

From the Associates



**Associates
Coordinator
Margit Szesztay
brings us news
from IATEFL's
Associates around
the world.**

Teachers' associations at the crossroads?

Before reading any further you might want to stop and consider the following questions:

- 1 Why did *you* decide to join IATEFL—or any other teachers' association (TA) you might be a member of?
- 2 Do you think of yourself as an *active* member? If yes, what does being active mean to you?

Why join a teachers' association?

Recently I took part in a think-tank meeting in Graz, Austria, focusing on possible future scenarios for IATEFL. Among other things, our group of seven voluntary leaders and members of IATEFL were wondering if *less tangible* reasons of the 'sense of belonging' type for joining an association were understood and emphasized enough by TAs themselves. We also discussed IATEFL's status and capacity as a *charity* organisation, brought into sharper relief by the Tsunami catastrophe in South-East Asia. We felt it would be worth adding 'the wish to help others in need' as an additional kind of motivation for getting involved in an association like ours. Wanting to highlight the more community related reasons for joining would have implications, for example, for what is printed on publicity materials, the types of articles published in a newsletter, as well as the whole social dimension of conferences and other professional events.

On the other hand, a TA might above all want to improve the more practical, tangible benefits to its members. In this case it will probably aim to increase the range and quality of the services it offers, for example, by making sure newsletters or journals are of a high standard and are received by members on time; conferences and other professional events are well organised with excellent professional content, etc.

Acting on the less tangible reasons for joining a TA might be central to recruiting and retaining future members. This has to do with the range and quantity of products and services offered to ELT professionals today. In many parts of the world (though of course not all) people are swamped by offers of various teaching resources as well as by advertising related to professional events and courses. In our part of Europe, for example, a plethora of ELT products and services are available these days as compared to the little that was there ten or so years ago when many local TAs were first set up. At that time TAs were one of the few providers of up-to-date professional information and exchange. Now teachers' needs for a wide range of ELT products and services are (at least in part) being met by other organisations, on-line and by a host of commercial institutions.

Why get involved in *leading a teachers' association*? What is needed to do the job well?

I think what people of energy and drive have in common in the ELT world is *commitment* to our profession, commitment to wanting to make a difference and change things. I see this as the key motivating factor for getting involved in leading a TA. However, I think that many more things are needed apart from the initial drive in order for someone to find their place as a committee member and to derive fulfilment and satisfaction from the work they do.

Based on my own committee experience, the most important other requirements are the following:

- task clarity,
- time,
- skills,
- team mindedness, and
- responsibility.

Task clarity is extremely important for organisational leadership as work is divided up within a team. Unless you have a very detailed description of who is responsible for what, important areas are likely to be left out. The problem is that many committee roles leave plenty of space for uncertainty about what they entail. This is why all the tasks which need to be done should be part of somebody's *job description*. This of course doesn't mean that one person is responsible for *doing* everything stated in the job description—but it does mean

that s/he is responsible for making sure that the job gets done.

The second requirement on my list is *time*. This seems obvious, but members joining a committee sometimes forget that they need to give *regular* attention to whatever tasks they have undertaken. Also, with teachers being overworked and underpaid in many parts of the world, this can be a serious obstacle to finding people to work for committees. In fact, I think it's a good idea when looking for committee members to give a rough estimate of the time that will be required of them (e.g. 2–4 hours a week or 2–3 days a month).

In addition to knowing what to do, and putting time aside to do it, most jobs on committees require certain practical *skills*. A newsletter editor will obviously need to be skilled at editing, a webmaster will need to know how to set up and maintain a website, and the treasurer will need to know something about putting together a budget, to list a few key examples. However, all these skills can also be learnt on the job. In fact, it can make the job itself more attractive if there are developmental opportunities involved, e.g. the chance to attend a course, or to learn from a more experienced colleague.

For me, *team mindedness* is the willingness and ability to work as a member of a team. While I see this first and foremost as a question of personality and attitude, there are also a number of skills which can facilitate working in a team. For example, the ability to communicate clearly and effectively during meetings is essential. In addition, I think that self-awareness and emotional maturity also help a lot. As do a sense of humour and light-heartedness. These qualities become especially important if people are getting bogged down trying to sort out a problem, or work through a conflict situation.

Perhaps the most crucial requirement, though, is a sense of *responsibility*. When you have a thousand other things to do (e.g. tests to correct for the next day, lessons to plan, as well as family and friends to attend to), it can be very hard to remind yourself of your voluntary TA tasks. As president of IATEFL Hungary, I have learnt that the more responsibility committee members take, the easier it is for the president to do her job. For example, if everyone takes responsibility for carrying out action points

agreed on at a meeting, there is less need for the president to remind, check up on work, and nudge people on.

Why stay involved in running a teachers' association?

Just as we differentiate between initial motivation and sustaining motivation in the long process of foreign language learning, I think it is also important to think about what keeps volunteer committee members going. There are six things that I'd like to mention here:

- sense of achievement,
- acknowledgement,
- recognition,
- rewards,
- member of a good team, and
- personal/professional development.

Sense of achievement perhaps plays the most central role in sustaining motivation. It helps people to realise that responding to e-mails, taking part in meetings, soliciting articles, putting together applications forms etc. do bear

fruit. This is why it is really important for volunteers to recognise and celebrate their joint achievements, such as a successful conference, or even a newsletter hot off the press!

Acknowledgement and *recognition* can also be important in boosting motivation. For me acknowledgment means getting credit from friends and fellow committee members for work that one has done. Recognition, though very similar, to me implies that the credit given for something comes from a slightly wider public. It could take the form of a 'thank you' letter, or flowers given, for example, to the organisers of a conference. There could also be *rewards* attached—such as opportunities for travel or the chance to participate in a summer course.

For me one of the most important motivating factors in doing voluntary work is the feeling that I am a *member of a good team* of committed and enthusiastic professionals—and who are simply people that are fun to be with! And finally, I think there needs to be a sense of *personal/professional development*. This could

be linked to learning new skills, coming across new ideas and being challenged to think differently, as well as having one's personal and professional horizon's widened by meeting and working with people from different cultural backgrounds, for example.

So, what do I conclude?

The impression that it is increasingly hard to find active members and people ready to take on voluntary work for TAs is one that I also share. In many parts of the world TAs are faced with a new social reality: an accelerating pace of life, increased professionalisation, as well as the growing commercialisation of ELT.

Against this backdrop, I think there is still—perhaps more than ever—a need for TAs which can instill in their members a strong sense of belonging to a wider international community of caring and committed professionals. In order to do so, TAs have to become more conscious of what they can offer and of what helps or hinders their work. I believe in this way we can tap into the vast energy source that language educators can create together.

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For further information contact: Helen Crossley
School of Languages, Leeds Metropolitan University
Headingley Campus, Leeds, LS6 3QS
E-Mail: h.crossley@leedsmet.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0)113 283 7440
www.leedsmet.ac.uk/lcif/sol

