

## LD SIG 2012 Research Grant Awardee: Interview on Research Interests

### 2012 年度 LD SIG 研究助成金受賞者：研究課題についての インタビュー

**“Journey of Professionalization”: An Interview  
With Cory Koby, LD SIG 2012 Grant Awardee**  
*by Alison Stewart, Gakushuin University*



Cory Koby and I met at the JALT Executive Board Meeting in Kyoto on June 29-30, where he was representing Sendai Chapter and I was an additional nonvoting representative of the LD SIG. He started by apologizing profusely about his delay in writing an essay in return for receiving the research grant he was awarded back in 2012, so, in order to expedite completion of a final article, I agreed to interview him about his interest in learner development instead...

**Cory:** Well, you see, that's the first problem: you ask me what my research interest is, and what my interest is in learner development. But I'm not sure that I can answer that. I've been teaching for the past six years, and I feel confident now in my teaching, but I don't feel I know enough about how students actually learn. So second language acquisition is something I want to learn much more

about. I've also been looking into Multiple Intelligences and that's something I've tried to apply to my teaching, making sure that I include different kinds of activities that apply to the different learning styles. But as for "learner development", I'm not sure exactly how I would define that.

**Alison:** In that case, let's start by talking about your teaching context. Where do you teach?

**Cory:** I teach at an all-girls integrated Junior and Senior High school in Sendai. It's an old Catholic mission school that's considered pretty elite in the area. I teach mostly high school classes though I also do some eikaiwa classes at the junior high level. The high school has an intensive English programme, in which the students spend almost a year in the second year in a school abroad, either in Australia, New Zealand, or Canada. All students are placed in a different school, so they are on their own for the year.

**Alison:** Wow, that's quite a challenge for 16 year olds.

**Cory:** That's right. Our job is to prepare them to survive independently, since they will have a limited support structure once they get out there. Once they arrive they are either put into ESL classes for from one to three months, or they go straight into the mainstream. I'm the sub-homeroom teacher for that programme, something I've been doing now for five years. Unlike the

homeroom teachers who move up the grades in the high school with their students, I stay in this first-year preparatory class. That's become an important role for me. Apart from that, I teach the returnee students communication classes, and I've started teaching a unique content course for them—World Topics—through the Social Studies department. I'm really excited about it.

**Alison:** Did you draw on high school materials from the American high-school curriculum or from British A-levels to teach this course?

**Cory:** No, not at all. I had a completely free hand to design the classes. So it was all new. This is what has taken up a lot of my time recently. The course is divided into some major themes that the students explore in depth. The first one we did was Food, Nutrition, and Hunger. Now they're looking at Gender Issues. And we will explore Conflict and Conflict Resolution, then Natural Resources to finish the year. These are issues that are real eye openers for them and, I hope, can be really empowering.

**Alison:** That sounds great. These have got to be very advanced high school students. Where do they tend to go to after they graduate?

**Cory:** They do intercultural studies, language studies, things like that. Quite a few of them go to Sophia University, because of the Catholic connection. Some go to Akita International University, we usually get one or two into Waseda and Keio. They virtually always go on to private universities, and don't even apply to the public universities. I always find that strange; I'm sure they would get into some good public universities, but it seems that they feel that they "ought to" continue in private education.

**Alison:** That is curious, isn't it. To go back to what you were saying about the course, it sounds like

you have a lot of freedom in your work as a teacher.

**Cory:** Autonomy, yes! I have a lot of freedom. With the Social Studies course, because it was a completely new thing for me and because it is Social Studies, not English, even though it's taught in English, I had the option of working with a Japanese co-teacher and took it. I think they wanted me to have the support mechanism if I needed it. But he hasn't gotten involved at all. Previously, the course was taught by a foreign teacher, an outside teacher, who came in just for this course. But that teacher had to leave, and the principal and the department head thought that I would be well suited to fill the place because of my background. So that's one of the courses I've been teaching the third-year students. I also do debate. So yes, I do have autonomy, the opportunity to branch out into something new.

**Alison:** What have you found to be the main challenges with this new course?

**Cory:** Well, the first challenge is deciding what to include. So far, I've settled on one topic per term, which is covered using different media. I show them TED talks and documentaries to familiarize them with the theme. I do some lectures and they have discussions and debates, and they write essays, which is the main way I have of assessing them. Last term they also did group presentations, for which each of the groups chose a food aid organization, like Christian Children's Fund, World Food Program, other NPOs and religious charity organisations. The students presented all in English. The capstone of this process was debate. Here the students formed teams, four on each side, plus umpires, and they had to vie for grants of money for their organization. That was really successful. And several of them have continued with the extracurricular debate team. The school

has a sort of Debate Club—actually, it's not a bukatsu, it has a special status, so that students can do debate and still join one other club—and it's had its most successful year to date. In the past few years, a handful of girls have been in the Debate Team and have participated in the national tournament. Because there aren't many schools doing debate in Tohoku, we don't have prefectural tournaments for qualifying but are given a free pass straight to the national. We haven't done particularly brilliantly against the other schools so far, but this year, 35 girls have signed up for the team, and I think we have a good chance to do much better. The debate team has some history behind it now—it's an established thing.

**Alison:** So success breeds success. It sounds like you're very committed to the school, with the new course and the work you've been doing with the debate team.

**Cory:** Well, as they say, teaching for a high school is more like a lifestyle than a job.

**Alison:** So tell me, how did you find yourself in this lifestyle, I mean, job?

**Cory:** I wasn't a teacher before I came to Japan. I have a BA in law, and I worked for 20 years in business in Canada. Then, my business partner at the time decided to pull out and it seemed to be a good opportunity to come to Japan and let my kids come and experience their other culture. So we came over and I started working as an English teacher. My first job was for an eikaiwa company in Ishinomaki. It wasn't a great job. They sent me all over the place to teach; some places I only visited a couple of times. So it was impossible to establish much of a relationship with the kids. But it was through that job that I came to my present school. During that first year, the foreign teacher who was working at the girls' school left, so the school offered me a full-time position. Initially, I

was working on a one-year contract. That's pretty normal—in fact, it's more stable than some other jobs. They renewed my contract once, and then I asked for a change in status. I asked them to make me permanent. At first, they were, like, but we've never done that before. But I said, well, why not start now? And they did.

**Alison:** So now you have this stable job at the school, how do you see the job developing?

**Cory:** Initially I thought I would leave after a few years and go to work in universities. But recently, I've been thinking, why not stay where I am? It's a good situation and I can help improve the course. Things are changing at the school too. I noticed a shift a couple of years ago. When I first started there, the foreign teachers were just part of the furniture, or rather, just window dressing. Foreign teachers weren't expected to do some of the things that our Japanese colleagues do. But now I have a good relationship with people at the school. I've established some kind of track record and people trust me. I'd say I have some sway with the administration. They seem to listen to me.

**Alison:** It sounds like an enviable position to be in. Why would you think of moving?

**Cory:** You're right. Where I am now, I can be closely involved in decision-making at the school. When I talk to people I know who work at universities, it sounds like many have no voice at all where they work. But all the same, I have nothing to compare it with. I've only been in Japan six years.

**Alison:** But it seems that you have been moving forward with your career in these years. You said that you have now started a master's degree?

**Cory:** That's right. I've completed the postgraduate certificate in language teaching, so I have just two more taught modules and the dissertation to go.

I'm doing it at East London. I know, it's not very well known as a TESOL programme. It's very small compared with Birmingham or Aston. I'm the only master's student on the programme who's in Japan. Probably most other master's programmes have more of a support network.

**Alison:** So is that what draws you to JALT? The support network?

**Cory:** Absolutely. It's a journey of professionalization. I can't imagine where I'd be without JALT. Before I joined, I knew very few people who were doing language teaching long term. I joined the Sendai Chapter just three years ago, and was immediately drawn in. Not only have I been the Publicity Chair for the Chapter for the entire time, I have now attended over 30 meetings and two National Conferences, and really appreciate the opportunities JALT provides. My development both as a teacher and learner are still very much in progress. In fact, just as one of the JALT slogans says, for me learning truly is a lifelong journey.

**Alison:** So, if learning is a lifelong journey, to return to the question I put to you at the beginning, how would you define learner development?

**Cory:** Well, that is the million-dollar question. As learners, each of us travels down a unique path of exploration and discovery, and these individual and very personal experiences shape our development. As teachers, I see our role as guiding our learners along their individual paths, helping our students understand and make use of their experiences. These definitions are obviously still "under construction", which I suppose is really part of my ongoing development as both a teacher and learner.

### LD SIG Grants 2013

The LD SIG Grants Committee would like to congratulate all of the 2013 grants winners. We look forward to their contributions to the LD SIG:

**Subscription grant:**

Natacha Piederriere

**Membership grants:**

Adrian Wagner

Brandon Kramer

**Winner of the LD SIG 2013 research grant:**

Michi Saki

**Winners of the 2 JALT 2013 National Grants:**

Caroline Ross

Aya Matsumoto

**Winners of the 2 LD Conference grants:**

Mike Sullivan

Tanja McCandie

The 2014 grants will be announced in late January or early February 2014.

For more information please go to:

<<http://ld-sig.org/grants2013/>>

Or send a quick email to:

<[learnerdevelopmentsiggrants@gmail.com](mailto:learnerdevelopmentsiggrants@gmail.com)>