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## Hosting a ‘Learning Cafe’: Shaping My Views of Teaching Positionality

I write about my experience about how hosting a Learning Cafe sparked insights and new pathways to grapple with my ongoing concern on how to help students express positionalities in their academic writing efforts.

I have been concerned with how to equip my students in their academic writings to ‘come out’ and express their positionality, which can be defined as their worldviews and positions they adopt about their research in relation to their social content (Robinson & Wilson, n.d.). My concern has been prompted in part by my teaching context in a department of English at a private women’s university in Tokyo. The students in my department are required to submit a thesis in order to graduate.

My seminar focuses on Asians’ English identities in which I adopt a broad view that identity is multiple (Kanno, 2003) and is the sum of various social sub-groups which are related to language (Riley, 2007). My interest in this topic goes beyond its use with the English language. My first love is history, through which I have come to grips with my own parents’ experiences and their struggles to be accepted beyond being immigrants in the United States (Ikeda, 2022).

I have students state their positions to their topics in the introduction section of their reports and theses. But often their statements seem inadequate to me, when they write they are students in a women’s university and are Japanese. The notion of positionality appeals to me. Holmes describes positionality as a researcher’s worldview which encompasses their assumptions or beliefs of how they view social reality, the world, knowledge, human nature and interaction with people (2020). Robinson and Wilson (n.d.) take Holmes’ statements which are directed to researchers to encourage student writers to be reflexive so that they can “be able to examine and react to your own emotions, motives, and situation (para. 2)”. When I have brought up positionality to include in their reports however, students seem to find it difficult to address their own. Part of this reticence may be due to them being subjected through their educational experience which stresses uniformity and adherence to norms of perfection. It may be that they wish to protect themselves, which may be an extension of wanting to look as if they have no blemishes.

At the LD30 Anniversary Conference (October 21-22, 2023), I was inspired to do a session which was categorized as a Learning Cafe. According to the conference website, a Learning Cafe is intended to be a session in which “*the presenter shares a puzzle, research, or activity to promote change in their students’ lives, local communities and beyond, and encourages participants to share their perspectives*” (italics mine). I looked forward to carrying out the Learning Cafe, mindful that my attempts to encourage students to express their positionality might be limited to my own perspective. By having other educators share their own ideas and perspectives, I hoped to expand my understanding into my teaching situation.

Originally, I had planned my Learning Cafe to take on more of a workshop to go through a number of mini-sessions with activities that I have done with my seminar students. One activity I thought would be enlightening personal and social identity wheels (maa1321, 2020), which are identity categories arranged in circles. Students are encouraged to spot identity labels that are important to them.

Talking about these labels I thought would help students to reflect and express their positionality and identities.

However, my prior notions of this session were shattered when I attended Devon Arthurson's Learning Cafe on the 1st day of the conference. Her session, titled "Exploring Our Identities in Our Communities", was conducted at a leisurely pace, with an open air, very much like a cafe. In such an atmosphere, we shared our various communities, which enabled her to share candidly one identity that I thought was irrelevant because it did not fit the carefully cultivated professional profile we create as teacher-researcher-practitioners.

I was inspired by Devon's session to make my Learning Cafe more free-flowing. I also came up with a warm-up activity that would bring up issues of positionality. I label this activity as "What's in a Name?". I asked those who came to the session to share their personal or given names. The questions I asked were:

1. Tell your personal name.
2. Tell what your personal name means.
3. What have people said about your personal name?

I asked these three questions as a conducive way to allow participants to tell about themselves and in doing so, reveal the communities and social ties in which their identities, and subsequently, their positionalities would be revealed. I thought that in time, I would be able to share my own answers to these questions, that 1. "Ken" is not an American name, but given by my parents in memory of a Japanese pastor who helped my father secure employment in California; 2. The *kanji* character of my name 献 stands for "offering" and "dedication"; 3. I felt burdened to have a short name with no middle initial, only feeling vindicated with my namesake who plays a starring role in the recent release of the "Barbie" movie.

I was surprised how much emotion and expression was released among participants through this activity. I recall that one shared how his name had Catholic roots and was given to honor past relatives in his hometown. Another participant told how the changing of just one letter in her English name spelling caused people to accept her name instead of associating it with a food. Her sharing of her name in turn reminded me of how my sister hated her given name because people pronounced hers as "Junk-o", which she felt her name was synonymous with garbage, so she went instead as "June".

The positive interaction sparked by this activity carried on for such a long time that I did not share the stories associated with my own name. In short, I was astonished by the synergy produced in these Learning Cafes. I found the Learning Cafe experience to be exhilarating, not only for bringing out emotions and experiences connected to histories and identities which lead to the articulation of positionalities, but also for building an excellent atmosphere among interactants.

This next year, I plan to have students continue to explore their identities and share those facets that they feel most comfortable. I had planned to continue using the identity wheel exercise. But one 4th year student wrote in her reflection that her classmates were confused by this activity because too many categories were presented, some which seemed to overlap ("gender" "sexual orientation"). Her opinion helped me to be more aware that I should not quickly use 'ready-made' materials without first trying them out myself. The "What's in a Name?" activity that I used in my Learning Cafe could serve as a nutshell prompt to help students verbalize their personal and social identities and awaken them to issues of their positionality.

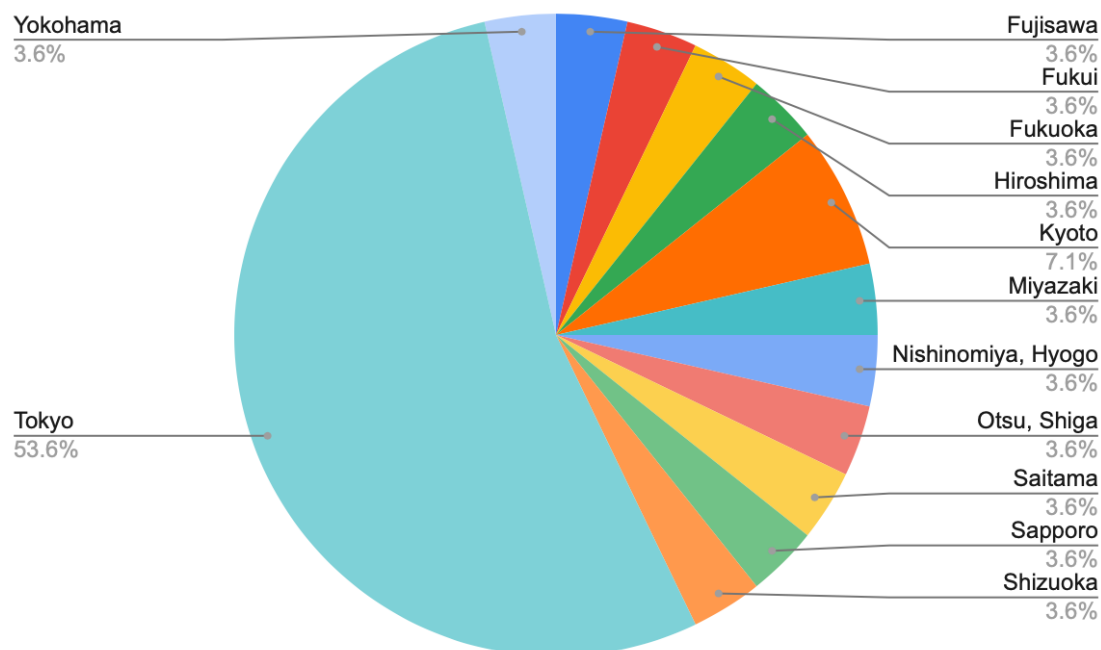
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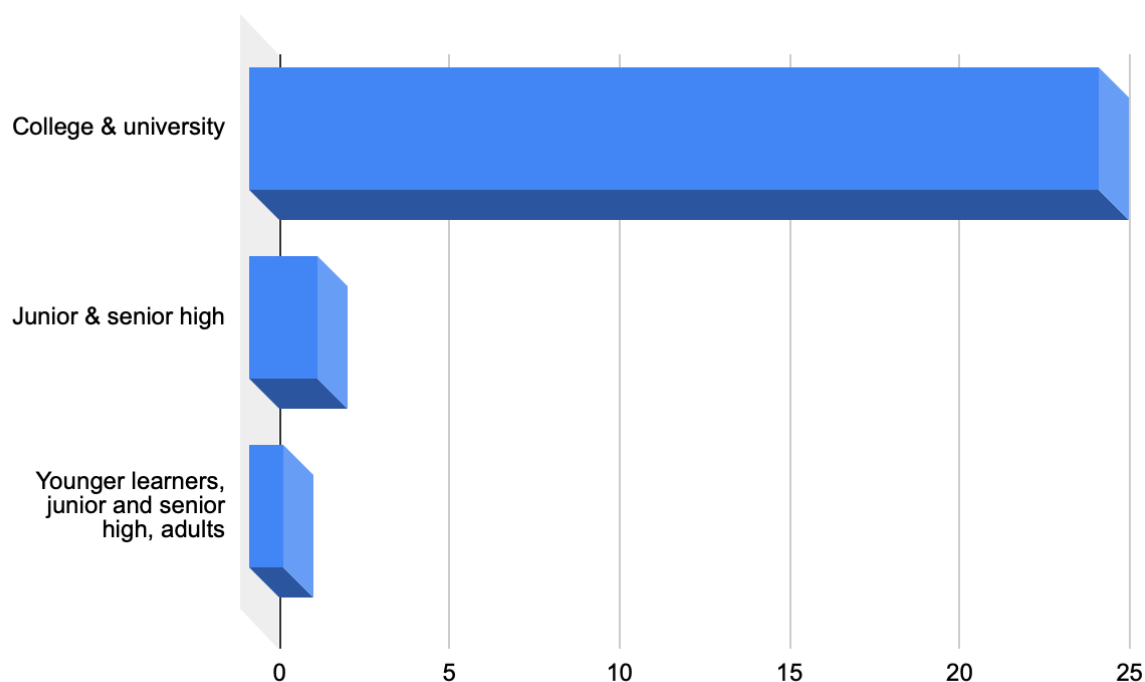
# Responses to the 2023 Learner Development SIG Survey (February to November 2023) (N=28)

## I. WHO TOOK THE SURVEY

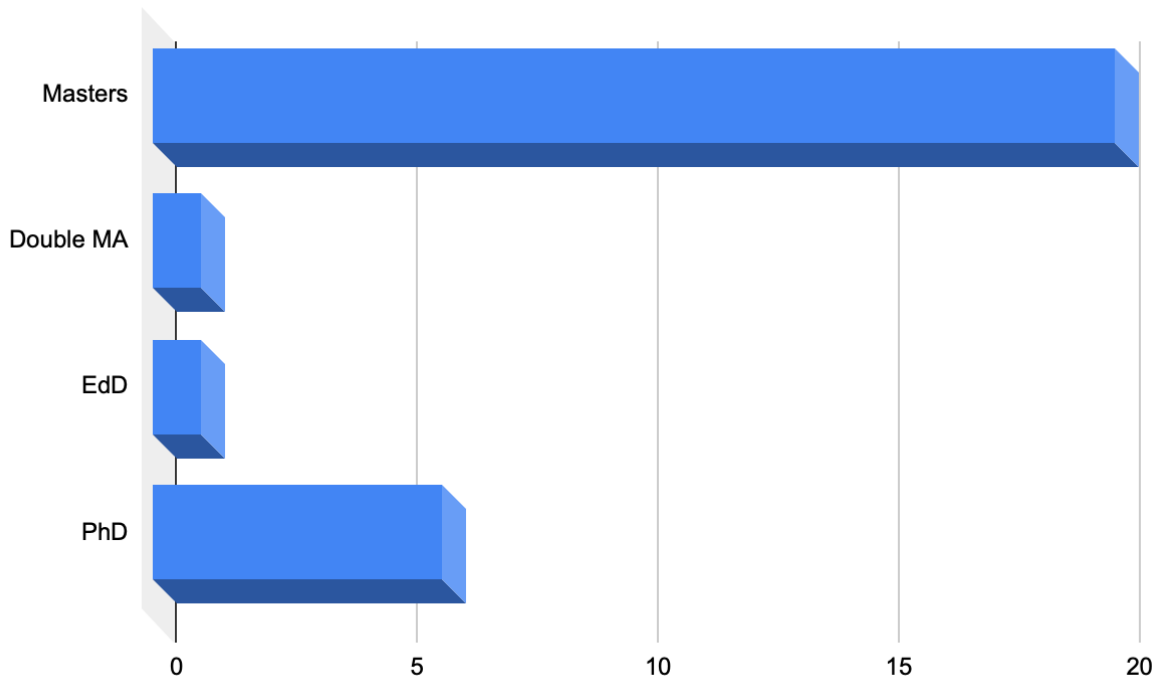
### 1. Where



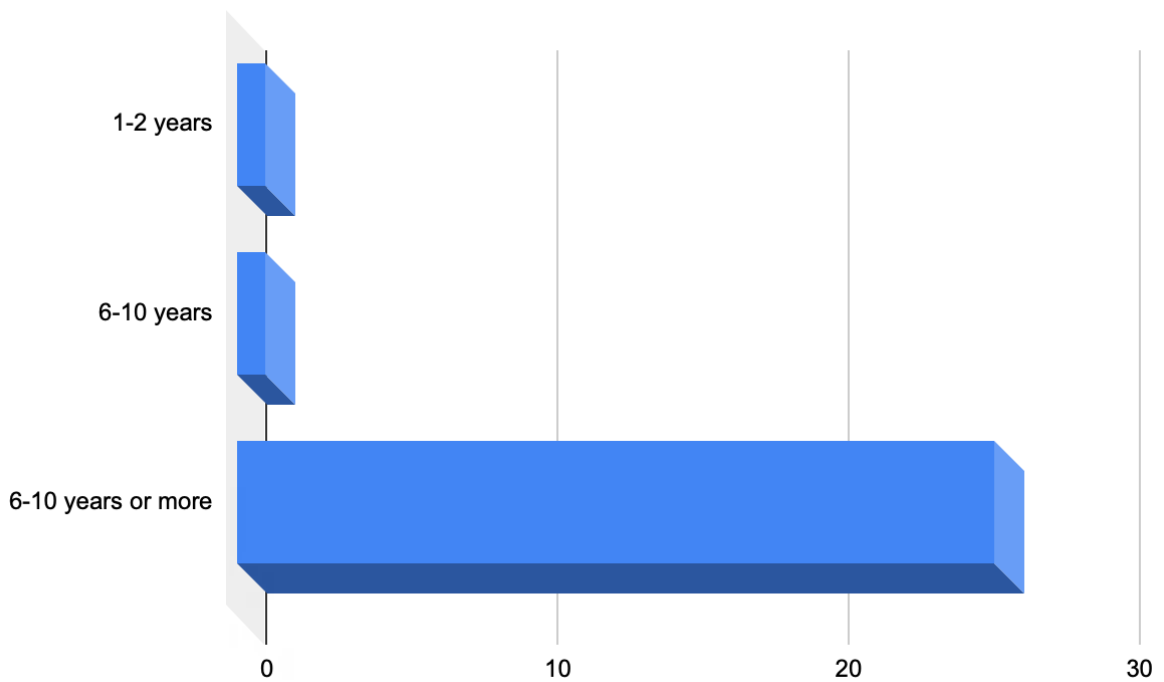
### 2. Work context



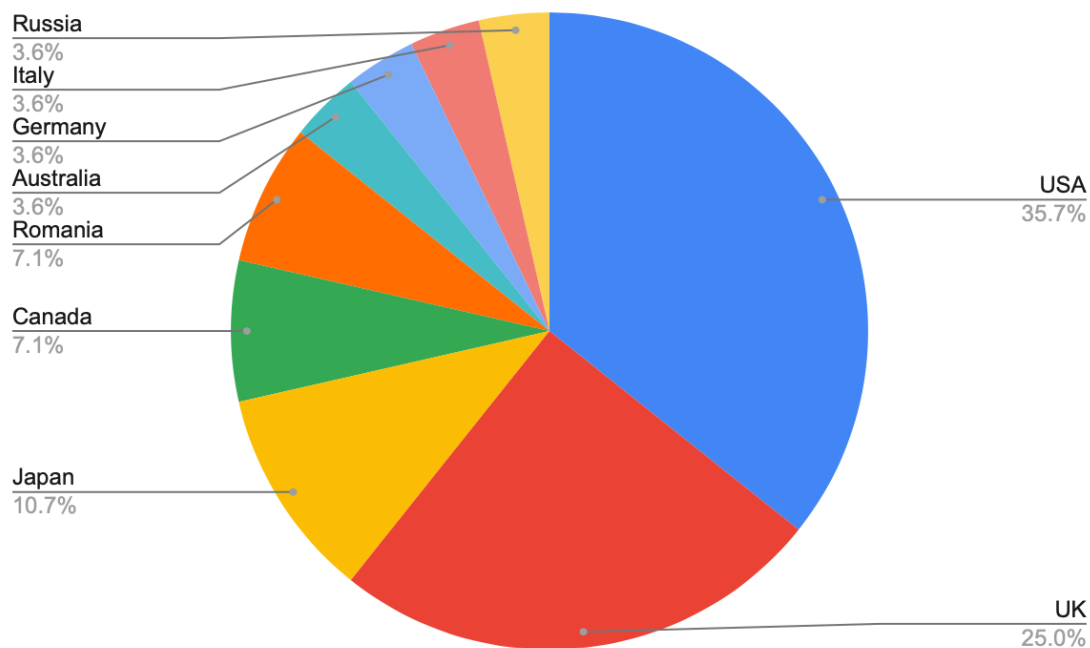
### 3. Highest degree



### 4. Years of teaching

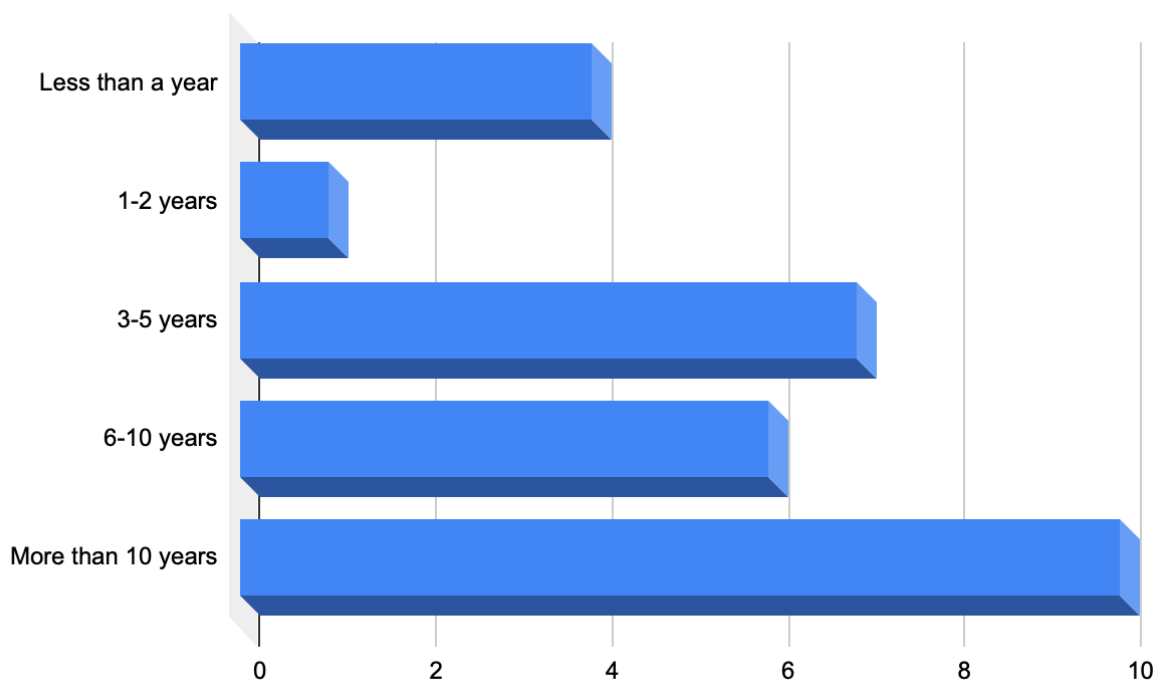


## 5. Nationality



## II. JOINING THE SIG, PARTICIPATION, INTERESTS

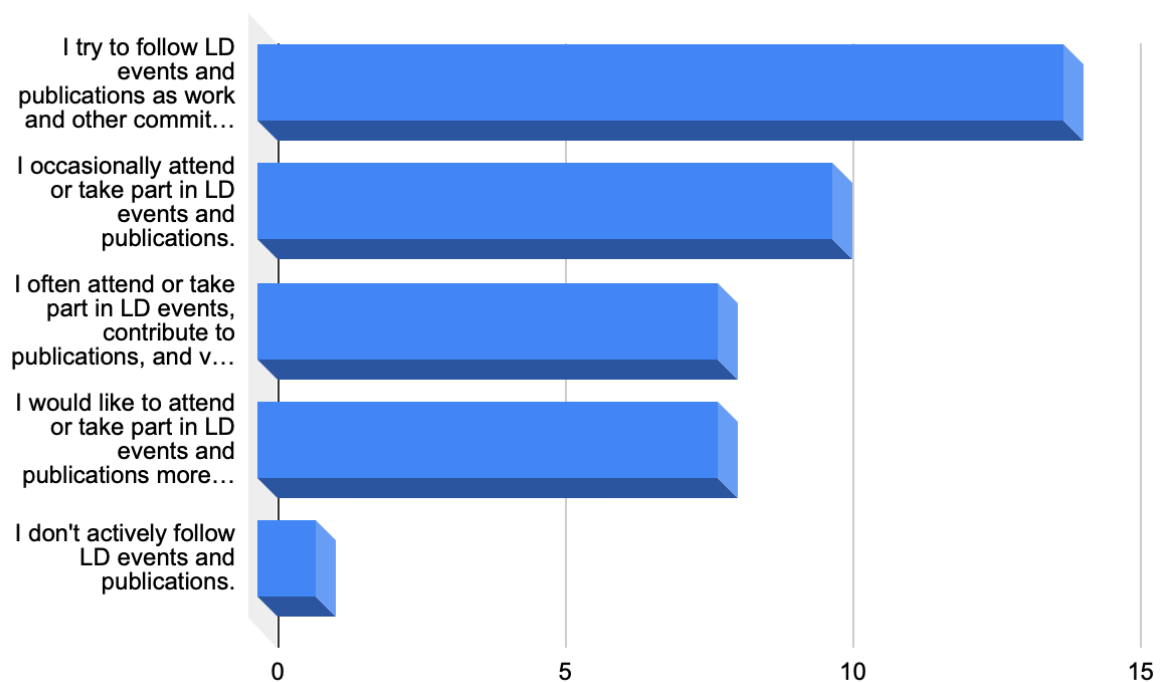
### 1. How long have you been a member of the SIG?



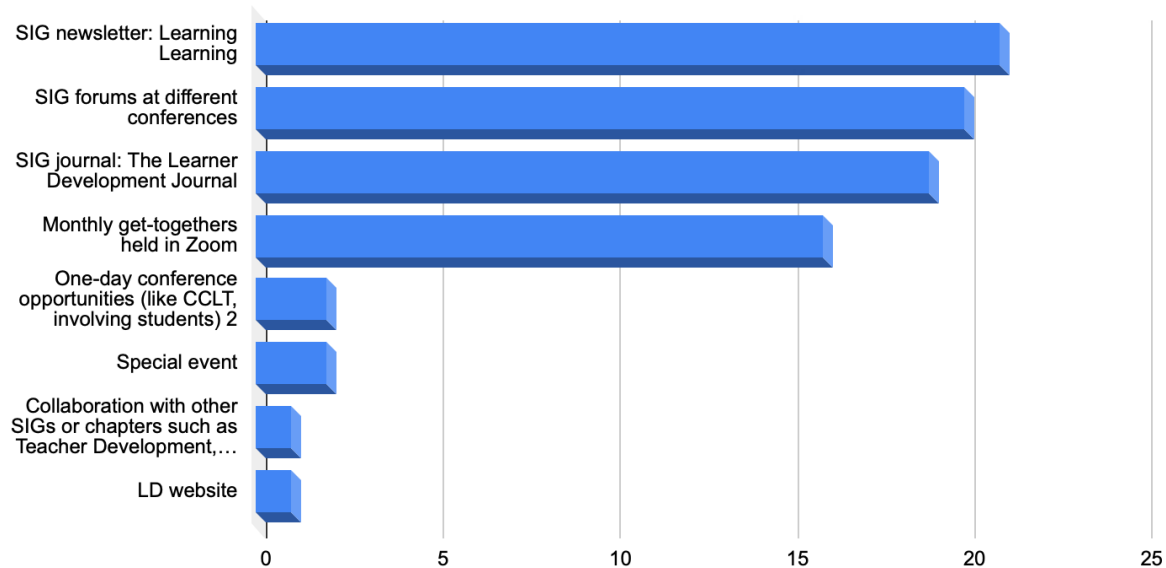
## 2. What attracted you to the LD SIG?



## 3. How would you describe your membership status?

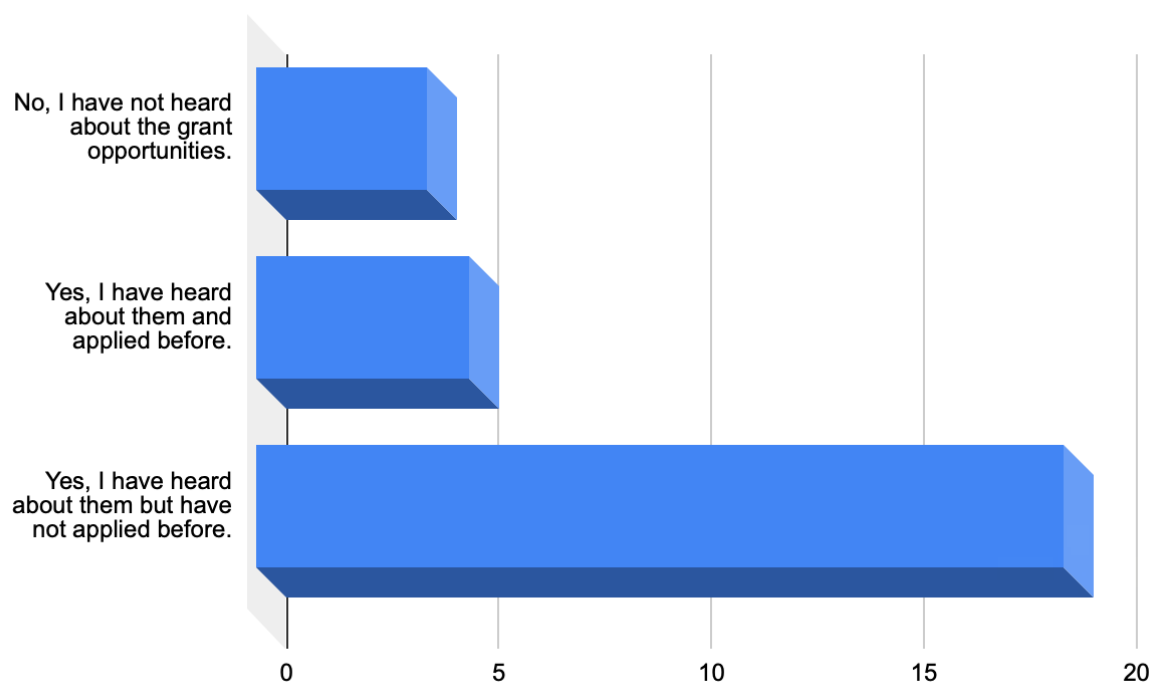


#### 4. Which of the following areas of the SIG's activities are you most interested in?



### III. GRANTS

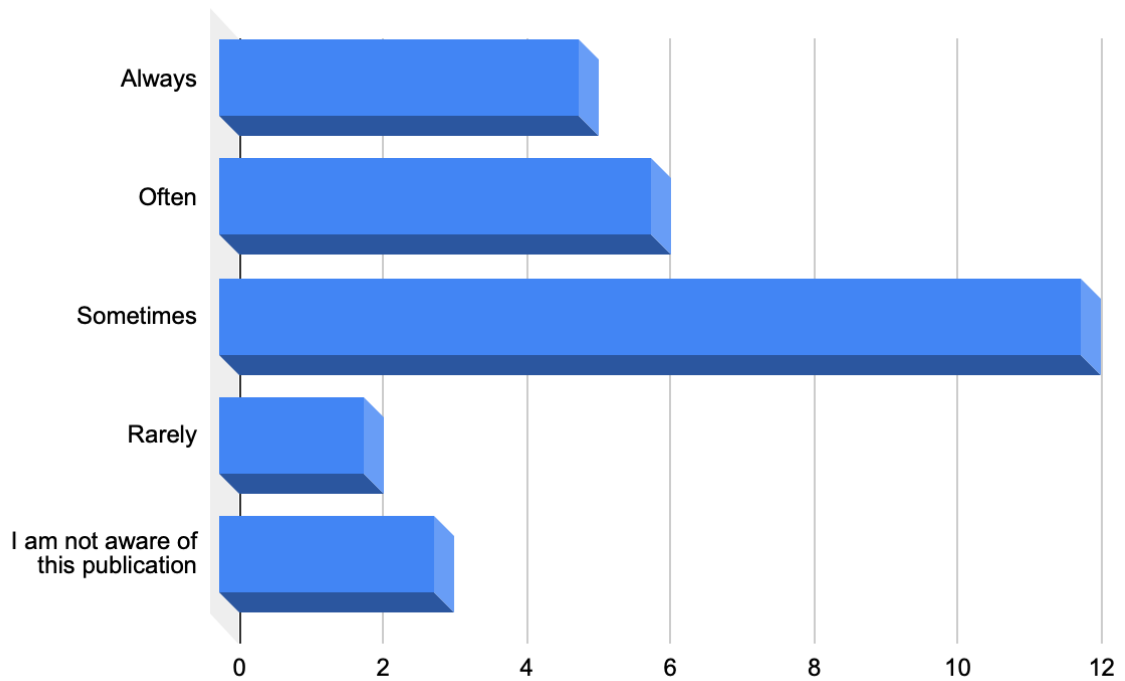
#### 1. Are you aware of the LD SIG grant opportunities offered as a part of your membership?



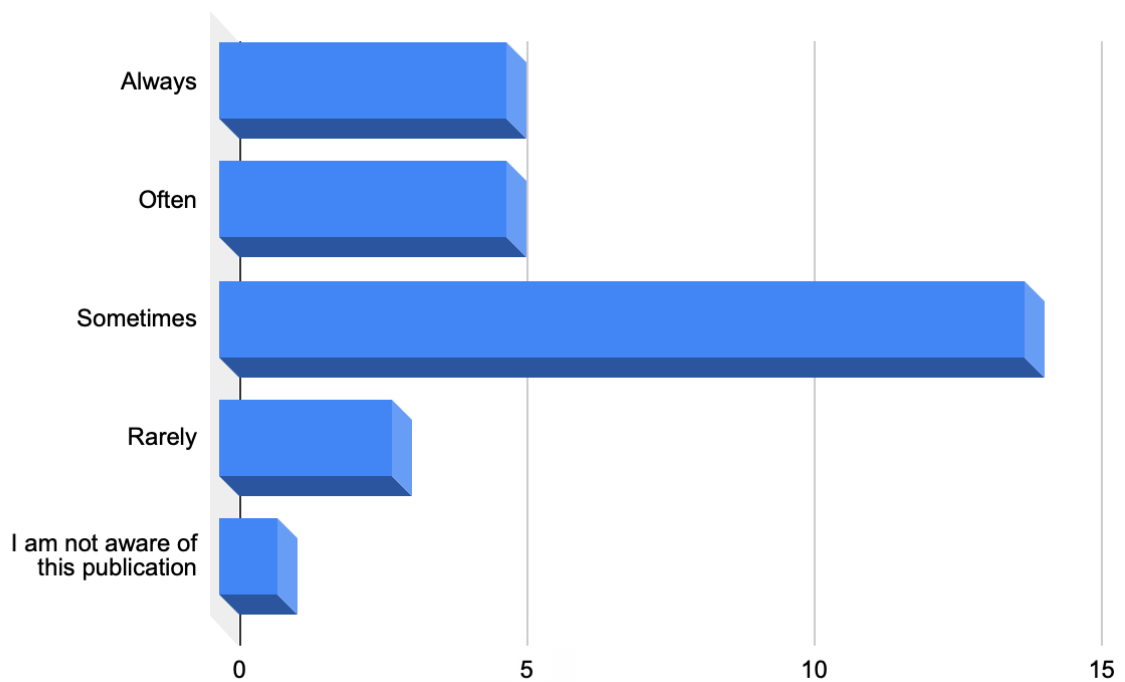


## IV. PUBLICATIONS

1. How often do you read our newsletter *Learning Learning* (LL), which is published in the spring and autumn each year?



2. How often do you read the LD SIG's *Learning Development Journal* (LDJ), which is published in November or December each year?



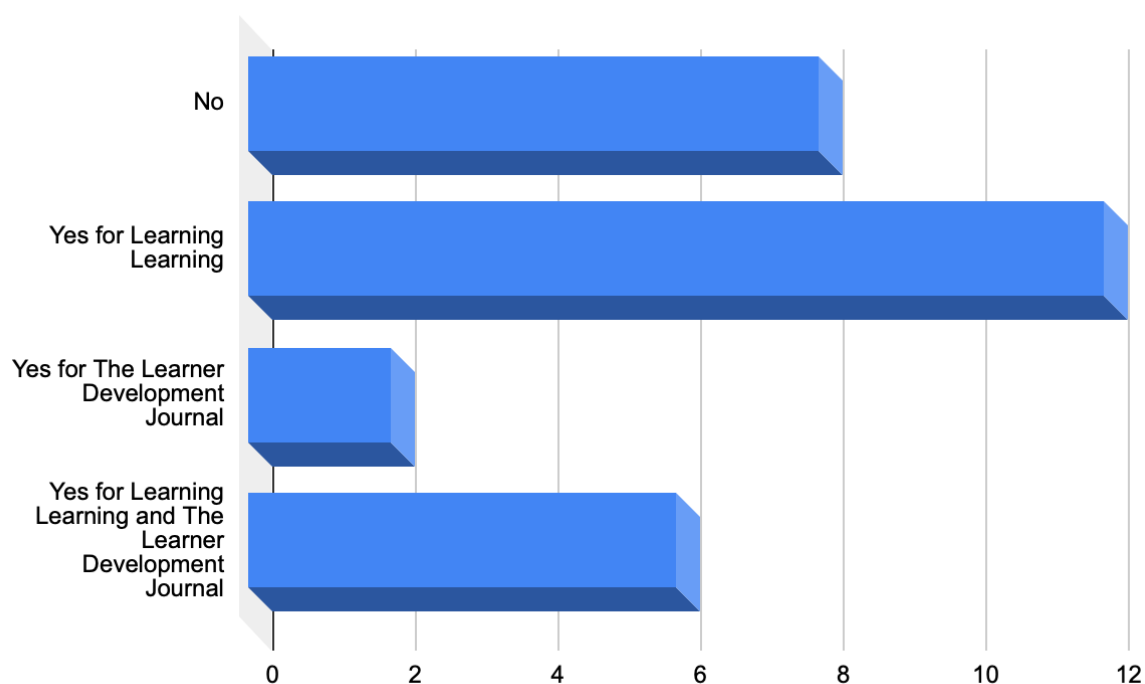
**3. Learning Learning (LL) includes writing in various formats that relate to people's ideas, reflections, experiences, and interests to do with learner development, learner autonomy, and teacher autonomy. Please share your impressions of the range of different writing in LL, and what you find particularly useful or interesting about LL.**

- *Being an editor has challenged me to improve my editing skills and work with people to help them get their story in print. It is a very enjoyable publication.*
- *One thing I like about LL is that you can feel the writers' voices. It has the features of a newsletter, an academic journal, and a forum of sorts - I like that it has a bit of everything for everyone, from hardcore researchers to language practitioners.*
- *I see Learning Learning as a community space for teachers and students interested in learner development to write, share, and respond about practices, puzzles, and conundrums that they have experienced or experienced in their learning. LL has always encouraged many different kinds of writing, of different lengths, and importantly has avoided becoming overly "academicised." A lively space for engaged, reflective, stimulating, unexpected writing about many different aspects of LD is how I see LL.*
- *I enjoy reading this newsletter in general, but for me the most interesting parts are related to the two main topic - Self-Access and students' autonomy at the University level.*
- *The feature articles are good. Members' Voices also make it easy to publish and keep us feeling like there is a social side of the SIG.*
- *There is always a topic of relevance or interest every time I read LL.*
- *It's cute. I prefer to focus on the LDJ.*
- *LL has changed since its inception with Naoko Aoki as bilingual. The conference reflections are particularly useful.*
- *I'm not sure because I don't really have time to read it now.*
- *In JALT we need to have various gateways for people to get involved with their writing for publication, so by having Learning Learning and the Learner Development Journal, the widest range of opportunities is created for the writers and readers.*
- *My involvement in LL has been to support both editors and writers, particularly with the latter, to help them develop another scholarly voice that is not restricted to the stereotypical impersonal clinical voice (one which I found has been in use in a major UK graduate program).*
- *I think it's great.*
- *There is a wide range of writing opportunities in the LL. Probably it should be more stated publicly that the LL seeks a decidedly less formal academic writing style that incorporates personal details in a 1st person voice with a degree of self-disclosure that endears to readers rather than critical researchers.*
- *Featured articles and conference reports*
- *Still building a picture*
- *I enjoy the variety itself, all the different kinds of contributions. The "Stories of Learning and Teaching Practices" is always engaging and thought-provoking.*
- *It's very well put together, but usually a newsletter is shorter. I wonder if more people would read it if it was shorter and sent more often.*

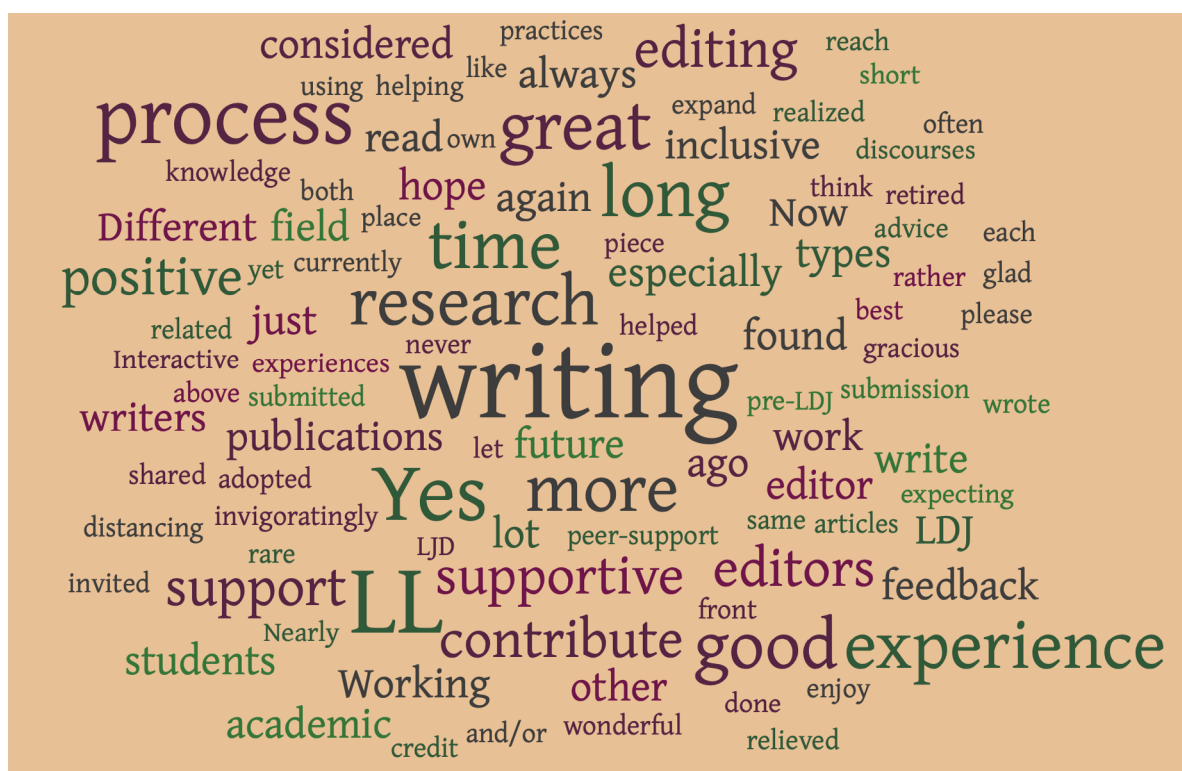
**4. The Learner Development Journal (LDJ) is published once a year. Each issue of the LDJ focuses on a particular learner development theme and follows a Community of Practices approach over a period of approximately 18 months in which contributors work together, under the guidance of the editors, to share, respond to, and develop their research and writing. Please share your impressions of the range of different writing in LDJ, and what you find particularly useful or interesting about LDJ.**

- *Interesting publication venue.*
- *I am impressed with the high quality of the publication and the talent of the editors and contributors.*
- *I really, really appreciate the open peer review setup that LDJ offers, and I promise myself all the time to contribute with some writing as well. I think LDJ has strong editorial leadership and could (should?) cater to wider audiences. The format that LDJ offers (18-month development process, guidance, co-creation, etc.) is coherent with the reality of academic research in the field of independent learning. It should get more exposure, within the SIG and outside of it. Now, I feel LDJ is like a small hidden gem, and you need to look for it to know that it is out there.*
- *LDJ is different from many other journals in its concept and aims. As one of the founders of the journal I am grateful to all the editors, reviewers, contributors, as well as members of the journal steering group, for all their work and contributions. It is just amazing that we will soon (in May this year) launch a Call for a Theme and Editors for Issue 9 of the LDJ. The range of writing in LDJ is, I feel, one of its great strengths --- as is the LDJ's commitment to supporting writers in developing their research and writing through a Communities of Practices approach.*
- *The engagement over a period of a year is an amazing opportunity. Talking over a piece of writing with colleagues and editors is challenging but extends the range of influences you can come into contact with. The final product may not show all of the discussions that went into it but it is a good quality journal.*
- *LDJ in 2022 was insightful and timely.*
- *The research is good, so I read it to get ideas.*
- *Again, I rarely actually read it so it's hard to say, but I think the rotating, collaborative editorial teams dealing with issues each time is a good way to keep the journal lively and engaged.*
- *My interest in the LDJ depends on the nature of the issue. As a longtime member of the LD, I prefer those issues edited by LD members but I do welcome the fresh perspectives of the issues by guest editors.*
- *My reading interest admittedly fluctuates depending on the issue's focuses. I wonder with the guest edited issues, how much do these sync with the LD ethos.*
- *I think LDJ is a forum in which people can experiment with different genres to express most authentically their practitioner research experiences. I hope LDJ remains distinct from other teaching/learning journal by promoting research and writing that captures the essence of exploratory practice and which leads to real professional growth.*
- *Not sure yet*
- *It is a wonderful opportunity for teachers, especially those new to research to submit their work.*

### 5. Have you ever written for *Learning Learning* or *The Learner Development Journal*?



### 6. If you chose one of the "yes" options, what was your experience like of writing for *Learning Learning*?



## 7. If you chose one of the "yes" options, what was your experience like of writing for *The Learner Development Journal*?



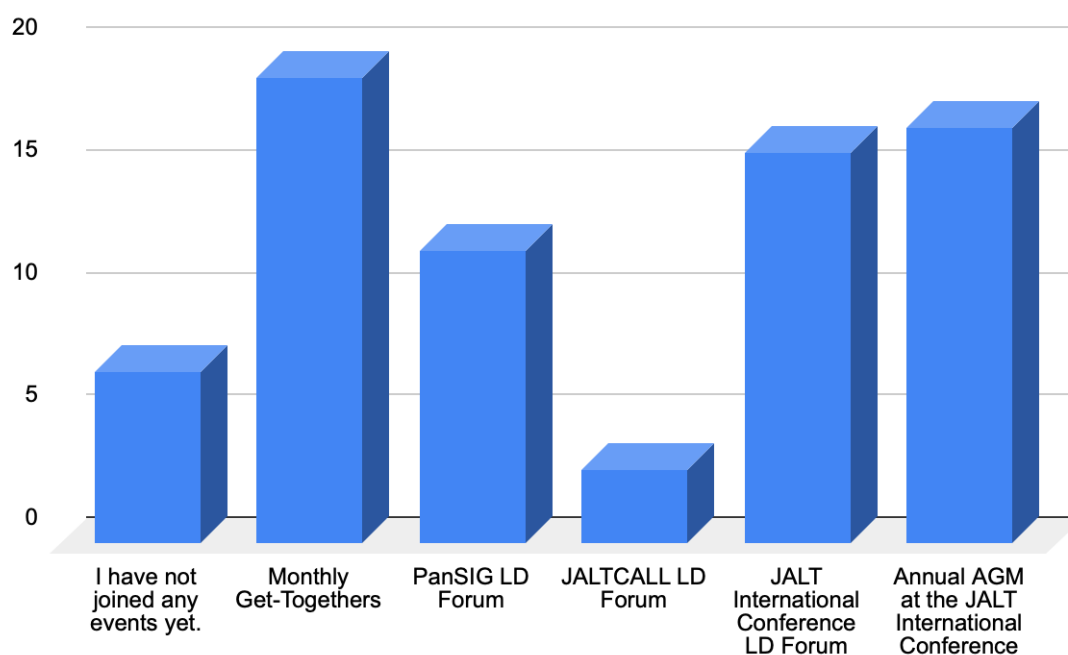
## 8. Please write any feedback/suggestions/questions you have for our SIG publications.

- *Need DOI for all publications.*
- *We need more editors in LL!*
- *I think we need more advertising outside of the "usual circles" and, most importantly, we need a unified website for announcements and publications.*
- *Keep on going!*
- *I will send you my feedback in a message; I am also interested in contributing for our SIG publications.*
- *Thank you for keeping me updated!*
- *Keep up the good work.*
- *Thanks for all you do for the LD SIG community.*
- *I wish more of our members would contribute more regularly. I feel those who have not published and are in need of writing opportunities, would be able to see that the LD SIG editors (particularly that of the LL) endeavor greatly to help them publish and do not revel in the role of being attack watchdogs, but work as encouragers.*
- *Keep on saving archives! We had a gap for about 10 years, where we had to hunt for the original pdf files with former editors or anyone who had them.*
- *It would be good to give over a little time in the LD zoom meetings to discuss publishing ideas. I haven't published much and it would be good to get feedback from people with more experience*
- *I think they do a great job. I really admire it. But sometimes I have the feeling they have a tendency, I cannot express this exactly in words. I am interested but this is a different kind of community and communication style.*
- *Thanks for the effort and hard work as the teams change each year.*

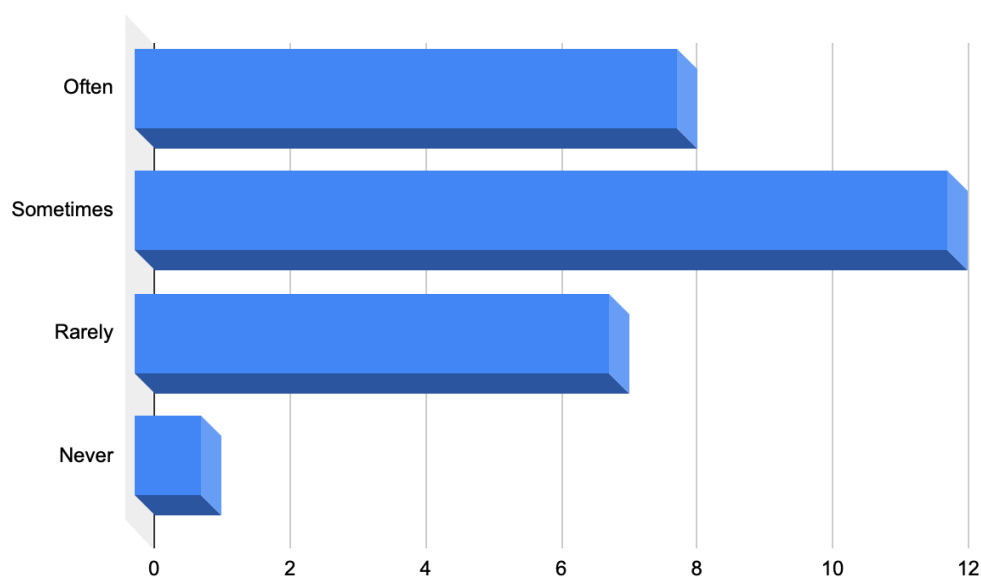
- *Keep up the variety, maintain transparency, and when you come up with an out-of-the-box novel conceptualization make sure you follow it all the way thru to an acceptable stage of implementation that can be understood by editors and explained in specific, concrete detail to authors so everyone is on the same page and no one is left hanging.*
- *Good to get information regarding learner development field.*

## V. EVENTS

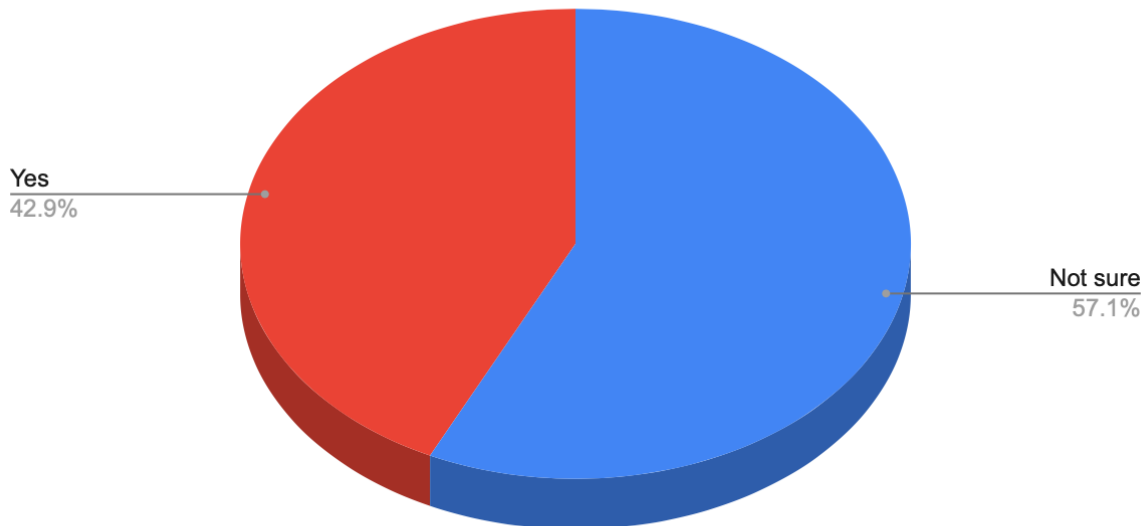
### 1. What SIG events have you been previously involved in? (You may check multiple options.)



### 2. How often do you participate in SIG Events?



### 3. Would you like more sector or topic-focused events/ get-together/ collaborations/ opportunities?



### 4. If you responded "yes" to the previous question, please share some examples of what you think would be interesting for you and other SIG members.

- *I hope that CCLT will be able to continue.*
- *My main interests are reflection and learning awareness - I hope these can be of interest to other members as well.*
- *Content-based learning, project-based learning, critical literacy, and ... learner autonomy*
- *Topic not sector. The topics you wrote above look good. Global issues, CALL, CLIL, ethnography, qualitative methodology, also interesting.*
- *Not sure...since LD topics are often student-focused and practitioner-friendly*
- *I think there needs to continue to be a "weaving" of sector-based and theme/topic-based things held at the different events and then the presenters and audience are drawn to what is available either (a) more specific to them, (b) more general, or (c) possibly of less interest ... and that is ok... Only "generalizing" somewhere in the middle of the field does not drill down specifically enough in some areas at some times/events. That balance of breadth and depth needs to be looked at in the annual planning (something I also felt was well-managed at LD) and in collaboration between the different organizing chairs and sub-committees envisioning the topics and format for the different events to maximize what is provided to members and the broader community.*  
*- But this is already being done far better at LD than in many JALT SIGs (which I am also a member of) ...*
- *Learner identities; post-study (i.e., after graduation) learning*
- *Secondary education, learner autonomy*



- *learner-User identities, learning and using language(s) beyond school and into life (includes autonomy)*
- *I hope the Get-togethers can become more focused by asking individuals to make 'mini-presentations' about their LD interests and for other participants to discuss and respond to what they hear.*
- *Interdisciplinary Learning Approaches, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, Cultural Competence in Education, Student Well-being and Mental Health, Inclusive Education Practices, Language Acquisition and Multilingualism, and Environmental Education*
- *I am interested in EMI and knowledge rich curriculum*

## 5. Please write any feedback or suggestions you have for our SIG events.

- *I appreciate the LD events as it is a gathering place to talk, meet other people, and bring my students. Thank you for the dedication of the LD officers and volunteers who make it all possible. This SIG will always be my place to come back to within JALT.*
- *The main issue that prevents me from participating more is that having two - soon to be three - kids that my evenings and weekends automatically become family time, and the SIG events tend to be on those days and times (which I understand and is the obvious choice, just unfortunately it rarely works for me)*
- *Keep on going!*
- *The Conference held at Gakushuin "Learning for Change and Action, Making a Difference for the Future" was enlightening.*
- *As it is an anniversary year, if there is a big event, the publicity, date setting announcement of the date to other organizers in JALT, should have happened 6 to 10 months in advance of the event.// It would be nice to do CCLT maybe at Otsuma, and that could be a small event. //Online events are cheaper and eco friendly and good for outreach but of course we miss the social aspect. //It would be nice to have a conference dinner. If we don't want to organise it then collaborate with another SIG who do want to organise it, but not one that is too big. Actually events with CUE were good but it depends.*
- *I've enjoyed them over the years because of the interaction.*
- *There always seems to be a good vibe, with a group of people involved in the planning and execution so that no one person feels (or seems!) burnt out and is then likely willing to carry on with another round and building familiarity, a chain of processes to improve on, and a solid legacy to pass on to the next committee taking on organizing... building a framework I think is important, more so in volunteer organizations and that is where some underfunded, inactive, top heavy (with only the same people doing everything all the time), same ol' same ol' for SIGs and their program delivery routines suffer in attracting executive, events committees, and ideas, and eventually active members at the events and "working on" the SIG itself. Sustainability is important!*
- *I did attend the CEGLOG conference and really enjoyed it! Extremely motivating event and I appreciated that it was online.*
- *Try to keep them hybrid and low to no cost as much as possible (especially for students and first-time non-JALT attendees).*
- *The Get-togethers on Sundays 2-5 always are at the same time as the Kanda Advising Certificate program. That's why I cannot attend. Having written this, I help plan the LD SIG original get-togethers and we planned the date and time first, lol.*
- *Thanks a lot! :)*
- *The LD SIG events are really stimulating and collaborative, but there is but ...*



