

# Japanese Education at the University of Alaska

## During COVID-19

Professors of Japanese at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) and the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) faced major challenges when both campuses closed due to COVID-19. The Consular Office of Japan in Anchorage interviewed three faculty members about their experiences adjusting to online classes during this pandemic.

Professor David Henry teaches 300 and 400-level Japanese culture and literature courses at UAF, and while he admits that there have been difficulties—he credits his students for having the motivation and flexibility to adapt to classes over Zoom. In fact, this tool has many features that can facilitate teaching Japanese, such as screen share, breakout rooms (where students can talk in pairs), and screen editing. As the administrator of the Zoom account, Professor Henry can do things like direct which students speak to each other, and set a timer for when they ‘return to the class.’ While making use of technology has been vital during these past months, Professor Henry says that his classes had already formed communities before COVID-19 was in Alaska, which helped his Zoom classes to start off strong.

Professor Hiroko Harada currently teaches 200, 300, and 400-level Japanese language and topics courses at UAA. She had previous experience using online platforms such as Blackboard and Digication (ePortfolio), where she posted materials and recorded students’ progress. However, like many other professors, she had not explored all of their features. While it was particularly hard to assess students’ progress in writing Japanese at first (and administering tests and quizzes)—Professor Harada, with the help of some of her tech-savvy students, as well as UAA’s IT Services and Academic Innovations & eLearning, learned how to make full use of these tools, including Zoom’s screen share and breakout rooms. Amidst all of the challenges associated with COVID-19, she is thankful for the chance to talk one-on-one with her students more than would be possible otherwise. She remarked that, “This unexpected shift to new course delivery has drastically increased UAA Japanese Program instructors’ interest in creating genuine online Japanese courses.”

Full-time Instructor Chisato Murakami teaches 100, 200, and 300-level Japanese language and FL Pedagogy courses at UAF. While she has always been interested in

incorporating technology into her teaching as a former software engineer—she is glad that classes over Zoom and Blackboard have afforded students the chance to come together and enjoy each other’s company, especially during the time of COVID-19. While a few students prefer face-to-face learning, she says that even Zoom classes can be a fun environment where students receive praise and encouragement. Also, the American Association of Teachers of Japanese (AATJ) has been a wonderful community for her to share ideas and resources. Instructor Murakami is also thankful that in UAF’s OIT & eCampus Section, Tech Supporters and Online Course Designers are there to help professors learn platforms like Zoom and Blackboard, and create engaging course material for online classes. Instructor Murakami, at the moment, is also enjoying various free online courses via Edx and Coursera MOOC platform not as an instructor, but as a learner. She hopes to experience new ways of learning online, so that she can incorporate new ideas into her own Japanese classes. She recommends this approach to not only teachers but to everyone.

From the Consular Office of Japan’s talks with Professor Henry, Professor Harada, and Instructor Murakami, it appears that the novel coronavirus outbreak has been a unique challenge to Japanese language education in Alaska. Our staff would like to wish all students of Japanese the best of luck with their studies, and encourage instructors to keep doing a wonderful job.

Ganbatte kudasai! (Good luck!)