

Prompt: What constraints are there in the pursuit of knowledge?

This exhibition will examine the obstacles imposed onto the process of and one's ability to acquire specialist, in-group knowledge, which requires effort to understand, through reflecting on the relationship between knowledge and the knower. In this exhibition, these obstacles are cultural-specific symbols, learning procedural knowledge without an expert, and one's linguistic background.

Object 1: Crane Earrings

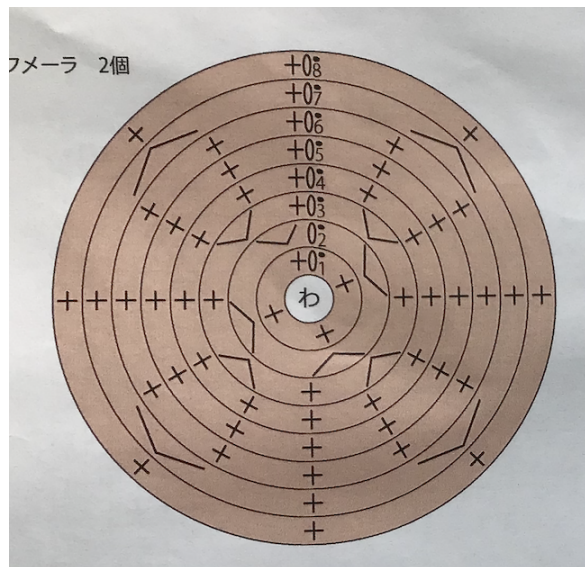


I bought these crane earrings from the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. They are made from miniscule handmade *orizuru*, which is Japanese for an origami paper crane. This object demonstrates how being a member of a community of knowers can help remove barriers imposed on a non-member knower's acquisition of new knowledge.

Orizuru are culturally-specific symbols in Japan associated with the ancient story of the *senbazuru*, meaning a thousand cranes, which states that folding a thousand cranes will grant one's wish. This Japanese legend led to the paper cranes becoming representative of peace and luck, and *orizuru* have an extra layer of meaning, of remembrance for the devastation of the atomic bomb. However, this knowledge of the atomic bomb contained within *orizuru* is often not understood by foreigners. Although this knowledge is important and holds emotional value for Japanese people, the specificity of the crane's symbolism can make a non-Japanese knower's pursuit of knowledge of the cultural significance of *orizuru* challenging, potentially lessening the impacts that they were intended to have. However, for me, this slightly unfamiliarly designed earring, especially amongst Western knowers, has acted as conversation starters, because of their curiosity. These interactions have been opportunities through which I, an insider, could inform inquisitive knowers about the value of *orizuru* in my culture, and the connection between the earrings and the atomic bomb it holds.

This suggests that culturally specific symbols, although may act as obstacles for a non-member knower's quest for knowledge, is not a constraint that cannot be overcome. These barriers can, to an extent, be overcome with the aid of an expert knower and help to widen an exclusive community of knowers, in this case the Japanese community, although the degree to which the knowledge of *orizuru* retains its emotional significance for non-native knowers is uncertain.

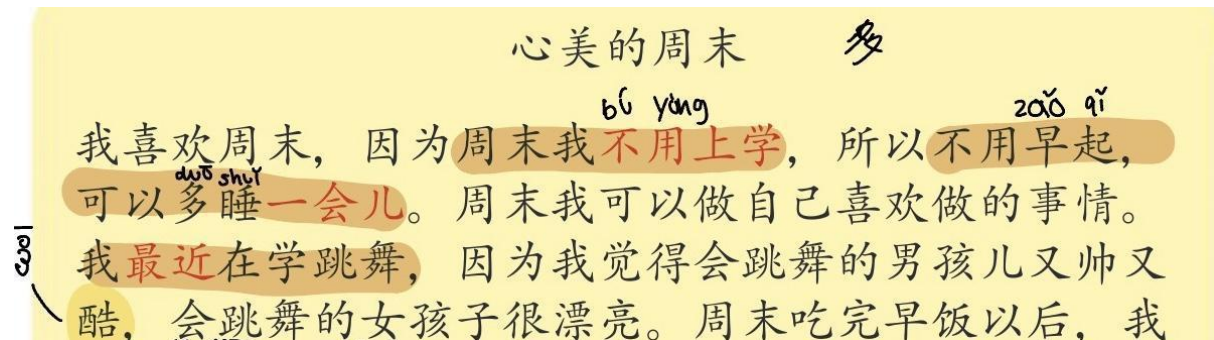
Object 2: Crochet Instructions Handbook Detail



The second object is an instruction handbook enclosed in my beginner's crochet kit, which was a birthday gift. The instructions are composed of symbols acting as a visual, non-verbal means of communicating the procedural knowledge of crocheting. This non-linguistic method of representing knowledge limits my ability to learn how to crochet, as my lack of access to an expert who can guide me acts as a constraint to my pursuit of this procedural knowledge.

The symbols made no sense to me. There was no explanation in the handbook to allow my learning of crochet to take place, so I consulted the internet. However, the Japanese crochet community is a niche one; the first obstacle I encountered was the sheer lack of resources. Despite finding a video demonstrating what the symbols in the image above meant, the videos explained the symbols in isolation and not how they all came together to create a final product. Through my failure to acquire the fine motor skills necessary to crochet, I learnt that even extensive effort cannot compensate for the lack of an expert. Contrary to my crane earrings where I was the guardian and gatekeeper of the cultural symbol, in terms of crochet, I am a student who cannot access the specialist procedural knowledge enclosed in my crochet handbook. Although much like my crane earrings, learning crochet skills requires an expert, this procedural knowledge is interactive in nature; the handbook itself cannot serve as a tool unlocking the knowledge of crochet - a specialist knower must guide an apprentice knower such as myself directly, through patience and demonstration. The crochet community's use of their private language of symbols, as a byproduct, has made the procedural knowledge of crocheting incomprehensible and inaccessible to outside knowers. Without the presence of a suitable expert, the unfamiliar knower's attempts to acquire new knowledge may be futile.

Object 3: A Sentence in my Chinese Textbook



The next focus is a sentence from my Chinese textbook, which reads “Recently I am learning to dance, because I think boys that can dance are handsome and cool.”. The English word “cool” is expressed with the character “酷”.

As a native Japanese speaker, it is often in my study of the Chinese language that I come across familiar *kanjis* or *hanzis*, which enables me to understand the meaning of words without knowing how to pronounce them. My Japanese background has aided my progress in the acquisition of linguistic knowledge. Therefore, when I came across “酷”, I interpreted it immediately through the Japanese knower’s lens. To me, the sentence read “boys that can dance are handsome and cruel”; a complete deviation from the intended Chinese meaning. The instant I read the sentence, I made a judgement, which was a criticism of the textbook author’s oddly crafted sentence, as it was illogical to me that the adjectives used in a grammar structure which was supposed to be used either for only positives or only negatives were “handsome” and “cruel”, which are not exactly synonymous. However, my teacher informed me that the character also means “cool” in Chinese, and therefore the sentence was grammatically correct. This shows that if I had solely relied upon my Japanese perspective, the depth and breadth of my knowledge in Chinese would be limited. Unlike the first object, my cultural lens became a barrier. One’s cultural, more precisely linguistic background, as well as assumptions of similarity between cultures and languages can impede the pursuit of knowledge. However, the sentence also demonstrates how crucial maintaining a flexible mindset is, as it can help overcome the initial conclusions and judgements that knowers make based on their biased lens.

References

Object 1: Photograph from author's own private collection

Object 2: Photograph from author's own private collection

Object 3: Shun Shih, K, Wang, Y, (27 April 2017), GuWu for Secondary Mandarin Chinese: Student Book & CD-ROM, Oxford University Press, p15