2) **Tasks** and (3) **Study** set up “dialogue with classmates”, and (4) **Test** and (5) **Conclusion** set up “dialogue with the self.” Through this kind of dialogue with the learning content (information), self, and others, I believe students come to possess an awareness of modern issues from a historical perspective and become able to seek out and assess the required information.

D: Utilizing worksheets as a tool that facilitates students’ summaries and expression of their own ideas

Although worksheets are mainly used in (2) **Tasks** and (3) **Study**, they are also tools that enable students to organize fundamental knowledge and arrange their ideas in their own way. Although they are unable to give presentations in front of the entire class, mutual teaching within the groups can be perceived in the broad sense as a “presentation.”

E: Unifying instruction and evaluation

The evaluations conducted in each semester are: i) short single question and answer tests (basic items) (20%), ii) regular tests (answer sheets and written tasks) (70-75%), iii) Tasks (reports) (5-10%).

It is undoubtedly ii) regular tests that test the level of understanding through the active learning style of lessons. Within the regular tests, from the first semester in the 2014 academic year I switched to an answer sheet format (roughly 70%) and written format (roughly 30%). The aim of the answer sheet format is to avoid the fill-in-the-blank style “Kanji (Chinese character) tests” and also to use true/false questions and chronological questions to measure the level of understanding of historical facts through the accurate interpretation of question texts. Although the questions have specific answers, they cannot be answered solely based on the rote memorization of historical terms but require consideration of historical connections and correlations, and therefore I believe they lead to confirming the “ability to analyze and communicate information.” The written format focuses on explaining historical terms, questioning correlations, organizing key themes and questioning one’s own corresponding ideas, and I believe this leads to confirming the “ability to understand social trends historically.” Note that iii) leads to the “development of skills in examining historical materials,” and the “development of historical analytical and interpretational skills” within the Science Council of Japan’s recommendation on “Essential points in developing the capacity for historical

thought.”

In summary, the active learning lesson style clearly develops the capacity for historical thought. In order to “evoke interest and curiosity in the past” which was mentioned in the Science Council of Japan’s recommendation on “Essential points in developing the capacity for historical thought,” even if the lesson content is fantastic, the lessons will be pointless if they do not become a venue to capitalize on “interest and curiosity in the past.” In high school Japanese history classes, the “active learning (lesson style)” is considered to be a valid way to promote the active learning activities of students.

Conclusion

To recap, I would like to concisely define the capacity for historical thought (the development thereof) based on the discussion above¹².

(1) Acquiring the ability to think by collecting, analyzing and processing information and presenting logical explanations using social and historical concepts and interpretations

(2) Acquiring the ability to analyze and summarize general and specific images across space and time

The common knowledge that we use habitually and experientially is “everyday knowledge,” and the knowledge that is far removed from the everyday world and experiences, that in some cases we are unable to internalize without investigation and study, is “academic knowledge.” This kind of academic knowledge is not limited to the study of history, since transferrable skills such as the ability to engage seriously in thought and discussion must be developed before university¹³. The exclusive focus on preparatory studies in order to sit university entrance examinations leaves no time for thought or discussion (educators try not to take up time with thought and discussion) before the end of the high school education. Although teachers’ explanations may occasionally touch on “academic knowledge,” there is no opportunity to take an interest in or examine this amidst the preoccupation with the rote memorization of as many as several thousand terms. Hence, the three years at high school unfortunately become “a time of non-thought” where there is no acquisition of the capacity for historical thought.

For the past several years I have put into practice and researched the active learning style of lessons in relation to the potential to develop a versatile history education for all pupils and students in addition to future history researchers or history graduates who will go on to become Junior high school Social Studies teachers or High school Geography and History teachers. Based on this, I believe the active learning style of lessons leads to a “versatile history education” that “develops a capacity for historical thought based on academic knowledge.” So that the active learning style of lessons does not simply become “chat studies,” education is required that seizes upon academic knowledge while creating a mechanism for considering what constitutes “academic knowledge.” Such a mechanism has the potential to develop transferrable skills that can be utilized by university students and in society.

¹² Minagawa, Masaki “The Active Learning Lesson Style and the Development of Historical Thought: Considering the potential for a versatile history education through collaboration and association between high schools and universities” (“Bulletin (Senshu University Senior High School)” 34, 2015), p.25.

¹³ Shinichi Mizokami “Comprehensive Development from Active Learning” (Kawai Jyuku, Ed. “Why do students develop through active learning? – Observations from investigations into economics and engineering at universities across Japan” Toshindo, 2011), p.252-253.

Within the active learning lesson style, based on Shinichi Mizokami's definition above, lectures given by teachers are not negated but are on the contrary located as a necessary compositional element of active learning. However, the value of lectures lies not only in communicating knowledge, but rather, for example, in presenting "today's question" at the beginning of lessons, and in setting up time for student discussion and time for reflecting on the day's learning activities. (1) Teacher's developing learning activities that promote student awareness, and (2) both teachers and students becoming able to recognize "what is being studied?" and "in what way is it being studied?" undoubtedly leads to the development of active learners through lessons.