

# What we have learned

## Objective

We at TJF believe that the high school students abroad who “encountered” the Japanese high school students in the Deai photo resource were able to reflect upon themselves as they read about and were moved by the characters’ lives—transcending national and linguistic differences—because they share the dreams and concerns of the same age. And based on their reactions to Deai, they created photo essays of their own, which they sent to us at the Deai Photo Essay Cafe. The Japan visitation program was set up to provide an opportunity for Japanese and overseas high school students to experience first-hand the process they had experienced vicariously through Deai, of coming into contact with new people, reflecting upon and expressing themselves through mutual understanding and continuing further dialogue.

## The TJF Formula for Friendship

TJF devised ways that would allow participants in the program coming from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds to enjoy the process of encounter and friendship in a short amount of time. Instead of having them merely spend time together, we divided them into groups of four to six based on language background and other considerations, and gave them the task of producing a photo essay on the natural environment or people of Izena island. *We created situations in which communication would be indispensable*, convinced that the participants would find ways to overcome their language barriers. It was made clear from the beginning that producing a photo essay was a goal but not the main objective of the project.

*We also sent along tutors to provide moral support and help with interpretation for each group and distributed worksheets that clearly defined the goals of the projects and steps necessary in reaching those goals.*

Ultimately, the participants worked intensely on their projects as a result of the limited amount of time, experienced the music of Izena which could be enjoyed regardless of language background, and produced photo essays on computers, another process that allowed them to overcome language barriers, all contributed in bringing the participants closer together.

## Feedback from the Participants

The feedback received from the participants revealed how tackling a project in an unfamiliar environment among new people of different language abilities was *at first bewildering, at times shaking their confidence*. It also showed how that situation changed as they turned to each other for support. Everyone who was involved in the program—the participants, the people of Izena island, tutors, and staff—all had their struggles, and although we did not find solutions to all our problems, *we all changed through our interactions with one another*.

Many of the participants said that through the process of bringing the project to completion, *they experienced the satisfaction of expressing their own opinions while respecting that of others in creating a consensus*, the pleasure of working on a team, and a sense of accomplishment.

We also received comments that *the program helped to broaden their horizons*, because the participants came from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. English-speaking students found commonalities and differences among themselves and expressed an interest not only in Japan but also in Korea and China. One Japanese student remarked on the fresh experience of meeting high school students from other countries who were studying Japanese.

Many of the participants told of *the frustration they experienced because of the language barriers*, which often kept them from communicating as they worked on their projects, and that this brought home to them the importance of language. At the same time, however, many participants remarked that: “understanding is possible without words.” They found they could relate to each other as high school students through their mutual interests in music, fashion, and relationships. *Their discovery of these commonalities deepened their desire to learn more from each other and to communicate better, renewing their awareness of the importance of language.*

We believe the students’ sense of accomplishment and broadened perspectives also all originate in the close bonds they forged during the program. Encouraged by participants’ comments like “I’ve come to value new encounters,” and “In the future, I want to find a job bringing people together,” TJF hopes to spread the importance of *deai* through projects that bring people together for common endeavors that transcend linguistic and cultural differences.

## Interacting via the website

Only fourteen students were able to participate in the Okinawa program of Deai, but we plan to open a site where comments can be posted in Japanese, English, Korean, or Chinese. We hope this will provide a forum for high school students from various parts of the world including Japan to post photo essays about themselves, give each other feedback, ask questions, and exchange ideas. The opening of this site was planned for 2005, but due to unexpected circumstances, it has been postponed to the spring of 2006. We apologize for the delay. If you are interested in submitting a photo essay or posting a comment, please take a look at our website.

➤<http://www.tjf.or.jp/photoessaycafe/>

We also welcome comments on the works from the “Lives of Japanese High School Students: Photo and Message Contest” posted on the “The Way We Are” website.

➤<http://www.tjf.or.jp/thewayweare/>

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