Title	Transgressing institutional boundaries : an ethnographic study of a liminoid intercultural space at a Japanese university
Sub Title	組織の境界を越えて：リミノイドとしての日本の大学における異文化交流の場の民族誌的研究
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Publisher	慶應義塾大学外国語教育研究センター
Publication year	2011
Jtitle	慶應義塾外国語教育研究 (Journal of foreign language education). Vol.8, (2011.) ,p.91- 100
JaLC DOI	
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Notes	研究ノート
Genre	Departmental Bulletin Paper
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AA12043414-20110000-0091

Transgressing Institutional Boundaries:
An ethnographic study of a liminoid intercultural space at a Japanese university[i]

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Abstract

This paper is an ethnographic exploration of the weekly intercultural sessions held at an alternative community space known as 'Mita no Ie'. We suggest from an anthropological viewpoint that Mita no Ie, because of its marginality, functions to illuminate the 'structures' and 'cultures' of the mainstream university institution, and to challenge its boundaries. We begin by providing an explanation of our conceptual framework which relies on Turner's notion of *liminoid*. We then give an account of our methodology, followed by an ethnographic description of a typical session. Finally, we analytically situate our ethnography in relation to the larger institutional and social context. We focus in particular on the transgression of professional hierarchies, boundaries of faculties/ campuses, as well as ethnicity and languages that characterize the intercultural sessions in Mita no Ie and point to the contrast between the formal knowledge-based learning of the university context and the experiential, performative nature of learning in the context of the Mita no Ie intercultural sessions.

1. Introduction

This paper is a study of an alternative community space known as 'Mita no Ie', organizationally set within Keio University. We will introduce our on-going ethnographic research on the intercultural sessions held in this space, where students, staff and members of the local community gather to share a meal and discuss a variety of issues and concerns, forming an informal, fluid learning community. In analysing the ethnography, we posit an anthropological approach. There has long been a tradition within anthropology of looking at the marginal or peripheral realm of a society to find out what happens at its core (Goodman 2008). It is at

the boundaries or margins that categories which seem static and unified are found to be in fact diverse, changing, ambiguous and flexible. We suggest that the alternative space of Mita no Ie, because of its marginality, functions to illuminate the 'structures' and 'cultures' of the mainstream university institution, and challenge its boundaries. In what follows, we will present an explanation of our conceptual framework which relies on Victor Turner's notion of *liminoid*. We will then give an account of our methodology, followed by an ethnographic description of our fieldsite. Finally, we analytically situate our ethnography in relation to the larger institutional and social context.

2. Liminal to liminoid

The concept of 'liminoid' was developed by the British symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner, as an extension of his well-known concept of 'liminality'. Based on his essays on the processual form of ritual (1967, 1969), Turner proposed that when ritual subjects are separated from their familiar space, they enter a liminal time/space. This is a period when subjects are liberated from their social ties to constitute a 'communitas'—an unstructured, relatively undifferentiated community that is a space of potentiality and creativity. Turner suggests that social life is a dialectical process that involves 'structure' and 'anti-structure', the latter being defined as the liminal period.

Whilst liminal phenomena are predominantly restricted to 'primitive' tribal societies and are experienced collectively as social upheaval, 'liminoid' phenomena take place on the margins of the complex industrial world (Turner 1974); they are the products of the actions of individuals or particular groups, and are generated continuously. Turner, for example, discusses carnivals, sports events, and theatre as liminoid experience. The 'liminoid' thus originates outside the boundaries of the economic, political, and structural process, and its manifestations often challenge the wider social structure by offering social critique on, or even suggestions for, a re-ordering of the official order (St. John 2008).

Based on this concept of liminoid, we suggest that it is particularly those individuals with identities that do not neatly 'fit' into the regulated norms of the university institution who come to seek an *ibasho* ('a sense of belongingness') in spaces such as Mita no Ie. In his critical account of the Japanese higher education system, McVeigh (2002) points to the 'myths' of ritualized learning and the gendered and ethnicized performance that is played out within a Japanese university. In a university, diversity is institutionalized and framed within bounded rituals of time, space and language, as well as hierarchies of age, teacher/student relations,

and boundaries of foreign/Japanese. Our description of a liminoid space aims to illuminate through contrast, the boundaries that define such an institution.

3. The setting : Mita no Ie

Mita no Ie is located in the bustling central district of West-side Tokyo, just minutes away from Keio's Mita Campus. As one meanders through the narrow back streets of the *shotengai* (commercial high street), lined with *izakaya* (drinking bars) and noodle shops that serve the 'salarymen' in their lunchtimes and afterwork drinking hours, one finds, hidden in a shady corner, an old and quiet traditional wooden-framed Japanese-style house that is Mita no Ie. Leaning against the wall is a small portable blackboard marked 'Mita no Ie: Open' in pink chalk. So inconspicuous is the site that we ourselves have often found trouble reaching it, even after several regular visits there.

Once one does manage to spot the house and draws the wooden shutters to venture inside, one is welcomed by a warm sense of nostalgia. The house interior is made of wood and plaster, the flooring is of a dark shade of wood. From the *genkan* (front porch), a narrow corridor leads into the kitchen, and further inside, the living room area. The cramped feel of the place with its low ceilings is perhaps most similar to the American country-style prairie house. The kitchen is cluttered with pots and pans, rice bowls and Japanese tea cups, and various condiments and drinks. Although the house is not occupied by any permanent tenant, the kitchen seems well-used and the fridge is stocked with beer, ginger ale, and *miso* paste. The living room includes a centre table, around which people will sit on the floor on *zabuton* (mats), or on the three wooden chairs or along the bench set against the back wall.

Mita no Ie is thus regarded as a pocket of nostalgia; infused with a retro, rural sense of 'Japaneseness' or 'Showa' feeling that seems removed from its actual institutional and geographical context. Yet, we argue that an examination of this site illuminates some pertinent aspects of the nature of a university as an institution of learning and socialization.

4. Organizational context

Mita no Ie is owned by a local shop owner, originally as a private home. It was leased to Keio University as part of a project funded by its Research Center for Liberal Arts in 2006, after which the house underwent four months of renovation to ensure its safety. The main objective of this funded project was to strengthen links between the local town community and the university by creating a communal space which would be a 'lounge-like' place of

learning.

At the time of our joining the project in 2010, Mita no Ie was being managed by seven professors based in various faculties with varying educational interests who took turns to act as the 'host' of the house once a week. Since the space has a different feel and function each day depending on which professor 'hosts' the session, our ethnographic account will focus on the activities and implications of the 'Monday sessions', which runs on the theme of 'a small intercultural exchange'.

There are currently five members who make up the coordination team of the Monday sessions. Since 2006, the sessions have been organized by Professor Tezuka Chizuko: a psychologist who specializes in intercultural counseling and who has been affiliated to the university's International Center. Professor Tezuka is the central motherly figure of the Monday sessions, but since 2010 when she took sabbatical leave, four other members have been supporting the running of the Monday sessions: Professor Hinata Kiyoto, an adjunct lecturer of English language at Keio, Mr. Tsunoda Yoshihiko, a graduate of Keio, and the two authors of this paper.

5. Methodology

The authors have been conducting fieldwork through weekly participation at Mita no Ie since April 2010, and the current report is a work in progress that discusses our initial fieldwork findings. Methodologically, our research poses questions of 'native' anthropology and the issue of shifting identities and multiple commitments in this context (see Ryang 1997). As anthropologists, our job is to observe and describe our fieldsite as a 'foreign' land, yet at the same time, we are part of the community. Our research is also an experiment of team ethnography (see Gerstl-Pepin and Gunzenhauser 2010). In the fieldwork process, we collaborate with other actors with whom we affect and construct the field—we share an online record of the weekly events and actively reflect on each session with the other coordinators. The anthropological analysis and ethnographic writing is then conducted through discussion between the two authors. The brief ethnography below is therefore a 'combined' interpretive account.

6. One Monday at Mita no Ie

The Monday Mita no Ie session opens around 12 noon when Mr. Tsunoda arrives. The afternoon usually passes with him working alone on the desktop computer placed in the

corner of the living room. People occasionally come to make a visit during the late afternoon. At 4pm, a former visitor of Mita no Ie, currently out of work, arrives. Every week, there are at least one or two 'non-student visitors' like her who casually stop by, which is welcomed by the coordinators.

A few other students, from different campuses and departments arrive, including two of our regular participants. One is a *kikokushijo* (returnee) commerce student from North America, eager to maintain his English language proficiency through interacting with foreign students in English. Another, a Japanese pharmacology student, is an active member of an international exchange student society and seeks for opportunities to meet international students.

The slow, chatting session continues in Japanese. A Korean exchange student arrives, and joins the conversation to practice his Japanese. A Japanese economics student then arrives and heads to the kitchen—he will be in charge of the cooking for the evening, having been 'discovered' of his culinary skills by one of the staff members.

The cooking and serving of a home-cooked meal is an important element of the Monday session. From around 6pm, the flow of people gradually increases and the activities take on their momentum. Three more exchange students who are 'regulars' of the Monday sessions arrive: an African-American student from Virginia, a Filipino-Canadian from Toronto, and a white student from Virginia. For these three students, who quickly formed a tight threesome after arriving in Tokyo, Mita no Ie is foremost a place to join for a homely Japanese-style meal.

Food starts to be served at around 7pm at the wooden table in the living room. The main dish is *chirashi-zushi* (mixed sushi rice). Professor Tezuka, who arrived at around 5pm, helps with the cooking and serving. As the food is being prepared and served, brief self-introductions—some made in English, others in Japanese—start, usually with Professor Hinata taking the lead.

In each Monday session, an invited or volunteering speaker usually gives a presentation and/or a performance. The topics and the type of speaker are eclectic, although the coordination staff tends to seek people and topics that one would not usually find in the university. Sometimes talks are given by students, but their presentations are of a style and theme different from those that would usually be given in a classroom context.

Although the presentation session is scheduled for 7pm, time at Mita no Ie is fluid and flexible. Usually it is past 8pm when all the eating, self-introductions and chatting ends, and the table is moved so that the participants are seated on the floor in the centre, facing the wall onto which the slides are to be projected.

The presenter for the day is an exchange student. The presentation is on the topic of Third Culture Kids (TCKs), and the presenter takes his audience through the concept of TCKs and of his own experience of being born in Argentina, being Taiwanese and growing up in Canada, and now studying in Japan. He not only uses visual slides, but also introduces music and poetry, and poses questions to the audience.

After the presentation, there is a lively discussion session where the speaker and the audience share experiences. Many first-time participants are surprised by the lively interaction of the presentation and discussion—an atmosphere created by both the attentiveness and curiosity of the audience and the conscious elicitation on the part of the coordinators. The end of the discussion is usually signalled by one of the coordinators, and its timing is flexible and contextual. At Mita no Ie, there is no clock to structure the time and no bell to signal it. After the presentation is concluded with a round of applause, the participants stand up as if ready to leave, but start to form small groups where they linger for more conversation. Some move to the kitchen, and help with the washing-up as they talk. The coordinators ask for contributions of 300-500 yen from the participants, though there is no strict surveillance concerning payment. As people start to leave, the members of staff begin to clean up, usually with the help of the remaining regular members. By the time the lights are turned off and the house is closed for the day, it is around 10:30pm.

7. Analysis: Delineating the boundaries of the institution

The above ethnographic account shows how the social dynamics within the Monday sessions of Mita no Ie are different from that within an everyday university setting. Within this space, there is no distinct concept of insider and outsider so that anyone can freely come to join. The social dynamic is situational—'like a jazz session' as one participant explained it—performed spontaneously through the interactions of the participants of that day. When we relate this 'alternative' space to the concept of *liminoid*, the participants can be seen as enacting a space that temporarily transgresses the various boundaries that maintain the order of the university institution.

i. Transgressing the teaching/learning boundaries

One of the boundaries that exist in any educational institution is that between the teacher and student. In a university classroom or lecture setting, the distinction between the professor and the students is clearly defined by their positioning in the classroom space as well as by

the ways in which they interact as 'teachers' and 'learners'. The teacher holds the authority to assess and thus control students, and classes are set within a specified time period of usually 90 minutes. The Monday sessions of Mita no Ie, on the other hand, are intended to provide an open, communal learning space, and the boundary of 'teacher' and 'learner' is transgressed. All participants, regardless of their roles within or outside of the space, actively engage in the learning process through interacting with fellow participants and discussing the topics raised by the presenters. Participants are not bothered by the number of hours they invest in the participation of this space. The liminoid space of Mita no Ie is thus an example of how the structures of a university's 'schooling' culture (see Illich 1973, Reim 1974) is temporarily loosened, challenging the institutional concept of learning itself.

ii. Transgressing the institutional boundaries of faculties and campuses

Another feature that makes Mita no Ie a liminoid space is the heterogeneity of its participating body in terms of their internal institutional affiliation. Students and staff from different campuses and faculties experience a communal learning environment that transgresses the institutional boundaries of campuses and faculties. This is contrastive to the situation within the university which is marked rigidly by the faculty and campus boundaries. The liminoid nature of Mita no Ie allows students and staff from a variety of campuses and faculties to form and experience a sense of community, or 'communitas'.

iii. Transgressing age grades

Mita no Ie is also liminoid in the way that vertical age hierarchies which characterize typical relationships within the Japanese university, temporarily become less visible. The foreign exchange students usually communicate in English, so that rules about the use of honorific language are not as conspicuously coded as in a Japanese speaking environment. The exchange students are also more diverse in their age group, and age is categorically deemphasized over ethnicity. Furthermore, the inter-crossing of category boundaries means that the interactions among participants of different statuses—students, *shakaijin* (full-time workers), as well as teachers, researchers, or professors—tend to be conducted 'horizontally' or somewhat 'diagonally', transgressing such status distinctions.

iv. Transgressing ethnic and linguistic boundaries

The Monday events at Mita no Ie are intended as a place for intercultural communication

with foreign exchange students. However, intercultural exchange in this context is not based on a simple dichotomy of foreign versus Japanese, nor based on a commodification of foreignness and the English language. People bring with them different aspects and degrees of foreignness or otherness; and perhaps it is this vague common feeling of otherness that makes participants feel at home. Whilst in the university setting, there tends to be a clear symbolic distinction that is constructed between 'foreign' and 'Japanese' (see McVeigh 2002), the subtle, shifting identities of Mita no Ie participants suggest that there are *degrees* of Japaneseness, Asianness, Westernness and foreignness, and that these can be fluidly and situationally performed (Mathews 2000).

Two working categories for referring to participants used among the coordinating staff are '*kikokushijo*' (returnees) and '*ryuugakusei*' (foreign students), which may both be understood as liminoid categories in that they are transgressors of cultural boundaries. One staff suggests that Mita no Ie seems to function as a place where *kikokushijo* can revisit and re-experience their bicultural, bilingual experiences. It is a space where they can show another dimension of themselves, and can talk in English freely without feeling any pressure to 'talk correctly' or worrying about their linguistic competence as is often the case in a 'mainstream' university setting. *Ryuugakusei* (foreign students) are mostly enrolled in the international programme at the Mita Campus, with some coming from the Science and Technology Faculty. Although frequently lumped together in one group, the *ryuugakusei* category can be subdivided into various types, in terms of ethnicity, race, linguistic competence, length of stay and level of acculturation.

Observation of the linguistic and cultural positionings of persons of diverse backgrounds is a key research theme to be continued within our current work in progress, but it may be said at this stage of our research that Mita no Ie functions as a space which allows for individuals of liminal ethnic and linguistic categories to represent themselves without deemphasizing their liminal identities.

8. Conclusion

The ethnography of Mita no Ie reveals a constructed liminoid space; the 'Japaneseness', the nostalgia, the home-cooked meals, the looseness of time, the non-institutionally-confined communitas are some of the enactments that take place within it. The process of institutionalization necessarily creates boundaries, hierarchies and specified roles. In liminoid time and space, these 'structures' are relaxed or undone, with potential to critique and change

that structure. Through ethnography, this working paper has begun to explore how actors within a university institution are enacting small resistances against the structure, whether consciously or unconsciously, by participating in an 'alternative' liminoid space.

Whilst there is much public and academic interest in the increasing diversification and internationalization of universities, the situation on the ground is that there are few places to accommodate such diversity, so that international students often feel stranded, while returnee students often prefer to assimilate themselves back into the mainstream. The function of Mita no Ie's Monday sessions has been to act as an *ibasho*, or a place to belong, for such students. From the perspective of learning, which is a central symbolic concept that defines the university institution, it can be said that there is a contrast between the formal knowledge-based learning that traditionally dominates the university context, and the experiential, performative nature of learning in the context of the Monday sessions. Mita no Ie, for some participants, is becoming a place to reconstruct the concept of learning itself.

If we are to see structure and anti-structure as a dialectic process as Victor Turner suggests, these small-scale, marginal endeavours by actors are likely to be, or at least have an agenda to be, a catalyst for bringing change to the university structure through an untying of its boundaries. When one considers the larger social and political context of Japanese universities, with an ever-increasing pressure for internationalization, collaboration, quest for innovation and quality in teaching practice as well as research, it is quite possible that what is marginal will be mobilized to eventually be legitimized or advocated into the mainstream. It remains to be seen whether Mita no Ie will eventually be incorporated into the mainstream, or whether it will disappear, or whether it will gain independence as a movement and community of its own.

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Note