

Negotiating for Grades: Dead-Serious Fun-Loving College Kids

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I have been designing and teaching Japanese film courses in a major American university for over twenty years now. Some meet the needs of students whose interest in cinema runs deep, whether or not they are enrolled in the film studies program. Some of my courses appeal to a wider audience. They are “distribution of studies” courses, my contribution to an extensive, wide-ranging menu our undergraduates choose from in fulfillment of their International Culture requirement of 9 credits in the total of 120 they must earn to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree.

International culture courses are meant to broaden a student’s horizons, to give them virtual, if not actual experience of subjects they may never encounter again. On the other hand, an international culture course can and sometimes does lead to an on-going interest and even more serious engagement with subjects the student might never have discovered otherwise. These courses have been known to change career paths, sometimes early, sometimes late in the course of undergraduate study.

Two of my international culture offerings are very popular. One offers comparative study of American Westerns and Japanese Samurai films. The other offers an interdisciplinary focus, studying Japanese literature on screen. Both these courses fill up on the first or second day of registration, with numbers of students adding their names to a waiting list. Students

have in fact been known to wait two or even three years to fit these courses into their schedule.

Another course of mine, Japanese Culture and Society through Cinema, is more popular. Also closed on the first or second day of registration, it has the broadest appeal. As might be expected, it concerns a critical study of representative Japanese films as reflections of the nation’s socio-cultural milieu. Since it also entails appreciation of film, the student also learns how various critical methods work with specific films.

One of the staples chosen for screening in class is Yoshimitsu Morita’s *The Family Game* (*Kazoku gemu*, 1983), voted the best picture of year by Japan’s prestigious journal *Kinema jumbo*. Film buffs East and West are fond of pointing to this film as a feat of youthful derring-do. Morita was just thirty-three. *The Family Game* was just his fifth commercial film. Shot in just three weeks, it is a comical satire on an affluent, but dysfunctional, middle-class nuclear family in Tokyo. It also takes aim at Japan’s nose-to-the-grindstone educational system. Morita takes full advantage of the fact that family and education became heavily, and in some respects destructively, interdependent in postwar Japan.

My American students are quick to see why Morita uses the roller coaster image to speak for what ails the delinquent younger son. Asked to explain, they point to it as evidence of the director’s poignant critique of Japan’s

achievement-by-scoreboard fixation on standardized education. The space warp toy featured in Shigeyuki's room is the perfect construct of the life mapped out for him. He must not be "derailed." All must go swiftly, smoothly along the given, if perilously "warped," trajectory from elite schooling to college to status and security in the workplace. Just as the space warp ball returns to its terminal only to start off again, the endless circle of fierce competitiveness must be pursued without let-up.

I also screen a number of cultural videos related to daily life and customs in Japan. My students take a natural and notably lively interest in the fact that college is just about the only stopover on the Japanese bullet train of careerist dedication. Only in college, they learn, do their Japanese counterparts get a chance to have a bit of fun before they settle for a lifetime chink in the sheer cliff face of corporate or bureaucratic success.

I know a sure-fire way to make my students sit up straight: some excellent footage I have of Japanese undergraduates indulging various extra-curricular activities, some as edifying as Japanese Chess Club, some as hilarious as a Japanese Karaoke contest seen through American eyes. And of course what could be more amusing to my "liberated" young audience than a roving camera-eye view of life on Lovers' Lane on the banks of the Kamo River in Kyoto, couples spaced out discreetly in a row, thirty feet apart.

For their part, many Japanese have the impression that fun is Job One on American college campuses they see as ruled by party-going and the dating "game." Such is not really the case. While it is true that college life here is a good deal more free-wheeling than in Japan and American students have more freedom of association, undergraduate study in the USA is serious business.

I use the word business advisedly. Higher education here costs a great deal of money, especially at a major university like mine. Except for a limited few whose parents are wealthy, most students here experience the costs directly. Some work hard to get and keep scholarships, which can be academic or athletic.

Failing that means of subsidy (or needing to supplement it), students either work or take out loans—or both. Government and/or bank loans are available at relatively low interest rates. Borrowers begin repaying once they graduate. My friend Emily, for example, borrowed \$40,000 to graduate from an expensive school noted for its computer engineering program. She now ranks as a manager at a major firm, at a salary well above average, yet every month she sees a large chunk of her paycheck going to pay her college debt.

Some students do graduate debt-free, though at a cost of a different kind. They pay as they go, working summers fulltime and part-time when school is in session. Some do make good money. I have known students who did quite well waiting tables at expensive restaurants. Yet even the best-paid student worker might come to see the experience as having its downside too. Some feel that juggling job (or jobs) and school stunted their personal or intellectual or academic achievement, or possibly all three. Some see the strain of it costing too much of youth itself, some indefinable essence of a time of life too precious to calculate in dollars and cents or, for that matter, professional success on down the road.

No wonder the vast majority of students I teach and advise take their college education seriously. They are, of course, perfectly well aware of the incalculable value of education itself. But on a course-by-course basis, as a

matter of on-going effort, they are equally aware of the time and money costs involved. They know that flunking a course can cost more than the money it costs to enroll in it and the time it takes to repeat the course. Failure can lead to loss of scholarship support and important social and academic privileges. That, in turn, can lead to a heavier burden of debt.

A goodly number of college students are enrolled in highly demanding pre-professional programs like medicine and law. Most enter those programs as freshmen well aware of the demanding course of study that lies ahead on into graduate school. Even in high school they were aware that high achievement in college is more than merely desirable: it is a must for gaining acceptance to the best-possible graduate programs in their chosen area.

It follows that pre-med and pre-law students (to cite but two examples) are among the most highly motivated of our undergraduates. The less determined among them soon drop out in favor of less all-consuming disciplines.

This may be the place to point out that many elementary and high school teachers combine work with earning graduate degrees, taking classes at night or during the summer. The economic incentive is very real, since most school systems reward advanced degrees with higher pay.

It goes without saying that the university itself monitors student achievement very closely. Results are measured on a four-point scale, a letter grade of A being 4.0. A student is put on probation if their grade point average at the end of a term falls below a D defined as 1 on that scale. A student on probation has the next term to bring their average up to the minimum. If they fail, that's it—they have "flunked out."

How does a student avoid the embarrassment of failure? Studying harder is certainly key, though it never hurts to solicit advice and the

right kind of help from the instructor. Help outside class in America is offered during "office hours." My university is typical in requiring all faculty, full and part-time, to hold regular hours, two or three a week. Days and times must be posted on their office doors and listed in the syllabus handed out at the beginning of each course.

My own undergraduate experience in Japan included dogged pursuit of one professor in particular. I desperately needed his signature on a form, yet he was never ever in his office. Finally, in despair, I cornered him after class, made my request, and gave him a self-addressed, stamped envelope for returning the form.

In my university, office hours hold an honored place in the scheme of things. Most students value the opportunity to interact with teachers. Most teachers see the value of offering timely help to a student who is falling behind. A student whose mid-term exam earns a mark of D or F needs to come in (or be called in) for a conference. Some teachers limit in-put on these occasions to general exhortation to try harder. Others take the time to review difficult material. Still others exercise the compassionate option of giving the student extra make-up work to do.

My own experience is relevant here, not least because I am one of those who consider office hours a benefit students are entitled to—even though, at times, I have to wonder at the cost of having to deal with this or that student whose aim is unmistakably and solely to negotiate a higher grade than he or she deserves.

All my students come by grade-consciousness honestly, since university policy obliges every teacher to include grading criteria on the syllabus for a course. My own grading scheme is based on several aspects of performance.

I require students to write three critical essays in lieu of a mid-term exam. They count

for 40% of the final mark. A final take-home exam counts for 50%. The other 10% reflects class attendance. The mathematic average is not absolute since I give special consideration to student participation in class discussion.

I am a stickler where attendance is concerned. The syllabus clearly states that more than three unexcused absences affect a student's grade. This is a very reasonable regimen for a class that meets just once a week. Most often students sign an attendance passed round towards the end of class. I am not above saying loud and clear: "Sign your name and your name only. Con artists get no mercy!" I also find it useful to let a surprise quiz confirm attendance from time to time. The time-honored slang term for this is "pop quiz." That's pop as in sudden loud noise—startling, unexpected.

You might say I do my part for youth and inexperience by keeping abreast of attendance. Once I caught two male students leaving under cover of darkness as a film claimed our attention. I chased them all the way to the end of the corridor and dragged them back into the classroom to a round of applause from the class.

I also e-mail elusive absentees or "nail" them before or after class. My students quickly learn that I am serious, seriously interested in their progress, and correspondingly generous with office hours. I make it clear that more than three absences signals major trouble.

Critical essays are the norm throughout, with emphasis on clear thinking and clean writing. Students get a hand-out describing essay criteria before the first written assignment:

Essay grades assess your ability to observe, analyze, reason and communicate your understanding of specific films. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers here. What counts most is how well you organize your thoughts and how convincingly you

substantiate your observations and arguments. Factual accuracy is a consideration too, especially in relation to the socio-cultural milieu of the work in question.

Students doing work below C level will be called in for advising. Some call me first, being that eager to do better. I am always happy to help any student look for ways to improve understanding and performance. Certainly, every student wants to get an "A." Some come to protest a mark as good as "B" on a critical essay, convinced that they can convince me to give it the "A" they think it deserves. I deal with them firmly, but respectfully, even though sometimes I have to wonder where they got their outsize nerve. I do my best to help them see their weaknesses and learn from them. It often helps to discuss one or the other model student essays from my files.

I also think it is important to do more than brand exams and essays with a mark. I do my best to offer written comments which go beyond correction, encouraging each student to connect and expand his/her interests. I do wish my weekends could expand accordingly. Getting students to see (as it were) how cinema fits the larger picture is engaging, not to mention time-consuming. As it is, I seem to devote Saturdays and Sundays to housework, running for exercise, and student papers and more papers.

I have always believed that marking and returning papers promptly is the way to go—even as I sometimes wonder how far it will take me in the direction of utter exhaustion. Be that as it may, my policy is to return papers the very next class.

Since grade-consciousness is a fact of life I always end the final, take-home essay exam with this question: "What grade do you deserve for the course?" (I also take care to introduce the essay topic by way of the sporting/exercise maxim "No Pain, No Gain.") I view this

opportunity for self-evaluation as educational for me in many ways as well. For example, it offers valuable insights into student thinking about this intercultural course and my teaching in general.

Student responses vary. Some are modest and humble while others are audaciously, even unreasonably, self-laudatory. Allow me to quote a few—with their permission. (In a country famous or infamous for law-suits of every conceivable kind, I have to be careful about not being sued for violation of student privacy!)

A student whose progress had been steady but not adequate for the highest grade based his appeal on holiday spirit: "It's Christmas time. Don't give me coal, but give me an 'A.'" He was counting on my intercultural awareness at the local level. Many Eastern European immigrants to Pennsylvania threatened to give naughty children nothing but "coal and onions" for Christmas.

What Japanese undergraduate would dream of seeking such an adjustment? This particular student also had the wit to enter in the margin of his exam, in extremely small letters, a more reasonable request: "B, please."

A surprising number of students show their respect for teacher and subject matter by adding comments like: "This is the most difficult question I have ever been asked. Whatever grade you think appropriate is fine with me. Thank you for a very enlightening class." Another variation on that theme took this form: "I thought the course was very good, regardless of whatever grade I get."

At the other extreme are the overconfident who assess themselves in terms like these: "I honestly believe that I deserve an A for my work in this course.... I always sat near the front of the class and tried to answer the questions posed to the class. My participation and the quality of much of my work made me think that I earned an 'A' for the class. Not

that I'm boasting, because I know a samurai should possess humility."

Another argued that given perfect attendance, good grades on all the papers and all the necessary work he had done, his grade should be a solid "A." Notes of apology and self-recrimination also occur, blaming a "mediocre" or "no-so-good" performance on poor health, coursework overload, and once in a while outright negligence.

I do take care to keep all student comments in proper professional perspective, though I must admit it sometimes helps at the end of a long day's night marking papers to come across comments like these: "I thoroughly enjoyed this class. It was my most interesting class this semester. This is why I have elected to take another course of yours next term." "Dr. McDonald, I would like to thank you for a giving me the chance to be a part of your course and for all the things you have taught me throughout this course...."

The most heartwarming remarks are apt to come from graduating seniors. Allow me to offer a sampling of those as I hurry to finish this account and get ready for another grueling round of teaching after the summer hiatus: "Good bye, Professor McDonald (sic), I really did enjoy your class. It is a shame I didn't know about you until my last semester." "Thank you so much for a wonderful semester. I really learned a great deal about Japanese culture and how to begin to analyze a film. I never realized how in-depth films can be and how they need to be studied in order to understand their underlying concepts." "This is the first time I have ever taken a film course. I am quite happy I did because I really enjoyed your course.... Take care and thank you again for an awesome semester!"

Is it any wonder I enjoy teaching so much?

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