On a sunny Wednesday morning, Sandhya wraps up her class, a small group studying Hindi at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in Arlington, VA. This Wednesday afternoon, one of the two times a month when no classes are held, she can focus on her own professional development. Today, she will spend the afternoon in a training session on task-based language teaching to enhance her skills as an instructor.

Originally from India, Sandhya teaches Hindi to Foreign Service personnel who are assuming official job responsibilities in India in a few months. Sandhya is one of hundreds of teachers at the School of Language Studies (SLS) at FSI, the training arm of the Department of State. She and her colleagues work to prepare Foreign Service employees and their family members for living and working overseas.

Sandhya is a fairly typical member of the staff in the School of Language Studies. She obtained her college degree in education at a university in Delhi. So when she first came to FSI, she was ready for the job of language teaching. But she could not be fully prepared for the unique aspects of teaching in our school, or for working with our specialized student population.

High-Stakes Training
At FSI, we are in the training business. We prepare people for a job. Our students are highly accomplished professional adults with specific language needs for the tasks they will perform overseas.

After studying one of about 70 different languages for 6–10 months, our students go to work at American embassies and consulates around the globe representing our country, responding to crises, and defending and advancing our national interests. They need skills like engaging with people using social media online, reading newspapers, delivering presentations, appearing on local TV, coordinating logistics with local law enforcement officers, conducting visa interviews, or running meetings. At FSI, classes are very small and the training is intensive and focused. Language training is a full-time job for our students. Our teachers help them learn the language to reach very high levels of proficiency in a short amount of time. Our students are learning languages at a breakneck speed, and we do everything in our power to facilitate this learning.

The ongoing professional development program at the School of Language Studies is essential in supporting language and culture instructors like Sandhya to do their jobs efficiently and competently. It provides them with professional development opportunities that meet their many needs and help them fine-tune their skills to provide the best training possible to our students.

A Culture of Sharing
To help teachers be more effective, we came up with a simple solution: We help ourselves. The few people running the staff development program at the School of Language Studies bring people together and provide support and a framework for peer-to-peer training in our organization. For many years now, the school has been cultivating a culture of sharing and a strong sense of community where we support each other in our professional journeys. Sharing our expertise...
is crucial to our growth as teaching professionals. We rely on our collective knowledge and learn from one another’s experiences to continue to develop as language teachers.

From the first day a teacher starts working with us, he or she is supported by a network of more experienced colleagues who are there to help. New instructors have mentors guiding them through the first weeks and months, arranging for class observations and helping them identify resources and appropriate training events. Faculty members lead workshops for their colleagues on topics such as teaching conversation and interaction, cross-cultural conflict in the language classroom, or classroom management for adult professionals. All new teachers, whether experienced or brand-new to the profession, participate in the new instructor orientation within the first 6 months of starting on the job. Russian language instructor Armen, who recently participated in the workshop, says: “The orientation provided opportunities to connect with my colleagues, to share my experiences, and to get exposed to a variety of new ideas and insights. All of that was very motivating, and provided a renewed focus on the important work we are doing here at the FSI.” All the presenters and facilitators in the 2-week long workshop are SLS staff members who volunteer their time and expertise to make their colleagues’ transition into a new environment and a new way of teaching a smooth one.

Passion for Teaching

Most of the hundreds of training sessions we organize every year for the language instructors at SLS are delivered by our own staff members. Our program grows and changes constantly to meet our needs and help us face new challenges. Twice a month, an afternoon is dedicated to the professional development of our staff. We offer face-to-face workshops, and presentations and we organize book clubs, discussion groups, and open houses. On an average staff development afternoon, we provide 10–12 concurrent sessions on topics ranging from language teaching principles and teaching techniques through communication skills and instructional technology to learning about our students’ job-related needs. The active involvement of hundreds of our colleagues keeps the program going and growing. They give of themselves and their time freely and instill a passion for the craft in all who are open and willing.

Creative Formats to Encourage Engagement

Laura, a Portuguese instructor from Brazil, often leads SMART Board Clinics for anyone who needs a bit of help with using the interactive whiteboards installed in every classroom. For years, language instructors like Laura have been facilitating the clinics—open house sessions that focus on problem-solving and hands-on practice with the SMART Board or mobile devices. There is no presentation or lecture at a clinic; people bring their questions and problems related to the tool, and facilitators and the other participants help solve them. Our motto is come when you can, learn what you need, leave when you have to.

Laura has an infectious smile and inexhaustible enthusiasm, and she is eager to share her expertise with her colleagues. “I like to facilitate,” she says, “because I can meet my colleagues during the clinics and it’s amazing, because it’s a moment of sharing. It’s not about you teaching your colleagues. Of course, you’re there as an ‘expert’ on the SMART Board, but at the same time you’re also learning things. It’s about learning together.”

Our in-service professional development program started over 25 years ago. Initially, it consisted of workshops delivered by language program supervisors and outside experts a few times a year. As our numbers grew and our students’ needs became more and more complex, our staff’s needs were changing as well. The School’s leadership decided to dedicate two afternoons a month to the staff’s professional development that are set in stone. Language teachers have regular opportunities to participate in professional development events or engage in independent study during these times. With growing numbers and demand, we had to get creative to meet the new challenges. We started delivering training in a variety of new ways to engage our instructors. In addition to traditional face-to-face workshops and presentations, we began experimenting with different formats that relied more and more on our own staff as experts. We began offering clinics, discussion groups, Teacher-to-Teacher sharing sessions, demos, open houses, and share fairs. We made webinars from professional organizations such as ACTFL and TESOL available to our staff to view in groups and created an internal site for sharing materials and professional development resources. We tried every suggestion we received for a new form of training to see if it would succeed. Most did.

One such success story is our Read, Reflect, and Discuss sessions. The suggestion came from staff, and for years now they have been a popular way to engage colleagues who enjoy reading about recent trends or research and want an opportunity to discuss their implications for the classroom. These sessions are facilitated by a volunteer who selects the reading—a research paper on improving language learning with cognitive psychology, for example, or an article from The New York Times on how to give effective negative feedback. Participants read the selected text before the session and then get together for a discussion facilitated by one of their own colleagues. German instructor April says, “Read, Reflect and Discuss sessions provide an opportunity to polish core skills alongside new ones. We can pool our best ideas and find solutions to our biggest challenges. Based on professional literature, the discussions allow us to convert sound theories into solid practices as part of a dynamic collaboration.”

Empowering Experience

Facilitating a training session for colleagues is an excellent professional development opportunity in itself, but getting people interested
and engaged may be somewhat challenging. In large part, getting people involved is about empowering them by encouraging and supporting their efforts, and by emphasizing that their knowledge and experience is worth sharing. It’s also about getting to know your colleagues and figuring out what their strengths are so that you can build a network of trainers in your organization.

Motivating and rewarding people for their efforts in ways that really matter to them is extremely important as well. The staff development program keeps track of the sessions that our staff members deliver and we provide this information to their supervisors every year. But one of the most successful ways to motivate people is to show genuine appreciation for their work; to do it publicly and do it often. Over the years, we have created a number of ways to reward our most active and inspiring presenters.

Every month, we send out a survey to the participants of the sessions delivered that month and ask them to vote for their favorite. The winner of the Best Session of the Month title is announced in the school’s monthly newsletter, and at the end of the year, all winners become members of the Staff Development Hall of Fame. We also issue the Presentation of the Year award to the presentation that received the most votes in their month, along with the Presenter of the Year award to the staff member who delivered the most presentations during the year. Every year, we host a ceremony and reception in appreciation of the hard work and dedication our colleagues show to the professional development of the staff. All the people who deliver sessions for our staff development program do so on their own initiative using time between or after classes to develop training for their colleagues. Every single presenter is invited to the award celebration as they all deserve acknowledgement and thanks.

**Getting Involved Is Easy**

“The staff development program supports presenters throughout the development of a training session including establishing the framework of the presentation, providing useful strategies for delivery, and giving feedback on session design,” says Haiyan, who teaches Mandarin Chinese. She recently designed and delivered her third training session for her colleagues on fluency-building activities in the language class. She adds, “The mentoring and guidance offered by the professional development program nurtures me as a presenter and motivates me to contribute even more.”

Seeing their colleagues’ success encourages teachers to join in the training fun. One easy way to get involved is to lead a Teacher-to-Teacher session on one of the professional development afternoons, where instructors from across the school get together to share their ideas, techniques, or activities related to a specific topic, such as teaching reading at advanced levels or using movies in the classroom. A volunteer teacher selects a topic and brings an activity or two to the session. Her job is to lead the discussion on the topic and facilitate the sharing of activities among the participating teachers. Spanish instructors can see how their Arabic and Japanese colleagues solve a problem they are facing, swap activities, and learn from one another’s experience in a relaxed discussion with their peers.

Working with colleagues across different language sections and divisions strengthens instructors’ sense of community. One large-scale example of this is the SLS Share Fair that we hold a few times a year. Teachers volunteer to deliver poster presentations on a single topic. Visitors come by during the open event to see their colleagues’ work, to show support, to share ideas, and to get inspired. Since the first such event in 2009, we have hosted more than 20 share fairs on a variety of topics such as using the local community for language teaching, engaging and motivating students throughout the learning process, or creating fluency-increasing activities in and outside the classroom. Share fairs are extremely popular with staff all around the school because they address topics that are of concern to most teachers and create an opportunity to come together as professionals and learn from one another.

**Win-Win**

A number of elements make our ongoing professional development program successful. Our small but enthusiastic office provides support and a framework for the training. We reach out to our colleagues across the school to identify people who are interested in offering training and we mentor new presenters if needed. We help them develop sessions and coach them through the delivery process. We survey our staff to make sure the training content relates
directly to our teachers’ professional needs. We use convenient delivery formats; our sessions are short and focused. Participation in our program is voluntary, and everyone is welcome to join either as a presenter or as an attendee. We maintain attendance and facilitation records and we publicly acknowledge everyone’s efforts to keep our program going.

Figuring out what motivates people to excel is not easy. However, we know that everyone has an inherent desire to seek out new things and challenges, to exercise their capabilities, and to learn. Much more effective than a carrot or a stick, our home-grown staff development program supports individuals’ own intrinsic drive to learn, encouraging them to rise to a challenge and excel. It creates an environment where we are all engaged and inspired by each other and continue to grow professionally. It’s a win-win for all.

Eva Szabo is Head of Staff Development at the School of Language Studies, Foreign Service Institute, U.S. Department of State, Arlington, Virginia.

The following courses (each three graduate credits) will be offered in the Fall 2016 semester, which begins September 12.

- Foundations of Technology in Teaching and Learning
- Teaching Information and Media Literacies in the Digital World
- Web-Based Teaching and Learning: Design and Pedagogy
- Using Technology for Instructional Improvement: Research, Data and Best Practices

The last day to register is September 7. For more information, visit www.umuc.edu/actfl or contact the UMUC Corporate Learning Solutions office at 855-CLS-5300 or cls@umuc.edu.