

# KANSAI GAIDAI UNIVERSITY

## Group Research Projects on Local Historical Sites : An Analysis of Student Outcomes

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## Group Research Projects on Local Historical Sites: An Analysis of Student Outcomes

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### Abstract

This educational research & report article discusses the author's recent implementation of a new assessment in the teaching of his "History of Modern Japan" course. This assessment is a group research project which requires small groups of students to visit and research about a local historical site. The article explains the rationale for creating this project, what the project involves in terms of student work, and initial anonymous feedback from students on what they have learned from the process. The author argues that this type of research promotes experiential learning and can support Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. This type of project also can help students to better make connections with students in their class and with the local community. Given the university campus's proximity to countless historical sites in the Kansai region, this project can be implemented relatively easily. This report also includes the author's reflections thus far on implementation of the group research project.

**Keywords:** historical sites, group research projects, history education, experiential learning

### Introduction

This educational research and report discusses the implementation of group research projects that require visits to local historical sites in the teaching of undergraduate history courses. The author teaches courses on topics related to the history of modern and contemporary Japan, film and history courses, as well as Asian history in a world history context, both premodern and modern history. In a course titled "History of Modern Japan," the author recently began implementing the use of group research projects based on a visit to local historical sites as an assessment and a required component of the course. This report is analysis of the preliminary feedback from students and reflection by the author on the use of these types of group research projects and their impacts on student learning, with the goal also of improving the implementation of the projects in future iterations of the course.

This report will also describe the rationale behind the project and assessment, the expected learning outcomes, and discussion of how students have connected these experiences to their overall learning in the course.

## Background to Initial Envisioning of the Assessment

The author's course focuses on the history of modern Japan, which begins coverage chronologically with the establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate (known as the *Edo jidai* 江戸時代 in Japanese) and progresses up until the recent past, with some coverage of the Heisei (平成) and Reiwa (令和) eras. Throughout the course students learn about Japan's history in the context of world history, though the major focus is on events, changes, and traditions in Japanese society's shift to becoming a developed modern society. Major topics of the course include, but are not limited to: the creation of the Tokugawa Shogunate; the Shogunate's policies (including the "closed door" policy known as *sakoku* 鎖国); the end of the Tokugawa era and the Meiji Restoration (*Meiji Ishin* 明治維新); industrial and economic changes during the Meiji period; Japan's turn towards militarism and imperialism; Taisho era (大正時代) political and cultural changes; Japan's involvement in World War II; the Allied Occupation; postwar economic, cultural and political changes; important recent historical events and changes; and contemporary issues in Japanese society. The course has been taught up until recently as a combination of lectures, readings (including a wide range of both primary and secondary historical sources), in-class discussions, viewing of relevant historical clips and images, and various other activities.

Up until recently, this course's requirements and assessments did not include the composition of a student research paper, student presentation, or any sort of experiential learning-based assessment. Recently the author began to contemplate introducing a group research project to facilitate more student interactions and more engagement with the local environment. The idea for creating this assessment and project in part extended from success with group research projects which the author has assigned in other courses taught. In the author's "Asia in World History to 1500" course he has implemented group research project presentations for the past few years. These require group collaboration and library research, including the utilization of written academic sources (books, journal articles, primary and secondary historical sources, with an emphasis in the course on the use of academic sources from the university's libraries). The group research projects in the Asian

history course would often generate high degrees of student engagement, since the students in each small group (groups are assigned by the author) needed to work together with their peers to conduct the research, discuss the research progress with the instructor during some class sessions, and then work together outside of class time to develop a presentation which required all group members to participate. These group research projects seemed to generate some very productive learning outcomes and would help to diversify the learning which students were acquiring through individual assessments that did not require cooperation or collaboration, such as written exams or individual research and writing assignments.

These previous group research projects mainly involved library and bibliographical research. Students were required to work together on these projects to address a research question on a historical topic (related to Asian history, within a world history context) which the group agreed upon. They were then required to collaborate to divide up the work into different aspects or areas of study, so that they could then assemble their individual parts of research back together into an overall finished group presentation. It should be emphasized here that these projects did not involve visits to locations off campus, only to the campus libraries. Students were required to meet together with each other to organize their research and their presentations, but this could be done in a virtual or online format if needed.

The thought of implementing a more experiential-based project also seemed to support the idea of creating “authentic” assessments. This is a term which originated in the 1990s in United States educational institutions but has become more and more prominent internationally in higher education in recent years. Authentic assessments, according to Jan McArthur of Lancaster University in the UK, can be thought of in a dialectical pattern, in which, “...we move from thinking of the real world or world of work to thinking in terms of society. Secondly, that we move from a focus on the task, to the reason for doing the task and how that validates the social belonging of the student. Finally, that we embrace a transformative relationship with society, with authentic assessment not just perpetuating what already exists, but propelling us on to a better future for all” (McArthur 2023, 93). McArthur’s description of this term may sound like a lofty goal ultimately, but the author hypothesizes that authentic assessments like group research projects may be more likely to foster the students’ awareness of their role in society and social belonging by interacting with their peers in the group in a shared experience of research. Since cooperation is essential in these types of group research projects, it also requires students to draw on a

wider range of learning styles, so that students who excel in a particular type of learning can best demonstrate their strengths. Since visits to historical sites also requires at least some degree of interaction with the local environment, it is also assumed that this may also contribute to the dialectic which McArthur has described.

This type of historical site group research project also seems to support Harvard University developmental psychologist and pedagogical theoretician Howard Gardner's ideas on the need for educators to recognize "multiple intelligences" when we design our curricula for our courses (Gardner 1993). Group settings like those in a group research project can draw on the strengths which different students may have in different areas of intelligence. Gardner has proposed that there are eight, possibly nine, areas of intelligence: visual-spatial, linguistic-verbal, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, and possibly existential (Cherry 2023). Each person has a range of intelligence within the different types. Although some have criticized Gardner's theory as too simplistic, it is still useful for thinking about how students have relative strengths and weaknesses in different areas of their existence. It is hypothesized by the author that a group project like this one, which requires a field visit and close group collaboration, may provide a lot of opportunities for students to utilize the areas of intelligence which they are strongest in. By doing that, the group is likely also to produce a better overall research presentation, since each student can focus on the areas of the project which they have the most intelligence or talent in, while also relying on other students to focus on areas which they may be weaker in. As this project was envisioned, Gardner's multiple intelligences concept was in the forefront of the author's thought process.

## Project Implementation Background

This previous experience with group research projects in the "Asia in World History to 1500" course, combined with the realization of the literally endless possibilities for researching about local historical sites which are relatively easy to reach by public transportation in the immediate Kansai region, led to the author's idea to create this kind of new assessment in the fall semester of 2023. Given the student makeup of this course, which typically includes on average around 20-25 international exchange students (typically including some students from the College of Global Engagement and many others from the Asian Studies Program) and about 5-10 local (mostly Japanese) students from Kansai Gaidai

University, this seemed like an interesting opportunity for students to experience history outside of the classroom with their very diverse cohort.

It was also envisioned that this combination of international and local students might work well in terms of balancing the workload. International students, most of whom are native English speakers originally from countries overseas, might excel at producing the results of the research in English through presentations and written texts. And local students would likely be helpful in navigating the local environment, translating Japanese language materials at the historical sites or primary or secondary sources relevant to the research, communicating with staff or individuals at the historical sites, or any other range of activities that would require a high degree of proficiency in Japanese. Since the project involves research and some limited travel, cooperation among group members with widely varying degrees of proficiency in Japanese language could be a bit challenging, but with at least one or two native speakers in each of the small groups, many of these potential problems can be easily alleviated.

The idea for implementing this project also developed through conversations between the author and the Dean of the College of Global Engagement, Professor Linda Bohaker, during the spring of 2023. As the CGE program develops and expands, Dean Bohaker has encouraged instructors teaching in this program to devise ways to increase student engagement, face-to-face interactions, and promote experiential learning. This aligns with some of the major goals of this academic department. As stated on the CGE website, “The College places a strong emphasis on ‘Experiential Learning.’ You will be able to acquire knowledge and skills through various hands-on experiential opportunities that will enable you to practice all that you are learning about Japan, Asia, and the world, as well as your role as a global citizen” (College of Global Engagement). As this course, “History of Modern Japan,” is offered as a course for the CGE program (and for students of the Asian Studies Program), the author wished to implement a group project which would not only require student interactions in the classroom, but also in the local community. Given that it is a history class, the idea of visiting local historical sites was a logical choice.

## History Education and the Learning Benefits of Visiting Historical Sites

There is ample evidence that visiting historical locations can provide inspiration and increase student outcomes. In a recent study by a group of history scholars in Indonesia,

it was found that student results on tests involving critical thinking, as well as historical writing assessments, demonstrated clear improvement in student learning outcomes after students had visited the historical locations which their assessments were focused upon (Malkisedek Taneo et al 2023). It was also found that visiting local historical sites makes it possible for students to have a fuller experience of history, rather than relying strictly on the internet, pictures, textbooks, or other traditional sources of information that can seem distant to many students. The ease of access to images and historical information online may also be making students less engaged. Many may be more concerned with simply finishing a research project rather than contemplating the deeper connections and meanings behind the work that they are doing. Visiting historical sites can also establish a stronger sense of connection with the local community and help students to realize the importance of place in their understanding of their position in world history, as well as local history. Since all local history is global, and vice versa, it can also be deduced that visiting historical sites can enhance students' interest and understanding of both local and global histories.

It has also been suggested by Marilyn Harper that students who visit historical sites can learn a great deal simply by visiting a location and examining it firsthand. Visits to historical locations can enhance the senses, particularly when students are required to carry out some sort of research or fieldwork while visiting an historic location. Harper has also found that it is important to facilitate and encourage discussions among students about what they noticed while visiting the location, as this can further enhance the experience. She also has noted that students can become more engaged in this type of research work, which allows them to become detectives of a sort, with the goal of investigating the answers to historical mysteries (Harper 2000). Harper gathered her findings on the educational value from the work of the United States' National Park Service, who have implemented a governmental effort called "Teaching with Historical Places," which provides educators with ideas on how to implement visits to historical locations in the US into their course curricula. Although this program focuses mostly on younger students who are led on trips to historical sites with their teachers, the general idea behind the value of visiting historical sites is a valuable one ("Teaching with Historical Places" n.d.).

## Description of the Assessment and the Process for the Group Research Project

According to the author's syllabus for fall 2024 for the "History of Modern Japan"

course, the project is described initially to students as follows:

The Group Research Project and Presentation is based on a historical topic of the students' choice (related to a location of historical interest and connected with the history of modern Japan). Students must demonstrate that they worked together collaboratively to prepare their Research Project and Presentation. The project will require meetings among group members. This project will also require the use and proper citation of historical sources. As part of the project, students must visit a local historical site, museum, or place of historical or cultural significance together as a group. The group will work together to make a presentation based on their research of their topic and what they found out when visiting their chosen location. Students will be required to complete peer reviews at the end of this process. Grades will be based on group collaboration, appearance of the presentation files, communication of the presentation, historical content of the presentation, and analysis of the research question. This project is worth 25% of your grade. (Bailey 2024).

This group research project is being implemented in the "History of Modern Japan" class, therefore, as a required group project. This is completed mostly in the period between about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the way through the class until the end of the semester, culminating with an in-class group research presentation. Students are divided into small groups of about 5-6 students per group. The groups are selected by the instructor, who aims for diversity in terms of gender identity, national origin, English language abilities, Japanese language abilities, and various other factors. The selection of group members is chosen intentionally to make each group as diverse as possible, so that students will be required to work together as a diverse team which can draw on each other's strengths. This is also done to make the project as engaging and challenging as possible, by requiring students to work together with students of different backgrounds, language abilities, experience in Japan, and other factors.

Once the groups are formed, they are required to meet to decide upon a historical site which they would like to research about and visit together. The only requirements for the choice of site are (1) that it is local and will not require long travel to visit' and (2) the site has some relevance for the history of modern Japan. Beyond this, the site cannot be a place which is part of a university field trip. Ideally, it is a location which either all or most of the members will be visiting for the first time. The site does not need to be a physical building



or precise historical landmark. It can even be a community, a town, or a neighborhood rather than a fixed exact spot. It can also be a site which contributes to understanding the history of modern Japan while not being necessarily a historical location, such as a museum. Anything is acceptable for the definition of historical site so long as students can research and present how that site has importance or historical relevance for the modern history of Japan.

The author wishes that students will select a location which requires research to investigate its importance for history, but of course it should not be too difficult to find sources of information available, ideally both in English and Japanese (as well as other languages). If information is only available in Japanese, it might make the project too demanding for those groups who do not have native Japanese speakers or students with high proficiencies in Japanese. If only one student in the group has a high command of Japanese (which is often the case in these courses) that can also put too much pressure on that individual. Therefore, sites should not be too difficult to find information about.

The students are given some time in the first in-class meeting to meet with their groups and to begin thinking of a historical site which they would like to explore about together. They then need to begin discussions about when they can all travel to the location, who will be doing what in terms of research, planning, or other tasks, and what kind of information that they wish to find out. After this discussion is completed, the groups are then to submit a group research presentation proposal document, in which they describe their intended location, why they are interested in it, when they will plan to visit there, and who will be doing what. This proposal is submitted to the instructor and graded, with prompt written feedback provided so that the students can begin their projects immediately, or revise and resubmit their proposals if needed.

## Identification of the Research Question

After the site has been chosen, students will need to also identify the research question which they wish to focus upon. This avoids a common problem with many student research projects, which tend to be only informational. Rather than simply providing a description of the historical site, students need to adhere to a research question of their choice. This is done to guide the research forward, and to provide some guideline for the students in terms of what to include or exclude from their research presentation. The inclusion of a

research question as the guiding point for their research presentation is a must for projects of this type. The author has previously assigned research projects for many years (usually individual research papers up until the last several years of teaching), but he has discovered over time that students are often lost about what to focus upon without a research question. The inclusion of a research question is an essential step in conducting research in the humanities and the social sciences (Booth et al 2024). It is also an excellent way to bring students back to the focus point when they begin to feel stressed about how to organize their research presentation. By employing a Socratic style method which focuses on the use of questions rather than answers, the author has found that discussions with students about their research can lead them into interesting directions for their research presentations. When they need to ultimately decide what to include or exclude from the presentation, the author has often asked students, “how will the information that you present or include in this presentation help you to answer or address your research question?”

### Student Experiences at Historical Sites and the Value of Simultaneous Visits to Sites

Once the group has made their plan and had it initially approved by the instructor, they are then free to visit the site together and conduct their research. One of the stipulations is that students should attempt to travel to the site together at the same time on the same day, so they can share the experience together of encountering the site. Proof of the fact that they visited the site together is also required when they submit their files, in the form of a photograph or video. It has been concluded thus far that when a group manages to assemble all their members together to visit a site simultaneously that the group’s collaboration tends to be stronger, and the overall quality of their research and their presentation tends to be higher. This does not always happen, though, as sometimes individual members become sick, are busy on the day, or have unexpected things that make it impossible for them to join the rest of the group. In other words, it has been found that group cohesion and collaboration tend to help the groups to “gel together” much better than when groups are less cooperative or are visiting the sites independently or separately. The chemistry among group members tends to be much more positive and supportive of each other when the group members have taken the time to visit a place together (after having planned their trip, blocked out time for it, and so forth). This may also be because inevitably students get to know each other better through the process of traveling to the historical site with each other. This also gives them

the opportunity to talk with each other about the possible content of their presentation while visiting the location. It may also make for a less stressful experience in visiting a location which they have never been to before when they visit that location together as a group.

## The Collection of Research and Presentation Preparation

In the weeks leading up to the due date for the presentation, the author also schedules periodic research workshops during part of the class sessions. These sessions provide opportunities for the author to instruct students on gaining access to historical sources and to think critically about the kinds of historical sources which they are using. For students who have not had previous experiences in historical research projects like this (which is the vast majority), these sessions can be valuable in improving the types of sources which students are relying upon. In this age of AI and the internet, students have tended to fall back on whatever sources are most readily available online. This eliminates a great deal of academic sources (books, journal articles, newspapers, and more) which are not immediately available online. Therefore, part of the process in these sessions is to direct students in how to locate sources in the university's libraries and to encourage them to do this whenever possible rather than relying strictly on internet sources. Students are encouraged to check out and utilize sources from the university's libraries. This project therefore has another benefit of supporting students' research skills. Since this is also a collaborative research project, students are encouraged to work together to obtain information and critically evaluate sources, rather than simply accept sources as inherently correct or in no need of analysis.

## The Research Presentation Process

During the last few days of the semester is when the author schedules each group to do their research presentation in front of the class. The presentations need to have all members of the group involved and speaking at least at some point. There also needs to be a visual component to the presentation, which is typically a presentation file, which often includes photos or short video clips of the site. The presentation is intended to focus on describing the entire process of their research, while also focusing on the research question as their guiding theme. By the end of the presentation, which should last up to fifteen minutes, they should

attempt to answer the research question based on their research findings and analysis. Students must also submit a bibliography of all sources consulted in the process.

Immediately after the presentation finishes, there is time for questions and discussion. The author typically encourages students not from the same research group to ask questions to the presenting group students first. It has been pleasantly surprising that these questions are often of a high quality and can lead to some interesting analysis. The instructor also asks at least one or two questions to each group after the student questions. The responses that students make to these questions often reveals a great deal about how the group worked together, what sorts of problems that they encountered, and of course how they arrived at their presentation's overall conclusion.

## Student Feedback on the Project Thus Far

At the conclusion of the project, after students have carried out their group presentation in class, they are required to submit a peer and self-evaluation form. The peer evaluation requires them to rate every other student in their group in terms of their contributions to the project, punctuality, attitude, and the degree to which each member of the group contributed to the overall success of the project. The scores from the peer evaluations are tabulated together by the instructor to help in the determination of each student's grade for the project.

There are also open-ended questions which require students to evaluate how their group performed in the project overall and to identify any problems which they encountered in the process of research and in preparing the presentation. There are also open-ended questions which require each student to self-evaluate their performance in the process of the research and the presentation itself. This includes providing thoughts on what they have learned from the process, what they did well and could have improved upon, and how they think they contributed overall to the project.

From this initial student feedback (this project has been implemented thus far in two semesters), there are several comments which are included below to provide a general idea of the type of written feedback which students have provided thus far on this project. These comments are taken anonymously from the "History of Modern Japan" peer and self-evaluation forms and reflect some of the most constructive comments received thus far. Please note that student names and genders are removed and replaced with letters (student A,

student B, etc.), as well as historic locations visited to preserve anonymity of the students' comments.

- I liked the fact that we all had to find a time to actually go together to see and learn about our respective historical locations.
- It was a very interesting experience to be able to work with people from different places, it allowed me to learn more about teamwork methods around the world.
- Although [student A] was not able to join us on our first tour of [historic site visited], [student A] made the effort to return to [the historic site] again on the next day [independently]... Also, [student B] struggled a bit to communicate with us verbally due to the language barrier, but [student B] was able to give a clear and interesting presentation and complete all [of their] work on time. [student C] did an excellent job of helping to organize the group and offer suggestions, while [student D] and [student E] did well to physically lead the group through tours and create a fun and friendly environment in which we could all easily get along.
- Working in a group for a humanities class was refreshing because I was able to experience a real collaborative spirit without having to suppress my own ideas, and because I was able to enjoy being friends with my other group members. I was able to meet and get closer to peers I wouldn't have met otherwise. For a class that could very easily be lecture-heavy [History class] and only require students to be constantly receptive to new information, a group project provides a good balance!
- I think this is a fantastic way to engage with students and for students to engage with the course material in a way that I think is unique and exciting. I think this project was great and I hope that this can be introduced into more classes at KGU.
- This group experience was really good for me, and I have had many bad group work experiences before so overall this taught me to not be afraid of group projects! If everyone is held accountable and knows their expectations, then it can go well. Also, communication is key!

- I think this project was great in allowing us to discover parts of Japan for ourselves and educate others during our limited time here. Thank you for giving us this opportunity.

## Grading and the Importance of Instructor Written Feedback

As soon as possible after the self and peer evaluations have been submitted, the author decides the grade for the project based on the criteria for assessment, which are: group collaboration, appearance of the presentation files, communication of the presentation, historical content of the presentation, and analysis of the research question. To the degree possible, grades are kept to the same level for each student. However, in cases where it is clear that one or more students did not carry out as much work as the others, or other issues arose, then their grades will of course be lower than their other group members.

It is important to provide written feedback on these presentations. The author believes strongly that providing only numeric grades for presentations is not beneficial for students to learn. Many of them are also clearly curious about how the grade was determined. Therefore, the author tries to make as much effort as possible in providing detailed written feedback for each group. For students who need additional comments (such as those who did clearly did not do as much as others in the group based on instructor observations and/or student peer evaluations), there should also be individual comments provided.

## Author's Reflections on the Project Implementation Thus Far

From the feedback which the author has received thus far, the project has been mostly a success, though there are certainly many ways in which it can be improved moving forward. One issue which has arisen is that a disproportionate number of the groups thus far have chosen a topic based on historical castles in the Kansai region. In fact, roughly half of the projects have focused on castles thus far. This is not meant to detract from the importance of castles to modern Japan's history, but it does raise issues of overfocus among the groups on castles. One possible way of limiting this in the future may be to limit each semester to only one group choosing a castle, though that could also create problems since there is obviously such demand and interest in castles as historical topics. The author's reflection is

also that by having many groups focus only on castles, that they are only focusing on the experiences of the elites associated with those castles, rather than the totality of society.

Another observation and reflection which is clear is that this type of project leads students to think deeply about group interactions and communication, as evidenced in their written reflections. This is of course a major benefit of the project. It is also clear, though, that in some groups they have experienced problems in group interactions and communications. Therefore, as the author introduces the project to students each semester in the future, it will be made clear to the students from the beginning the importance of establishing effective lines of communication among the group members, both during class activities and while they are outside of the classroom and in the field conducting their research together. It is also quite clear thus far that groups who take the time to establish simultaneous visits to their historical site generally perform better in terms of group collaboration, as well as overall learning outcomes.

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