Ongoing Development: Pathways and Challenges

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Since 2011, the Learning Advisors (LAs) at the Self Access Learning Centre (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) have been engaged in a curriculum evaluation and modification project. This project is still ongoing and we are continuing to make strides in providing an informed curriculum for students. This is the final column in the self-access case study on the SALC at KUIS, so it is fitting that we briefly review what we have learned from this process and discuss what has been accomplished since the beginning of the project. Following this a basic overview of the current status of the project for the curriculum is not static and there will always be possibilities for growth and potential challenges as the environment changes.

Framework of the Project

In the first installment of the column, Katherine Thornton, Academic Coordinator of the SALC from 2011-2013, explained the context, framework, and environmental analysis stages of our project. Our focus was on discovering the strengths and weaknesses in our current program and exploring ways in which we could modify it. Thus the framework is the guide for the project and provides us with direction in the ways in which we can evaluate the curriculum in the future to ensure that we are meeting the changing needs of our students and to combat a static curriculum which does not reflect the best practices of our field or the needs of the students. Once the framework was established, we could begin our curriculum work by focusing on the environment analysis. This stage was vital to our understanding of the constraints that we have to consider in conducting curriculum redesign. Following this stage, we could progress to establishing the needs of our primary stakeholders, the freshman students, as well as the stakeholders who support them at KUIS. This phase of the project was our information gathering phase.

Information Gathering Phase

In the second installment of this column, Takahashi, et. al (2013) elucidated the intensive information gathering phase in which four major stakeholders. LAs, sophomore students,

teachers, and the university senior administrators were surveyed and interviewed in order to conduct a thorough needs analysis to ascertain the stakeholders' perceptions of freshman students' self-directed learning needs. We collated the findings from each of the four stakeholders, and grouped them into four areas: socio-affective needs, cognitive needs, metacognitive needs and self management needs. Afterwards, these items were further collated and then rephrased as Learning Outcomes which the LA team decided that all freshman students at KUIS need to achieve. The formation of the learning outcomes was essential in helping us progress into establishing principles that would guide our curriculum and in the coming years assist us in continuing to evaluate its effectiveness.

Principles provide a foundation for the curriculum, and utilizing Nation and Maclister's (2010) subdivision of principles, the LA team created principles for 'format and presentation', 'content and sequencing', and 'assessment'. For lists of these principles, an explanation of how they were established and an outline of the strengths and weaknesses of each area that were discovered after using them to evaluate the curriculum, please see the third installment of this column (Lammons, 2013).

Evaluation Phase

Once the principles were decided, we turned those principle statements into checklists that we used to evaluate the freshman modules, First Steps Module (FSM) and the Learning How to Learn (LHL) Module (for more information about the modules, see Lammons, 2011; 2012; Noguchi & McCarthy, 2010). Following this process, we were able to prioritize the weaknesses of the FSM and use the principles to modify it in order to create a module or course that better reflects our best practices and supports students. We used this information to create a pilot course which led us into the third phase of our curriculum project.

Design and Piloting Phase

Within this phase of the project, we were able to modify the FSM and add additional content while delivering it within the context of a Freshman English class during one semester. Afterwards the course was evaluated and we were able to draw some preliminary conclusions about its effectiveness based upon the feedback from the stakeholders. The fourth installment by Watkins, Curry, and Mynard (2014) explicates the entire process. Based on the research that was

conducted afterwards on the pilot course, in-class self-directed learning gave the students the chance to learn self-directed learning skills and provided a possibility for the direction of our curriculum.

Another aspect of the design and piloting phase is preparing for how the curriculum will be assessed. In the fifth and latest installation of the column, Noguchi (2014) provides the background for how LAs evaluated cognitive and metacognitive aspects of self-directed learning skills. This has led to further ongoing discussion about how we assess students' module work. As we have moved onto another pilot of our freshman module in an outside of class format, we are utilizing and making modifications. This concludes what we have reported thus far about our SALC curriculum reform project. The next section of this column will highlight where the curriculum currently stands as well as some possible challenges for the future.

Ongoing Development

Due to the continued curricular changes in other university departments, it was not feasible to incorporate the self-directed learning skills content within the freshman classes. Thus, we had to return to the outside of class non-classroom based self-directed learning model. In this module, students spend four weeks learning about self-directed learning skills, create a learning plan as they complete the units, revise the plan and then they spend four weeks implementing the learning plan they have created. However, we were able to utilize the research that had been conducted on the pilot study in addition to activities that have worked in our elective SALC courses and the FSM to create the Effective Learning Module 1 (ELM 1). We decided that the second module, formerly LHL would be named Effective Learning Module 2 (ELM 2). Last year the university decided that all incoming freshman students would be required to purchase an iPad for use with the university's changing curriculum. Thus, we are in the process of creating an iPad application that students will be able to use submit their modules to their LAs and get feedback.

After the students complete ELM 1, we need to conduct an evaluation of it to see whether it is supporting students' self-directed learning and also to check that we have adhered to our principles. In order to begin this evaluation, we will be conducting a survey at the end of this semester with students who have taken the ELM 1 to find out what their impressions are of the module. Moreover, we are also considering creating focus groups next semester to get a clearer

picture of the areas of the module that are working well and the areas we could improve or change altogether.

By the end of ELM 1, students will have created a learning plan for their goals, trialled the plan over the course of four weeks while reflecting on their learning process, and revised their learning plans. ELM 2 will give students the opportunity to continue with their plans from ELM 1 or create new ones.

Another aspect of the curriculum that has been explored this semester is Optional Course Content (OCC). The content includes separate mini-modules that students can try based on their needs, and the topics include motivation, reducing anxiety, time management and confidence building. These areas came from the results of the needs analysis (Thornton, 2013). These are being made available in the SALC as printed sheets and are also available online. OCC is being promoted through advising, posters and social media.

With all of this activity with our SALC curriculum, we are continuing to work diligently to provide the best support that we can to the students who are taking the modules and those that come to the SALC to improve their learning.

As we have continually impressed throughout the installments of the column on the SALC at KUIS, our curriculum project is ongoing. We are determined to provide a curriculum that fits the best practices of our field and supports our students in their self-directed learning endeavors. Hopefully our journey helps to inspire other self-access centers to evaluate their curriculum and perhaps this project and in particular the curriculum framework will serve as a model to follow.

Notes on the contributor

Elizabeth Lammons holds an MA in TESOL from Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, USA. Her interests include learning advising, self-directed learning and professional development.

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