

Title: Lifelong Learning Platforms and the Fostering of Civic Agency: An Analysis of Knotworking Practices in Japan's "Minna no Seminar"

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Research Overview :

This study analyzes "Minna no Seminar" ("Everyone can be both a teacher and a learner" seminar initiative) in Japan as a knotworking-based lifelong learning practice. Through qualitative and action research methods, it examines how flexible citizen networks foster collaborative learning, complement formal schooling, and contribute to the formation of sustainable community-based lifelong learning platforms.

Purpose :

This study focuses on Minna no Seminar, a community-based learning initiative in Japan, as a practical approach to constructing lifelong learning platforms within local communities. In contemporary Japan, opportunities for learning beyond formal schooling and after entering the workforce remain insufficient despite growing demands for lifelong learning in the context of social transformation and "Society 5.0" (Cabinet Office, 2023). Although local communities possess diverse learning resources such as schools, community learning centers (kominkan), non-profit organizations, and civic activities, these resources have not necessarily been systematically connected.

At the same time, conventional school education has been criticized as a form of "encapsulated school learning" disconnected from broader social contexts (Central Council for Education, 2008). Such learning environments often provide limited opportunities for reciprocal learning, interaction with diverse others, and collaborative engagement with real-world issues.

In response to these challenges, Japan has promoted the SIP (Strategic Innovation Promotion Program) initiative entitled Platform for Realizing New Styles of Learning and Working in the Post-COVID Era. One practical embodiment of this initiative is Minna no Seminar, organized under the slogan "Everyone can be both a teacher and a learner." The initiative encourages citizens to share their experiences and knowledge through collaborative learning events in which diverse participants are loosely connected through dialogue and mutual learning.

This study examines how Minna no Seminar functions as a platform for collaborative and expansive learning. Specifically, it aims to:

1. clarify how networks enabling the participation of diverse citizens are formed; and
2. analyze the characteristics of relationships established among local learning hubs and participants within these networks.

The findings of this study are expected to provide practical implications for the formation of operational networks in the future design of lifelong learning platforms in Japanese society.

Methods :

This study analyzed the policy background and theoretical challenges surrounding lifelong learning platform formation in Japan through a review of SIP policy documents and previous research on lifelong learning in Japanese society.

A qualitative case study was conducted in Muroto City, Kochi Prefecture, where Minna no Seminar has been continuously implemented. Participant observation was carried out throughout the planning, preparation, and implementation processes in order to document how collaboration among residents and learning activities were organized.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with organizing committee members to examine their perceptions regarding the significance, outcomes, and challenges of the practice. The study also adopted an action research approach in which the research team collaborated directly with practitioners in the planning, implementation, and reflection processes of the activities.

Results/Discussion :

The organizing committee members of Minna no Seminar participated through a form of “knotworking” (Engeström, 2008), characterized by loose and flexible networks. Rather than operating within a fixed organizational structure, members gathered only when necessary and temporarily formed “knots” according to situational needs and shared goals.

This mode of participation enabled egalitarian relationships and adaptive collaboration under constantly changing conditions, with participants’ roles shifting flexibly depending on the situation. Such practices may contribute to sustainable forms of community-based lifelong learning and represent the study’s central finding regarding the formation and characteristics of citizen networks.

The findings further suggest that knotworking practices within local communities may complement learning and relationship-building functions that formal schooling alone cannot fully sustain. The practice demonstrated the possibility of redefining schools not as isolated institutions but as community-based learning hubs connected to local society.

School-opening practices also facilitated residents’ access to schools and lowered barriers to school-community collaboration.

Finally, the study suggests that participants developed a sense of ownership and civic agency by creating and managing learning activities themselves. The accumulation of such practices may function as an “infrastructure for coexistence” contributing to the revitalization and reorganization of local communities.

At the same time, concerns remain regarding the fixation of organizing members and the routinization of activities, which represent ongoing challenges for knotworking-based network management.

References

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