Happy Spring

Spring is a season for growing and flourishing. The Brain SIG has certainly been growing. We now have over one hundred members! Unfortunately, the publications arm of the SIG has lain dormant these last couple of months due to a medical emergency (sorry!). Now, however, with this April issue, we are ready to once again provide interesting and informative articles and discussion about the mind, the brain and education.

Last fall, at the JALT 2015 National conference in Shizuoka, several members of the Brain SIG presented their thoughts and ideas. Some presenters were seasoned pros while others were new to standing in front of their peers. Here are two reports from Brain SIG members John Duplice and Allison Dansie.

Presentation Report One

Book Review and Discussion on “Mind, Brain, & Education Science: A Comprehensive Guide to the New Brain-Based Teaching.” by Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa

By John Duplice, Asia University

What started as an initial question to a colleague, “What’s the Brain SIG like?” turned into a head first plunge into Mind, Brain, and Education. I have been interested in the topic of neuro-education for some time and found on the JALT website the Brain SIG. As I investigated the SIG online, I found a past newsletter with an article written by a colleague of mine at Asia University. After asking her about the SIG, she put me in contact with Curtis Kelly and within a week I had started reading up on the discipline, was invited to the SIG forum Saturday afternoon at the JALT conference, and somehow invited to present the book I was reading, Mind, Brain, & Education Science by Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa.

I was apprehensive about presenting on a topic that I was just starting to learn myself. After choosing my first book into the field, I found out that the author of the book, Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa, actually presented at a recent Brain SIG conference in Kyoto. Here I was not only doing my first presentation for the Brain SIG, but I was following the author herself. What could I actually provide? Would I get her ideas wrong? This is where the focus on learning and reporting emphasized at the JALT event was the perfect first step for me into the discipline. I didn’t have to be an expert on the topic, I only had to bring what I learned to the table. I give a lot of kudos Marc Helgesen for coming up with this system

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that provides access to newbies such as myself into the field by getting involved from the onset.

With the five minutes allotted to present followed by five minutes of questions, I had to really focus on a specific part of the book. Before the presentation at the JALT forum, a group of teachers at Asia University got together to provide feedback on our upcoming presentations. At this gathering, I gave ten teachers a quiz on neuromyths from the book I was presenting on. Surprisingly, all but two teachers, who both happened to be involved in neuro-education, got most of the questions wrong. At the JALT presentation itself I started with the basic premise behind Mind, Brain, and Education (MBE) and then quickly brought up the neuromyth quiz. This was by far the most interesting and interactive part of my presentation.

Although most of the SIG members aced the quiz, there were a number of people who came to the Brain SIG for the first time and had similar results to the instructors I gave the quiz to at my university. This then led to a very engaging conversation on the topic among the three different groups whom I presented to.

There is no doubt that this event had a very positive impact on me. The week following the JALT Conference, I ordered numerous books on Mind Brain and Education, requested our university to subscribe to MBE Journals, and was invited to do a poster presentation on this topic in January at the English Language Teacher Symposium in Kanda, Tokyo. Coming away with such a positive experience, it is obvious why the Brain SIG is the fastest growing SIG in JALT.

Group photo from FAB 8: Kyoto (Kyoto Sangyo University, September 25th~27th 2015)
Tracey Tokuhama-Espinoza is in the second row from the front and is wearing a coral blouse with a white sweater.
This is the book that John Duplice discussed.


Presentation Report Two

Reflections on Presenting at JALT 2015
Brain-Based Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

By Allison Dansie, Kansai Gaidai University

We teachers are, at our very core, presenters. It’s what we do everyday, and yet there is something very different about presenting to colleagues than presenting to our students. Thus, I have to admit that I was slightly nervous in the moments leading up to my presentation “Brain-Based Vocabulary Teaching and Learning” at this year’s JALT conference. The fact that there are so many enthusiastic and knowledgable teachers within the field of neuro-education in Japan is both impressive and simultaneously daunting for those of us who consider ourselves ‘newbies’ in the field. That being said, I truly enjoyed presenting: my audience members were positive, seemed engaged, and were overall very supportive of what I had to say. I walked away feeling that I had not only shared my own ideas, but I had learned a lot from the audience members who I chatted with before and after my presentation.

When preparing my presentation, I wanted to approach brain-based vocabulary teaching from the viewpoint of a typical classroom teacher — someone who wants to understand the basic workings of the brain — but is at her core a practical classroom English teacher. For this reason, I chose to present basic explanations of a few core tenets of brain-based theory, and then show how learning these tenets has changed my own classroom teaching. I showed some simple ideas as to how I have changed my own classroom activities based on what I have learned from neuro-educational theory.

I’m planning to extend the presentation and to focus more specifically on episodic memory and how we can create classroom-based episodes that are linked to target vocabulary in order to enhance our students’ recall. A big thanks to those whose words have encouraged me to move forward on this, despite being a ‘newbie’.

“quickquote”

Experiences shape the brain, but the brain shapes the way we view experiences, too.

- Helen Fisher
Do you feel better when you the sun is shining? Have you ever had the winter ‘blues’? It turns out that exposure to sunlight really is correlated with positive mood and improved cognition. Read this study published in Environmental Health in 2009, and find justification for taking your students out to enjoy the cherry blossoms in the park.

Preparing for a presentation takes a significant amount of time. Why waste that effort? Share with others. If you have a presentation that you can give, please add your name and what you can present on to the Brain SIG Speaker Database. With the database, JALT chapters or organisations can see who could help them to learn more about Mind, Brain, and Education and request that a given speaker present to their group. Access the database here.

This is your SIG; let your voice be heard. If you have ideas for a great article that you would like to write up and submit to either the newsletter or the let us know. If a full article seems a bit daunting at this point, that's fine. Share other things that you find. Do you know any brain related (appropriate) jokes? Let us hear them? Have you heard any great quotations recently? Send them our way so that we can share them with the entire group. We can all learn through sharing our respective interests and ideas.