

Problems Related to the Practice of Video Education in Japan

Kaihei HASE¹

Hitotsubashi University

ABSTRACT

The practice of video production as a means of learning through art is closely related to the concept of *media literacy*, although misuse of the term in Japan has created some obstacles. First, an imbalance exists between video literacy's two educational aspects: using video to express ideas and interpreting the expressions used within them. Second, unqualified instructors are frequently tasked to teach video production in an educational context. Third, rapid changes in social environments lead to disparities between social reality and educational objectives. These problems are rooted in an outdated understanding of media literacy as a concept in Japan, which in turn can be attributed to an inadequate translation of the term into Japanese that strips away its creative connotations.

Keywords: video production, media literacy, media, instructor education, video expression and education.

How should video education be taught in Japan? To answer this question, one must first understand the current state of media literacy in Japan, since both subjects are closely related. Literacy can refer to one's ability to read and write, in addition to a general state of being educated; in contrast, video is a medium through which information is transmitted. Video creation is included in art and cultural education curricula in Japan, and closely linked to media literacy, since educators seek to develop students who are literate in video creation, which is a form of media. When the word media is affixed to literacy, however, it encompasses more than the mere ability to communicate using media. This conceptualization of media literacy is relevant to all media, not just video, although it varies according to each situation. As Kasahara (2012) notes, "the term lacks consistency in [its] interpretation,"² an assertion that is particularly evident in Japan where media literacy is interpreted according to

researchers' specializations and positions. In other words, the precise meaning of media literacy in Japan remains undefined in academic discussion and practice; consequently, the ambiguity of the term has exerted a negative impact on video production as an educational tool. Hence, this article addresses problems unique to Japan regarding the educational practice of video production caused by an ambiguous understanding of media literacy.

Propagation of Media Literacy as a Concept in Japan

Media literacy as a concept arose against the backdrop of the Grunwald Declaration in 1982 at UNESCO's International Symposium in Germany. The declaration generated worldwide awareness concerning the importance of media education that cultivates a critical viewpoint, and appealed to a multitude of societies and organizations. Moreover, it asserted that societies under the strong influence of mass media should "develop greater critical awareness among listeners, viewers and readers" (UNESCO: 1982) through education, thus redefining the concept of media literacy.

Media literacy became a buzzword in Japan during the late eighties and early nineties, when mass media faced heavy scrutiny regarding a series of scandals that would cause the public to doubt its journalistic integrity. The first incident occurred in 1989, when a photograph accompanying an inspiring newspaper article on the environment was deemed misleading; next, in 1992, an investigation revealed that segments of a popular televised documentary were intentionally falsified. This wavering confidence in mass media accelerated the spread of media literacy as a concept, and subsequently stimulated educational activities involving it. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (then the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications) responded to these developments by establishing a research committee on media literacy. Their findings were summarized in a report entitled "Youth in the Broadcasting Sector and Media Literacy" (2000), which would later function as a blueprint for the practice of media literacy in Japan. The report is summarized as follows: The

1 The author may be contacted through email at hase.k@cio.hit-u.ac.jp

2 Translations from Japanese to English are the author's.

forefront of present-day Japan's unsolved challenges is "to promote healthy and tense relations between broadcasters and audience" (p. 1). Implication of the word "broadcasters" in the report encompasses all media with information transmission capabilities across a dispersed audience. On that basis the report says that it is important to cultivate people's ability to think critically toward broadcast content as defined by the report. Following these developments, many educational programs involving video production were sanctioned to cultivate learners' ability to critically evaluate mass media through the lens of media literacy.

Media Influence and Media Literacy

Moving images can be described as a series of codes that vary in meaning according to each recipient's cultural background. As Barthes (1985) notes, "[These] codes are simply associative fields, a supertextual organization of notations which impose a certain notion of structure" (p. 288). Therefore, the meanings embedded in moving images not only differ between recipients, but also between recipients and the author. But mass media does not exert influence solely through the meaning embedded in moving images. As we see later in this article, mass media itself is a social device capable of influencing people's judgments, and similar to any entity that possesses authoritative power.

In the Milgram experiment (also known as the Eichmann Experiment), Stanley Milgram (1972) demonstrated that individuals tend to obey authority regardless of their personal beliefs. The experiment's participants were given orders contradictory to their ordinary moral values to determine what proportion of the subjects would comply. The results revealed that most individuals would obey orders when given by a person of authority despite their moral apprehensions.

Nick and Eltchanin (2010) expanded upon Milgram's work and examined whether television cast members would obey producers' orders to perform content contrary to their moral values. In their

article, examples of participants' actions were reported as follows: "behave dishonestly" (p. 204), "flight from reality" (p. 205), "they used violence to obey the producer" (p. 269). Additionally, the researchers rang a bell to alert participants when they had inadvertently submitted to such influence. As Cialdini (2010) observed, when the acceptance of an authoritative power is internalized, individuals adhere to a simplified decision-making process devoid of critical thought. The aforementioned studies suggest that television through its authoritative power can diminish viewers' ability to make sound decisions. Hence, television is capable of influencing audiences' behavior in a manner devoid of critical thought, and therefore a social device that facilitates non-democratic situations.

As mentioned in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications report from 2000, media literacy education designed to effectively combat mass media's non-democratic nature is "absolutely necessary in developing a democratic society comprised of people with a multitude of values" (p. 2). In other words, media literacy is a fundamental component of a properly developed democratic society. In Japan, the purpose of teaching media literacy is to foster skepticism towards mass media, and subsequently considered a valuable concept from both a social and educational standpoint. Yet the government curriculum guidelines for art education in Japan have no mention of media literacy. Still, Shimoguchi and Hase have pointed out that "practices of video production as a means of learning through art have been parallel in purpose to media literacy" (2014, p.98). This does not mean that video production as a means of learning through art has been well practiced in Japan. For one thing, there is "a major problem of lack of video equipment" (p.96). Working against this difficult situation, a highly-motivated art teacher may pay for video equipment out of their own pocket in order to teach video production as a means of learning through art. Generally, however, educational methods of video production in Japan are taught as a simplified process of professional video making, with outcomes of making short films, video advertising, and news shows.

Obstacles to Teaching the Expression of Ideas Using Video in Japan

In the instructional practice of video production to promote media literacy, students are familiarized with one kind of literacy: how to express ideas using video. Media literacy allows students to understand how viewers interpret messages presented in videos, thereby enabling them to independently evaluate mass media such as television. Art education curriculum designers in Japan are supportive of studying video production. For example, [the government curriculum guidelines](#) for art education by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (2009) includes a section entitled, “Expressing ideas using video pictures,” which entails the following four objectives: creating works that demonstrate a mastery of video equipment; effectively conveying messages using visual elements such as lighting, shooting angles, and motion; fully utilizing the potential of video media to achieve one’s creative vision; and finally, capturing images while considering various forms of expression and understanding (p.44). Shimoguchi and Hase (2014) investigated historical practices of art educators using filmmaking in Japan through review of the professional magazine *Kyouiku Bijyutsu* [Art in Education]. First published in 1935 and still in publication, the magazine mainly offers practices of art education. Shimoguchi and Hase’s investigation revealed that Aiba was using filmmaking in his classroom in 1975. At the time, “video equipment was too expensive” (p. 95) so he taught students to make a television program with support from his school. He was using filmmaking in art education because “he was deeply concerned that people might believe that all televised things are truth” (p. 98). In other words, he thought media literacy was needed in the curriculum and got started by using filmmaking in art education. Aiba’s practice began seven years earlier than the Grunwald Declaration. Shimoguchi and Hase’s investigation also showed that, historically, filmmaking in art education in Japan mainly contained media literacy elements; the practice of filmmaking in art education was not active. Reports of filmmaking in art education were published in *Kyouiku Bijyutsu* only in 1975, 1993, 2000,

2008, 2010 and 2011, totaling 20 articles over 36 years. To contextualize this, *Kyouiku Bijyutsu* publishes over 10 articles every month on art education practices. This has resulted in “the situation that teachers tried to practice [teaching filmmaking in art education] by trial and error” (The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications: 2000) and the rate of practice is low.

While it is clear that guidelines exist within the Japanese art education curriculum for video production, media literacy education still fails to address the expression of ideas using the medium. In that respect, the following three obstacles, outlined below, prevent students from learning how to effectively express their ideas using video.

A Disparity Between Understanding and Creating Videos

As mentioned earlier, media literacy education in Japan tends to focus on understanding videos rather than using them to express ideas. In a report entitled “The Improvement and Enhancement of School Textbooks” (2008), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology observed a problematic trend in which “the literacy dimension of the current media literacy program places disproportionate emphasis on the receiving (interpreter’s) side, regardless of whether it is an individual reading literature, listening to a voice, or viewing films or videos” (Chap. 1-4.2.2.1.a). The report further states that, “although literacy should fundamentally include both reading and making abilities, the making aspect has received insufficient attention” (Chap. 1-4.2.2.1.a). In this scenario, the problem involves policymakers’ failure to promote the practice of expressing one’s ideas using video. When compared with initiatives to increase students’ understanding of expressions in videos, steps to improve learners’ ability to express ideas using the medium are virtually non-existent. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications pointed out this fact in noting that the “opportunity to systematically learn teaching methods relating to video media is rare” (2000, p.37). The root of this problem, however, lies in a shortage of instructors qualified to teach learners how to effectively express themselves using video, as expanded upon in the second obstacle.

One can obtain video production skills in Japan either from systematic learning at a college or vocational school, or through on-the-job training in the media industry – and instructors capable of teaching students how to express their ideas using video are no exception to this rule. At the college level, filmmaking is generally taught in specialized departments or courses. However, Tamegaya (2008) notes that while universities are “expected to bear the important responsibility of training instructors” in art-related fields, no specific attempts have been made to establish programs to train instructors capable of teaching video production (p. 27). The primary objective of filmmaking programs at universities and vocational schools is to produce graduates who will utilize their talents within the film industry, not the classroom. As addressed in the following section, one might assume that industry professionals can perform adequately as educators, but this is not necessarily true.

Unqualified Video Production Instructors

The demand for qualified video production instructors in Japan cannot be fulfilled simply by hiring professionals with industry experience. Hoshida (2004) astutely notes that among professional Japanese video producers who learned through apprenticeships, few are capable of explaining concepts related to effectively expressing ideas through the medium since they were not trained as instructors.

Komaya’s (2008) survey of junior and senior high school students highlights the problems associated with employing professional filmmakers as instructors. Participants in the study completed a series of exercises involving the creation of television programs, which were overseen by professional television producers; later, the students completed a questionnaire related to the experience. The results revealed that nearly half (43.2%) of the participants desired a more concise explanation of how to create television programs. Hence, the study fortified the notion that an individual’s expertise is not indicative of an inherent ability to teach video production effectively.

Hiring industry professionals as educators presents another dilemma, in this case related to media literacy’s function in counteracting the perception of media as an authoritative figure. Specifically, it is possible that students will inadvertently accept the infallible nature of media since they are being educated by a school-sanctioned industry professional. In this sense, learners are placed in a state of mystification, whereby a sage teaches his craft. Indeed, as one participant expressed in Komaya’s (2008) study, “I have respect for industry professionals’ ability” (p. 87), a heightened mystification of mass-media may result from this teaching. Yet, Japanese educational institutions currently have no alternative to the practice of hiring industry professionals. Moreover, the notion that ideal instructors even exist in the field is erroneous because of the aforementioned deification of media professionals, and the inherent conflict this poses to the concept of media literacy.

Rapid Changes in How Video Is Viewed and Produced, and Consequent Gaps Between Social Reality and Educational Objectives

Recent changes in Japanese society have also impacted how the practice of expressing one’s ideas using video should be taught. Specifically, the relationship between individuals and information is in constant flux. While television has traditionally been the most widely used medium, its overall importance is in a state of decline. Hashimoto (2012) conducted two separate surveys in 1995 and 2010 to determine the average number of hours Japanese twenty-year-olds spent watching television. The results revealed a 32.4% and 38.5% decrease in viewing by twenty-year-olds and teenagers respectively, a trend that will undoubtedly continue as individuals begin to rely on alternative media sources. Additionally, two studies conducted by Hakuhodo in 2005 and 2012 confirm the aforementioned shift: while individuals surveyed spent greater time consuming media in general, the proportion of that time spent watching television each week dropped from 52% in 2005 to 45.9% in 2012.

Despite these changes, the direct influence of television is by no means weak, although the Internet has clearly affected the extent and manner of its public impact (Nick & Eltchaninof, 2010). The emergence of services such as YouTube, Niconico (a Japanese video sharing site), and Ustream has created an environment in which nearly anyone can produce and distribute videos. Furthermore, these services have transformed the medium from a unidirectional to bidirectional form of communication. The Arab spring is a prime example of this phenomenon, in which videos filmed and distributed online by amateurs played a pivotal role. Video with social media was unquestionably a key element.

More importantly, perhaps, bidirectional video communication allows content creators to bypass traditional media gatekeepers both on a small and a large scale. Video creation and distribution are no longer practices limited to a select few, but accessible by the general public regardless of their status, and to some extent, economic condition. This increased accessibility and understanding of the medium's power increases the need for effective instruction in video production.

The Need to Enhance Video Expression in Japanese Media Literacy

Given the aforementioned changes in the public's dependency on mass media, and the increasing use of video as a communicative tool, it is necessary to reconsider how video production is taught. In the past, individuals were merely consumers of video, and so media literacy focused on analyzing content from a critical point of view. Currently, however, technological advances make this approach inadequate; present-day pedagogical approaches to media literacy must address how users can effectively express their ideas using video so that learners are equipped with the skills necessary to utilize the medium in a bidirectional manner.

Additionally, the literal translation of *critical* into Japanese carries with it connotations of denial, or rejection. Hence, the equivalent Japanese term for media literacy (and its relationship to critical

thought) fails to impart the importance of people's video expression ability typically associated with its Western counterpart. In turn, this misinterpretation hinders educational institutions' ability to teach creative video production. While Japanese researchers are well aware of the nuances between Western and Japanese notions of media literacy, and have repeatedly stressed said differences, educators in the country continue to reduce the concept to a realization that mass media is inherently deceitful. Such habits make it perpetually difficult to disassociate media literacy with negativity so that it might embody creative elements as well, which is fundamental to all forms of art.

Prominent art educators remain confused about how to successfully realize the medium's benefits. While these educators are tasked with teaching pupils about video production, they remain unaware of how to actually operate common video devices, much less teach students how to use them as a tool for artistic expression (Hiramuki, 2007). Despite an awareness of video production's importance in relation to media literacy, Japanese educators have failed to actively consider the practice of video production itself.

In summation, the view that media literacy strictly entails the act of analysis and criticism is outdated. Moreover, the concept of media literacy commonly propagated in Japan is inadequate in fulfilling the goals of art education, that principally involve students creating in media. Unfortunately, alternative interpretations of media literacy have not gained momentum in Japan. This condition is problematic in the development of pedagogical approaches to video production in Japan, which by default reference antiquated notions of media literacy.

Conclusion

This article highlighted three unique obstacles to teaching video production in Japanese education institutions. The first is that a disparity exists between teaching video to express one's ideas and interpreting the medium's content. This inadequacy can be attributed to the second obstacle: an insufficient number of qualified instructors

in the field of video production. Furthermore, professional experience in the media industry does not necessarily deem an individual qualified to teach video production. The reason for this is twofold. Those who learned their craft through apprenticeship may lack the pedagogical skills necessary to convey their knowledge to students in a concise manner. Additionally, the traditional goal of media literacy (to enhance reader / viewer / listener objectivity) may be obstructed by the deification of the instructor and the mystification of his or her profession.

The third and final obstacle is a chasm between social reality and educational objectives caused by rapid advances in how videos are viewed and produced. This is rooted in the absence of curricular components to teach expression as part of media literacy. Because this understanding of media literacy guides art education in the country, it must be reassessed to meet modern pedagogical demands.

In examining the above-mentioned issues, one point becomes evident: the interpretation of media literacy prevalent in Japan is negatively influencing the development of pedagogical approaches to video production in the nation (please see Fig. 1). To solve this problem, a reconceptualization of media literacy must occur that also encompasses the notion of *video literacy*, and subsequently the importance of students' ability to express ideas through video.

Regarding the reformulation of pedagogical approaches to video production, Hase (2014) asserts that filmmaking entails the creation of a collective intelligence. If video creation can be portrayed as an intellectual activity, it can be implemented in an educational setting in isolation, without the connotations traditionally associated with media literacy. Since no alternative to media literacy presently exists in Japan, reorienting video production so that it is perceived as an intellectual pursuit may prove advantageous. To establish an effective means of teaching video production, it is imperative that the aforementioned approach be implemented in the Japanese educational context.

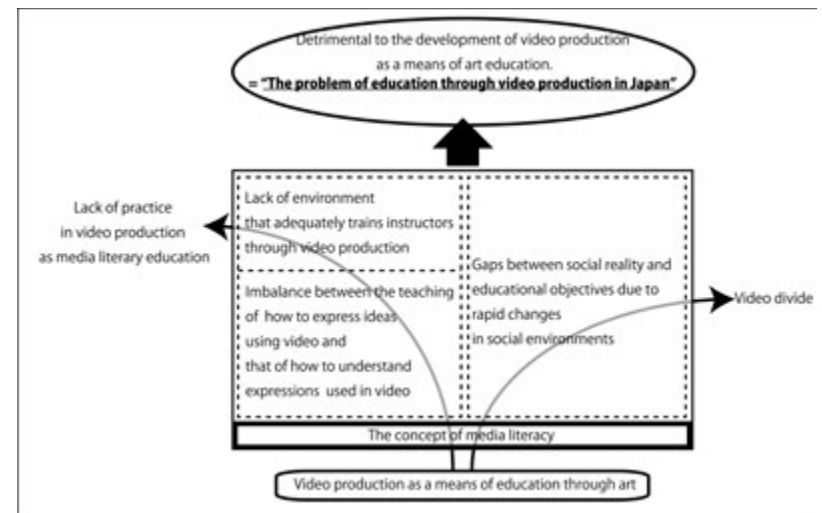


Figure 1. Negative influence from the concept of media literacy on the development of Japan's education through video production.

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