

Catch the Wave towards Building and Sustaining Strong Japanese Language and Culture Programs

Introduction

Japanese language programs need to be more than “just a language class” offered at your school. The support needed to build such strength in a program can come in many ways and can be identified when you look at a few key questions. Your body can overcome an illness if you consistently live a healthy lifestyle and keep your muscles, skeleton, and organs strong. Your home can survive a major weather event if you build it on a strong foundation. And your students can succeed in the area of learning Japanese if you use a standards-based approach that connects them to real-life use of language and meaningful experiences. So, what about a strong Japanese program? How do you build a strong foundation for your program, one that consistently advocates for learning Japanese and helps those involved find success in their abilities?

While we may search for this answer, one might be right in front of us, one that we use in all World Language study to build a framework for language learning. The 5 Cs of the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning serve as the framework for “what” our students need to know and need to be able to do in our Japanese classrooms and beyond when it comes to learning, studying, and communicating in Japanese. And, just as our curriculums can be organized around these the 5 Cs of Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities to give our students a strong foundation in knowledge and ability in Japanese language and culture, we can use the 5 Cs when we think about building and sustaining a strong foundation for our Japanese language programs.

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Communication

Communication is the key to human existence. To whom, when, what, where, and why you communicate about your Japanese language program can be the key to its survival in your school and your district. This can be one of the most difficult tasks for teachers who often do not want to be seen as “bragging” about their programs or pushing their discipline as more viable than other options for students in their academic careers.

Communication Opportunities

Communicate about your program and put a set of lists in place to help make that happen. Create a list of contacts in the local media (TV, newspapers, community news) that are readily available to you when you need it. Use the school walls and school communication avenues (i.e., school paper, website, newsletters) to display and show quality work that your students have done. If you live in or near a heritage Japanese language community, set up experiences where students can practice their language skills in comfortable situations to engage in meaningful language tasks. Communicate with local service organizations about your program such as Rotary Clubs to help them establish international connections in Japan. While it may seem simple, using some of these techniques on a regular basis will begin to “communicate” to others outside of your class that your program not only exists but also is a prominent component of the academic program in your school and district.

Assessment for Learning

Many do not think of “assessment” as a key vehicle for communication about your Japanese language program. On the contrary, assessment results and a strong commitment to assessment “for” learning (as opposed to assessment of learning) are valuable indicators of program success. These, as well, will help to gain the support of others who are looking at which academic areas are vital in the larger school and academic environment. When students are aware from the beginning of what their learning targets will be in Japanese language class, it also serves an equally important role by involving your students in their own learning. By making your program benchmarks attainable for all students, your Japanese learners take ownership for their achievement; this, in turn, communicates through feedback from assessment to all stakeholders (students, parents, administrators, school boards, etc.) that not only do you believe that your students can learn Japanese but that you believe that your students can do it. This also means that communication between the staff in the upper and lower levels of Japanese must occur on a regular basis so that expectations will be not only clear but flexible enough to meet the needs of all the learners in your program, not just at one level.

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Connections

Relations with staff, departments and administration

Our situations differ from being the only member of the staff in a Japanese language program to working with multiple staff members in multiple buildings. One thing remains important: relationships with other members of the World Language staff, other staff that teach a variety of disciplines and your administration are vital for the growth and health of your Japanese language program. Collaboration is key in the education world of the 21st century, from the start of PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) in your schools to the interdisciplinary skills that are deemed necessary for our students to possess as mentioned in the Partnership for 21st Century Skills.

You need to be an active and willing participant in your World Language department. While you may be seen as an adversary by some members with the false belief that students who choose to take Japanese will take away from numbers (which equates to jobs) in other languages such as French or German, you need to remain positive and go the extra distance to support World Language learning in your schools as a whole. This means being present at school board meetings to support and advocate for World Language programs and initiatives, collaborating on curriculum with other World Language teachers as well as being present at (and participating in) other World Language events. By doing so, you show that you are a viable and trusting member of the World Languages department and you will be able to count on your colleagues as well when you need them to voice support for your program.

The same goes for connecting with other staff members and administration. Be a part of other committees and celebrations at your school, so you are seen as an important staff member who is willing to give time and energies to collaborate with others. Lend your expertise to other disciplines to teach them about the history of Japan or music from Japanese culture. When administration is looking for a team of educators to pilot a new academic program in their classrooms, be a part of this team so that your students not only benefit from the latest and best practices in education but your program is seen as cutting edge in its practice.

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Building an elementary/middle school Japanese program

Creating an elementary/middle school program that is “worth the time” can be an obvious desire for any program, but it is something that can seem daunting as a task from the beginning. There is no argument that, in the 21st century, the “early start, long sequence” when it comes to learning another language is ideal for all students. But getting elementary staff and administration to buy into the fact that it is important to have an elementary school Japanese language program can be another thing. Elementary classroom teachers struggle each day with the many subject areas they are expected to teach, along with skills in using technology, following up in the areas of art, music and PE while trying to teach students not just the academic skills they need to be successful in school but the social growth needed to make learning doable. The list can be exhausting. Adding in a language like Japanese to the already crowded day can seem impossible and therefore not necessary.

There is a delicate balance that is necessary when creating a curriculum for young learners of Japanese. By integrating the study of language into other subject areas, you are “assisting” the classroom teacher in his or her daily educational goals as well as demonstrating that you find value in helping the students. More importantly, Japanese needs to be shown as something that students are “capable” of doing, with specific learning targets and benchmarks in the target language that promote learner success and articulate up to the next level of language learning.

If you are a fortunate district or community that has a K-12 Japanese language program (or one that articulates through various stages other than just at the high school level), the above principles can still be applied to help sustain and strengthen your program. Consistent curriculum review that promotes alignment that is horizontal, vertical and across disciplines can help achieve that goal. Finding the time to do this is critical to connect not only what is happening academically in your classes of Japanese but to share and achieve some consistency in outside opportunities that evolve for your learners of Japanese.

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You do not have an elementary or middle school program? There is still a need for you to “connect” with those levels to get those students curious about learning Japanese and to begin to get some students that will feed into your program. Connect with a staff member at those levels to see if you or your students from the upper levels can come in for a demonstration on the Japanese language. Starting an after-school club for Japanese at the elementary or middle school levels can serve a dual purpose when involving the middle and high school students of Japanese. You create an opportunity for Japanese language students to use their skills and knowledge of language and culture to teach younger students while enhancing the education of younger students. And, in doing so, you are creating your own “feeder” program of students from the lower levels who will want to continue their studies of Japanese language and culture when they reach the upper levels. Tap into the parents of elementary-aged children, who are often the most engaged in their student’s school life and may be willing to. This early connection with parents will also help to ensure that you will have long term support for your programs in the upper levels as well.

The Japan Foundation, Los Angeles

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Cultures and Comparisons

Be a part of the whole

Studying Japanese, whether at the lower elementary levels or at the highest level offered at the high school, is one part of a student's academic and social day. When you take into perspective the time spent in school as a whole and the part that is spent in Japanese class, the percentage of the latter is quite small. Therefore, it is imperative that the Japanese learning experience be extended beyond the classroom walls and be seen as a "part " of the whole educational experience of the students who fit into the culture of your World Language department, school, district, and the larger community.

Many Japanese programs have one large event each year to highlight their program. While these events often bring students, parents, and outside community members together for a few hours or even for a day, they are short lived in the minds of all involved and may not be at key times of the year when budgets are decided on and when programs may be cut. Therefore, it is important to incorporate Japanese into the many different "parts" of the school experience.

An important way to keep Japanese in the forefront of what is happening in the school is to cooperate and collaborate with teachers of other disciplines in the school to include Japanese in multiple ways. For example, by making a welcome sign in Japanese for the front of the school and labeling your school areas in Japanese makes visitors realize this is a school. Other possibilities include offering to provide music or specific songs to be sung and played at a school concert as well as practicing with students for these times during Japanese class. Work with other disciplines such as environmental science to plant trees or flowers around the school that are of Japanese origin. Ask the art teacher to work with you to illustrate a haiku poem the students are working on in class. Provide materials or resources where library personnel can order and get books in Japanese and/or in English for the library. If the school counselor or student council is participating in a fund raiser, offer to have your students make origami figures or Japanese foods to sell and be included in the event.

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Acquiring and Maintaining Quality in Staffing

Another area of “culture” can be that of your World Language Department and Japanese teaching staff. If you have a chance to help with the staffing of your Japanese program, there are key factors to consider here, too, which go beyond what a résumé may say. It is critical to fully assess the needs of your program, not just the need for a Japanese language teacher when hiring staff. When you truly look at what type of program you have and what your needs are, then you can hire the person who best fits the needs of your Japanese program and not the credentials on the paper. No one knows the needs of your program better than you do. And while an administrator might see superior language skills of one candidate as being the key factor to hiring a certain individual for the job, you need to help him or her see the value in hiring the candidate for not only for the job but for your program. And that could be a person with not only strong Japanese language skills but also with high interpersonal communication skills, experience, or potential for advocating to the community, possessing the ability to handle stressful situations, or making connections to students or others outside of your program

Realize, too, that native and non-native speakers of Japanese may have different professional development needs and that these needs should be addressed openly and planned for throughout their tenure from the time that you hire that individual. Working together as a Japanese language staff and meeting to assess everyone’s strengths as well as weaknesses can help divide the tasks needed to be done in order to establish continuity in all aspects of your program.

Compare and Reflect

When you take a hard look at your Japanese program and compare it to other programs in your school and district, analyze what you see. What is it about that teacher or program in your school that continually puts them in the spotlight for the academic achievements by the students as well as for the visibility in many areas? What are the continual practices that bring attention to this area and what positive perspective does this leave with the larger community? When you compare your program to others, it helps you to seek new paths and possibilities to enrich your students’ Japanese language studies as well as your own professional growth.

Setting up an academic year-long timeline and plan can help you organize not only your curriculum of what you are going to teach in classes but it can give you a clear view and comparison into the activities you regularly engage in (or should engage in) so that they connect to enhance the students’ learning and to your program. Where you find gaps, you can fill them with small, doable experiences that help others see Japanese language and cultural studies as a fixture in the school and larger community. Keep the history of your program with details and images so that, as the years pass by and staff members change, others can continue to find strength in what you have done as well as to continue to grow and develop a durable program.

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Communities

“Communities” seems to be the area that brings it all together. When you look at a community, such as your town or city, it is built of small areas and parts which flow together every day to make a sustainable living space for all its inhabitants. When you search on the web for the definition of “community,” two distinct definitions appear: 1. a group of interdependent organisms inhabiting the same region and interacting with each other; 2. common ownership. Your Japanese program needs to mirror this type of development and commitment to interdependency that includes all the participants of your program, everyday, to not only sustain your program but also to instill a sense of ownership within your program. When looking at the path that you need to follow in order to build that community, there are several avenues to consider in the aforementioned points as well as those listed below.

Capitalize on Meaningful Experiences with your Students

While the ultimate goal may be to take your students to Japan one day, there are many things that can be done to help your students be a part of the larger global community of Japanese language learners. Connect with an organization that promotes the study of Japanese language as a means to bring in guest speakers, exchange students, and experiences such as musical groups or artists so that your students can experience a part of Japan in their own community. Take every opportunity you can to have your students participate and use their knowledge of Japanese language and culture in contests, exhibitions, or events where they develop and share their work, which also helps to make your community aware of your students’ abilities not only in Japanese but also in other areas as well. And, more importantly, set up venues to celebrate your students’ successes in many areas of Japanese language and culture study.

Professional Membership and Development

Making many of these experiences possible for your students can only come if you are a part of the larger community of teachers of Japanese and teachers of World Languages. Become a member of your state and national associations for World Languages as well as those at various levels for Japanese language teachers. This only serves to show your administration and colleagues (as well as your students and their parents) that you are serious about your own professional development and that you connect with others to improve the quality of education in your Japanese language classes. This is also the path to engage in the aforementioned experiences that can engage your students into a deeper involvement in their own language and cultural studies of Japan.

Conclusion

Building a strong Japanese language program relies on the viability of many pathways in order to make Japanese more than “just another language class” in your school. This can and has been done by others through communication that provides viable feedback on many areas of your program, connections to colleagues and other in your community, building a culture of excellence in a variety of areas in your program, and reflecting upon and comparing your successes to continue to grow a community of involved learners of Japanese language. The ultimate goal is to get your Japanese program to become an integrated and lasting component of the larger school community. Asking yourself the tough questions and taking the systematic steps it takes to get there will help make it happen for you and, most importantly, for your students of Japanese language and culture.

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