

## Impact Objectives

- Develop adaptive ground rules based on the process of mastering distance discussion skills
- Explore how technology can determine the optimal learning environment for everyone

# The importance of discussion skills

*Professor Mika Nakano, from the Fukuoka Institute of Technology, discusses her work on developing distance discussion skills to promote equality in communication*



**Can you talk a little about how you came to be involved in comparative social culture?**

In around 2000, while working as a university debater, I discovered that there were both British and American styles of debate in English that were mainstream in Japan. The British style was more mainstream internationally, especially in Southeast Asia. Although both have merits, I believe that the British style of debate, which is popular as a practice of rhetoric and emphasises communication with the audience, is a more effective way to train the international dialogue skills that I wanted to acquire, for me and other Japanese students. My experiences of how different cultures develop in the same debate have led to my current research on creating the optimal curriculum and environment for people to grow.

**You have expertise in epistemology, thinking and communication. Can you talk about the aims of your research?**

I have consistently conducted research on university students because, in an international debate competition I once participated in as an adjudicator, Japanese

students came last. I felt a sense of crisis in Japanese education. I came to believe that higher education was important for increasing national power. Since then, the Japanese economy has waned. A major problem in Japanese education is that there is little dialogue and discussion in the classroom. Under these circumstances, my research aims to include everyone in discussions and decision-making, to form consensus based on diverse opinions, while respecting our own culture. This research is primarily intended to educate university students, but it also targets younger pupils and other key stakeholders.

**What is the purpose of the work by your team at the Centre for Liberal Arts?**

The Fukuoka Institute of Technology's Centre for Liberal Arts was established in 2021 to cover university-wide education. I was transferred from the Faculty of Engineering. The Centre for Liberal Arts manages subjects related to general skills and general knowledge that all students enrolled at our university should acquire, regardless of their specialty. Since 2012, I have been responsible for designing university-wide first-year education aimed at developing employment skills. I am leading the curriculum development and management for the first and second semester lectures on

'Career Design' and 'Communication Design'. I write common textbooks and manage instructors to deliver lectures in 22 classes to approximately 1,000 students each year. I also deliver lectures on psychology using a method of 'active learning' which focuses on interaction among students and gives them chances to enhance multiple perspectives. This is a popular lecture with about 1200 people applying to take it each year, and there is always a waiting list for cancellations.

**How does your research develop adaptive ground rules for remote discussion skills?**

When classes were modified to online lectures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many students struggled with remote discussions. Students felt anxious in situations where there are no other people in front of them, and unsure of the rules of behaviour. Ground rules are rules decided during discussions. It is not a new concept, but in many previous studies, the rules were decided by the teacher. I believe it would be useful to clarify the rules of behaviour in discussions and reduce the difficulty felt in remote situations. In the process of conducting research, it became clear that the process of deciding rules as a group function is a valuable team building tool that also fosters personal growth with the help of technology. ●

# Let's talk about change

**Professor Mika Nakano** seeks to drive radical change in Japan's education system through developing communication skills in university students

Discussion is an important aspect of human communication and in a diverse human society, is critical in ensuring that all voices are heard. Participants should be able to actively join in on an equal basis and be included in creating the rules in group discussions. This helps to build a healthy social infrastructure of dialogue and develops adaptive methods for building discussion spaces from the bottom up.

In Japan, a country struggling with a declining and ageing population, societal norms follow traditional and established patterns. However, Professor Mika Nakano, from the Fukuoka Institute of Technology, believes that this is holding the nation back internationally. 'We consider that entrepreneurship education

build a system for everyone to collaborate,' she describes.

Using 'argumentation' as an education method allows students to shift to a more global perspective and anticipate opposing options. It covers both thinking and expression and encourages participants to respectfully share ideas and build consensus through different viewpoints. 'It is important to create a climate that allows free speech to increase self-affirmation and self-efficacy, to improve understanding, and to collaborate and build relationships with different people,' Nakano says.

Nakano is methodical in the development of her curricula, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches drawn from psychology and anthropology

However, Nakano considers that the next challenge is to form partnerships with researchers internationally to further her work. 'We are excited about future possibilities, not only in the field of education but also in the field of business, such as improving the efficiency of business negotiations and internal operations, as well as its application in medical institutions,' she outlines. She also plans to build an entrepreneurship education programme for children in Japan.

Such radical thinking demonstrates a marked departure from the traditional mindset of Japanese society. Nakano's belief that helping students to develop critical thinking and communication skills can in turn help her country drive growth and prosperity in international markets. ●

*The uniqueness of this research is that it cuts into the digital divide and social disparities, provides opportunities for everyone and attempts to build a system for everyone to collaborate*

will empower young people and will allow each individual to utilise their individuality to improve the society,' she enthuses. Based at the Institute's Centre for Liberal Arts, where she and her colleagues are creating a network of 18 universities in the Kyushu-Okinawa region, she is working on revitalising education through fostering an interuniversity arrangement.

## LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELD

One aspect of this work is to develop remote discussion skills in Japanese university students as Nakano believes this to be a major, yet overlooked, stumbling block in the growth of many students. She seeks to level the economic disparity between students with access to electronics from an early age and poorer students who have developed fewer communication skills. 'The uniqueness of this research is that it cuts into the digital divide and social disparities, provides opportunities for everyone and attempts to

methodologies. She incorporates observation, questionnaire and interview methods to observe, create experimental plans, and propose effective curricula and learning methods for the students in her institution. Basing her research on real life practice and continually verifying its efficacy is central to her work.

## THE NEXT CHALLENGE

Nakano's work with the other regional universities on the 'interuniversity' aims to teach important 'soft' skills to students irrespective of their area of study. She has also worked with several international institutions such as Babson College in the US and the University of the Philippine Los Baños for training and research exchanges. Furthermore, she has been a part-time lecturer at her alma mater, Kyushu University, delivering lectures focused on communication to a wide range of students from undergraduate to postgraduate levels.

## Project Insights

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### BIO

**Dr Mika Nakano** is a professor in the Center for Liberal Arts, Fukuoka Institute of Technology. Her research interests include curriculum development for higher education, argument, epistemology, thinking, entrepreneurship, communication and learning environments. She is the recipient of 15 academic awards (<https://researchmap.jp/nakanomfit/awards>).

