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Effects of Drawing and Sharing a ‘Picture of Life’ in the First Session of a Mentoring Program for Experienced Learning Advisors

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Abstract

Since language learning relates to learners’ life events, Learning Advisors (advisors) who are professionals in promoting learner autonomy through conducting reflective dialogue with learners, often tap into learners’ life stories in advising sessions. The previous studies on the life narrative approach indicate that storytellers construct personal meaning and stronger self-image while telling their stories (Bruner, 1990; Erikson, 1968). Atkinson (1998) indicates that creating visual images ahead of time could help storytellers prepare to tell their life stories.

This study investigates the effects of drawing a ‘picture of life’ (PL) and sharing it in the first session of a professional development (PD) program where one-to-one mentoring sessions were conducted between five experienced advisors and the author during a period of six months. Data were collected from written journals and post-mentoring questionnaires. A qualitative analysis was conducted to investigate the effects of conducting the PL activity in the first session. The results showed that the PL activity not only helped the storytellers bring new insights and meanings to their professional and personal lives, but also it served as a ‘point to return to’ which became a strong thread throughout the following sessions.

Keywords: picture of life, narrative approach, professional development, advising in language learning, mentoring

Background

Advising in language learning (ALL) is a growing field in language education which focuses on supporting language learners become more autonomous in their learning (Benson, 2011; Mozzon-McPherson & Vismans, 2001; Mynard & Carson, 2012). This study sheds light on Learning Advisors (advisors) who are professional language educators dedicated to promoting learner autonomy by interacting with language learners through a unique use of dialogue. In general, 1) advisors work in tandem with self-access centers (SACs) which consist of educational elements such as resources, people, and systems to promote learner autonomy among language learners (Benson, 2011; Benson & Voller, 1997; Gardner & Miller, 1999), 2) advisors’ central goal is to help language learners become effective, aware,

and reflective learners by developing learners' ability to identify their language needs and manage their affective issues (Kato & Mynard, 2016; Mozzon-McPherson & Vismans, 2001; Mynard & Carson, 2012; Reinders, 2012; Yamashita, 2015), and 3) advisors need to develop professional knowledge and strategies in ALL by undergoing well-established professional development (PD) programs (Kato, 2012; Kato & Mynard, 2016; Kodate & Foale, 2012; Morrison & Nararro, 2012).

Mentoring for mutual learning

In this study, a mentoring program was introduced as an experienced advisors' PD program where a mentor (the author) conducted one-to-one sessions with the mentees (advisors). Mentoring was defined initially using a definition by Kram (1985) as a relationship between more-experienced mentors and less-experienced mentees, where mentors provide mentees with career support and psychosocial support (Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2007). This type of traditional mentoring approach is based on transmitting knowledge and skills from experts to novices and thus, the process is often directive and hierarchical, expecting to see improvement in mentees' performance (Ragins & Kram, 2007). On the other hand, the modern approach in mentoring perceives mentoring as a personal and professional relationship which focuses on transformation by broadening a mentee's world-view (Brockbank & McGill, 2006). This type of modern mentoring relationships induces 'mutual learning' where the dialogue between a mentor and a mentee will be co-constructed (Delaney, 2012).

Mentoring has also been introduced in teacher education to enhance the professional growth not only for novice teachers but for experienced teachers (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009). Previous research has shown that mentoring relationships reduce attrition among new teachers, improve confidence in teaching, and develop self-reflection skills (Delaney, 2012; Hobson et al., 2009; Kissau & King, 2014). Mentoring relationships become beneficial when the imbalance in power, such as significant differences in age or experience between the mentor and the mentee, is prevented (Brown, 2001; Delaney, 2012; Kissau & King, 2014). Furthermore, equality in relationships establishes trust and rapport which leads to mutual learning that also helps experienced professionals grow (Brown, 2001; Delaney, 2012).

Life story/life narratives

The effectiveness of mentoring largely relies on having a trust relationship which also applies to the advising relationship between an advisor and a language learner. To establish trust in the first session, advisors often tap into learners' life stories as language learning is connected with learners' life events. This process of exploring 'who the learner is' creates the foundation of a trust relationship and reveals the values that the learner has (Kato & Mynard, 2016). Karlsson (2012) investigated autobiographical narratives in advising and claims that storytelling in advising provokes self-reflexivity and helps learners become more autonomous language learners. The life narrative approach has also become more widely accepted in establishing PD programs for teacher education in the past decades (Clandinin, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Atkinson (1998) argues that the potential benefits of sharing a life story are gaining clearer perspectives on personal experiences and feelings, creating a stronger self-image, cherishing experiences and insights, gaining joy and inner peace, releasing burdens, creating community, changing something in our lives, understanding oneself better in a way one had not tried before, and giving a 'good' ending to the story (p. 25). When a life story is being told, it tends to create a new shared meaning between a storyteller and a listener as they together are collaborators composing and constructing a story (Atkinson, 2002; Bruner 1990; Yamada, 2000). In this regard, advisors have advantages to be a good life story interviewer as their job is to listen to learners attentively. In fact, advising strategies such as repeating, restating, summarizing, empathizing, asking metaphor questions, and giving positive feedback were repeatedly used in the sessions in this study.

Using a visual aid: Picture of life

Using visual aids is relatively common in ALL, life narratives, and clinical psychology. Techniques such as using photographs, drawing a time line or images, and making a collage are used in ALL and life story interviews in order to support storytellers in identifying the key events and feelings which those events carry. The Draw-a-Man test (Goodenough, 1926), the House Tree Person test (Buck, 1948), and the Baum test (Koch, 1952) are notable drawing approaches used in clinical psychology. In each case, a drawing is used as an effective approach to promote the dialogue between a storyteller and a listener to explore the storyteller's unconscious mental state. Yamada (2002; 2012) who specializes in investigating on models of life-span in developmental psychology, focused on life story

drawings to examine how people from different cultural backgrounds represent their lives visually by drawing their 'image map of life'. Yamada (2012) suggests eight categories in visual life stories, such as the climbing story (showing ups and downs in life as climbing a mountain), the expansion story (focusing on growth and development), the road story (describing life courses which leads to their goals), the events story (sorting out by life events), the choices story (elaborating on choices and turning points in life), the flow story (describing life as a flow of a river or a stream which is beyond one's control), the cycle story (describing life as a never-ending cycle), and the being story (focusing on here and now).

Based on the concepts of using drawing as an effective tool for life story telling, the participants of this study were asked to draw a 'picture of life' (PL) which represents their past, present, and future. The eight categories of life story pictures in Yamada (2012) were shown to the participants in this study as an example before they were asked to draw their PLs. The participants mentioned later that having seen the examples helped them draw their pictures as they could get some ideas on what to draw in advance.

The study

The purpose of conducting the study is to establish a well-structured PD program for experienced advisors. As the previous studies imply, mentoring relationships could contribute to experienced teachers' professional development as mentoring relationships help teachers gain confidence, develop self-reflection, and promote mutual learning (Brown, 2001; Delaney, 2012; Kissau & King, 2014; Hobson et al., 2009). Since advising is based on one-to-one dialogue between an advisor and a learner, the author believes that one of the most valuable approaches in establishing experienced advisors' PD program is to introduce mentoring where a mentor and a mentee conduct one-to-one dialogue (Kato, 2012; Kato & Mynard, 2016).

In this study, the five participants were invited to attend a one-to-one mentoring program during a period of six months as a 'mentee' where the author took the role of a 'mentor'. The study focuses on investigating the effects of drawing a PL and sharing it in the first mentoring session. The program consisted of four sessions for each mentee (Table 1). Each session lasted for 1.5 hours on average and was conducted in the mentees' native language (English or Japanese). The participants were asked to complete the following four tasks; 1) draw a PL prior to the first session, 2) write a reflective journal after each session, 3)

participate in a collaborative feedback session where the mentor and the mentee share their journals, and 4) complete a post-program questionnaire.

Table 1. Structure of the Mentoring Program

1 st session	2 nd session	3 rd session	4 th session
Mentee shares life story by using the ‘picture of life’.	Mentee sets the agenda for the session and mentor listens attentively. The session is conducted in mentee’s native language. One session lasts for 1.5 hours on average.		Mentor and mentee share their journals to have a collaborative feedback session.
Task after the session			
Both mentor and mentee keep journals after the sessions by using the provided format.			Mentee completes a post-program questionnaire.

Participants

The five advisors who attended this program as ‘mentees’ were all females with experience of working as full-time professional advisors for two to six years. When the participants started their career as advisors at SACs belonging to a university in Japan, they all participated in an initial orientation and training program. Some advisors are currently taking on the role of an advisor educator or serving as a senior colleague (a mentor) to new advisors.

The author, who participated in this program as a mentor, has been working as an advisor/advisor educator for more than 10 years at a university and a two-year college in Japan. The mentor is a Japanese-English bilingual advisor who has conducted over 3,500 advising sessions. She was either an advisor educator to the mentees participating in the study or worked with them as their colleague in the past. She currently works at a different institution and does not have a role in any kind of personal or professional assessment or evaluation. To ensure the equality in relationships and to include the researcher as a participant, the mentor completed the same tasks that were assigned to mentees (drawing a PL, sharing a life story, and writing journals).

Data collection, data analysis, and coding

Prior to the data collection, the participants were briefed on the purpose of the research and were asked to sign a consent form including the research ethics. Qualitative data, reflective journals, open-ended questionnaires) were collected together with quantitative data (five-point Likert scale items on a questionnaire) from both the mentor and the mentees. A three-step coding process, (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding) was applied. First, the author examined the data and created tentative labels which represent what emerged from the data. Second, the relationships among the open codes were identified (axial coding), and then, core categories were chosen to relate other codes into a simple storyline. Initially, 27 tentative labels were identified which were summarized into 23 labels. Then, they were categorized into four main categories (Table 2).

Table 2. Coding Categories

	Category	Definition	Sub category		Frequency
1	Awareness	Awareness raising observed related to the PL activity.	1.1	Awareness triggered by drawing a PL	14
			1.2	Clarity	13
			1.3	New aspect of storyteller	9
			1.4	Future	10
			1.5	Thinking on the spot	8
			1.6	Connecting past and present	8
			1.7	Unexpected	10
			1.8	Connecting insights	6
2	Emotions	Affective or emotional state expressed or observed.	3.1	Hesitation	16
			3.2	Tears	11
			3.3	Enjoyment, satisfaction	9
			3.4	Confidence	6
			3.5	Regrets	4
			3.5	Fear	1
3	Relationship building	Serving as reasons for building relationship between the mentor and mentee.	2.1	Approval, acceptance	15
			2.2	Mentor's story	11
			2.3	Point to return to	6
			2.4	Co-creation, mutual learning	7
			2.5	Value sharing	6
			2.6	Trust	5
4	Career support	Transferring knowledge and skills by referring to approaches and procedures related to the PL activity.	4.1	Applying PL activity	13
			4.2	Advising strategies	11
			4.3	Proposed changes	6

Results

Data were collected from written journals and post-mentoring questionnaires which were produced in English or Japanese. In the following results, the data provided in Japanese were translated into English by the author.

Task 1: Drawing a PL prior to the first session

Figure 1 shows the PLs produced by the participants. Picture 1 is a cartoon style drawing where each box indicates a place and life events. Picture 2 uses a hand to represent a life where each finger points out important values. Picture 3 shows a mountain which has a long flight of stairs filled with life events shown as stars and cracks. Picture 4 includes a graph and symbols of life events. Picture 5 is a flower where each petal shows past careers. The center of the flower gathers the skills and knowledge acquired through past jobs. Picture 6 was produced by the mentor which shows a never-ending life cycle including past events and future visions. The above life images could be categorized as a climbing story, a road story, an events story, and a cycle story according to Yamada (2012). Although the drawings were creative and detailed, they were not yet a life story but just symbols and images before the stories were told. The mentees added more drawings while telling their stories or seemed to realize something on the spot when using the PLs in the first session. The PLs were used again in the following sessions and the PLs helped the mentees connect themselves right back to the first session without much effort. In other words, the PLs were used as a tool to take the mentees to their high points of the first session without any scaffolding process.

Figure 1. Pictures of Life

*Images are deliberately presented in low resolution to protect participant's privacy and to maintain confidentiality.

Task 2: Writing reflective journals

The data from the journals indicated that drawing a PL was challenging and some mentees showed vulnerability and hesitation when showing their PLs to the mentor.

Examples:

“It was challenging to do because initially, I worried about my drawing skill.”

“I felt like a kid when showing my picture to my mentee.”

“I hesitated once because I didn’t know how much I should share as I was not sure it was what the mentor wants.”

However, all mentees agreed that the PL activity helped them reflect on their lives in an eye-opening way and eventually, it developed trust, openness, and goodwill between the two.

Example:

“By showing the picture in the first session made it easier for me to talk to my mentor honestly in the following sessions as she already knows who I am.”

Task 3: Collaborative feedback by sharing the journals

McCracken (1988) mentions that ensuring internal consistency offers a primary quality check and emphasizes that reliability and validity are not the best standards for life story narratives as the process itself is highly subjective. Therefore, in order to ensure the internal consistency, a collaborative feedback session by the mentor and the mentee sharing each other’s journals was conducted at the end of the program. It was also a process for both participants to explore what they could not observe on their own. The results indicate the PL activity was a risk taking self-disclosure but its advantages outweigh the disadvantages. It not only clarified the mentees’ past experiences but also their beliefs and identities.

Task 4: Post-program questionnaire

Table 3 shows the results of the post-program questionnaire completed by the five participants (P1 to P5). The questionnaire consists of 12 items in five-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree), followed by two open-ended questions. The data indicate that the PLs helped the mentees tell their life stories (4.80), sharing each other’s PLs developed trust relationships (4.80), and drawing and using the PLs in the first session had a positive effect on the following sessions (5.00). However, it also became clear that there were

individual differences related to the ‘hesitation’ towards drawing and sharing the PLs which derived from a lack of confidence in their drawing skills or feelings of vulnerability in self-disclosure. However, it turned out that the PL served as a powerful awareness raising activity which had positive effects on the following sessions.

Table 3 Post-program Questionnaire

		P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	Average
1.	When I was asked to draw a ‘picture of my life’ and bring it to the first session, I felt uncomfortable and hesitant at first.	5.00	4.00	2.00	2.00	1.00	2.80
2.	Drawing the picture of my life helped me become more aware of many things which I wasn’t aware of before.	5.00	3.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
3.	I enjoyed drawing the picture of my life.	4.00	5.00	4.00	5.00	4.00	4.40
4.	I felt uncomfortable and hesitant to share the ‘picture of my life’ with my mentor.	4.00	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00	2.80
5.	While I was telling my life through the picture, I became aware of things that I wasn’t aware of before.	5.00	2.00	3.00	5.00	4.00	3.80
6.	Having the picture of my life as a visual tool supported me talk about my life story.	5.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.80
7.	Having the picture of my life activity in the first session limited the topics to talk about.	1.00	2.00	3.00	1.00	1.00	1.60
8.	I wish I could start the mentoring program without having the ‘picture of my life’ activity.	1.00	3.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.40
9.	Telling my life story by having the picture of my life helped me connect with my mentor.	5.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.80
10.	Having my mentor share her picture of her life with me helped me connect with my mentor.	5.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.80
11.	We occasionally came back and talked about the picture of my life in the following sessions as well.	5.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	4.60
12.	Telling my life story by having the picture of my life as a visual aid had a good influence on the following sessions.	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
Open end Q1: What are the possible advantages and disadvantages in drawing the ‘picture of my life’ and sharing it with the mentor in the first session?							
Open end Q2: Please share your thoughts and ideas on starting the mentoring program by drawing the ‘Picture of my life’ and sharing it to your mentor.							

Results from coding

The data collected from the journals and questionnaire were coded and the following four main categories were chosen as shown in Table 2.

1) Awareness raising

In terms of frequency, the most significant main category was ‘awareness’ which was observed throughout the program. Within the category, the highest sub-category was ‘awareness triggered by drawing a PL’, which occurred while drawing, after drawing, and while talking about the PLs. The second highest sub-category in ‘awareness’ was ‘clarity’. While telling their stories by using the PLs, many mentees realized something on the spot which they had not noticed when they drew the picture.

Examples:

“Drawing a picture allowed me to broaden my thoughts rather than writing it out. While I was drawing, I could connect my past, present, and my future more easily.”

“It was interesting that just by drawing pictures, it helped me to talk about my life. if I didn't do this, I felt a little bit of everywhere. I discovered me through this process.”

“There is something about the process holding pencil. Drawing pictures, I was thinking as I drew what do I want to represent here. Because I did it and it was easy for me to talk.”

2) Emotions

The first session turned out to be emotional in most cases as the mentees faced their past and current struggles. Therefore, emotions such as hesitation, tears, enjoyment, confidence, regrets, and fear were observed. The highest sub-category in ‘emotions’ was ‘hesitation’ followed by ‘tears’ and ‘enjoyment, satisfaction’.

Examples:

“I felt a little vulnerable, as I was sharing not only a story but something I had made.”

“I talked about my past experiences. This is where I cried. I can't describe it accurately, but I could feel that my mentor was empathizing with how I felt.”

“It was a fun, interesting, and stimulating ice-breaking approach that seemed to engender trust, openness, and good will from the very start.”

3) Relationship building

Within the sub-categories, ‘approval and acceptance’ was the highest and it had a strong connection with building relationships between the mentor and the mentees.

Examples:

“I truly felt I was not judged. I felt accepted. I am me and this is my story. It's been respected by the mentee.”

“I felt powerful at the end of the session and valued because throughout my sharing experience, my mentor had been listening closely to me and absorbing what I said and connecting it.”

It also turned out that having the mentor sharing her PL and life story established equality in relationships and helped the mentees feel safe to disclose about themselves.

Example:

“My mentor honestly revealed her life story. That made me feel I could also tell my honest feelings and emotions. My mentor sounded no longer a researcher but a person who share similar experiences crossing borders.”

Conducting the PL activity in the first session is highly challenging, however, it gave a significant opportunity for the mentees to experience ‘approval and acceptance’ from the mentor which lead to building a strong trust relationship between the two.

4) Career support

The mentees showed high-metacognition in realizing what was going on in the sessions. In other words, the mentees attend the sessions as mentees but at the same time, they were observing the sessions objectively as professional advisors. Therefore, comments such as ‘That is a great metaphor question to ask at this point’ or ‘You had me experience the process of acceptance and it was powerful’ were made during the sessions. To this extent, the mentoring sessions were taken as an opportunity for knowledge and skill transfer which is considered as one of the features of career support in mentoring.

The effects of drawing and sharing PLs

Drawing a PL and sharing it in the first session was a process of helping mentees establish a clearer self-image, connect insights, bridge the past, present, and future, and create new perspectives about their professional and personal lives. In general, the process was full of emotions such as hesitation, enjoyment, satisfaction, fear, and tears. Sharing life stories also created a foundation for a trust relationship between the mentor and the mentee. In this

regard, the results of this study coincided the claims which Atkinson (1998) made about the benefits of sharing a life story.

The uniqueness of this study was to focus on drawing a picture of life prior to the first session and using the picture when sharing a life story. The coding analysis showed that within the highest main category ‘awareness’, the highest sub-category was ‘awareness triggered by drawing a PL’. A variety of awareness seemed to occur while drawing, after drawing, and when sharing their PLs. Furthermore, although disclosing one’s life story in the first session was a challenging task and showing their drawings to the mentor was even more challenging, all five mentees agreed that the life picture activity had a positive influence on the following sessions (Table 2).

Discussion

Keeping options open

The PL activity seemed to provide an opportunity for the mentees to prepare their life stories ahead of time by leaving their options open. Rather than describing in a written format which requires more logical thinking, drawing symbols and images to show values and meanings of their lives provided more freedom for translating what the symbols mean when other people see it. In this sense, the picture itself is not a life story yet. It becomes a life story when the story of the picture was being told. Life story interviewing is a process where a storyteller and a listener co-construct a story (Bruner, 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, Yamada, 2000). In this regard, the PLs provided the storytellers with the freedom to decide on the extent to which they wanted to co-construct the story with the listener by observing the levels of comfort and trust they have with the listener. Therefore, it is assumed that drawing a PL was effective in terms of preparing a rough storyline while leaving some open space for the mentees.

Serving as a ‘point-to-return to’

Usually, it takes a while to reflect on the previous sessions in a dialogue. However, the PLs helped the mentees jump back to the moment in a few seconds. In fact, when the PLs were shown to the mentees again in the following sessions, it was obvious that the mentees’ minds instantly went back to the first session without much effort. In particular, the PLs played a significant role in the final sessions as a ‘point to return to’. The PL activity was not only effective in prompting reflection on the past sessions, but also in considering a new

future. Most of the mentees had a better sense of how to continue their life journey and how to complete the pictures. In every case, a powerful moment was created whenever the PLs were used in the sessions.

Building a mutually trusting relationship

The previous studies imply that the role of trust is critical for having a successful mentoring relationship, and listening to a life story is a process of collaboration where a storyteller and a listener co-construct a dialogue (Atkinson, 1998; Brockbank & McGill, 2006; Brown, 2001; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Delaney, 2012; Kram, 1985). In this study, it was also the quality of relationship which influenced the outcome of the mentoring process. Without establishing a mutually trusting relationship, it would have been extremely difficult for both parties to collaborate successfully. It is considered that the strong trust relationships observed in this study were built upon the following three factors. First, the mentor disclosed herself by completing the same tasks which the mentees had to complete (sharing her PL and journals). It is likely that the mentor's willingness in taking the same risks created a sense of trust in relationships. Second, the process of 'approval and acceptance' which was the highest subcategory in 'relationship building' (Table 2) seemed to have a positive influence on building trust. As a matter of fact, it was often the 'approval and acceptance' process which later revealed to be mentees' turning point in building trust relationships. Third, the mentor was an experienced advisor who specializes in conducting dialogue through building trustful relationships and mentees were professionals in promoting their self-reflection. Therefore, the collaboration between the mentor and mentees could occur in a natural flow. The above three hypothesis in trust building leads the author to future research questions which are: 1) what are the 'turning points' in building trust between a mentor and a mentee? and 2) how can a mentor effectively induce turning points in sessions?

Future research and proposed changes

Despite the positive effects the PL activity carries, we need to be aware of the risks of self-disclosure. Some people could be intimidated, embarrassed, and feel uncomfortable about telling their life stories to others. Seen in this light, it would have been easier and comfortable for the mentees in this study to draw and share their PLs if the mentor had drawn and shared her PL before asking mentees to do the task. Also, as the number of participants of this study was limited to five and as they were all female advisors, the findings of this study could only

be applied to the data collected in this study and cannot be generalized or directly applied to other contexts.

Conclusions

This study investigated the effects of drawing and sharing a picture of life in the first session of a six-month mentoring program for experienced advisors. Positive effects were observed from the data collected from the journals and questionnaire which indicated that the PL activity helped the participants to develop a clearer self-image, deeper insights while connecting their identities and values with their past experiences related to their professional and personal lives. Sharing a PL usually triggered emotions; however, challenging self-disclosures resulted in establishing stronger relationships between the mentor and the mentees. Moreover, referring to the PLs in subsequent sessions was effective in terms of facilitating the recalling of memories and immediately promoting reflection on the first session.

Language learning is strongly connected with learners' life events, and all learners have stories to tell. The same applies to experienced educators when it comes to their PD. Although this study focuses on the field of ALL, it might have a potential to be applied to teacher mentoring programs which provide not only pedagogical techniques to mentees but also psychological support based on a trust relationship.

Notes on the contributor

Satoko Kato is a Chief Learning Advisor at Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages and a lecturer at the graduate school at Kanda University of International Studies in Japan. She is developing and implementing advisor education programs for novice and experienced advisors. She co-authored *Reflective Dialogue: Advising in language learning* with Jo Mynard (published by Routledge, NY in 2016).

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