

Forschung und Lehre

Teaching Fieldwork in Japanese Studies — A Blended Learning Approach

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Summary

In the BA Plus program “Japanese Studies — Cultural and Social Perspectives” at Heinrich Heine University (HHU) in Düsseldorf, students acquire skills in qualitative research methods in order to carry out research projects in Japan. In this paper, we discuss how we prepare students for fieldwork in Japan and introduce our program’s approach to this challenging task. We rely on a small classroom setting, and utilize e-learning by combining a virtual classroom with a learning management system for documentation purposes. This blended learning setting supports students throughout their individual and heterogeneous fieldwork phases in Japan. We argue that both parts, the offline introduction to qualitative research methods before going abroad and online classes during the fieldwork in Japan itself, are equally important. We have found that e-learning and blended learning scenarios are especially useful tools for bridging the distance between teachers and students, and for better supporting the latter in the field. Therefore, we suggest that these teaching methods can be helpful and applicable outside of structured programs as well, because they can easily be adjusted to different teaching contexts.

Keywords: Bachelor Plus, Japan, Japanese Studies, fieldwork, qualitative research, e-learning, virtual classroom, online tutoring

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Introduction

Japanese Studies do not have a single set of methods. Instead, researchers have creatively adapted ones, such as participant observation or interviews, from a number of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. This wide array of possible approaches makes it difficult for students to choose an appropriate set of methods for their research project. In the BA Plus program “Japanese Studies — Cultural and Social Perspectives” at Heinrich Heine University (HHU) in Düsseldorf, we mainly focus on teaching qualitative research and fieldwork methods.

However, fieldwork is usually considered a solitary experience. Bronisław Malinowski, the so-called father of fieldwork, often recalled a feeling of loneliness in his diaries from his time in the Trobriand Islands (Malinowski 1989: 291). Malinowski paved the way for fieldwork being a core principle of Anthropology, characterized by observing *and* participating in the field for a longer period of time. More than a hundred years later, fieldwork is still considered a rite of passage that is to be realized — and sometimes suffered through — alone. Doing fieldwork is very challenging, especially for students who are conducting it for the first time. This solitary experience can lead to frustration, confusion, and insecurity when encountering unforeseen obstacles. Even if relevant methods are taught in university, they do not fully prepare researchers and students for the actual experience in the field.

In this paper, we will discuss how to train students in ethnographic methods and how to support them when preparing for and conducting fieldwork in Japan. We begin with a short overview of the literature on fieldwork in Japan that we have found useful in our class. To provide context on how our teaching concept has developed, we present the Bachelor Plus program at HHU and its implications for teaching fieldwork methods. We will then explain how we introduce students to qualitative research methods, and how we prepare them for fieldwork before they leave for Japan. This is followed by an introduction to our e-learning-based support offered during students’ various fieldwork stages while in Japan. In the final section, we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the curriculum both from the students’ and the teacher’s point of view, and the transferability of our teaching concept to other contexts.¹

1 This research essay is based on the presentation that we gave at the 17th German Japanese Studies Conference (Japanologentag), held in Berlin in August 2018. We would like to thank Cornelia Reiher for the invitation to speak at the panel on ethnographic fieldwork there, and also the opportunity to present our project in this special issue.

How to teach fieldwork: Readings and previous experiences within Japanese Studies programs in Germany

In order to teach methods, providing students with readings is important. In class we rely on both readings focused on methods and studies by scholars who have applied these methods. In the field of Japanese Studies, many scholarly works are available that present the results of various kinds of qualitative empirical research and ethnographic approach. Some examples that students can begin with when wondering what they can achieve by employing qualitative research methods include monographs on Japanese housewives and their networks (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012), the impact of Japan's nuclear industry on a rural community (Dusinberre 2012), or robot technology and its usage in nursing homes (Wagner 2012). However, only a limited number of scholarly works on methods for fieldwork in Japan are available. Most helpful for prospective researchers is a collection of essays on Japan scholars' direct experiences during fieldwork (Bestor et al. 2003), and an article on fieldwork in Japan by McLaughlin (2010).

Based on his personal experience in Japan, McLaughlin addresses the challenges that students may encounter in the field. These include access and technical problems such as securing research data. For McLaughlin, these problems result mainly from students' "peripheral position" as foreign and junior researchers. Therefore, he suggests to focus on creating personal networks through both formal and informal introductions made by members of host institutions and friends. In these networks, gatekeepers — who provide access to possible informants in the field — are particularly important. He explains how and why to affiliate and act with(in) a Japanese host institution, and stresses its importance for access to resources and introductions to individuals and organizations in the field — but also for future career options. His choice to "embrace field research as a chance to learn new skills" (McLaughlin 2010: 11) is especially motivating for younger researchers as are his pragmatic tips for academic networking. With regard to collecting data, his warning that researchers may "accumulate seemingly unmanageable mountains of material" (Ibid, 16) is more relevant than ever in times of almost unlimited data storage availability.

Bestor et al. (2003) demonstrate the plurality of academic research on Japan. Twenty-one scholars from different academic disciplines like Anthropology, Sociology, and Religious Studies discuss their own experiences of conducting fieldwork in the country. They touch upon issues like getting started in the field, gaining access to a field site, contacting official institutions, undertaking interviews, and conducting follow-up research. Especially the questions of field access and personal networks are crucial ones (Hendry 2003). Bestor et al. stress that "with proper training, patience, and ingenuity field researchers can find Japanese society to be an incredibly open, diverse, and multivocal society" (2003: 16). This is a key lesson that we convey to our students.

Although the literature on fieldwork and methods in Japanese Studies provides insights on how to conduct research in the country, they do not address the question of how to teach related methods. So how can ethnographic ones be taught to students enrolled in Japanese Studies programs? Only a few such programs in Germany teach methods in a hands-on way, through offering fieldwork experiences. They often provide opportunities to apply and practice research methods by studying Japan-related topics in Germany. At Freie Universität Berlin, master students learn and practice methods through research workshops on Japanese foodscapes in the capital, and publish their results in a video blog (Reiher 2016; see also, the same author in the introduction to this special issue). At HHU, our colleagues have joined this project and explored Düsseldorf's Japanese foodscapes, visiting Japanese restaurants and comparing their research with that of colleagues in Berlin (Kottmann 2017). In a project on the Japanese diaspora in Düsseldorf, students visit the city's "Japan Day" festival so as to conduct participant observation, and later publish their findings (Tagsold 2009). These student-centered projects allow learners to develop their research skills, and apply and deepen their knowledge of the Japanese language. However, students also need opportunities to practice both explaining their research projects to others and dealing with practical and technical aspects while they are already in the field, in order to successfully conduct their own research in Japan eventually.

Integrating methods and fieldwork into the curriculum of Japanese Studies at HHU

For a Japanese Studies program with a focus on social science research on the country, teaching qualitative methods to students as early on as possible and supervising the application of these methods in the field are important tasks. However, bachelor students are already quite busy with learning the Japanese language and acquiring a basic knowledge of the country's culture, history, and contemporary society too. Seminars in the field of social science research on Japan usually focus on introducing students to specific topics, such as the ageing society or minorities. This leaves little time to teach research methods.

In the past, students who went to Japan to conduct ethnographic research sometimes came back with unsatisfactory results. This is partly because they were not trained in research methods, lacked experience, and sometimes missed support from their teachers — especially when they encountered problems in the field. Even if most partner universities in Japan do assign students a supervisor, it is not always possible for them to provide close and regular support for exchange students' research. In addition, exchange students may find it difficult to approach professors for help that they have only known for a short time. Contacting their teachers back at the home institution in Düsseldorf is an option, but the distance often makes individually designed supervision difficult.

Against the backdrop of these challenges, we successfully applied for DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) funding for the four-year BA Plus program “Japanese Studies — Cultural and Social Perspectives.”² The aim of this program is to help talented and enthusiastic students to develop their own research projects, and to carry out fieldwork during a mandatory one-year stay in Japan. In order to make fieldwork more successful, training in qualitative research methods takes place before students leave for Japan.³ The program first started in 2010, and supports five students with a partially funded scholarship provided by the DAAD — as well as up to five additional students with alternative funding every year. Those applying for the BA Plus program are required to present a well thought out qualitative research project, and must demonstrate high academic skills.

The BA Plus program’s concept combines an introduction to qualitative research methods and independent student research carried out during an exchange year in Japan. The curriculum was developed and structured to meet students’ needs. In an introductory course on empirical research in Japan, students start preparing for their fieldwork in the country. In their third year, students then actually study in Japan and complete five of the BA Plus program’s study modules at five selected partner universities.⁴ Thus, students carry out their own research in Japan while also simultaneously attending intensive Japanese-language classes and seminars. The data that students collect during their stay provides the basis for their bachelor thesis, and can also be analyzed in more depth during the subsequent one-year master program “Japanese Studies — Cultural and Social Perspectives” if they choose to continue their studies.

To date, seven groups of students have successfully completed research in Japan. Their project topics have ranged from fast food consumption, to left-wing journalism, to the integration of the therapeutic robot Paro into care routines. Not only have the research topics been highly diverse, so have been the methods used too. Among the ones that students have employed have been narrative, expert, and group interviews, as well as participant observation and questionnaires. In order to provide them with structured and continuous support as well as supervision while in Japan, we utilize e-learning classes and an online project colloquium. Students’ research and the two accompanying online colloquia during their stay are part of the curriculum abroad. In the following sections, the concept of supporting students’

2 The program (BA Plus “Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaftliche Japanforschung”) was first initiated at the Institute of Japanese Studies of HHU by Professor Dr. Shingo Shimada and his team.

3 As the DAAD will terminate its funding of the BA Plus program, this support will come to an end in September 2019. Starting from October 2019, funding will be provided by HHU (so called Qualitätsverbesserungsmittel/QVM).

4 Partner universities are: Chiba University, Keiō University, Nanzan University, Ōsaka University, and the University of the Ryūkyūs.

fieldwork — by helping them to prepare for it before they leave for Japan and through e-learning courses while they are there — will now be described in detail.

Getting ready for fieldwork in Japan: Coursework at HHU

Our aim of supporting students' research with structured supervision starts with methodological preparation and training before they leave for Japan. During the months prior to their stay abroad, students participate in the mandatory seminar "Introduction to Empirical Research on Japan." The course covers four topics: 1) a history of and introduction to fieldwork methods; 2) practicing these methods in small test runs; 3) engaging with anthropological findings by established scholars from the field of Japanese Studies; and, 4) face-to-face exchange with senior students and researchers from our and other institutes who give first-hand reports about their own fieldwork experiences in Japan.

In the course, students work on their initial project idea and learn to focus their research interests and plans. They constantly work on and further develop their research proposals, comment on their peers' research projects, and, at the end of the course, give a short presentation about their projects and receive feedback from their peers and instructors. Thereby, we encourage learning with and from each other in order to improve everyone's projects. This creates networks of peer support between students all facing similar challenges and who often work with similar methods but in different fields. This way, the students also learn to work together as a group of researchers; everyone remains responsible for their own project, while at the same time exchanging ideas and experiences. In the past, students often created their own groups via social media after the end of the seminar to keep in touch while in Japan, outside of the online classes.

The course starts with an introduction to the history of Anthropology and Ethnography, critically reflecting on the former's initial idea "to study people who were discovered and often colonized by explorers and conquerors who arrived in their lands and needed to understand their different ways" (Hendry 2015: 122). To be aware of this is part of the responsibility of a researcher: to never simply impose meaning, but to rather listen to and to actively engage with informants on a more equal footing. After discussing the basics of Anthropology, we introduce selected methods for collecting data. Drawing on our own and previous students' experiences in Japan, we focus on those fieldwork methods that have worked best for first-time researchers. These include open and semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and field notes. The course continues with hands-on activities, to enable students to gain first-hand practical experience through the applying of fieldwork methods and by discussing the results. By collecting their own data, students also learn about technical aspects of research like recording and transcribing interviews, saving data, and data protection.

In order to conduct fieldwork confidently, students not only need to hear or read about methods but also to actually apply them. Therefore, we conduct small

simulations and work with data that students themselves collected. The following two exercises have proven particularly helpful for students: interview simulations and observation. The first exercise takes place after reading texts from handbooks on interview methods. Students then develop mock research questions (e.g. “What motivates students to enroll for Japanese Studies, and what are their career goals?”), think of interview questions in Japanese, and then proceed to interview each other. Afterwards, they transcribe the short mock interviews. Thus, we combine theoretical input, the practical application of the method, and working with data. This training ends with a session in which students compare texts from ethnographic researchers who have worked in Japan, to analyze how others have put their interview data in writing.

The second exercise is one in (participant) observation. Students are free to choose a field and context for this exercise, and spend at least 45 minutes observing and taking notes. Based on their field notes, students write a small text — which they then present in the seminar. We discuss experiences and feelings during participant observation, and compare both notes and texts with those of their peers. This is not only good practice in using ethnographic methods, but also helps students reflect on their role and approaches as researchers. This exercise ends with practical tips on possible tools for taking notes quickly in the field and examples of field notes from senior researchers, to give students an impression of the different ways that these can be taken and afterwards written up.

In addition to these hands-on exercises, we invite researchers from other universities or senior BA Plus students to talk about their fieldwork in Japan. Their experiences and examples from the field serve as very effective preparation for the students’ own research; having the opportunity to ask more experienced students questions reduces the fears and concerns that junior ones can have. While they can ask the instructors about these issues as well, they might feel more comfortable asking someone who is still a student him or herself.

Encouraging cooperation in research is another goal of this course. This is why we include various forms of group activity, ranging from discussions, to conducting mock interviews, to short participant observation. Students also learn to present their own research project to different audiences, while also practicing critically evaluating and commenting on those of their fellow classmates too. After completing the introductory seminar, and before leaving for Japan, students hence by now know the basics of fieldwork there, have acquired first-hand experience with methods such as participant observation and interviews, and have refined their individual research agenda.

Support in Japan and back home: Presenting research in virtual and real classrooms

Once the students arrive in Japan, communication and cooperation have to be managed over a long distance. Therefore, two virtual seminars constitute an

important part of the curriculum during their stay abroad. We transfer a traditional classroom setting into a virtual one, thus providing a forum for students to continually discuss research questions, research methodology, and their current state of research with their peer group. We discuss pressing issues and concerns, and give students the opportunity to bring up any topic that they would like to review with the whole group, thus receiving encouragement and suggestions as to solutions. In case of difficulties that students do not want to discuss within the group, they can receive individual support through online consultation.

The online classes are conducted via web conferencing software. Existing software ranges from commercial to open source applications such as Blackboard Collaborate, Adobe Connect, or BigBlueButton. They all offer synchronous communication, text chats, instant polling, application sharing, access to presentations, or audio and camera functions. This allows for an individualization of the learning process, and enables cooperation in a multi-sited setting. While each software's individual strengths and weaknesses as well as data protection policy differ, many German universities tend to use the commercial web conferencing tool of Adobe Connect, which is free of charge for teaching and research purposes under a license agreement with the German National Research and Education Network (DFN). Having previously tested a number of software solutions, we now use Adobe Connect in the BA Plus program as it offers the most secure connection, allows for flexible scenarios, and had earlier already been successfully utilized in web conferences with different Japanese universities. There are, of course, small technical difficulties that occur even after countless tests. In e-learning-based seminars the unexpected can and will happen, and just like during fieldwork students and teachers have to find creative ways of dealing with it.

The students attend up to ten virtual meetings in one term. The first serves as a kick-off event a few weeks after they have arrived in Japan. In consecutive meetings, students take turns presenting their individual research project, its current state, possible challenges, as well as future plans. Each student is in charge of one meeting, and our role as teachers is mainly to chair the online discussions. Being in charge for a session is a chance for students to become more active and to tailor the meeting to their own individual needs. We therefore coach each student individually before their respective session, as they prepare a written draft on the current state of their research with questions for discussion and a presentation to be given during the meeting itself.

Each meeting is scheduled to last ninety minutes. They all follow the same three-part structure that allows for participation and discussion. First, each student gives a short report on the current state of their research. This allows us to gain an overview of the individual projects' progress. Subsequently, the student in charge presents their own project in more detail, such as their interview guide or preliminary research findings, and discusses the questions sent with their preparatory text. The presentation and its discussion take between forty-five to sixty minutes, more than

half of the meeting's allotted time. Each meeting concludes with a feedback session. This is crucial to increase motivation, to actively engage the students in discussion, and to further develop their skills in critically evaluating other people's research.

By the end of the first semester in January, the focus of the sessions usually shifts from questions on how to access and interact in the field to how to apply methods like interviews and participant observation. Towards the end of the course, students will present preliminary results. The shared experience of carrying out research and of constantly developing projects further changes the dynamics of the online meetings. Course participants establish a peer group that shares ideas, success stories, and strategies to deal with challenges and difficulties. In this sense, the constant interaction in the virtual classroom can strengthen the shift from teaching to learning, and "builds a learning community based on shared responsibility with individual efforts" (Schullo et al. 2007: 332). The structure of the virtual classroom sessions and their preparation not only helps students to advance their research, but also to improve their (online) presentation skills.

When the students return to Düsseldorf after two semesters abroad, they bring back with them a vast amount of research material and data from the field. In the remaining two semesters of the program, students sort and review the field data that they intend to use for their bachelor theses. They continue their studies at HHU, and attend classes together with students of the regular BA program. Concrete and practical advice regarding the process of writing the bachelor thesis is also provided in a colloquium. This poses certain challenges, as BA Plus students present and discuss their research together with peers who have not necessarily previously carried out qualitative research. It also means that supervision of BA Plus students' projects shifts from the instructors who oversaw their learning during the preparation course and also during their stay in Japan to different ones. Of course, students can still contact BA Plus instructors with inquiries about the research project — but after one and a half years of intensive individual supervision and support within the program, they now have to organize their data analysis in a more autonomous and self-reliant manner. However, our experience shows that after having successfully completed their research in Japan most students are well prepared to do so.

Challenges, and lessons learned

In our methods courses at HHU, we were faced with two main challenges. First, time and other resources were limited. Second, BA students would be conducting fieldwork for the first time. The BA Plus program has addressed these challenges by including in the curriculum an introductory methods course and structured support via a virtual classroom setting during students' stay abroad. Based on our experiences from the program, we can clearly see that students' fieldwork results, BA theses, and language skills have since improved considerably. If we expect students to carry out independent research projects, we consider it our responsibility as instructors to convey the skills and knowledge that enable them to do this.

Therefore, it is necessary to include an introductory course about qualitative research methods in the curriculum as early on as possible. However, in Japanese Studies many other subjects have to be taught too — including the language itself, as well as knowledge of Japanese history, culture, and society. For this reason, the number of methods courses that it is possible to incorporate into the program's curriculum is limited.

While abroad, problems can occur with regard to language, access to the field, research design, and general frustration. When left alone in the field in Japan, students often struggle with their research and sometimes come back without any or with only poor results. Having a good support structure and a peer group via the classes in Düsseldorf and the e-learning courses provides students with a safety net. If they stumble or encounter challenges, then they can rely on a peer group, supervisors at the Japanese host university, as well as on lecturers at their home one for help and encouragement. With regard to language, the combination of learning Japanese and conducting research in the country is challenging for students — but nevertheless important for their acquisition of related skills. Although our students have usually studied Japanese for almost two years before heading there, this is rarely sufficient preparation for conducting research. Therefore, the Japanese language classes at their host universities and actual language immersion once in the country are essential for making significant progress. After the first few months, most students have improved their Japanese so much that they can conduct interviews in it. Thus, students soon realize that “doing fieldwork is in itself a powerful language-learning opportunity” (Bestor et al. 2003: 9).

With regard to teaching fieldwork off- and online, we argue that both parts — the offline introduction to qualitative research methods beforehand and the online classes during the stay in Japan itself — are equally important. Methods training and exercises in the classroom can only prepare for actual fieldwork to a certain extent. Teaching fieldwork methods in a practical manner can give students the tools that they need to succeed in their first ethnographic fieldwork. However, the successful implementation of what they have learned depends on the students themselves, the research topic, and to a certain extent on serendipity too. Guidance and feedback can only take students so far, but the regular sessions of the online class can help motivate them, solve any problems that they may encounter, and relieve the frustration that they might feel.

For this purpose, the virtual form of communication practiced in the Bachelor Plus program is crucial. One major didactical challenge of a virtual classroom, however, is the different type of interaction between participants that it gives rise to (Martin et al. 2012; Schullo et al. 2007). While communication takes place in a mostly synchronous virtual setting similar to a seminar, participants only view each other through a screen and are not physically present (Al-Nuaim 2012: 212). Therefore, to increase the interaction between instructors and the students, we offer virtual open office hours for individual counseling outside of the regular course.

From the instructors' perspective, supervising the students' projects from their first draft to the successful completion of their BA thesis is extremely inspiring and satisfying. Long-term teaching in a small-group setting helps us to get to know the students and their individual strengths and weaknesses, and also enables us to tailor our support to their specific needs. Having experienced similar difficulties to the students during our own fieldwork in Japan, we have a good understanding of their worries and fears, both before and during its occurrence, and are able to address these in the off- and online classes. Due to the small-group setting, most students develop close ties with each other and stay in contact beyond the courses through social media. Because of these close social ties, students feel more comfortable to share their concerns in class.

While the teaching experience is very gratifying, the provision of continuous support also places a high workload on the instructors. We constantly give detailed, lengthy feedback on students' homework and general progress, tailor our support to the students' individual projects, and schedule online classes or online consultations. Students in Japan often contact the instructors not only about their research projects, but also with regard to difficulties in coping with life in an unfamiliar environment. Furthermore, in the summer term two groups of BA Plus students have to be supervised: the group preparing for their year in Japan and the group currently abroad. Therefore, teaching and supporting the students is often more time-consuming than regular courses are. As it takes students usually about three years from application to the program to finishing the degree, it is beneficial to have a team of the same lecturers throughout this period who get to know the students and their projects. However, institutional constraints such as part-time and short-term contracts have become more and more common at universities and make it increasingly difficult to meet these challenges.

In summary, our concept of teaching fieldwork has been developed and implemented through the Bachelor Plus program that offers a wide range of experience and ideas for teaching fieldwork to students. We think that both formats, the introductory methods course and the online course, can be transferred to other programs. This can, for example, include providing students with the chance to practice interview and participant observation methods in small groups. As the time available for methods training within BA programs is limited, online support during their stay in Japan is extremely valuable.

E-learning software is available at all major universities, and provides a handy tool for supervising and guiding students carrying out research in Japan. Depending on the available time for a colloquium and for presentations, three to four students can present their current state of research, discuss preliminary findings, and introduce research questions. In addition, online counseling is more efficient than communication via e-mail and can provide immediate support for students struggling with their research. E-learning is thus a great tool that ensures that students are not left alone in the field. Based on our experience, we believe that

introducing students to fieldwork methods and supporting them in a structured manner enables them to carry out research in a responsible and more independent way, and prevents them from coming to experience fieldwork as a solitary endeavor.

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