

NACAE

National Association of Comics Art Educators

Kyoto Seika University's Department of Comic Art is the first (and, as of this writing, only) program of it's kind in a Japanese four-year university. It began operation in April of 2000 after two years of planning and struggle. Now in it's fourth year, the program is preparing to send out its first class of graduates. One of our seniors has just made her professional debut, and I believe perhaps a dozen other of her forty-one classmates may be able to do the same within a year of graduating.

The Department of Comic Art was apparently first proposed by veteran political cartoonist Kei-ichi Makino. Makino had been teaching in Seika's old cartooning program (at the time located within the School of Design) for several years, but felt that program's strict focus on single-panel editorial cartoons and caricature was out of step with the times. Although he himself had never worked in multi-panel "story manga," he felt that any cartooning program that ignored this field was an anachronism. Others in the cartooning program strongly opposed the introduction of "commercial" cartooning, but the President of the university, Hajime Nakao, liked the idea.

I was brought into the proposed project, as I recall, sometime in mid-1998. At the time, I was teaching a course at Seika on popular culture on an adjunct basis, but Nakao knew that I had been studying the culture of manga and also translating manga professionally for nearly a decade. He called me into his office one day and asked me, if I could create a department of comic art, how would I do it? I asked, "Are you serious?" He said the chances of the proposal passing are slim, but, yes, he was very serious.

For me, this was an incredible opportunity, and I threw myself into the project body and soul. There were two major obstacles: the faculty senate, and the Ministry of Education and Science. There was little that I, as an adjunct and outsider, could do about the former. Nakao and Makino handled the faculty politics, and to this day I don't know how they managed to get the approval of the Faculty of Arts, considering how much opposition and skepticism there apparently was.

My primary job was to come up with a curriculum that would impress the Ministry of Education and Science, which exercises an enormous amount of

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control over private universities. The president and I both agreed that our program would have to be very different from the kind offered in many technical schools around the country. The theme we came up with (I suppose I said it first) was "the thinking cartoonist." Although studio courses would be the core of our program, we would encourage students to challenge themselves and expand their horizons by teaching them the history of sequential art, exposing them to comics from other countries, and examining the place of comics in society. We would expose them to such concepts as semiotics, the economics of publishing, freedom of speech, and social responsibility. Many of our students simply want to create action comics, romance comics, or humorous comics, and that is of course fine. But no one will leave our program without first being made to think about why they want to do what they do, and about the possible implications--personal, social, and artistic--of their choices.

This was (and remains) the basic concept behind the program, but this concept had to be adapted to the requirements of the university and the Ministry of Education and Science. So many studio credits, so many practicum credits, so many lecture credits, et cetera et cetera. Thus we ended up with a couple of courses (e.g., "Contemporary Media Culture Practicum") that we weren't sure what to do with in practice, but which must have seemed like a good idea at the time we were preparing our documents for the Ministry.

Unfortunately, Japanese universities are set up in such a way that it is very difficult for different departments to share common courses. So even though each department in the Faculty of Arts requires some kind of drawing class, each has to re-invent the wheel from scratch. And while most cartoonists can draw, few are trained to teach others to draw, so this aspect of our program was spotty for the first couple of years until we realized there was a problem. Next year (2004) will be the first year in which we can legally make changes to our curriculum, and we will be adding new electives in drawing and dropping some of our more awkward courses.

One challenge unique to a program in sequential art--perhaps particularly in Japan, where the single-creator model predominates--is finding a good balance between courses on writing and storytelling, and courses on drawing. Our

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faculty has generally stressed the former, because so many would-be cartoonists focus almost exclusively on drawing. On the other hand, we have found that those who cannot draw reasonably well when they are first admitted still can't draw well enough four years later, in spite of our best efforts. There are of course exceptions (we have one or two students who blossomed quite suddenly in their second or third year), but we tend to be cautious about admitting applicants who do not draw well, unless they demonstrate extraordinary promise as storytellers. Of course, it is also true that some people who draw very well and have a wonderful sense of composition and layout never learn to tell a decent story, but in Japan these people have more alternatives (illustrator, character designer, animator, etc.) than do those with the reverse problem.

Although we do have a lecture course on scripting, and a couple of studio courses that focus entirely on visual technique, the core courses for second- and third-year students are holistic, in the sense that students are usually assigned to do a complete work, from concept to finished product (including editing and preparation for printing).

Although the first four years have often been awkward, we have been able to improve our program with each new year of experience, and the program has been a massive success from the standpoint of the university. We have three entrance examinations each year, with approximately 400 applicants vying for 40 positions. The number of applicants reflects the popularity of comics in Japan today, but it also reflects the fact that no other four-year college or university offers such a program. This will change very soon, however, as several colleges are preparing competing programs. Seika is now exploring ways to maintain its position of leadership in teaching the art of comics. One possibility under consideration is the creation of entire Faculty of Comic Art, which would include a School of Animation, and might also include game design and other related branches of study.

-- Matt Thorn