



Why Spending my Honeymoon with my Brother was an Education Like No Other

by Meredith McEvoy, M.Ed., Educational Specialist

In October, my husband Pete and I traveled to Japan for our honeymoon. Following many long discussions, we decided that a week in Kauai, Hawaii followed by a week in Tokyo, would be ideal. One of the reasons we chose Japan was because my brother **Andrew Feinberg** moved there in July and is now teaching English as a Second Language through the **JET Programme**, a Japanese government-sponsored partnership with the U.S. He teaches at **Wako International High School**, a public upper-secondary school located in the Saitama Prefecture, one-half hour north of Tokyo. Andrew co-teaches all of his classes alongside a Japanese teacher, who is employed by the school.

The highlights of our Japan trip included mouth-watering sushi, served to us on a train-like conveyor belt called a "Sushi-Go-Round"; visits to exquisite temples and shrines; breathtaking walks through Japanese gardens; and setting out each day to explore virtually every section of Tokyo via subway. However, as an educator, I was especially intrigued to visit Wako and to observe the differences between American and Japanese classrooms.

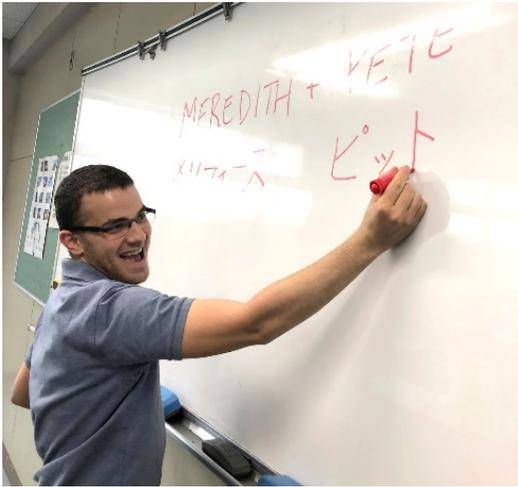
Cultural Contrasts

For example, students and teachers do not wear shoes at schools; they wear slippers instead. Even guests are required to use "guest slippers" (Pete shuffled around the school in a pair that were too small, but he made it work!). Andrew also explained that there are no custodians employed by the school; rather, the students volunteer to do all of the custodial work themselves. In addition, I immediately noticed how quiet and respectful the students were. Every student was punctual and sitting in their designated seat. No one interrupted or engaged in side conversations. And there was a strange reluctance among the students to speak out, even if the students knew the answers to questions addressed to them (Andrew's explanation is detailed in the Q&A on the facing page.) Observing a quiet, attentive high school classroom was a new experience for me!

During our visit we observed both first-year and third-year English classes. We were surprised by how well even the first-year English speakers communicated. When Andrew asked them to form groups of



Andrew outside the Wako International High School in Saitama.



Andrew is a wonderful teacher. It is apparent that his students admire him. He is also nearly fluent in Japanese which makes it much easier when the students need clarification.

two and come up with a question to ask us in English, girls only paired with other girls, and boys only paired with other boys. Andrew often has to remind boys and girls to work together.

Andrew explained to his third-year students that he and his co-teacher would be teaching a very special lesson that day on the topic of LGBTQ communities around the world. To be honest, I was shocked to hear that the Japanese teacher

decided on the theme. The students watched a short video of a Japanese politician espousing the view that LGBTQ people were not productive members of society. Following the video, the teachers asked the students to react. Students reactions ranged from "This makes me sad" to "I do not agree with her" to "People's differences should be celebrated." Later, Andrew expressed gratitude for being placed in a school that is progressive and accepting of other people's differences.

Bringing it Home

As an educator, this remarkable experience served as a critical reminder for me. Every family within every culture shapes their valued ideals. I am fortunate to work with many different families, who arrive from every corner of the world, here at Morrissey-Compton. As I participate in helping to shape their children's educational futures, it is imperative to keep this in mind.

Q&A with Andrew Feinberg

Here are some additional questions Meredith posed to Andrew during her visit:

Q: What is the JET Programme?

A: The JET Programme stands for the Japan Exchange and Teaching program. While I'm technically an ALT (assistant language teacher), my job is first and foremost about intercultural exchange. In addition to language, I teach both students and teachers about life in the U.S., our customs, and our way of thinking. Not everyone in the JET Programme is an ALT, although most are. Some JET participants are CIRs (coordinators of international relations). These people translate and interpret between English and Japanese at local government offices throughout Japan.

Q: What school do you teach at?

A: I teach at Wako International High School, a public upper-secondary school run by Saitama Prefecture. While most ALTs are placed in public schools, some receive placement at private schools, especially in big cities like Tokyo and Kyoto. My school is about a five-minute walk away from the Tokyo city limits.

Q: What is your favorite part of teaching at your school?

A: I love to see the excitement expressed by my students when they finally understand a new concept, following an initial struggle. Japan is a very group-focused society that downplays individual accomplishments, so when I see students expressed confidence and pride in their English skills, that makes my role extra special.

Q: What is the most challenging part of teaching at your school?

A: Mostly, it's getting students motivated to participate publicly. Especially in large-group or co-ed settings, it's difficult to get students to raise their hands to answer questions. By and large, they're terrified of speaking out, not just because they're afraid of getting something wrong, but they don't want to show off or stand out from the crowd. Students are much more comfortable talking in pairs than speaking in front of the whole class. Even the easiest question can take five minutes to answer if the students are feeling especially shy that day.

Q: In your opinion, what is the biggest difference between American and Japanese schools?

A: In American schools, it's all about individuality, and in Japanese schools, it's all about teamwork. There are pros and cons to each approach. In American high schools, students are developing their personal brands. They wear special clothes to broadcast their wealth, status, or group affiliation. They dye their hair to express their individuality. They either study hard to prove their intelligence or slack off to prove their indifference. None of that applies in Japan. Uniforms enforce the fact there is no social hierarchy between students; the only differences are between the student body and the teachers. Students are not allowed to dye their hair. Doing one's best is seen as a virtue because it's part of being a



Andrew teaching a lesson on LGBTQ communities.

good team player. Students don't want to disappoint their fellow group members, so they need to blend in and become a functioning "cog in the machine." This is also why clubs and team sports are so important in Japan.

Q: Do any of your students receive special education?

A: There are separate special education schools for students with significant difficulty following the standard school curriculum, such as students with severe cognitive impairments. However, it's highly likely that some of my own students, in a typical public school, have learning differences that are more difficult for those around them to notice, such as dyslexia or an attention deficit. In general, mental health issues (and any cognitive or learning differences at all) are taboo in Japan, meaning that most common learning differences are either ignored or otherwise swept under the rug. It's possible to receive quality mental health care in the country, but admitting to being "different from the norm" and being open about it are things that are still largely socially unacceptable.

Q: How would you describe the demeanor of your students?

A: The boys and the girls behave somewhat differently, and they form two separate cultures in a sense. Broadly speaking, the girls tend to be quieter and more subdued, and the boys tend to be louder and more willing to make fun of themselves. All of my students are hungry and sleepy all the time. Students sleep roughly 6 to 7 hours a night because of their commitment to club activities like sports and drama. There's a culture of working through physical distress that's all-too-prevalent in Japan, and being sleepy or uncomfortable is a sign of virtue. I even see students asleep in my class from time to time, which the teachers mostly allow.

Q: Anything else you'd like to share?

A: I love teaching in Japan, and I feel like I appreciate Japanese culture so much more than when I arrived. There are many, many rules for everyday behavior that take many months to get to know, but it's all systematic and grounded in some kind of logic, even if the logic is old-fashioned. Japan is an amazingly safe country with a lot of orderliness, but that comes at the cost of individual expression and some personal freedom.