

# Student Observational Research : Analysis and Evaluation of the Senkoka Research Project Course

Tamara Swenson

## 専攻科リサーチ・プロジェクトの分析と評価

タマラ スェンソン

### Abstract

This paper describes the OJJC *Senkoka* Research Project course and analyzes it using information collected from student interviews and e-mail questionnaires.

**Key words :** Third-year students, field research, NGOs & NPOs, student evaluation

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### 抄 録

この論文は大阪女学院短期大学専攻科リサーチ・プロジェクト授業を説明し、学生面接とアンケートのデータを調査する。

**キーワード :** 専攻科、リサーチ、NGOs & NPOs、学生評価

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## Introduction

In the 1998 school year, the students in the *Senkoka* course, the third-year graduate course at Osaka Jogakuin Junior College, began following a new curriculum more closely connected to that followed by second-year students at OJJC, though more in depth and more rigorous.<sup>1</sup>

One feature of this curriculum is Theme Studies I. Students take four Theme Studies I courses, two each in spring and fall term. Each course focuses on one of the core topics at OJJC: peace studies, science and religion in society, human rights, and problems of modern society.<sup>2</sup> All four courses have one thing in common, students conduct library research and write papers and make presentations about this. While more demanding than the research required for the second-year courses Topic Studies I and II, the research is primarily secondary. Students rely on outside experts for their information and to formulate their conclusions about the topics.

In addition to these courses, *Senkoka* students have one course devoted to learning how to conduct primary research. This course, a core component of the revised *Senkoka* curriculum, is called Research Project. It is a 3-credit required course, held in winter term in the first two years of the new curriculum.<sup>3</sup> This course requires that students apply what they have learned during their previous study, both during the *Senkoka* program and prior to enrollment at OJJC, to the “real world.” In this course, “students select an NGO in the Osaka area to observe and do volunteer work at. After completing the field work, they write a paper. . .” (Kim & Cornwell, 2000, p.143). The completed papers are then compiled and published. To date, two volumes have been completed: *Volunteer Assistance in the Osaka Area: Observations of Volunteer and Non-Profit Organizations, 1999* (Swenson, 1999) and *Kansai Area NPOs & NGOs, 2000: Observations of Volunteer and Non-Profit Organizations* (Swenson, 2000a).

This paper will describe this course, analyze its contents, and briefly evaluate it based on the instructor’s observations and student comments.

## Background

### *Senkoka Students*

While most of the students entered the *Senkoka* program immediately upon graduation from the two-year course at Osaka Jogakuin Junior College, a few graduated in earlier years from OJJC. Reasons for entering *Senkoka* are detailed by Kim and Cornwell (2000). In addition, the course is open to students who graduated from other junior colleges, but none of the students enrolled in *Senkoka* during the first two years of the new curriculum came from other institutions.

The 1998 *Senkoka* Research Project class had 12 students. One dropped out early in the

term and only 11 completed the course. All 18 students completed the course in 1999–2000.

## Course Information

### *Description*

Research Project is a course that can be considered to be the culmination of students' three years of study, forcing students to apply their knowledge and abilities to "real world" activities. As described to students :

This course is a student directed research project of a community service organization. Students will be expected to research the history of an organization, set up and prepare for observation of the organizations, observe the organization during a four-week period, assist the organization as requested during this observation period, maintain a record of the organization, and prepare both a report (written) and a presentation based on what they learned and observed. Organizations will include local non-profit and community service groups, non-governmental organizations, and other "volunteer" organizations. (Swenson, 2000b)

### *Course Structure*

Primarily, the course focuses on preparing students to conduct field research and maintaining appropriate field notes. Class time is also spent on the ethics of conducting research, framing research questions, and overcoming difficulties encountered. The course text, *A handbook of social science research* (Bouman & Atkinson, 1995), helps guide discussion in these areas and prepare students for observational research. Students also receive instruction on use of computer software to conduct research, write papers, and make presentations.<sup>4</sup>

Before beginning observations, students select groups to observe. In October and November 1998, preliminary contact was made by Mr. Yoshinobu Tanaka with 12 organizations to see if they were willing to allow students to observe. Students selected 10 of these. One student made her own arrangement with an organization. For the second year of the course, students were given a list of the 12 groups that were willing to participate in the second year of the course in November, 1999. Students selected seven of these groups, six of which had received student observers the previous year. In addition, responding to student comments following the first year of the course, students were encouraged to contact other non-profit organizations. Eleven students did so. (See Appendix A for a list of organizations.)

The bulk of the course requires that students observe and assist the organization they select. All students must spend a minimum of 16 hours at the organization over a four-week period, with at least four hours spent each week to give them a deeper understanding of the organization. Most students during the first two years of the course spent more. For the 29 students who completed the course, the average number of hours spent at their organizations was 22.5. One student spent nearly 40 hours at the organization she elected to observe, while

several others spent 25 to 30 hours.

## **Results and Analysis**

### Student Reaction and Comments

#### *Interviews with 1999 Senkoka Students*

After the first year of the course, interviews with six students were conducted in English to determine what aspects of the course they found beneficial and which aspects they felt needed further improvement. The six students interviewed were generally positive about their entire experience. They indicated that they felt that the course was one of the highlights of their study for two reasons. First, it allowed them to apply their knowledge to the “real” world and interact with members of the community beyond the boundaries of OJJC. Second, they felt they gained a deeper understanding of how to conduct research. They also were pleased to have their papers published, but would have preferred to have more time to revise the papers prior to publication.

Lack of time was the greatest complaint, as only two weeks were devoted to preparation, four weeks to the observations, and the final week to revision of papers and presentations. All six wanted more time for each of these steps.

#### *E-mail Questionnaire to 2000 Senkoka Students*

Unfortunately, the second year of the course had an even shorter winter term, only five weeks. While students began working independently six weeks prior to the beginning of winter term, the e-mail questionnaire administered at the end of the course indicated they felt that the five-week winter term, plus their independent preparation, was insufficient.

However, the 14 e-mail questionnaires returned by the students also indicated that they were pleased with the course. One wrote in the comments that it was one of the best experiences she had had at OJJC. The questionnaire was administered in English. (See Appendix B.) All 14 students were satisfied with the amount of time preparing their written reports, but four indicated they would have liked more time to prepare their presentations and felt it was difficult to both write a paper and prepare for a presentation in the limited time provided.

The major suggestion students had for the course was to begin formal preparations earlier. They felt that this would have made it easier to do the observations and write the results for their papers, and allow them more time to prepare to talk about the results to the other students.

Four of the students also said they would have liked more guidance in selecting their organizations as they were not completely happy with the work they were expected to do or what they learned. However, the other 10 reported only positive experiences at the organizations. Even the four who were not completely happy indicated that they were pleased with

the course, learned a lot from the observation, and felt they got a lot out of it.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Many of the suggestions for changes by students in the first two years have been implemented for the third year of the course. A primary change was to stretch the course over two terms rather than trying to concentrate both the preparation and the observation during the 5-week winter term. The 2000 *Senkoka* course students are meeting one class hour each week during fall term, allowing more discussion of research ethics and methods, as well as more time preparing for observations.

While no formal evaluation of the organizations's experiences with the OJJC students has been conducted, the comments I have received have been positive. Many of the groups have said they would be very willing to accept another student in the future and none have indicated they do not wish to participate.

The *Senkoka* Research Project course has been, for the most part, a very positive experience for students and the community. The decision to provide students with the opportunity to interact with the community has been positively received during the course's first two years. The books published each year have also been well received, both by the graduates and the organizations observed. While there have been rough spots, for students, the organizations, and myself, the overall experience has been a positive one.

## Notes

1. Kim & Cornwell (2000, pp.142–143) briefly describe the Senkoka course and the related first and second year curriculum.
2. A complete description of the contents of the new curriculum for first and second year students at OJJC is beyond the scope of this paper. See the article titled *Osaka Jogakuin Tanki Daigaku kariyuramu: 1998 nendo hensei ni suite* (Osaka Jogakuin Junior College curriculum: Regarding the changes in 1998) (*Sounitsu 30 Shuunen Kinen linkai*, Ed., 1998, pp. 147–155) for a description of the new curriculum in Japanese and the rationale for its adoption.
3. The 1998–1999 winter term was 7-weeks long, beginning before the Christmas and New Years holidays. The 1999–2000 winter term was 5-weeks long, however, preparation began for the course in November. Beginning in 2001, the course was expanded to cover fall and winter terms to allow for more preparation. Observations of the two-term course are not reported here. The total number of class hours and the time spent at the volunteer organizations remain unchanged.
4. Computer software programs used in the OJJC computer labs included *Netscape4.5* (Netscape, 1998), *Microsoft Office 98 : PowerPoint* (Microsoft, 1998), *ClarisWorks 4.0J* (Claris, 1996), *PageMaker 6.0J* (Adobe, 1998), *PhotoShop 4.0J* (Adobe, 1997), all versions for Macintosh computers.

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## **Appendix A : Organizations Observed by *Senkoka* Students**

### *Organization & year observed*

- Asia Volunteer Center, 1999 & 2000
- Braille Translation Group *Michishirube* (Signposts), 2000
- Center for Global Citizenship Education, 1999
- Center for Multicultural Information and Association, 2000
- Fureai Bunko* (Braille Picture Books for Children), 2000
- HuRights Osaka (Asia Pacific Human Rights Information Center), 1999 & 2000
- International Center of the Rights of the Child, 2000
- International Friendship Network of Japan, Kansai, 2000
- Japan Asian Association & Asian Friendship Association, 2000
- Japan International Food for the Hungry, 1999 & 2000
- Kaizuka International Friendship Association, Kaizuka City, 1999
- Kobe Student Youth Center, 2000
- Network "Earth Village", 2000
- Osaka City Postnatal Hearing Loss Association, 2000
- Osaka Council of Girl Scouts, 2000
- Osaka NPO Center (Non-Profit Organization), 1999 & 2000
- Osaka National Hospital, 2000
- Osaka Volunteer *Kyokai* (Group), 1999
- Osaka YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association), 1999
- Osaka YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association), 1999 & 2000
- Peace Boat, 2000
- Roujin Hoken Shisetsu Maikodai*, Kobe City (Home for Senior Citizens), 2000
- St. Margaret Institute of Life Education, 1999

## **Appendix B : Questionnaire to *Senkoka* Students**

1. What was the most difficult thing to do at the organization you observed?
  2. What was the easiest thing to do at the organization you observed?
  3. Did you receive enough assistance on writing your paper?      Yes      No
  4. Did you receive enough assistance preparing for your presentation?      Yes      No
  5. Did you learn enough about the software to make your presentation using the computer?  
Yes      No
  6. How would you suggest the instructor and students spend class time?
  7. Did you find the readings useful in guiding your research?      Yes      No
  8. What did you like best about the Research Project course?
  9. What did you like the least about the Research Project course?
  10. What changes would you suggest for future Research Project courses?
- Other Comments