

Response Paper

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Educational Epistemology, Culture and History: Response to Joan Walton

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I read Dr. Walton's response to my paper with great interest. I truly appreciate her writing up the response that I believe will allow us to think deeper about the issues raised by my paper. I would also like to thank the journal's editor-in-chief Dr. Margaret Farren for giving me the opportunity to write this response to Dr. Walton.

First of all, Dr. Walton offers an important point about the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity. She argues that the dichotomy is tentative in nature, given the fact that all human perception can be regarded subjective. She makes a compelling argument that objectivity is not an independent entity that complements subjectivity, suggesting what seems objective is merely an inter-subjective agreement that is constructed among people. Thus the sense of objectivity is a construction in our minds in a socio-cultural context: We make sense of the world we experience and construct meanings, some of which we choose to label as objective. She makes this point by referring to quantum physics and the consciousness research where the consensus built among scientists and philosophers is the fundamental departure from the traditional paradigm of science. In these cutting-edge research domains, the nature of objective reality cannot be fully captured with positivistic science.

To me, her discussion is a good follow up discussion to the issues that I raised in my paper. The main topic of my paper is teacher expertise development but it can be seen to encompass a broader issue of how future social research should be envisioned and construed. In the field of education, especially in the United States, the quality of teaching is often discussed in terms of meeting teaching standards and performance goals that are considered to be "objective" criteria (Ravitch, 1995; Valli & Buese,

2007). I do not necessarily consider the use of standards and goals meaningless, but as my paper suggests, what seem to be at the core of teacher expertise development does not end with merely setting such criteria no matter how "objective" they seem to be. Rather, it is each individual teacher's psychological construction of meanings, what they choose to do to overcome challenges in each classroom situation and how they interpret their teaching to plan for the next step. This means that what is transformative in teacher education cannot be truly captured without incorporating the subjective dimension and dynamics of inter-personal forces inherent in day-to-day teaching. As is widely known, the accountability movement that has swept across schools in the United States in the last decade can be seen as a movement to dismiss such subjective dimension and teachers' meaning-making process in the name of objectivity (Ingersoll, 2013; Zeichner, 2010).

In fact, as Dr. Walton suggests, this is the very point qualitative researchers in the Western cultures have been arguing, long before the accountability movement: The first person account of experiences is what matters to understand the complexity of teacher development, and it can be captured only through qualitative methods embodying epistemological stances substantially different from the positivistic approaches. Dr. Walton points out that Western cultures are therefore not foreign to the issue of subjectivity in educational research.

I agree with her point but I would like to add a few points: First of all, it is not necessarily true that qualitative researchers view practitioners' actions-in-practice as an essential arena for practice improvement. The point of my paper is to suggest that the subjective basis of practitioners' actions is an important area to focus on for educational researchers but I am not clear that if this is something that is necessarily assumed among qualitative researchers in Western societies. In fact, qualitative research can take place as outside-in research just to identify certain patterns from qualitative data without any intention to engage in inside-out inquiries into teachers' meaning-making process or their actions (Mertens, 2008).

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To me, teachers' actions are where the subjective sense-making and the objective reality truly interact, and therefore, teachers' reflections-in-practice seems to be what genuinely leads to teacher expertise development. Many qualitative researchers have captured this point and delved into the nature of practitioner's subjective sense-making in their research frameworks, but I am not clear to what extent this view is widespread among the qualitative research communities. My contrasting between subjectivity and objectivity in my paper reflects my attempt to shed a light on this subjective dimension not necessarily captured by research communities in the field of education.

Dr. Walton has asked if inclusion of teachers' subjective sense-making reflects the characteristics of the Japanese culture. I would not like to assume a role to represent the Japanese culture in any way, but in response to Dr. Walton's question, I would like to offer a few perspectives. First, at least in my experiences, the materialist view is highly common in Japanese industries and economic practices. I was born and raised in Japan during the era of rapid economic growth and industrialisation characterised by the brutal use of objective science for global competition. Then I moved to the United States and have lived there for more than 20 years mainly as an educational researcher at universities. At the industry and economic levels, I do not see much significant difference between what I have observed between the two cultures in terms of the popularity of objective science except some craftsmanship that lasted for centuries. Though there are Japanese ways of handling things in Japanese industries, I am not clear if we can say it is more dominant than the materialist view commonly embraced in Western cultures.

However, I do see a major difference in how teachers, school leaders and educational researchers conceptualise ways to promote teacher development. From what I have observed, in the United States, teachers tend to be receive less validation for their meaning-making system or inter-subjective collaborations by those who are in power (see Duffy, 1994; Schmidt & Datnow, 2005). In contrast, in Japan, things are quite different. Teachers are called "*sensei*" – a forerunner of life understanding the wisdom of living, rather than those who were hired to teach academic subjects (Inoue, 2012; Stevenson, 1991). In Japan, teachers are more respected and receive more validation for their meaning-making system that is considered to be essential to ensure the quality of teaching (Wray, 2008). Furthermore, as was introduced before, it is common practice among Japanese teachers to collaborate to improve not only their teaching but also their

meaning-making system in the form of Japanese lesson study. However, in the United States, this is rare. Though there have been movements to initiate something similar, I do not think inter-subjective collaborations to clarify and improve each other's meaning making system is very common yet. In the United States, I have encountered many teachers who do not receive validation for their *jikkan* or meaning-making system with almost no colleague to share their first-person experiences in classrooms or be given institutionalized support for such dialogues. I also witnessed many policy makers and researchers dictate school reform discussions dismissing teachers' personal meaning making as trivial.

This whole picture of teacher education in the United States must be foreign to most of Japanese teachers – at least from what I observed. I would not deny the fact that there are Japanese teachers and educational researchers who are heavily influenced by the Western mental set, but almost all of Japanese elementary school teachers who I met whole-heartedly embraced the importance of their personal identity as *sensei* and considered their subjective meaning-making process – personal reflection and collaborative dialogues with their colleagues – as the most essential determinant of their practices. And they are usually in the middle of the process to clarify and improve their meaning-making system through lesson study and other collaborative dialogues with their peers typically institutionalized in Japanese schools.

In fact, if you become fluent in Japanese, it is very common to hear Japanese teachers talking about their deep-seated feeling (called *omoi* in Japanese) as the foundation of their teaching as well as their efforts to improve their teaching in collaboration with their colleagues. The same thing applies to *jikkan* (gut feeling) and *ba* (inter-subjective meaning-making space) that I discussed in my article. The Japanese language ensures such subjective and inter-personal grounding of professional practice (Inoue, 2012; Maynard, 1997).

One may wonder why this is the case in the Japanese culture. I can offer a few hypotheses. For instance, it could be the case that the long recent feudal period that Japan went through had shaped and sustained the minds and the language of Japanese people to cherish the intra and inter-subjective value systems. Or Japan as a "Far East" country managed to avoid heavy influence from Western-style absolute powers (e.g., Roman empire, King of England) that mercilessly destroy the bottom-up meaning-making by those who live in the territories. Or it could be the case that the people could have developed indigenous wisdom centered on the personal dimension of teaching and placing respect on those who teach would

eventually pays off in the society. Again, these are merely my hypotheses, and studying these hypotheses would be quite eye-opening in connecting culturally shared educational epistemology and the historic trajectory of the culture.

One thing that is worth mentioning here is that the Japanese society went through the darkest time of its history during World War II characterised by public despair and total denials of humanistic values. However, after the war, it renewed its commitment to humanistic and democratic value system through American occupation forces, based on which Japanese education system was re-booted (Cummings, 1980). What is ironic is that while educating hearts and minds of children is considered to be a defining characteristic of education in Japan today (Lewis, 2016; Wray, 2010), this is often seen largely lost in schooling in the United States (Kohn, 1999). History often shows us a very interesting twist of fate.

One interesting hypothesis that I have is that there was a fortunate misinterpretation of American democratic values by Japanese educators right after the war. In the United States, the democratic process is often characterised by freely speaking one's points of view and making a clear argument publicly, which is basically an attempt to defeat the other side using refined logic and rhetoric, and once you win, you enjoy the winner takes all status. However, for Japanese, the democratic process does not seem to equivalent to that. Rather, it seems to mean patiently negotiating meanings with others in order to build consensus with others in inter-subjective dialogues. The key is negotiation of meaning to create a peaceful state where everyone is in accord. It could be the case that Japanese schools could have misinterpreted the "democracy" conveyed by Americans back then and unknowingly localised the democratic process using its inter-subjective epistemology and collectivism. Thus education as a field still emphasises intra and inter-subjective meaning-making of children as well as teachers (Lewis, 1995). But again, this is just my hypothesis. Things could be much more complex: The tendency to value teachers' subjective meaning-making system could stem from something that is more deeply rooted in the history of the Japanese society. If it is the case, a large part of Japanese educational epistemology could be tacit and may not be captured easily in terms of the objectivity versus subjectivity discussion. If so, we might be merely skimming the surface: As Dr. Walton pointed out, this could be better captured in terms of the Jungian concept of collective consciousness.

In any event, one thing that I am convinced about is that we have a large potential here. The globalised world

allows us to easily exchange different perspectives across cultures and reflect on our own assumptions, walls and limitations. And I witnessed that the US teachers that I teach grow tremendously and become empowered through the action research process, which I found to be much easier to describe using Japanese cultural concepts. To me, it seems that teachers' action research project, if it is done to support their personal meaning-making, could open a huge door of opportunities in Western contexts (Inoue, 2015a).

I would like to point out here that my paper is not an attempt to create a utopian image of the Japanese society or schools. Rather, it is an attempt to illustrate the teacher development process that takes place in action research projects in light of what cannot be easily captured by "objective" science. My research suggests that the active ingredients of teacher expertise development can be found in teachers' subjective sense-making that has been largely dismissed (or lost) in teacher education dialogues and policy discussions in the United States. I have been arguing elsewhere that what can be limiting our understanding of our mind and growth process could be the very chain of thought that we have been accustomed to (Inoue, 2012). That is the very reason why I often use East Asian epistemological concepts for examining how we can stretch our horizon by encountering culturally different ways of seeing things.

With this in mind, I have offered an annual Japan program in the past five years where my US students and Japanese students studying education interact and co-reflect on action research projects and explore what can be learned in such cultural exchanges (see Inoue, 2015b). Though this program is not free from limitations, it has served as essential opportunities to mutually uncover the cultural dimension of action research and explore previously unknown pictures of teacher expertise development. My hope is that this kind of cross-cultural exchanges, including this one, leads us to move out of our comfort zone and show us a new direction of teacher education as well as educational research. I would like to invite readers to join such endeavors.

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