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Editorial: Directions in Self-Access Learning

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Editorial: Directions in Self-Access Learning

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This special issue accompanies the “Directions in Self-Access Learning” symposium held at Kanda University of International Studies in on October 19th, 2013. The purpose of the event was to explore past, present and future directions of the field of self-access learning and was aimed at newcomers and veterans alike. For a summary of the presentations and themes explored during the symposium, please refer to McLoughlin (2014). This special issue continues the dialogue by examining several related themes, which are: the role and purpose of self-access, learner support, online presence, and learner involvement.

The Role and Purpose of Self-Access

The role and purpose of the self-access centre has certainly changed since the first facilities appeared in the 1970s. In those early days, SACs were often designed for students working alone on language exercises which teachers did not have time to cover in class. However, on the surface at least, there appears to have been little development in the field since the 1990s, when physical centres began to focus on the development of learner autonomy and to cater for different learner preferences, and include both social and individual learning opportunities. The first article in this special issue is by **Diego Navarro** who shares preliminary research into the role and purpose of contemporary self-access centres as envisaged by those involved in their organization and running in 38 different SACs worldwide. The purpose of the investigation was to gather beliefs not only about roles, but also about how learners should be involved in running SACs. The author hopes that his investigation will initiate discussion that will help to establish a code of practice for SACs, which will no doubt be of great help in future SAC directions.

Learner Support and Advising

Learner support is a theme that has occurred frequently in recent articles in *SiSAL Journal*, along with the importance of the role of the learning advisor. As we have argued previously, although resources are becoming easier to access, the role of the learning advisor is more important than ever in order to help learners to locate, select and use the resources meaningfully (Mynard, 2012). In addition, we should not underestimate the emotional aspects of learning a language. In the previous issue of *SiSAL Journal* (edited by Carol J. Everhard), Maria Giovanna Tassinari and Maud Ciekanski emphasized the importance of the affective dimension in self-access language learning, and noted that many learning advisors “do not feel at ease dealing with the psychological aspects of learning” (p. 272). In the present issue, **Neil Curry** continues these arguments in his paper and offers some practical ways forward. While working with learners suffering from Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), the author is adapting tools more commonly used in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) in order to help the learners overcome their anxiety and work towards their language goals. His preliminary research findings show how some of the practices associated with CBT can be applied by Learning Advisors to help students to overcome FLA.

Learner support might be provided in the first instance in the classroom, and in the regular column published in this special issue **Satoko Watkins** and her colleagues describe the phase of an ongoing project whereby compulsory self-directed skills are introduced to students during regular class time. The authors describe how the pilot was designed, how it was evaluated and the results of the research, which will be useful for the next stage of the project.

Online Presence

When thinking of future directions in self-access, clearly technology is going to play an enormous part. Some SALCs may already be technologically advanced or indeed, entirely virtual spaces already – especially new projects that have leapfrogged previous iterations of a self-access centre that other more established centres have transitioned through. However, many SALCs - especially well-established ones with a strong social

function - are likely to begin to incorporate new technologies and virtual spaces gradually. **Troy Rubesch** and **Keith Barrs** argue for the need for SALCs to develop an online as well as a physical presence. Using the example of the ALC at Kanda University of International Studies, the authors demonstrate the advantages that an online SALC provides. They describe features which offer benefits to students, such as a website, social media platforms, online reservation systems and resource archives, all of which can complement physical features. As well as widening the availability of resources and learning opportunities, a virtual presence can undoubtedly increase scope for learner autonomy by enabling students to organize their studies according to their own preferences – a true definition of self-access.

Learner Involvement

To ensure that SALCs do not become simply storage space for resources but also foster a sense of community, it is vital that students feel a sense of ownership of such centres. This ensures continual growth and development of a SALC, as well as maximizing its use. As part of this process, **Craig Manning** examines the importance of implementing formal peer-support networks in SALCs. He argues that such networks enhance learning experiences and opportunities for learner autonomy, but function much better if they are formally established and supported. To establish successful networks, the author argues for the need for institutions to follow certain guidelines, namely to ensure alignment with an institution's educational objectives and to provide formal training and support for peer advisors. He also provides some tips for successful network development. This paper is useful reading for those who are interested in setting up peer support networks.

Future Predictions

No special issue with “directions” in the title would be complete without some predictions for the future. We (the editors) predict that in the coming 10 years, there will be subtle shifts in the field of self-access, but it certainly will not end as others have hinted (Clarity, 2008; Reinders, 2012).

Firstly, the community aspect will become one of the main functions of SALCs as language learning after all is a social process. SALC managers need to invest in community-building activities that provide a sense of ownership of the learning space.

We also predict that in the coming years, there will be increased interest in the field of advising, along with a developing knowledge among language educators of skills that help learners deal with the emotional aspect of the experience of learning a language, as Curry suggests in his contribution.

In terms of space, there are reasonable arguments for no longer needing a physical space (see Reinders, 2012) as almost anything can be done online now. However, given our first prediction related to community, this is likely to still be best achieved through a combination of online and in-person interactions that might take place in a physical space, a virtual space or a combination of the two. As Rubesch and Barrs show us in their contribution to this special issue, there will gradually be more of a blurring and overlapping of offline and online activity. We already see this, but it will increase over the next few years.

We hope that the development of self-directed learning skills can become part of the mainstream language curriculum so that learners can make the most of opportunities to learn outside class. An optimistic prediction is that this area of focus is no longer the niche domain of a self-access curriculum, but something that every language teacher incorporates into his or her classroom practice. The students can then deepen their awareness how ways to learn and apply them in a SALC (or indeed, any learning situation).

Of course there will be fewer physical resources in a SALC. We are already witnessing this as students find it more convenient to access material on a mobile device. Publishers are responding to this need, but distribution and access remains difficult. Within the next few years, platforms will begin to emerge which allow easier access to resources for registered users. (If such a platform already exists, we would be interested in hearing from you!). Will physical resources be necessary at all? We predict that print books and other physical resources will continue to co-exist alongside the digital resources - or become a blend of the two. This is already happening to a degree; i.e. read a book and download extra content online.

The terminology might change; although the terms SAC and SALC are widely used and understood, the words are problematic. The term “self-access” implies that a learner is working alone, yet language learner and professionals working in the field know how important other people are to the language learning experience. In addition, the inclusion of the word “centre” is restrictive. As we move beyond the physical “centre” this word holds us back. A term widely used (but for broader purposes) is “Learning Commons” which is a learning space, but this might be too broad for what the field of self-access language learning is trying to achieve: to support learners in developing language learner autonomy and providing resources to enable them to do that. We need to establish a transparent term that represents the *activities, interactions and learning* rather than a *place*. Perhaps the term ‘learning community’ is a possible alternative?

Finally, we need to acknowledge that there are also enormous technological advances that will affect the field of language learning more broadly, but we will leave these for another day.

Notes on the editors

Neil Curry has been teaching in Japan for 8 years and is currently a learning advisor at Kanda University of International Studies. His primary interests are in Foreign Language Anxiety and language advising.

Jo Mynard holds an M.Phil. in Applied Linguistics from Trinity College, Dublin (Ireland) and a Doctorate in TEFL from the University of Exeter (UK). Her research interests are in affect, advising, learner autonomy and CALL.

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