



Building Community With a Staff Newsletter

Shiho Kawano, Amity Corporation, Okayama, Japan

The Setting

Amity Corporation is one of several large private corporations operating language schools throughout Japan. Amity offers a variety of English language classes to children and youth, from infant to high school age. Currently, there are 72 Amity schools nationwide, serving approximately 20,000 students. Each site employs both native speakers of English and Japanese teachers who speak English well. Although some Amity teachers have background in teaching English as a second language, many do not. Amity will be successful in its mission only to the extent that we can provide quality training and ongoing professional development and support for our teachers. We are using a monthly newsletter, *The Learning Center*, as one means of building a professional community among our scattered and diverse workforce, particularly the native English-speaking teachers who are new to Japan and to teaching.

Our experience with *The Learning Center* may be of interest to other language schools and institutes, particularly those with many branch sites. The questions and answers below summarize key points about the development of the newsletter and feedback we have received from our readers.

Who Created the Newsletter and When?

No one on the current Amity staff remembers who initially started *The Learning Center* over ten years ago. At that time, it was faxed to each learning center. Later, Amity went through a period of understaffing, and the newsletter was discontinued. In 2001, the newsletter was reintroduced in its current electronic format by one of the company's teacher trainers. Now, it is e-mailed to the site managers who print and post it on the message board in each center.

Who is Responsible for Producing the Newsletter Now?

One interesting feature of *The Learning Center* is that it is produced regularly despite the fact that it is not assigned to one particular person or position. After one year of teaching, Amity teachers have the opportunity to join the office staff as a trainer or emergency teacher. Trainers are responsible for conducting pre-service and in-service training. They support teachers through telephone contacts, school visits, and regular professional development gatherings. Emergency teachers are substitute teachers who are posted around Japan to provide temporary or short-term service where they are needed. Trainers and emergency teachers who are temporarily assigned to the head office generally pitch in to work on *The Learning Center*. Thus, it is a result of many hands working together. I can imagine that in other settings, it might be preferable to put responsibility for a newsletter like ours in the hands of one particular teacher or staff member.

How Long Does it Take to Put Together an Edition of *The Learning Center*?

The time it takes to finish a newsletter varies depending on who is available and how many other duties they have in any given month. A rough draft can generally be created in a week. Then, senior staff members edit, offer suggestions, and solicit feedback from other teachers and staff.

Can You Describe the Content of the Newsletter?

The Learning Center was originally created to give novice teachers ideas for language games and activities that would add variety to their classroom routine without much time-consuming preparation. We still try to meet this need, but since 2001, we have included several other columns as well. Now, the front page usually carries a teacher-of-the-month profile, a game or classroom activity, and notes about upcoming cultural events or festivals, both Japanese and Western. For example, the February edition included information about Black History Month, Valentine's Day (or Singles Awareness Day), and the Japanese *Hinamatsuri* (or Doll's Festival). Page 2 usually has a

simple recipe for a Japanese dish, often something that can be prepared in a rice cooker. It also includes an advice column geared toward common Amity class challenges and a Japanese language column. In the remaining space, we print additional ideas for classroom activities and recognize staff members who are coming, leaving, or having birthdays.

What Feedback Have You Received From Your Readers?

In 2005, we asked readers to complete a survey. Their feedback indicated that they most appreciated teaching and craft ideas, the Japanese language and recipe columns, the teacher-of-the-month feature, and information about upcoming events. Readers also gave us some excellent suggestions for improving the newsletter, most of which would require adding length. These suggestions included requests for more teaching tips, particularly activities requiring little preparation, more information on Japanese culture and language, and more realistic advice in the advice column. For its part, members of the staff have talked about adding a humor column as well as a guest column featuring a teacher essay or editorial.

Do Your Teachers Have Access to Other Professional Development Opportunities?

Yes, we provide intensive orientation for new teachers, quarterly regional meetings, and biannual conferences. At these events, teachers meet other teachers from throughout Japan and reconnect with the cohort that they trained with. Sessions include workshops, guest speakers, and publishers' exhibits. These gatherings are for both personal and professional development.

What Do You See as the Primary Benefits of *The Learning Center Newsletter?*

The newsletter reminds teachers that they are not alone and that the challenges that they face are probably similar to those faced by other teachers in other places. The newsletter reminds all of us that we are part of something greater than what we may see or feel on a daily basis, particularly if we feel isolated in our own small town or workplace. Finally, the newsletter helps teachers keep abreast of upcoming professional development opportunities and network with colleagues in distant locations.

About the Author

Shiho Kawano grew up in California speaking both Japanese and English. She earned her MA in TESL from Hawai'i Pacific University. She has been working for the Amity Corporation for four years and is currently serving as project trainer. She is interested in bilingual education and foreign language instruction for young children. To find out more about Amity, visit their website at: www.amityteachers.com.