



Environmental Awareness through Upcycling

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Introduction

As the world, and Japan, becomes more aware of the environmental issues facing us, people are finding creative new ways to rehash the old 3-part *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle* motto. Although *recycling* certainly has its place in Japan (where 70% of plastic is recycled), and there has been some progress in the *reducing* department (i.e. the use of *My Bags* or *My Hashi* chopsticks), *reusing* often gets left out of the party. One way to reuse involves *upcycling*. Upcycling is the creative art of taking waste and converting it into something new of better quality or of environmental value. A quick Google search reveals an amazing array of upcycled products, utilizing everything from skis to old tires to light bulbs.

An EFL Course on the Environment

Students in the course I teach on “Japan’s Environmental Impact” have become masters of the upcycling process. This class is an English content elective course with a focus on bettering the environment through self-awareness and community-related sharing. Some of the topics that we study throughout the year include food waste, cosmetics and disposable waste. Despite Japan’s high recycling rates, students are generally unaware of the impact that rampant buying and use of plastic bottles, plastic bags, and disposable chopsticks (*waribashi*) has. Through a series of hands-on lessons, out-of-class “blog challenges” and a final project, students gradually explore the ramifications of their environmental impact as they improve their English language skills.

Final Class Project

Upcycling comes in during the final project. Every year, teams get together to upcycle a chosen product after several weeks of lessons pertaining to disposable waste. They get to choose whatever they like: plastic bottles, cans, paper cartons, toilet paper rolls, soda tabs, etc., but must use only one product as their focus. The goal is to turn their product (with the help of tools like glue and markers) into something *of use* once again.

The Upcycling Process

The upcycling process is quite simple. Students are informed of the project at the beginning of the disposable waste unit and are shown examples made by previous students and from the Internet. During the lessons leading up to the project, they have time

to choose a product and collect used portions of it. Most students decide to collect their product from the waste bins on campus, adding a localized rationale to be included in their signs (explained below). I also give them a few minutes at the end of each class to brainstorm ideas and plan what’s needed to make their final project. Once the project time starts, students are given three or four 90-minute classes to put their project together. Of course, they can work on their projects outside of class time. Although the time frame is short, teams usually manage to use their time wisely and finish in time for presentation day.

Publicizing the Project

Besides constructing their projects, students must accompany their final work with an English sign. The sign must explain their project: the number of products used, where the product was found, and how the product was reused to help people and the environment. It must also be translated into Japanese to make it accessible for the local community. Projects and signs are put on display on our campus for two weeks, in a “free space” that I arrange ahead of time. Assessment is based on their English sign, creativity, work ethic before and during project time, and overall impact.

Student Reactions

This year’s projects have been superb, ranging from a paper carton umbrella to a modern *waribashi* lamp. Overall, students express satisfaction with the projects as it is a fun way to rethink waste and its impact on our lives. Many of the projects end up being taken home by the students or holding a permanent space in a teacher’s office. In addition, the public viewing of the projects has received a positive reception. It’s a great joy to see students stopping to read the signs and express surprise and admiration at how waste has been turned into such beautiful things.

Useful Resources

- www.upcyclethat.com
- www.upcyclemagazine.com
- <http://hipcycle.com/what-is-upcycling>
- www.wikipedia.com (“upcycling”)
- www.hgtv.com/design/topics/upcycling

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