

# **A Case of Cultural Conflict, Centering around “Communal Computer” at a University in Japan as a Transcultural Contact Zone**

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**Abstract:** In this case study, a conflict in the concept of “communal computer” is to be reviewed and analyzed in numerous internet messages that were exchanged for about three months in 2015, and the actual setting up by one of the actors that caused the fatal damage to one of the actors’ computer. These actors’ cultural backgrounds include Chinese, Japanese and Americans. The scene takes place at a Japanese university; a task was to set up a computer to be used for “communal use.” The central argument is about the transculturation of the “contact zone (Pratt, 1992)” in which logics of three cultures land on the appropriateness through a case study of conflict. Questions include, “how three subjugated and dominant cultural players show the modes of the concept of “communal property,” and “how they appropriate their concepts.” Through knowing different modes of appropriateness, or “what they make it mean (Ibid. p.7),” modes to a coherent peace can be suggested. In other words, all three aspects, not one, should be taken into consideration when it comes to “an agreement.” It appeared that a Japanese professor in computer science claims “communal property” usage is legitimized by financial ownership, so authorized persons share the password. A Chinese believes that a “communal” computer should be available to anyone at large, so that there should be no restrictions on anyone, thus, a password was posted on the monitor for a “communal” e-mail address. A professor with an American cultural value claims that it is a violation of law unless the contract is made to cover a multiple number of users. Thus, the concept, “communal property” plays in ownership, authorizing decisions, access, and usage specified in the contract. The author suggests, all these aspects should be informed thoroughly to actors prior to the installation of a communal computer.

**Keywords:** Cultural conflict, Communal property, Japan

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Cultural conflict can occur any time at anywhere when more than one person from different culture interactions. Areas of conflict can be on the surface level, or deep in the value and assumption levels. Many times, when people experience cultural conflict, usually subjugated or a less powerful party is silenced, and the conflict itself may not be sensed by any parties participating in the interaction but only in the subjugated one.

This cultural conflict happened in a Support Room at a university in Japan. This ten-year-old office serves international students, and basic facilities in the office include desks, chairs, computers, couches, and tables in the space, 5 meters by 10 meters. Five graduate students are hired every semester as assistants and each show up only one day a week. From the start of this office about ten years ago, there has been only one computer that only one graduate student used at that time. After a decade, the number of assistants increased, and this year, five graduate students were hired and use it when they show up. The job is taken via internet message, or some students walk in. The nature of the job is, a lot of times, to check the

language grammar, or consult students when they bring problems. There are two administrators who are alternately in charge of running the office, for six months at a time.

Only this year, a faculty committee made a suggestion to purchase two new computers for the public at large be permitted to access in this office. This administrative decision introduced the invisible conflict among administrators, a graduate assistant, and computer server administrator. The focus was around the computer setup and registering for an account for the software program.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

Participant observation was taken by the researcher. The text data were collected from the internet e-mail messages, and act of doing and its report, all made by above three persons and surrounding people, from the incident appeared on February 10th to April in which the trouble settled will be examined by discourse analysis. From the interview with surrounding people, more messages were exchanged among surrounding people, but they were missed from the eyes of the researcher. All text data were printed and ordered in sequence. Because the discourse in this case is daily and ordinary business communication, one's privacy was not included. In addition, identities are not disclosed in the final report. All messages were written in Japanese. (According to Japanese law, such communication is legally disclosed as long as individuals are not identifiable by outsiders.)

### **2.1 The Scene:**

The idea of increasing the number of computers in this Support Room appeared at least two years ago in the faculty committee meeting. At that time, no doubt of illegality was raised from the 7 or 8 faculty members. Then, two new computers were decided to compromise due to the limited budget, however, they planned to purchase more in the next semester to let all five graduate students use one for each. However, there was a disagreement among administrators because the space was too small to accommodate all five students. Then, the idea came of making these two new computers to be available for the students at large. The communal computer was a difficult idea because an administrator A knows the contract with the computer software company limits the number of users to one, every time she purchases a set of computers. Therefore, when the graduate student sent A, a notice of setting up the computer, A stopped to further this process, and asked the university-wide Compliance Office if this type of usage was legal or not. Unexpectedly, the reply said, "There is no problem with the contract provided by the software company." Therefore, she had to agree on the setup.

The graduate student, then, set up two computers, with the account setting under the communal name, not an individual name. However, the software company did not accept this communal name as an account, so she failed in setting it up. Then, she e-mailed asking if anyone knows how to set it up, please continue to use the computer by him/herself. At the same time, she asked if anyone received a security code sent by the software company, she would like to have it, so that the registration can be completed. However, administrator A did not think it was a good idea to give security code to someone else than the one to whom it was sent. In addition, A was tremendously busy with other academic matters, so she did not pay attention to the matter. Then, after completing the set-ups, the graduate student left the room with password pasted on to the monitor screen, which was assumed to be the administrator A's account (The communal name of the account was that of a list-serve account, and this A serves as an administrator of this list serve.) Then, A contacted this graduate student, not pasting the password on the monitor. Then, the graduate student went back and pick the password and threw it away by shredding it.

The story turned out to be a serious problem because A's computer at home started running strangely one day, then her office computer started showing the similar condition. Then, A tried to repair the computers by asking the professor who is a computer server administrator at the department, and commercial technicians at stores in town. It turned out, those failures of the computers at A's home and the office were due to the improper access to the computer software account made by the graduate student. The number of access was made a dozen times, so the software company had to list the address of the source as an improper user.

The problem was not acknowledged instantly by two people because the registered address was A's address used as a list serve program administrator. The solution took more time than necessary, but the central argument among them was about the "communal computer usage." The question for A and the graduate student is, "is a communal computer legal to set up, and technically approved by the software company?"

The professor of computer server administrator at the department watched the situation and called a meeting to see how and why it became like this, and furthermore, he gave two persons an answer to the question. "Yes, it is legal and technically possible." While he claimed A's computer situation is nothing to do with the graduate student's improper access to the software account which was registered under A's e-mail address, he stated, (1) communal computer can be set up technically, and (2) legally permitted.

The technical problem of A's computer was solved after consulting the software company. The professor of computer server administrator then switched list-serve administrator to another administrator who did not question the legality at all, and made further attempt to make new computers for communal use. It took entire three months to settle the problem, but people in concern felt bitter about this case.

### **3. DATA**

Pratt (1992) claims that the transculturation of "contact zone" often shows groups of people have different levels of power. This case study offers the "contact zone" of three cultures: Chinese, American, and Japanese. A graduate student is from China, so we assume she has a background of having Chinese culture. The researcher A has a long stay in America, so we assume she has a background of having American culture. Then, comes the computer server administrator who has a background of Japanese culture. All three cultures "contact" in the university for this occasion. Pratt further points out that logics of three cultures land on the appropriateness. Let's see how each cultural values and behaviors interact with their own logics of appropriateness.

#### **3.1 Power Relationship**

The ascribed power is, A is a professor but not directly instructing or administrating this graduate student. The level should be not so influential or forceful, but A's authority was necessary to carry on the task. For this graduate student, her own administrator of the Support Room holds the highest authority. For the graduate student, the computer server administrator holds remote power distance, and the graduate student did not consult him for any computer setting. There is one professor who is the administrator of the Support Office at that time, but she was out of the picture. She plays an important role in starting the project and creating the problem, but when it come to the communal usage of the computer, she refrained from expressing her own opinion. The researcher guesses that this person senses the risk of setting up the communal computer, but she could not do anything but follow directions, because she had no time to examine and investigate the legality and technicality of using the computers. Leaving two boxes of new computers, and not setting them up were acceptable, as it is always the case with two other old computers, sitting in that office without being set up for a couple

of years. In the discourse, the messages reflected above power distance and authority. For example, the graduate student opened and closed the message with the expression, such as; "Otsukaresamadesu (I bet you must be tired.))" and it is a formal written greeting, and "Ranbun nite shitsurei itashimashita (I am sorry for the poor statement.))" and "Nanitozo, yoroshiku onegaishimasu (Best Regards)".

There was another concern for not directly addressing the person to whom this graduate student wanted to ask. When she had to obtain the security code sent by the software company, her addresses include all other four Support Room staffs, and the expression to ask "if any of you know how to continue the setting up, please go on." The researcher sensed that this particular message was directed to her because no other staffs would know how to do it, but her. Therefore, sense of power was hinted in the vague expression of "anyone," because this graduate student could not dare to address directly to the researcher A. The content of the message is about the security code, and this fact also indicates the reason for hesitation of addressing directly to the power holder.

The professor or the computer server administrator holds almost the same level power to the graduate student, but this professor holds professional knowledge regarding this case. So, ascribed power is somewhat higher than the researcher, but attributable power level may not be because the researcher obtained the technical information from the computer specialists in town, and their knowledge was more up-to-date than that of the computer server administrator.

The last aspect of power relation is the host/guest situation of the setting. In other words, the Chinese graduate student feels a lot less power in Japan due to her "guest" status. Language usage is the major difference, but "culturally appropriate" behavior is not learned in a short period of time, although cognitively knowing may not mean culturally acceptable behavior, or vice versa. The researcher and the computer server administrator both have "host" status, but not in the core discipline of the department. This implies for the graduate student, these two professors do not hold the highest authority against her.

### **3.2 Discourse on "communal computer usage" and Analysis**

When the researcher e-mailed the computer server administrator, asking if using one computer by an unlimited number of people is illegal, he replied; ". . . the license is tied with each device, so it is principally no problem if unlimited number of people use (Nov. 17, 2014)." "There is no problem from the aspect of the license (Ibid.)" "If every user has to obtain his/her user-specific license for the computer, we have no way but letting people use the one set at the net-cafe and hotel lobby (Ibid.)."

This computer server administrator, further states in response to the researcher's points, when newly purchased computer is set to start, the contract phrase is, "user must be one," by the computer software company, he jokingly wrote; "Who, on earth, is saying this ("one computer's user must be just one person") ? ? ? "

The condition of setting a communal computer is for each user to sign so the administrator knows who used it, in case of some wrong usage appeared. This solution is to find the criminal afterward's, not preventing the honest serious persons from committing a crime. But this computer server administrator told the researcher that it is more important to know who did the wrong act, but you do not need to collect their names for sign-ups.

This computer server administrator claims that he holds all the authority. The communication activity to make this authority appropriate is the assertiveness in his technical writings. He even blames that the statement that goes against him is totally "wrong."

The university Compliance Office also asserts the authority in judging, although this case, the party who holds the authority of the contracting license is the software company. There are no clear backups from the computer server administrator for the Compliance Office, but the line of logic is very similar, and thus, it may be the university authority routine logic that shows appropriateness.

The graduate student's message opened up from the beginning the setting up the communal computer, and that task was directed by her supervisor, as follows; "Today, I got LAN cable and the Office Academic from my supervisor, so I set up the computer(s) . . . for the Support Room." "Last week, I informed you (four staff members and two supervisors) about setting up the communal computers in the Support Office (Feb. 16, 2015) . . . both computers are ready . . . so, I wanted to share this information with you (six people) (Ibid.)" "These Two communal computers have PPTP connection, and . . . the Office Academic is already installed, and I created the account for the activation. The account name and the password are posted on the computers in the Support Room (Ibid.)"

Then, the researcher A asked the graduate student not to paste the password on the computer monitor. She replied, and agreed to discard the piece of paper. The discourse with this graduate student ended here, but it turned out from the documents from the software company, this graduate student created two accounts after she found one was not accessible. In the attempt of creating the first account, she tried to access it 13 times by putting in different passwords with which she came up from somewhere. Fortunately or unfortunately, she hit the right password one time, and she was able to go into the account.

The researcher indicated it was against the license agreement, so it is illegal and technically impossible, and she told for last two years to the same staff members. For the first reply, she stated as follows; "The communal e-mail address which you (the graduate student) tries to create is, in fact, a virtual one. There is no password for this address (as you requested in the past.). You cannot send any messages out to somewhere. It is a 'receive' only address. You can name that address as if sender is not an individual, but the group . . ." "A multiple numbers of people are not allowed to share the same e-mail address. So, please use your individual address online and continue using it as you did in the past (Feb. 11, 2015)."

Then, the graduate student asked if anyone received a security code. Then the researcher replied that arrived at her address. However, the researcher's appropriation for her cultural conflict was that she did not share the security code with this graduate student. Then, the graduate student's appropriation was to go on creating more accounts until she was able to create the workable one which actually, was the second e-mail account.

In the end, when the problem appeared to be a fatal computer incident, the researcher asked this graduate student about what she did to the e-mail account in detail. However, the graduate student's appropriation was to forward any inquiries regarding this incident to the boss of her own boss (By this time, it is easy to speculate that her boss told this graduate student forward all the inquiries to the boss of her own boss.)

"An act of referring" is the appropriation for the cultural conflict of the graduate student. That is the avoidance to clarifying the story, and everything became blurred. That is, if setting up two computers for the use of an unlimited number of people appears illegal, the authority to take responsibility must be the one at the highest status in the department. In other words, rank-and-file students and staffs are chicken out, but covering up all the possible mistakes. This act is, authentically, "appropriate" for the graduate student's power position, for the task demand to set up the computer, and to survive in the academic program.

The researcher made a semi-legal attempt to inquire this graduate student's supervisor for the damage made to her private as well as office computers (because her software company's account had a fatal misconduct, any programs registered under that account name were affected), but the supervisor made an attempt to keep the innocent posture, as well as paternalizing (as a father like supervisor, that is often indicated as Japanese business scene) her job to rescue this graduate student from unreasonable attack. For the supervisor of the graduate student, a damage covering all computers was unheard of, so she kept the position stating, it must be a wrong charge against her.

The computer server administrator, similarly, did not believe an entire damage was due to the graduate student's numerous attempts to log in with the wrong password. He directed his anger to the higher authority while claiming the entire damage was not done by the graduate student. He also claimed the damage was made due to the totally different act that the researcher attempted previously with some other commercial accounts.

Shifting the accused target to something different, and then bring the conflicting scene with harmony, while severely criticizing the one (the researcher) who accuses of the damage to some specific persons. And the appropriation made by this computer server administrator was to "avoid looking for the causes, but solve the problem of computer usage as soon as possible (Mar., 24, 2015)." Shifting the focus of attack appeared naturally, and it seems this is the Japanese way of handling the cultural conflict. The wordings of this computer server administrator were as follows;

"It is also important to look for the causes, at the same time, it is necessary to solve the problem as soon as possible of the computer which (You, the researcher) cannot use." It seems that finding the causes and accuses someone for the problem may challenge the harmony or group sentiment in the work situation. Therefore, a technical solution can be the least political strategy so that disturbances may not be induced.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The concept of "communal property" become complicated when people from different cultural backgrounds are involved, and there appeared all sorts of "should not" behavior attached. Concerns include not just their activities, but the future informal evaluation from unrelated people. With Pratt's term, this case is a "contact zone" in which transculturation happened, and the actors came up with modes of appropriateness for the conflicting situation. These "modes of appropriateness" are assumed by the three actors' cultural heritage; because that is the way people usually carry into different social interaction.

From this case study, it appeared, not only to find the causes, but also the solution would take different cultural approaches, and all actors offer different ways of dealing with them and appropriate them by keeping their silence, accusing the bad actor, or using the legal help.

The concepts they make association with the "communal computer" include, financial ownership, authorizing decisions, access, and usage specified in the contract. The author suggests, all these aspects should be informed thoroughly to the actors prior to the installation of a communal computer.

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