

FINDING IRISH LURKERS

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If you're trying to establish a study group, or to increase your numbers, how do you get the word out?

First, let us point out that it isn't unusual to think you are the only person for miles and miles around with an interest in the Irish language. Yet we have seen, with other groups that have thrived for years, that at their beginning meetings many of their members were surprised to find others interested in the language lurking, as it were, in their own backyards.

So the first lesson is to avoid a couple of assumptions: one, that there isn't anyone else out there, and more importantly, two, that if there were someone else studying the language in your area, you'd already know about it.

The simple truth is, if you haven't bumped into other Irish students with whatever you are doing now, looking for study buddies by the same methods isn't going to suddenly reveal a host of language enthusiasts.

That doesn't mean that you might not be crossing paths with them now. One group got started by including information about forming a study group in the announcement of a dance competition. It turned out that prospective Irish students had been attending the same events, but were unaware of each other.

And there's a second lesson: make a lot of noise about your interest. You have probably heard the advice that if you are looking for a new job, or even starting a business, you should mention it to absolutely everyone you know, and more than once. You can never tell when the officemate of your cousin's husband's sister is going to make the necessary connection.

That means vigorously pushing the "learn Irish" notion in all the circles you currently frequent. Let people at work know, your relatives know, your friends, your softball team. Naturally, tie into Irish events in your region. If Irish musicians pass through your neighborhood, ask them to make an announcement. Contact your local newspaper a few weeks before St. Pat's and suggest an interview or article about the language.

Which brings us to lesson three: you really don't know where your Irish students will be. Jessica Wagner, who leads a very successful group in Fargo, N.D., tells us she gets great results from tear-off sheets placed in coffeehouse bathrooms!

In our own case, Gaeltacht Minnesota was fielding shrinking beginner classes at our workshops once we saturated the usual Irish community channels with announcements. Then we landed in the St. Paul

Community Education catalog, aimed at an entirely different audience, and we have been very busy ever since!

The essential practice is to spread the word everywhere without trying to guess where your audience is. Get notices on coffeehouse, supermarket, workplace bulletin boards. Take advantage of any free ads or publicity you might have. Mention it on your FaceBook page. Make enough noise, long enough, and people just like you will hear you and get in touch.

And one more tip: look for "language junkies"! Besides our students who jumped in because of their heritage, because they enjoy the music, or because they are interested in history or lore from Ireland, there are many people who just like learning languages! So make your group known wherever people learn languages, any languages. It may not seem to make much sense to post a notice on the bulletin board of a French or German department at your local college, but trust us, some of the people who read those boards are looking for the next great language to try. And that could certainly be Irish.

The trick is not to try to reach a specific audience, but to broadcast your interest in Irish through as many channels as you can, for as long as you can. Help your fellow students find you. We know this has worked for other groups, and it will work for yours.

Patience and persistence produce results in recruiting students, just as they do in learning the language once you all get together.

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