“Traditional Crafts”\(^1\) are defined as mainly handmade items that are made using traditional materials and techniques, have a history of at least 100 years and are used for everyday life. Some examples of such items include, dyed and woven cloth, ceramics, lacquer ware, items crafted from wood, bamboo or metal, and Japanese paper (washi). The Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry has designated 218 unique “Traditional Crafts” that have been developed in various regions throughout Japan.

However, in recent years, due to changes in lifestyle and the increase in cheap imported goods, the production of traditional crafts in Japan has fallen to levels below that of 1975. In addition, there are fewer young people entering the profession of creating traditional crafts nowadays, and the older artisans are having a more difficult time finding apprentices. It is relevant that as interest and demand for Japanese traditional items seems to be increasing outside of Japan, the younger generation of Japanese often don’t recognize the beauty and value of their own nation’s traditions, such as traditional crafts.

Facilities such as Kanbe No Sato\(^2\), however are trying to develop interest in traditional Japanese folklore and crafts as well as appreciation for nature. Backed by a lush forest, the Kanbe No Sato facility in Shimane prefecture, Matsue city was designed to provide a place where people could learn about the history and culture of the Izumo region. It is located only about 15 minutes by car from the University of Shimane Junior College campus. Kanbe No Sato consists of three main facilities; the Traditional Crafts building, the Folklore Building, and a forest with walking trails. The
Traditional Crafts Building houses five studios where guests can take lessons from professional artisans in their respective fields on how to make traditional hand-woven cloth, baskets and other objects woven from cane, ornamental balls decorated with Japanese paper (washi), ceramics, and wooden items.

Shortly after Kanbe No Sato was opened in 1994, many tourists from outside Shimane prefecture as well as local people of various ages frequented the Traditional Crafts Building. However, now most visitors are middle-aged or older and younger people or non-local visitors are becoming rare. There seem to be fewer regular visitors coming to learn traditional crafts from the instructors as well.

There are of course many factors influencing this trend, but for the purposes of this study, I am interested in exploring young people’s perceptions of traditional crafts and how they change as a result of firsthand learning experiences. It goes without saying that traditional crafts are worth learning and maintaining as important cultural traditions, but how can it be made more popular for Japanese youth? One solution could be to simply let young people experience the pleasure of making traditional crafts by hand. Such experiences could lead to greater appreciation and popularity for traditional Japanese crafts among young people.

This paper is a report of a study on how University of Shimane Junior College students’ perceptions of traditional crafts changed after taking part in making traditional crafts and interviewing the instructors at Kanbe No Sato.

2 Methods

This project was conducted as part of Lange’s English Education Seminar, Graduation Project Course for second year students, with 8 students of the University of Shimane Junior College enrolled in the Department of Arts and Sciences.

The 8 students formed three study groups to research and learn how to make a traditional craft. There were two students in the cloth weaving group, three in the ornamental ball decorated with Japanese paper group and three in the cane weaving group. From after our Graduation Project course began in April 2014, until the beginning of May, each group used books, magazines and internet resources to learn about their particular traditional craft and write a report on its history, materials and other basic information related to the craft. Students were also instructed to prepare questions for the traditional craft instructors at Kanbe No Sato.

In the middle of May we took our first trip to Kanbe No Sato to conduct our interviews. Students split into their three groups and interviewed their respective instructors. We visited again, in the middle of June so the students could try making a handicraft and learn more about the production process from the instructors. During both visits, with the permission of the instructors, we recorded the events with pictures and video.

For the purposes of measuring students’ changes in perceptions regarding traditional crafts, we conducted a pre and post survey. All survey questions were given a five point scale with an answer of 5 indicating “I strongly agree”, 4 “I somewhat agree”, 3 “I moderately agree”, 2 “I somewhat disagree” and 1 “I don’t agree at all”. Questions 1, 4, 5 and 9 on the Pre Survey however, only required an answer of “Yes” or “No”.

The following are the Pre Survey questions:
1. I am familiar with the word “Traditional
Crafts"
2. I can explain what traditional crafts are.
3. I can give examples of items which are considered traditional crafts.
4. I have seen traditional crafts before.
5. I have been to Kanbe No Sato before.
6. I know what kinds of facilities Kanbe No Sato has.
7. I know that we can learn about traditional crafts at Kanbe No Sato.
8. I know about the traditional crafts of the Matsue area.
9. I have been to an exhibition at an art museum or otherwise for traditional crafts.
10. I know about problems traditional craft artisans are experiencing.
11. I think I would like to try making traditional crafts.
12. Traditional crafts appeal to me.

The following are the post survey questions:
1. My interest in traditional crafts is greater than it was before.
2. Now, I feel more familiarity with traditional crafts than I did before.
3. I can better understand the strictness of artisans than I could before.
4. I can better understand what it’s like to work as an artisan than I could before.
5. I can think more broadly about future job opportunities that I could before.
6. I could notice areas where I need to improve myself, as a result of this experience.
7. I felt the importance of passing traditional crafts on to the younger generation, as a result of this experience.
8. It was a good experience for me.
9. I would like to go to an exhibition at an art museum or otherwise for traditional crafts.
10. I felt the charm of traditional crafts.
11. I’d like to display traditional crafts in my house.
12. I’d like to go back to Kanbe No Sato and learn about another traditional craft.

Students were also given a free response survey in which they were asked to briefly describe how their awareness had changed as a result of this project.

3 Results

The Pre Survey results indicated that the students were familiar with the word, “traditional crafts” (Table 1). All the students answered “yes” for questions 1, and 4, indicating they all knew of traditional crafts and had seen them before. However, their responses averaging less than 3 points for question 2 and 3 show that they may not have been able to explain what traditional crafts are, or give examples of them. Students were generally unfamiliar with Kanbe No Sato, with 3 out of 8 students responding that they had been there before on question 5. Likewise, responses for questions 6 and 7 indicated students had only limited knowledge of the facilities at Kanbe No Sato and the types of instruction available for traditional crafts.

The average response of 2.0 points for question 8 shows that students are not familiar with the types of traditional crafts that are representative of the Matsue area. Responses to question 9 show that only one student of the 8 had attended an exhibition for traditional crafts. Knowledge of the problems facing traditional artisans was limited with an average response of 2.5 for question 9. The relatively high average responses of almost 4 points for both questions 11 and 12, tell us that traditional crafts are appealing to the students and they are interested.
in making them.

Looking at the results of the Post Survey we see from question 1 that student interest in traditional crafts generally increased (Table 2). Question 2 shows that students on average felt more familiar with traditional crafts as a result of this project. This sentiment was also reflected in 3 written comments from the students on how their perceptions had changed. Questions 5 and 6, which tried to measure student self-reflection and connection with individual career choices, showed that this project did not necessarily influence perceptions related to their own self-improvement or future careers.

A majority of students acknowledged the importance of having apprentices to carry on the tradition of making these crafts in question 7. The highest average response on the survey 4.6 was for question 8 showing students felt this had been a worthwhile experience. The average responses for the last three questions, 10, 11 and 12, were all around 4 points and seems to show that traditional crafts became even more appealing for the students after making something themselves. The second highest response average was for questions 9 and 12, which indicates students wanted to learn more about other traditional crafts.

The following student comments were translated from Japanese to English by the author:

I thought that traditional crafts had no connection with my everyday life, but surprisingly I began to notice them around me. Three of us were taught by the same teacher to make baskets, but each of our baskets was different. I could see that each student’s individuality could be expressed in this way. I’m glad I could have such a valuable experience. There are fewer people willing to carry on these traditional crafts but I thought that I’d like many people to know about this important form of Japanese culture.

I had the pleasure of taking a lesson on rattan cane weaving. Until now, I had never given much thought to traditional crafts. However, by making something myself I could begin to understand their importance. The instructor talked to us frankly about the difficulty of finding a successor and the decreasing number of people employed as traditional artisans. We realized that traditional crafts are closer to us than we thought and we felt that we should do our best to make them know to a more people.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Pre Survey Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average (n = 8)</td>
<td>Y=8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(For questions 1, 4, 5 and 9, “Y” is for the number of “Yes” responses and “N” is for the number of “No” responses.)</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Post Survey Results</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average (n = 8)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Traditional crafts are famous and well-known but it was my first time to actually see them and make them, so it was a valuable experience for me. In particular, I learned that familiar items such as the handles for ceramic teapots and handbags used during festivals are woven from cane. Before I had no interest in such things, but now I thought I’d like to study more about it and learn to make another traditional handicraft.

I learned that the process of preparing the materials used to make traditional crafts is quite difficult. This work is fine and detailed so I thought it was wonderful that a relatively small group of people are keeping this traditional craft alive. Also, by experiencing weaving cloth with my own hands, I could enjoy creating something and I felt that I’d like to make more things by hand.

Before going to Kanbe No Sato, I didn’t know much about the crafts of Shimane Prefecture. However, after doing some research and taking a lesson in making I became aware of how wonderful crafts are. I was also introduced to problems such as the lack of apprentices and successors for traditional crafts and I thought that we mustn’t allow these traditions to be lost.

4 Discussion

The survey results showed that students were not very familiar with traditional crafts before our project, but they recognized their appeal and wanted to attempt making them. After learning about and making a traditional craft, the majority of students continued to find them appealing. Additionally, students strongly indicated that their interest in traditional crafts had increased as a result of this project.

Before our project students reported feeling attracted to traditional crafts but without a specific purpose, such as this project, it is doubtful that they would have gone to Kanbe No Sato independently. Students were given the opportunity to select their Graduation Project class so they probably had some interest in the subject of Lange’s course, traditional crafts, beforehand. Providing this opportunity for students to learn about a traditional craft also lead to interest in other traditional crafts as reported on the Post Survey.

From the written responses in which students were asked to describe how their perceptions had changed as a result of this project, I noticed students using the words, “familiar” and “closeness” to describe their changes in perception of traditional crafts. This may indicate that they felt traditional crafts were previously unrelated to their lives. However, some students simply didn’t notice that common items such as the handle on ceramic teapots is often made from rattan cane and woven by hand according to a traditional process.

Students also voiced concern at the decreasing number of professional artisans who are continuing to make traditional crafts. They learned about the factors influencing this decline in artisans through their research and they asked the craft instructors in person about these issues. Students became aware of the global factors influencing this trend such as competition with cheaper, imported goods and changing lifestyles.
5 Future Studies

The next part of our project will be for students to make blog posts in Japanese and English to summarize and present what they have learned to a larger audience. Our focus will be on making a blog that will appeal to youth, be accessible in both English and Japanese and include interesting and detailed information about the instructors and the process of making each traditional craft.

According to the model of experiential learning by Kolb and Fry (1975), the learner should reflect on concrete experience in order to understand what was learned (fig. 1). Following this stage in the model, the learner forms assumptions from the experience that will be used to anticipate the effect of similar actions under similar conditions. Testing these notions in new situations is the next step in the process of experimental learning.

My students have already had the experience of learning from traditional craft artisans, now they are working to reflect on that experience in writing for our blog posts. The second phase of this model, observation and reflection will be carried out next.

By putting information about this project on the internet we can make it accessible to a much wider demographic of ages and people living outside of Shimane. My students are now making two types of blogs; one is a summary of the interview with the instructors and another is focused on describing the process of making the particular craft. Both blog posts will be accessible in English and Japanese. We believe making this information available on the internet in English is an important factor in attracting foreign interest and tourism to Kanbe No Sato and Matsue city.

We also plan on publishing booklets on the traditional crafts we studied at Kanbe No Sato in English and Japanese. Hopefully we can make these booklets freely available at convenient places like tourist information centers where more people can learn about the pleasure of making traditional crafts.

With this site, we hope to offer more people the opportunity to learn about the wealth of traditional crafts offered in Shimane. In particular we are hoping that this blog will appeal to the younger generation and foreigners who are interested in the traditional crafts of Japan. Our task is to communicate the value of this region’s traditional crafts in English and Japanese. Through research on traditional crafts, fieldwork and practice we hope to communicate the knowledge and experiences gained to a wider audience.

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Fig. 1  Experiential Learning Cycle  
(Kolb and Fry, 1975)
注
2) 出雲かんべの里 (Website for Kanbe No Sato).