

Kurofune of the 21st century

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At the end of the school year each March, I must struggle with a huge pile of handouts. Tests, model answers, all information documents from school and handouts from each teacher, are about 40 centimeters high. It feels like an impossible task to sort the papers and clear them away.

But suddenly a modern version of the Kurofune, the “Black Ships” which appeared at the end of Edo period to open our country, arrived. It came in the form of the new Corona virus. Though it is more sinister in nature, there is a silver lining. After the spread of Covid-19, all schools were closed and students had to stay home. Luckily, my school started online classes from April 13. We had 7 hours of online classes every day as part of our daily schedule including PE and art class. At first, I had trouble connecting to classes and my screen sometimes froze. However, gradually, we got used to the new normal.

In May, I took part in the UNESCO Global Webinar COVID19-Reflections. Over 620 participants from different countries discussed the issues and their experiences of remote learning. Some students emphasized the ease of submitting homework and other documents online since it's paper free, and computers automatically record if we submit them before the deadline. During these reflections, I felt our education system was quite behind the rest of the world. Why are we so behind?

“Stuck in the 1980s” is the title of a CNN news article, in which a reporter commented on how Japanese people still use FAX machines. A technology that is no longer used in other countries. He pointed out that we still depend on traditional name stamps on official documents, making it exceedingly difficult for business people to work from home. The same resistance to technological change in the business sector has been the case in education. We have just followed the old style of education.

According to the survey about ICT in education, done by PISA, Sweden and Denmark ranked high, but Japan ranked lowest among the countries that belong to the OECD. Why? There must be some reasons. One reason is schools did not give students the opportunity to access and use the internet. Also, some insisted on the inequality in education because there are some families who cannot afford computers. There are even some teachers who do not want to venture into new technology. We have believed a teacher centered class is the best way to learn for a long time.

I know classes at school are fun and stimulating, especially face to face discussions and group work. They help build a spirit of collaboration and we enjoy the interactions. I know teachers prepare well to give us good lectures. However, after taking online

classes for more than 4 months, I would say, we can now do almost everything we thought was impossible to do online. Not only submitting assignments, or taking test, we are also able to share our opinions, and in small groups we can do group work.

Now, the movement to digitalization is accelerating. I heard e-signatures will be introduced soon. Like the Kurofune in the 19th century, the coronavirus today has been changing the way we study, too. I do not know what the future holds, but the last few months have shown that we can adapt and change quickly when we need to. There should be some education for Japanese students to move into the modern world of technology like students abroad. Well, at least my pile of handouts will be less next March.