



## Will "Spinach" Stop Japanese Schools From Teaching Kids in A Way That Promotes Innovation?

**Here's the project:** The governments in Japan and South Korea say they want to educate students to become more innovative and creative in order to participate more fully in the global economy. They are promoting English language instruction (with an emphasis on speaking), self-expression, critical thinking and problem-solving. I'm on a research trip to those countries to find out more.

In my last newsletter, I asked for help. And I got it! I've been astonished (and delighted) by how many teachers, policymakers, researchers, students, and school administrators have reached out to share their reflections about the kind of teaching that produces innovators, what's changing, the challenges, the opportunity, and potential for transformation in the U.S and in Japan. **Again, thank you! Keep those emails coming** ([Pegtyre1@gmail.com](mailto:Pegtyre1@gmail.com))

**Progress:** I've been spending time with teachers, administrators and policy makers. A few days ago, I interviewed an educator, Joe Hug, who has a unique perspective on the school-to-workplace pipeline in Japan.

After working as a teacher and university professor, Hug started a consulting firm that helps Japanese teachers of English (junior high school, high school, and college) who are under pressure to create classrooms less dependent on rote learning. He also helps prepare university students to become more active learners so they can enroll and thrive in prestigious business school program in the West. He has a gig with two large, well-known Japanese companies (including a division of Mitsubishi) teaching "global competency" to their junior employees.

Hug, who is married to Reiko Hug, a Hiroshima native, says the biggest blocker to the government's efforts to produce a culture of innovation might be "spinach."

**What Does *That* Mean?** It's a loose translation of the mnemonic Ho-Ren-So, which sounds like the Japanese word for that leafy green. In practice it works like this: "*Hokoku*" means report everything that happens to your superior. "*Renraku*" means to relate all the pertinent facts (absent opinion and conjecture) to your superior. And "*sodan*" mean to consult or discuss all your work with your boss and your team-members. Ho-Ren-So was popularized in the 1980s by the Japanese executive and author Tomiji Yamazaki, who put the

catchy name on this deeply held set of interlocking cultural values which prize collaboration, caution, and stability over risk-taking and creative problem-solving. To the Western eye, Ho-Ren-So in the workplace can look like repetitive back and forth with your team. Or having a micromanaging boss. To be clear, he wasn't suggesting that tired ethnic cliché of "groupthink" but something more subtle: a learned aversion to "getting it wrong."

**What Does This Have to Do With Schooling?** Ho-Ren-So reflects a set of norms that are reinforced in the early grades of nearly every Japanese school. Children are taught to collaborate. They are asked to follow directions precisely. And respond to questions with what the teacher has determined is the correct answer. It's the opposite of "working well independently" which is actually something U.S. schools prize. (And a comment your parents might have read about you on your report card.) And it couldn't be more different from the mantra of our latest crop of Silicon Valley billionaires -- "move fast and break things" (which clearly has its own downside.) **It's about teaching and learning in a way to produce the answer that is expected.**

**Here's Hug:** "The Japanese school system is great but it focusses on teaching kids to come up with the right answer, the one that is required of them. But that's not the modern world." In the modern world, he says, students need to figure out "what are the possibilities." It's difficult to teach students that way, says Hug, when students don't want to be seen as "getting it wrong." These days, teachers are being challenged, says Hug, to create and support a classroom culture that's flexible enough for students to make a mistake and recover from it. Where "getting it wrong" is part of the process of getting it right. And "teachers feel abandon," says Hug. Most didn't learn that way. The "spinach" culture of Japan doesn't support it. And teachers aren't sure how to pull it off.

**Your Thoughts?** Have you ever encountered "spinach" in Japanese schools or companies? How exactly are teachers in Japan going to be managing this transition? Do we have a version of that in the U.S.? Here's a big question: Can fear of failure co-exist with innovation? I'd like to hear from you.

**Know of someone who might be interested in this conversation? Send me their email.**

*My trip is made possible by a generous Abe Fellowship for Journalist (administered by the [Social Science Research Council](#).) I retain full editorial control. I also appreciate the moral support of my colleagues at the [EGF Accelerator](#), an incubator for education-related nonprofits in Manhattan.*