

Leveraging Online Professional Learning Communities to Address the Challenges in Japanese Language Education: The Case of the Boston x New York Study Group

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WorldCALL 2023 – CALL in Critical Times
Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Japanese language education in the United States is currently confronted with an existential challenge: a severe shortage of teachers, as evidenced by the increasing average age of Japanese language educators and the retirement of experienced professionals (Hoogenboom, 2022). In light of this situation, it becomes crucial to explore how we can leverage online professional learning communities to cultivate collaboration among teachers and enhance our ability to maintain a critical mass of effective Japanese language educators. To address these challenges, the Boston x New York Study Group (BNYSG), was established in 2022. This initiative is designed to foster a sense of community among educators across the spectrum of Kindergarten to Grade 16 by using the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (NSFLEP, 2015) as our vision, thereby promoting professional growth and knowledge sharing. In BNYSG's professional development sessions, we apply the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001) for online pedagogy. By basing our sessions on the three presences, teaching, cognitive, and social, we create a space for Japanese language educators to interact effectively in support of each other's teaching contexts. To optimize this professional development time, we implement the Synchronous Online Flipped Learning Approach (SOFLA®), which uses an 8-step learning cycle to engage participants in synchronous online settings, thus facilitating deep dialogue and collaboration among teachers (Marshall, 2017; Marshall & Kostka, 2020). The online format of BNYSG removes geographical and affiliation-based limitations, enabling equitable participation for teachers at all levels. This deliberate choice promotes inclusivity and equal engagement opportunities. It also ensures that we stay current and continue progressing toward a clear and guiding vision in our language teaching. Moreover, encouraging discussions and dialogues within the community regarding the latest theories, teaching methods, and technologies, including Generative AI Systems, promotes staying current and up-to-date. Within this community, it becomes easier to explore and experiment with new initiatives and approaches. The paper shares the current status of BNYSG, the frameworks we draw from (CoI and SOFLA®), and various new pedagogical projects derived from the members who share similar visions and awareness for the issues involved.

Keywords: Online Professional Development, Community of Inquiry (CoI), Synchronous Online Flipped Learning Approach (SOFLA®), World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (W-RSLL), Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI)



WorldCALL Conference 2023 in Chiang Mai, Thailand

Introduction

Japanese language education in the United States is facing a critical teacher shortage, necessitating the exploration of online professional learning communities to foster collaboration and retain effective educators. The Boston x New York Study Group (BNYSG), founded in 2022, is a community of Kindergarten through Grade 16 (K-16) educators, guided by the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages. BNYSG utilizes the Community of Inquiry framework and the Synchronous Online Flipped Learning Approach (SOFLA®) for an online pedagogy and emphasizes teaching, cognition, and social presence to promote effective interaction among Japanese language educators. The BNYSG's online format eliminates geographical affiliation-based restrictions and promotes equal opportunity for teachers at all levels to participate. Community discussions covering theory, teaching methods, and technology enable educators to stay current and explore new approaches. This paper presents the current status of the BNYSG, outlines the frameworks used, and shares our work and visions for the collaborative online community.

1. Boston x New York Study Group (BNYSG)

1.1 Background of BNYSG Established

Currently, the number of institutions offering Japanese language education in the U.S. is decreasing. According to Saito, Graham, & Tsuda (2022), the number of K-12 educational institutions in New England, U.S. that provide Japanese language classes has been shrinking for the last four years. Moreover, the aging of educators and their consequent retirement becomes an issue (Hoogenboom, 2002). The Japanese teachers in the U.S. face a fear that the knowledge that has been cultivated up to this point might be lost. Therefore, our Boston x New York Study Group (BNYSG) is working to continue the legacy of Japanese language education and raise the level of educators by creating horizontal connections.

Table 1: The number of K-12 educational institutions in New England, U.S.

	K-5	6-8	9-12	Total
2018	8	5	10	23
2022	6	4	7	17

(Saito, Graham, & Tsuda, 2022)

1.2 Principal of BNYSG

BNYSG was founded in 2022. The goal of this study group is to promote effective interaction among Japanese language educators and develop their skills. We adopt SOFLA® to reach out to Japanese language educators. There have been seven study sessions by November 2023 and each study session has an average attendance of about 50 people from everywhere in the world. BNYSG uses World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (NSFLEP, 2015) as our vision and creates unit plans for teaching the Japanese language that are available to everyone in the public.

World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages was collaboratively developed by language associations in the U.S such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the American Association of Teachers of Japanese (AATJ), the

American Association of Teachers of French (AATF). This is the implementation of the Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century (1996) and Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (2006) (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (U.S.) & American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2015). The standards “define the central role of world languages in the learning career of every student (ACTFL)”.

The standards show five goal areas of communication, culture, connection, compassion, and communities (Figure 1). The standards will lead the way for learners to develop the ability to communicate effectively and interact in a culturally competent manner to participate in multilingual communities in their own countries and around the world. In the U.S., some states such as New York and California states are creating their state standards based on these standards and they show the achievement goals within the framework of K-16 (Tohsaku, 2021).



WORLD-READINESS STANDARDS FOR LEARNING LANGUAGES

GOAL AREAS	STANDARDS		
C OMMUNICATION Communicate effectively in more than one language in order to function in a variety of situations and for multiple purposes	Interpersonal Communication: Learners interact and negotiate meaning in spoken, signed, or written conversations to share information, reactions, feelings, and opinions.	Interpretive Communication: Learners understand, interpret, and analyze what is heard, read, or viewed on a variety of topics.	Presentational Communication: Learners present information, concepts, and ideas to inform, explain, persuade, and narrate on a variety of topics using appropriate media and adapting to various audiences of listeners, readers, or viewers.
C ULTURES Interact with cultural competence and understanding	Relating Cultural Practices to Perspectives: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the cultures studied.	Relating Cultural Products to Perspectives: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the products and perspectives of the cultures studied.	
C ONNECTIONS Connect with other disciplines and acquire information and diverse perspectives in order to use the language to function in academic and career-related situations	Making Connections: Learners build, reinforce, and expand their knowledge of other disciplines while using the language to develop critical thinking and to solve problems creatively.	Acquiring Information and Diverse Perspectives: Learners access and evaluate information and diverse perspectives that are available through the language and its cultures.	
C OMPARISONS Develop insight into the nature of language and culture in order to interact with cultural competence	Language Comparisons: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.	Cultural Comparisons: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.	
C OMMUNITIES Communicate and interact with cultural competence in order to participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world	School and Global Communities: Learners use the language both within and beyond the classroom to interact and collaborate in their community and the globalized world.	Lifelong Learning: Learners set goals and reflect on their progress in using languages for enjoyment, enrichment, and advancement.	

Figure 1: World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages

2. DEI of BNYSG

The most salient feature of BNYSG is its unique approach, where there are no hierarchies, obligations, titles, or financial incentives. Instead, it thrives on the simple willingness of individuals to be part of our collaborative planning team.

Our common goal is to provide practical resources to fellow teaching professionals, encouraging mutual support in everyday teaching practices while nurturing personal and professional growth. We believe that learning opportunities should be accessible to all, whether you're a teacher, a pre-service educator, or simply someone eager to learn. Guided by this, BNYSG offers workshops open to any Japanese language educator in search of learning opportunities.

2.1 Four Key Areas of DEI

Our guiding principles are Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), and we focus on four key areas: access, workshop format, material sharing, and bidirectionality (feedback).

We are committed to making workshops available to everyone, regardless of geography, affiliation, grade level (K-16), Japanese as a foreign language, Japanese as a heritage language, native speaker or non-native speaker, or professional background including experience and employment status. There are no participation fees, and all workshop materials are readily accessible. We schedule workshops at times suitable for educators in both the US and Japan.

Our workshop format is based on the SOFLA®, involving pre-work such as video viewing or document reviews to ensure everyone is on the same page. This approach helps new participants catch up easily and allows anyone to join at any time.

Materials created for the workshop and those generated by participants are shared freely. We plan to make these materials officially available as Open Educational Resources (UNESCO, 2019). After each workshop, we seek participant feedback through surveys to enhance future workshops.

For Breakout room discussions, which are allocated a large chunk of time, we create and pre-assign diverse groups, including different levels (college and middle/high school teachers), experience, and context. This mix enables educators at different levels to interact, exchange insights, and learn from each other's unique teaching experiences. At the end of the workshop and afterward in a separate email, we request participants to complete a survey with free comments, and this provides insights to improve future workshops.

3. Community of Inquiry

The professional development sessions by the BNYSG adhere to the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, as conceptualized by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001), focusing on the interplay of teaching, social, and cognitive presences in online learning. The model emphasizes that each presence is crucial for a successful learning experience (Figure 2).

Community of Inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001)

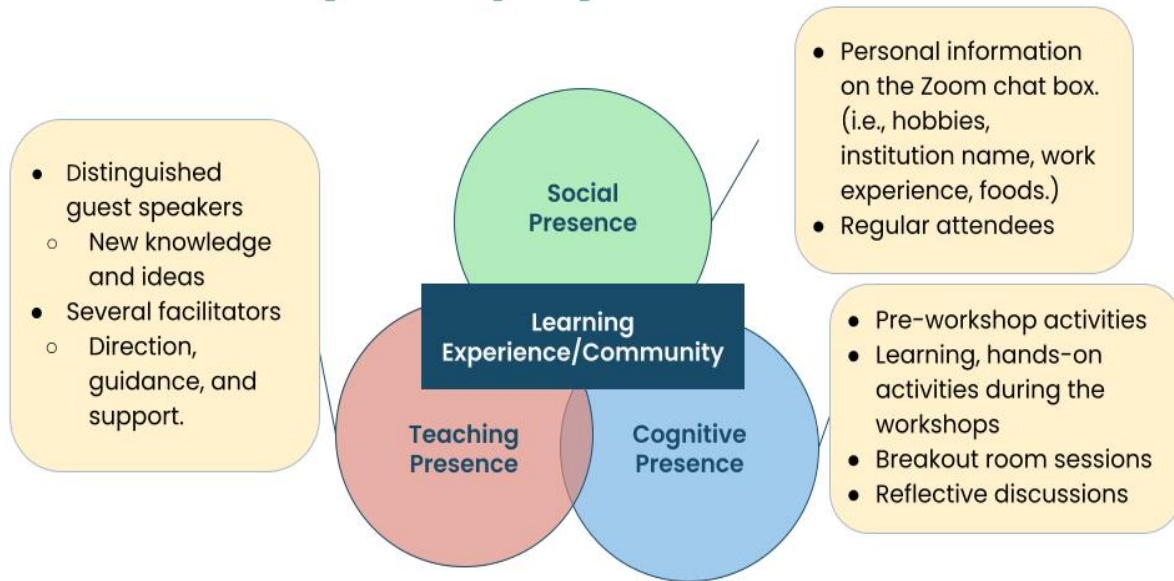


Figure 2: Community of Inquiry of BNYSG

Social presence, vital for creating a safe and engaging learning environment, is fostered through personal interactions in our workshops. Participants are encouraged to share personal and professional details, using creative methods like food metaphors to build a robust communal atmosphere. This approach has led to regular attendance and peer familiarity, reinforcing social connections.

Cognitive presence, the ability to construct and validate meaning through sustained communication, is promoted through pre-workshop activities like reviewing videos or reading materials. During workshops, challenging and collaborative activities, such as creating backward-design unit plans focusing on social and environmental issues, stimulate deep thinking. These activities are shared and discussed in breakout rooms, culminating in reflective group discussions to ensure applicability in teaching contexts.

Teaching presence involves designing and facilitating these processes to enhance learning outcomes. We invite guest speakers and conduct lectures and workshops, like the recent AI-focused sessions with Dr. Yasu-Hiko Tohsaku on "Utilization of AI such as ChatGPT in Japanese Language Education." Expert facilitation in breakout rooms and active participant engagement is key to the effectiveness of our sessions.

Overall, we aim to structure sessions around the CoI model's presence to create an environment conducive for Japanese language educators to interact effectively, know each other, and support each other in their unique teaching contexts, enhancing both the teaching and learning experience.

4. Workshop Format: SOFLA®

BNYSG utilizes SOFLA® as the primary format for its online education workshops. The template of SOFLA® is a revolutionary approach to online learning that draws from both the

Col model for online teaching and the principles of flipped learning (Bergmann & Sams, 2012). This approach provides a robust structure for the integration of synchronous and asynchronous components, to meet the diverse needs of learners in online environments. The eight-step learning cycle in SOFLA® includes 1) Pre-Work, 2) Sign-In, 3) Whole Group Application, 4) Breakouts, 5) Share-Out, 6) Preview and Discovery, 7) Assignment Instructions, and 8) Reflection (Figure 3). These steps are carefully crafted to create a fertile space for online learning.

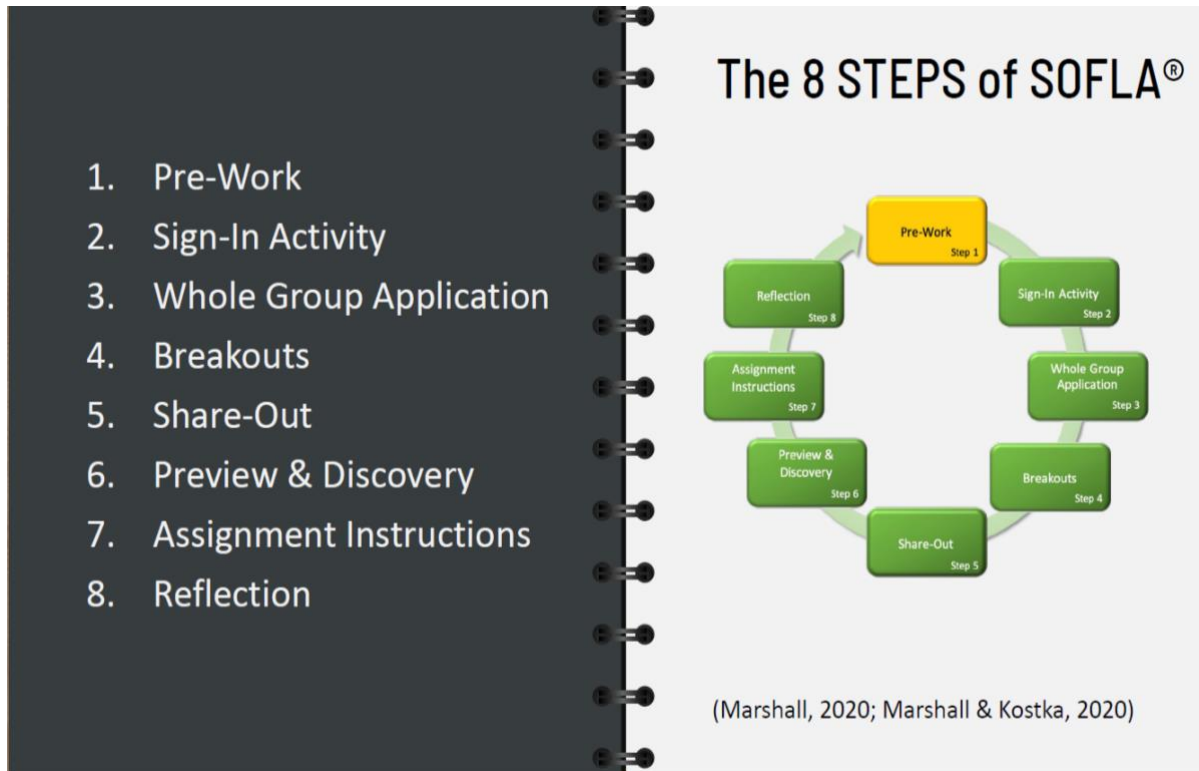


Figure 3: Synchronous Online Flipped Learning Approach (SOFLA®)

BNYSG's planning team engages in strategic brainstorming sessions to discern the content suitable for preparatory activities and the material best suited for hands-on engagement, thus emphasizing the deliberate and thoughtful approach underpinning the SOFLA® framework.

4.1 Prework Materials

In the past, prework materials for BNYSG sessions included the following resources:

- Webinar lecture videos: These videos provide in-depth content and explanations to help participants understand key points related to the session topic.
- Explanatory videos: These videos offer additional support and clarification on important concepts.
- Surveys: Participants are encouraged to complete surveys to gather information about their knowledge and understanding of the topic before the session.
- Reading materials: Supplementary materials are provided for participants to review and prepare for the session.

4.2 Session Design

The planning team carefully designs the sessions to ensure a seamless experience for participants. The sessions are structured in a way that:

- Evokes participants' past knowledge: The sessions aim to activate participants' prior knowledge and connect it with the session's content.
- Provides a high-level overview: New participants are given a summary of the previous sessions' topics and discussions, providing them with a contextual understanding before joining the synchronous session.

4.3 Synchronous Session

During the synchronous session, the following activities take place:

- Agenda and objectives review: The session begins with a review of the agenda and the workshop's objectives, allowing participants to understand what will be covered.
- SOFLA® framework: The activities during the session follow a template from the SOFLA® framework, which helps achieve the workshop objectives.
- Preview & Discovery: Step seven of the SOFLA® framework provides participants with a preview of upcoming BNYSG sessions and introduces new activities inspired by BNYSG.
- Public announcements and camaraderie: This step also offers participants the opportunity to make public announcements and fosters a sense of camaraderie within the online community.
- Reflection: The final step of the SOFLA® framework is Reflection, where not only anonymous voices from participants are heard, but also dedicated time is set aside for the planning team to reflect on each other's insights and experiences.

This comprehensive approach ensures that participants receive a well-structured and engaging experience during the BNYSG sessions.

5. New Initiatives

In our collaborative efforts within this online professional learning community, three noteworthy projects have developed, fostering a community where Japanese teachers from different institutions, regions, and backgrounds engage, learn, and find inspiration for continued pedagogical exploration.

5.1 Dialects Project

The 'Japanese Dialect Project', spearheaded by a committed team of Japanese teachers in the New England region, who were volunteers, began in the fall of 2022 at the ACTFL Convention. The primary goal of the project is to create an open educational resource that promotes the teaching of dialects in Japan, showcasing the diversity of the Japanese language. The audio recordings have been made publicly available on the Miro workspace application, serving as valuable educational resources for Japanese language learners and teachers. These recordings, featuring speakers, including native Japanese speakers and individuals who have learned Japanese as a second language from around the world, highlight the unique qualities of their respective hometowns or personally significant places in their regional dialects. It has

inspired members of the BNYSG to integrate regional dialects into their lesson plans, providing an unconventional element not commonly found in traditional textbooks.

5.2 Human Library for Japanese Teachers

The online Human Library for Japanese Teachers (HLJT) draws inspiration from the Human Library that originated in Denmark in 2000. In this platform, Japanese teachers of diverse backgrounds share their life stories as "human books" and engage with participants on Zoom. Anonymous story summaries are provided beforehand, creating an intriguing first encounter in the breakout room where participants discover the identity of the "book" author. The one-hour online event allows participants to connect with two "books" in 25-minute sessions each, including Q&A time that evolves into an important dialogical space. Initially targeting educators in the New England region, HLJT now boasts participants from across the U.S. Post-surveys indicate that these encounters foster learning, self-reflection, and inspiration for both "books" and "readers." Future plans include inviting more diverse "books," including non-native speakers, adjunct faculty, and pre-service teachers.

5.3 Five-Minute Spotlight

The 'Five-minute Spotlight' event, following the NECTJ Summer Workshop in August 2023, showcased 12 BNYSG members presenting their recent practices and projects in concise five-minute presentations. Following each presentation, a shared document facilitated comments and questions, with approximately one minute allocated for responses. This event provided a unique opportunity for K-16 teachers to share their practices, especially those facing constraints such as budget, time, or institutional culture, who might not typically present at regular conferences. The succinct presentations offered fresh perspectives from various institutional levels, well-received by participants. The use of Google Docs for anonymous comments and questions encouraged wider engagement, fostering a sense of community as presenters responded to inquiries during and after the Workshop.

6. Perspectives

Our study group's perspective is rooted in a commitment to lifelong learning, integrating AI technology, and enhancing regional education through innovative curriculum development and K-16 articulation. This approach marks a significant departure from traditional educational methods, as evidenced by the comprehensive quality and scope of our offerings.

Central to our innovation is the creation of the 'Human Library' for personal knowledge exchange and the 'Dialect Database' to preserve linguistic heritage. Alongside these, our AI-enhanced learning initiatives support sustainable education and celebrate diversity, with activities like bilingual and multilingual contests enriching the international educational landscape. This aligns with our group's philosophy of promoting borderless education, firmly grounded in the principles of DEI.

Strategically, we balance our initiatives to maximize impact. Small-scale projects, such as personalized learning paths and community workshops, deliver significant local benefits with modest resources. Conversely, larger-scale endeavors, like integrating AI in education, require greater investment but promise wide-reaching, transformative effects. Thus, our study group emphasizes innovative AI integration and curriculum development in education,

balancing local and global initiatives to foster a diverse, sustainable, and transformative learning environment.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, our educational tactics encompass a broad spectrum, ranging from intricate, detailed initiatives to expansive, sweeping reforms. Our approach intertwines these two scales: the minute, detailed methods act as catalysts for transformation, while the extensive strategies provide a fertile ground for these changes to take root and thrive. This dual approach underscores our commitment to enhancing and broadening educational access at every level. Moving forward, we recognize that each incremental step is a crucial component of a more extensive, transformative journey. By juxtaposing micro and macro strategies, this paper highlights the significance of a multifaceted approach, one that addresses both immediate, localized needs and broader, systemic reforms. This balanced strategy ensures comprehensive coverage, catering to the immediate, tangible aspects of education as well as the overarching structural changes necessary for sustained progress. In doing so, we will strive to grow through the online professional development community in the BNYSG and worldwide partnerships.

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Resources

Boston x New York Study Group (BNYSG). Website: <https://sites.google.com/view/boston-x-ny-study-group-japane/>

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