

A Unique Perspective on Learning: In Honor of Yamada Mitsuyoshi

Aaron Gerow

When I arrived at the International Student Center at Yokohama National University in 1997, it was my first full-time academic position. Thus while I certainly had had plenty of experience teaching before then, I was somewhat nervous about holding classes in this new, more pressured environment. That unease was doubled when one of my new colleagues, Professor Yamada Mitsuyoshi, the faculty member in charge of student counseling, asked to sit in on my modern Japanese literature class. I could only presume he was going to inspect my knowledge and teaching skills, perhaps to report to the center or the university. As someone initially on a three-year contract, this prospect unnerved me.

But something curious happened. Professor Yamada did not only attend the first couple classes, he sat in on every session in the semester. Then he took part in every meeting of my classes on Japanese film and manga the next semester. The same thing happened the next year, as he even repeated the modern literature course. And then the next. In fact, Professor Yamada has participated in all of the classes I have taught at Yokohama National University so far, and not simply as an observer. He has consistently read the assignments, asked questions and made comments in class, and even joined us on class outings (actually taking over once when I fell ill!). Far from being an inspector, he has been a valuable member of my courses.

Some may feel such attendance is below the dignity of a full professor at a national university, but in my mind, it is part of what makes Yamada Mitsuyoshi a different academician. Certainly his background was not necessarily in the ivory towers of the university. Graduating from the Faculty of Law of the University of Tokyo in 1959, he spent much of his life working for the Bank of Tokyo (now merged with the Bank of Mitsubishi), utilizing his English skills to work especially on overseas matters, including

serving for three years in the San Francisco branch. It was only in May 1989 that he joined the faculty of Yokohama National University, initially as Instructor in the Faculty of Economics. He switched to the International Student Center in October 1992, becoming Associate Professor at that time, and then finally advancing to Professor in April 1994.

These credentials, different from those of most academics, have provided him with a unique perspective that I have found logical, professional, and down to earth. For instance, while I have found the institution of the university in Japan sometimes bewildering in its bureaucratic rules and “customs”, I have always admired Professor Yamada’s incisive analysis and, at some times, constructive critique of this occasionally illogical quagmire, one based on his practical experience both abroad and in the Japanese corporate world.

His outlook, however, is not simply that of the former business insider, although he has put such credentials to academic use when teaching courses on business Japanese and Japanese society. His point of view slightly outside the halls of academia has given him a perspective that can be as close to that of students — especially international students — as of a faculty member, a horizon that is ideally suited for a foreign student advisor. An advisor, I believe, must always understand the way students, entering not only the university, but also Japan, from another world, view their situation with a mixture of perplexity and the desire to learn. His occasional status as a “student” in my class can in part be seen as an extension of his ability to step into the shoes of a foreign student and comprehend their experience.

This ability to share perspectives has enabled him to establish close relationships with the international students on campus. He has not only advised students in his office, but warmly interacted with them by meeting them in situations like my class, events held at the International Student House (where he has served as superintendent since April 1990), as well as at a number of outings, like the annual trips to Hakone or to the mountains to ski, that he regularly supervises. Yet his superior experience

in life, as well as his impeccably professional attitude, enforces the status necessary for an advisor to teach, lead, and direct students — all the while understanding their position.

Professor Yamada's unique point of view has also enabled him to comment incisively on the problems of advising, the lives of international students, and government policy towards educational exchange in a number of important articles in the *Journal of the International Student Center, Yokohama National University*, and other publications, as well as at international conferences like those of the European Association for International Education, scholarly pieces that should become required reading for both student advisors and policy makers. His commitment to critically rethinking the position of student advisor, in part by actively referencing systems in other nations like the United States, as well as to formulating policies that both understand the needs of international students as well as promote responsible study, is an attitude that I hope his successors will carry on.

Yet much of what I have written here about his accomplishments seems inadequate to express my deep respect for Yamada Mitsuyoshi. In the end, that respect fully blossomed out of the pleasure of having him attend my classes — in witnessing his unending eagerness to learn, his original point of view on the subjects at hand, his own erudite knowledge of Japanese society and culture. There were many times I was the student to his teacher, but he never tried to undermine my position as instructor. This was due not only to his professionalism, but also to his humility: not to me, but to the vast and marvelous world of knowledge. When the existence of arrogant professors who claim they know everything, yet teach from the same notes they prepared twenty years ago, threatens the legitimacy of the Japanese university, Professor Yamada's frank and humble dedication to continue learning even in his sixties, to endlessly add to his repertory as a teacher — to build himself anew as the world changes — is not only refreshing, it is inspirational. I personally have decided to pursue my career in Japanese institutions of higher learning, but I will always remember the unique figure

of Yamada Mitsuyoshi as a model of a true man of learning.

Yet I do not wish to speak too much of the past. Some weeks ago, Professor Yamada asked if he could occasionally sit in on my classes after April 2001. It seems that even after retirement from Yokohama National University, Yamada Mitsuyoshi will still be braving new worlds with humility, dignity, and bountiful energy.