

Connecting the Dots and Making a Difference

Aviva Ueno

Meiji Gakuin University

Contact: uenoaviv@k.meijigakuin.ac.jp

You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards...Believing that the dots will connect down the road will give you the confidence to follow your heart even when it leads you off the well-worn path; and that will make all the difference. (Jobs, 2005).

When Steve Jobs spoke about connecting the dots in his legendary commencement speech at Stanford University, it made countless numbers of people reflect on their lives and the events that have shaped their lives. When I reflect back on my 32 years of teaching English in Japan, I am amazed at how the dots (the schools, the colleagues, and the students) have connected, leading me to where I am today. In this paper I would like to share two stories about my journey as an English teacher in Japan. Although there were several ruts in the road, each step along my journey helped me to develop both professionally and personally. I hope that my stories will inspire others to reflect on their own teaching journeys and appreciate how the most challenging experiences are often the ones that push us forward on our journeys.

How it all began

In 1987, I began teaching at a branch of a well-known English conversation school with locations all over Japan. The school had three categories of “native” teachers: regular class teachers, who taught upper level classes that met once a week; class visit teachers, who visited lower level classes that were taught by Japanese teachers; and lobby-talk teachers, who sat in the lobby and talked to students before or after their regular classes. I was hired as a lobby-talk teacher, probably because I had absolutely no teaching qualifications or experience. Although lobby-talk teachers were clearly at the bottom of the totem pole in terms of importance, I believe that it was the most challenging teaching position because there was no curriculum and no way to know how many students would participate, or what level the students would be. It required a great deal of flexibility and thinking on one's feet. When I began my job as a lobby-talk teacher, I would sit in the lobby of the school, my eyes trained anxiously on the entrance, and when students walked in I smiled at them and hoped that they would come and talk to me. Sadly, it rarely went that way. Some students would see me and veer off to the farthest corner of the lobby to avoid having to make conversation with me. Others sat near me, but when I tried to chat with them it was challenging to say the least. The conversation tended to peter out quickly after the first few exchanges and the awkward silence that followed was stressful for both the students and me. I quickly realized that I had to take some sort of action to improve my situation. Out of a sense of self-preservation, I started bringing in pictures that I had clipped from travel brochures picked up at a nearby travel agency, thinking that I could use the pictures to strike up conversations. Armed with a picture of a temple in Kyoto, for example, I would approach a student in the lobby and say something like, “Sorry to bother you, but could you help me? I am new to Japan and I really want to go to this temple, but what is its name?”, “Where is it?” and “How do I get there?” Amazingly, this strategy of playing the naive foreigner actually worked! I was giving the students an opportunity to share their knowledge about something that was easy for them to talk about, and giving them the satisfaction that they were able to use English to give me advice, and in that way I began to gain their trust. I started getting regular “customers” for my lobby talks and realized I had to come up with additional strategies, so I compiled a big file of pictures and made handouts that I put on the table with prompts to help get conversations started. I even made some

educational board games and card games that became quite popular. As the weeks went by I found more and more students joining my lobby talks before their regular classes. I even had some students who came in just for lobby talk! A stressful and awkward situation had become an enjoyable and rewarding one.

One day the director of the school summoned me for a meeting. He was a rather stern-looking man who sat in the back of the office. I had had very little interaction with him up until that time. I was terrified, wondering if I had done something wrong, but apparently it was just the opposite. He told me that he had been observing my activities in the lobby and was very impressed. He said that, amongst the lobby-talk teachers, I was the one who was most successful at getting the students engaged and excited. He informed me that I was being offered a part-time position at headquarters to put together an instructor's manual and lead workshops for other lobby-talk teachers. I was thrilled at the opportunity, and although I really was not qualified to do either of those jobs, I eagerly accepted the offer, and that is how I became a teacher trainer. I started working at headquarters as the "lobby-talk" teacher trainer, and it seemed that my superiors were pleased with my work, because I quickly rose in the ranks, and eventually became the chief coordinator of the "native" education section. As the chief coordinator I was in charge of all the "native" trainers; I worked with personnel to help interview new instructors; I observed and evaluated teachers; and I ran countless numbers of teacher training sessions and workshops.

I loved the job but I often worried that someone would ask me questions about my qualifications, namely where I had done my teacher training, and where I had earned my Master's degree. This was obviously a concern because I had not had any formal training and did not have a Master's degree at that time. But nobody ever questioned me and I worked for many years in that position. Eventually I got married and had a son, and was finding the long hours and the hour-plus commute too hard. I left my teacher trainer position and went back to full-time teaching at a local branch of the conversation school (by which time I been promoted from lobby-talk teacher to a regular class teacher!). I taught at the conversation school for nearly 20 years, until I decided it was time to move on. I applied for and successfully was hired to teach at a private high school and a private university. Both of these teaching positions required a Master's degree, but thanks to my high-level position at the language school and my many years of experience along with glowing letters of recommendation, both institutions hired me in spite of not having a degree.

Stepping off the well-worn path

Fast-forwarding to the point where I had left my job at the high school and was teaching part-time at two different universities. Although this involved a fair amount of commuting, the teaching schedule was better, so I was fairly content. However, I was starting to feel like I was stuck in a rut (perhaps I was possibly having a mid-life crisis). Then, one day I was chatting with my supervisor at one of my universities, and she said, "Aviva! What are you doing with your life? Do you really want to still be a part-time instructor when you are 50?" (I was around 45 years old at the time). She said, "You need to get a Master's degree and get a full-time job, and you need to get started now!"

Well, of course, I didn't want to still be a part-timer running around to several different jobs when I was 50, and I did want to get a Master's degree. It was something that had been on my mind ever since my days at the English conversation school. I went home that night and thought about the pros and cons of getting a Master's degree. There were certainly a lot of pros. Getting my Master's degree would help me get a full time job and improve my teaching. I have a great love of learning so going back to school was very appealing to me, and this might be the perfect way to get out of the rut I seemed to be stuck in. But there were also cons. Getting a Master's degree would require a lot of time, something I felt that I never had enough of. It would also require a great deal of money, which was tight as it was. Yet probably the biggest deterrent for me was my age. The idea of studying with people who might be half my age worried me. I was also full of self-doubt about whether I had the ability and the stamina to start a Master's program while working two jobs and taking care of my family. As I considered all of these pros and cons, I remembered another quote from Steve Jobs' commencement speech. He said:

Almost everything - all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I

know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart. (Jobs, 2005)

Though I didn't expect to die anytime soon, the reality is that eventually all of us will die, so what was I waiting for? This made me wonder what I really had to lose that couldn't be replaced. I went back to my "cons" list and looked at it again. The first item on the list was time. How would I be spending my time if I weren't studying? I would probably be watching TV or chatting with my friends, which I could do after I finished the degree. The next item on the list was money. Money will always be tight but one can always go out and make more money. That was not a good reason not to try for the Master's. Age. Did it really matter if I were older than the other students, or if I embarrassed myself by not being able to keep up with the younger students? Not really. The last con on my list was self-doubt and what better way to get rid of self-doubt than to further my education and become a better teacher? Once I realized that I really didn't have anything to lose that could not be replaced, I decided that it was time to step off the "safe, well-worn path" of my life and go for the Master's. This turned out to be the best decision I ever made.

I took a Master's in TESOL course online with a highly-regarded American-based university. The program was made up of an amazing group of world-famous professors who guided me throughout my learning journey as well as supportive classmates, some of whom have become lifelong friends. Although it was not easy, I was able to finish the program in two years. I did quite well in my courses, which helped build my self-confidence. Furthermore, earning the degree made me much more credible. Having my Master's in TESOL provided me with the qualifications that I needed to get hired as an assistant professor. Becoming an assistant professor has given me so many opportunities to grow personally and professionally. In my current position I help with curriculum development and with hiring and training part-time instructors. I lead faculty development sessions, I conduct research, I present at conferences, and most importantly, I get to do what I love, which is to teach English to highly motivated students.

So how do the dots connect in my stories? Looking backwards from where I am now, I am currently an assistant professor at my university because I earned my Master's degree in TESOL. I went back to school to get my Master's degree because my supervisor scolded me for my lack of ambition when I was a part-time teacher. If my supervisor hadn't scolded me, it is unlikely that I would have had the nerve to step off the well-worn path of my life and walk down a new path to get a Master's degree. Furthermore, I would never have met my supervisor if my university hadn't hired me as a part-time teacher. It is unlikely that I would have been hired by my university in the first place had I not had years of experience as a teacher trainer at the English conversation school. I became a teacher trainer because the school director recommended me after watching me conduct my lobby talks. Therefore, if I had not been hired as a lobby-talk teacher, it is unlikely that the school director would have even noticed me. Thirty-two years ago, when I was sitting in the lobby of that English conversation school I would never have predicted how the dots would connect and bring me to where I am today. Although there are some things I might have done differently along the way, I can reflect upon my journey and appreciate the importance of the events that brought me to where I am now.

In summary, I really do believe that it doesn't matter where you are on your journey as a teacher, and it doesn't matter where you started. Every experience that you have had, every student who you have taught, every colleague who you have interacted with - both the wonderful and the challenging - have played an important role in shaping who you are. If you take the time to reflect, to look at the dots and how they connect and brought you to where you are now, it will give you the strength and confidence to continue on your path, and to make a difference in your life and in the lives of your students. Steve Jobs (2005) said, "You've got to find what you love...If you haven't found it yet, keep looking until you find it. Don't settle." If you feel like you are in a rut and just going through the motions, change it up, and do something different. It doesn't matter if you are 20, 40, or 60 years old, it is never too late to "step off the well-worn path", as Steve Jobs so eloquently put it, and try something new. It is important to remember that time is limited, so don't waste time worrying about what you have to lose. Just follow your heart.

Reference

Jobs, S. (2005, June). Steve Jobs: How to live before you die [video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/steve_jobs_how_to_live_before_you_die