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Abstract

This paper investigates the issues involved in training student workers in a social learning space (SLS) located at a large national university in Japan. Six years after its inception, the SLS has grown to more than eight times its original size. With the increase in space, there have been more visitors and activities, which has led to the hiring of more student workers. With the increase of workers, the manager implemented a more organized system to delegate the duties of each student worker. The researcher looked at the different roles of the student workers and what they consist of. A thematic analysis of transcripts taken from one 3-hour training session and three interview transcripts was done to understand these roles and how the students viewed their responsibilities. How to balance the SLS as a delicate ecosocial system (Murray & Fujishima, 2013) while maintaining a solid foundation for training effective student workers is a challenge. Some common themes found in the interview data will be highlighted, as well as implications and recommendations for improvement.

Keywords: social learning space, student workers, manager, training

In the social learning space (SLS) known as the L-café at Okayama University, both Japanese and international students are employed to do a variety of tasks. The hiring of staff and the delegation of tasks are carried out by the manager, with the help of two staff members. When the present manager took over the position in April 2014, there were no specific guidelines concerning how to train student workers. In the beginning, six years ago, when it was called the English Café, it was relatively easy to hire and train students because the center was so small. In 2013, what used to be a small room housed next to a lunch café was moved to a separate annex more than eight times larger in size and given the name of the L-café. With this expansion, it became necessary for the manager to employ more student workers to accommodate the increase in visitors.

After the change in managerial staff and growth of the L-café, I was curious to know what adjustments had been made in the training and supervising of the student workers. Although I have no direct role at the L-café, other than teaching general English classes in the same Language Education Center, I wanted to take a closer look at what the current student worker system was like under the new management. I was also interested in this because it was closely related to a four-year longitudinal study on this social learning space I conducted

with my colleague, Garold Murray (Murray & Fujishima, 2013; 2015). Data were collected from one three-hour training session and interviews with three student workers. A brief description of the L-café, the roles of the student workers, and how they contribute to the operation of the L-café will be described. Finally, I would like to propose some ideas for the future in terms of training student workers.

Defining a Social Learning Space

The definition of the function of a social learning space is not as straightforward as that of a self-access center (SAC). As Murray & Fujishima (2013) state, the L-café is a place where students ‘learn with and from each other in a non-formal setting’ (p. 140). Students do not necessarily go there to use learning materials, although they are available. Morrison (2008) outlines four main ways a SAC supports language learners, by providing a space: to practice their language skills and increase their proficiency, to help them become independent learners, to give guidance in promoting effective learning strategies, and to offer a variety of learning materials and support. A social learning space fulfills all of these functions, but with an emphasis on peer support and learning. There are no trained learning advisors as there would likely be in a SAC, but there are student workers who are all a similar age to the students who visit. The manager chooses students who are more knowledgeable and experienced in order to provide learners with the assistance they need.

Student Worker Roles

One of the first things the new manager did was to create categories for the student workers in a more organized way than previously. Under the umbrella of student workers, she made four categories:

1. Peer teacher: These students teach non-credit bearing English lessons, which include TOEFL or TOEIC preparation, and speaking and discussion classes. Peer teachers include Japanese and international students.
2. Receptionist: These students sit near the entrance of the L-café at a reception desk and greet visitors. They help visitors by guiding them into the L-café.
3. Assistant manager: These students are inside the L-café and assist visitors with whatever they need, such as how to use the graded readers or introducing them to conversation leaders. They are also responsible for opening up and closing the L-café each day.

4. Student officer: This position is reserved solely for the international students who can either be a peer teacher or a conversation leader. If their Japanese is good enough, they can also become a receptionist.

Student Worker Training

In the spring term of 2015, there were 29 student workers employed at the L-café. Fifteen of them were Japanese and the remainder were international students from a variety of countries. Before the beginning of term, the manager held two training sessions in March. Students were asked to attend one of these sessions if they were available. Several international students did not arrive in Japan until April, so could not attend a session.

In order to understand the content of the training sessions, a thematic analysis was made using data from the transcripts of one of the three-hour training sessions held in March. This session was attended by the manager, two staff members, three Japanese and two international student workers, as well as this researcher. During the training session, conducted in Japanese, the main functions of the L-café that were brought up and discussed at length and showed that the L-café is understood to be a place where:

1. learners seek help to improve their language skills with both human and non-human support (Morrison, 2008),
2. students seek advice or counseling regarding studying abroad,
3. students complete their homework assignments from their speaking classes.

Another important function of the L-café is offering the non-credit bearing English language lessons taught by the peer teachers, but this was not touched upon during the training session. On this particular day, there were no peer teachers present, so perhaps this was the reason it was not mentioned. However, overall the session was quite comprehensive and informative. The student workers also role-played certain scenarios they would encounter on a regular basis at the L-café.

There were three types of manuals given out at the training session. These were compiled from information left behind by the previous manager, former student workers, and what the manager believed to be important for all student workers to know. Two of the manuals, one for the receptionist position and the other for the assistant manager position, were written in Japanese. For the receptionist and assistant manager positions, there were very detailed instructions of what the job content was, such as how to greet visitors, important facts about the L-café, how to borrow graded readers, and basic points of caution. The third manual

was for student officers and written in English for the international students. This was much shorter than the other two manuals and outlined the job description, what to do with visiting students, what their responsibilities were, and contact information. Two main responsibilities of student officers were as peer teachers and conversation session leaders, but neither was mentioned in the manuals. The manager stated later that this was an area needing rectification.

Student Worker Experiences

Data was also analyzed from the transcripts of three student worker interviews (see Table 1 for details). These three students were the only ones who responded to a call for interview participants among L-café student workers. Two of the student workers, as shown in Table 1, had just started working at the L-café, while the third one had been working there for just over one year. Each interview lasted about 20-30 minutes and was conducted in English. I was interested in knowing the answers to these questions:

1. How were the student workers trained? If they couldn't attend the training sessions, how did they receive guidance?
2. What were the student workers' responsibilities?
3. What did they like best about their jobs?

Table 1: List of Interviewees

Designation	Title	Country of origin	Male/ Female	Length of employment
SW1 (student worker)	Assistant manager and receptionist	Japan	F	Three months
SW 2	Student officer	Serbia	F	One year and three months
SW 3	Student officer	France	M	One month

Issues regarding the training

When asked how they were trained for their positions, all three students interviewed said that they did not attend any training session before they started their positions. The initial training sessions were held during the spring break before the semester started, and none of the three interviewees were in Okayama at that time. Instead, SW1 relied on the office staff for help and guidance. SW2 from Serbia got advice about her role as a lesson teacher from

other students. She said that she attended what she referred to as meetings in the beginning to get acquainted with her peers and the L-café staff. She also received information of her duties. However, she did not refer to these meetings as training sessions and mentioned that she learned what to do mostly from older students or the staff. SW3 from France had no formal training for his position. When he started, he was merely given an explanation of what to do and some administrative documents to fill out.

The three student workers mentioned that the newly hired staff member, Mr. Tanaka (pseudonym) was very helpful in explaining their duties and employment responsibilities. This staff position was created at the beginning of the 2015 academic year to alleviate some of the work of the manager so she could focus on other administrative duties. Because none of the three student workers I interviewed attended the training sessions, they relied on Mr. Tanaka to give them guidance whenever they needed help. In this way, the office staff held an important function by providing ongoing support.

Creating an inviting atmosphere

Each of the interviewees made it clear that they wanted visiting students to feel welcome and relaxed. They were always thinking of ways to help make an inviting atmosphere. This was an issue that the manager discussed during the training session as well. It is important to create an open and welcoming environment. The manager and staff encouraged the student workers so they felt a sense of involvement, importance, and pride, even when they were at the L-café outside of working hours. When SW2 was asked what the most important part of her job was at the L-café, she said:

“Smiling, looking happy and say ‘welcome and please enjoy’ happily. I really hope that from the bottom of my heart so I want student to stay at L-café very comfortable and relaxed and enjoyable.”

Helping others

As for the L-café providing a place where learners can seek help to improve their language skills, all three student workers agreed that assisting students in this way was the most important part of their duties. As an assistant manager, SW1 introduced visiting students to the extensive library of graded readers, as well as English language learning materials. In her additional role as receptionist, she greeted visitors from a reception desk near the entrance. She also introduced them to student officers or teachers who had office hours there to practice their speaking skills.

SW2 worked as a peer teacher. The non-credit English lessons were scheduled throughout the day, and students had to register to attend. SW2 enjoyed being a peer teacher and found it rewarding when people learned something new from her. She was studying cultural anthropology in graduate school and liked interacting with Japanese students. For her discussion class, she chose topics that were somewhat controversial. These topics are difficult for Japanese students to discuss in English, so SW2 was pleased when the students would return to her lessons. She commented: "...if people come back, so they talk to me once, and they want to come back, I feel that is very inspiring."

SW3 was a conversation leader in the L-café. There was no preparation needed for these sessions, and students joined if they wanted to practice casual conversation. SW3 said that he enjoyed meeting new students and helping them get used to speaking English, but at times he would have a student who would not say much.

"Sometimes [I'm] doing a monologue—I have someone in front of me—I'm trying my best for like finding new topics or something interesting or something not too much difficult. I try but sometimes they don't really help me, so I have to find something...I try to be nice, you know, if they are stressed or shy."

Related to this, some classroom teachers assign their students homework during the semester, which requires them to go to the L-café and talk to an international student in English for 15-20 minutes. Although it seems like a good way to get students, even those who are not interested in studying English, to go to the L-café at least once, it has caused several problems. Firstly, if groups of students go together, sometimes there are not enough international student workers to accommodate them all. Secondly, some students go unprepared and expect the student workers to initiate conversation, which makes it difficult to have a smooth dialog, as SW3 mentioned.

Managerial Issues

The fact that the manager received limited guidelines when she was hired is evidence of the struggles she has in her position as middle management in the hierarchy of educational administration. Her superiors did not give her a clear explanation of what her responsibilities should be. As Gardner and Miller (2014) explain:

They [middle management] will typically have restricted decision-making authority over staffing and resources but will be expected to take responsibility for ensuring the success of SALL [in this case, the SLS], and should expect to be further managed by more senior managers. (p. 31-32)

Thus, in her capacity, she was constrained by restrictions on what she could do to fulfill her duties. In this respect, the decision from above to hire Mr. Tanaka was a positive move in acknowledging that one person, the manager, could not function well without more support.

Another difficulty the manager faced was finding responsible student workers. When she first arrived, most of the senior students had graduated. In April, there were only two students who had prior experience that the manager could rely on for support. It was at this time that she decided to hold an informal meeting with ten students, both Japanese and non-Japanese. This meeting proved to be an effective way to exchange ideas and share experiences. Since then, the manager decided to hold more formal training sessions at the beginning of each semester for incoming student workers. One issue, however, is the timing of these training sessions, as it seems that quite a few students are not available before the semester begins.

Implications and Recommendations

As the L-café continues its work and the student worker population changes from year to year, it is important to outline the basic duties and responsibilities for each of the student worker positions. Due to the nature of university life, there will always be a high turnover rate of workers. This is especially true for the international students, whose stay in Japan is usually short. When they leave the country, it becomes more difficult to pass on the knowledge they gained from their experience. How to maintain the institutional memory to make sure knowledge gets passed on between workers was a central issue, which became clear from the data.

One way to overcome this difficulty would be to have a journal or message book, along with a manual, where former workers could write their reflections for future workers to note. Each role would possibly need a different approach, depending on their duties. Currently, the manager provides students working as receptionists with a manual containing set phrases. While useful for this role, a manual may not be realistic for a student officer as the responsibilities are not as clearly defined. Another idea, outlined by Uchida (2015), would

be to create a 'digital habitat' (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009), which would work in the same way as a message book, but be a virtual space where information could be accessed easily by anyone. This would take more time, planning and coordination with the university computer center to set up, but in the long run, would be an ideal way in which to keep records, promote collaboration, and provide a means of communication between former and current workers.

Another idea would be to provide staff meetings in which workers could discuss various situations that arose and how they handled them. This would be a good way to help the transition from older to newer workers. In addition, the manager could ask current student workers to keep an eye out for possible candidates to replace them in the future.

There also needs to be support from the teachers' side to train their students who visit the L-café in order to avoid situations mentioned earlier of students who have trouble maintaining a conversation in their second language. Classroom teachers could have their students prepare a list of questions in advance, and recommend students to attend an L-café orientation (held at the beginning of each semester) before doing their homework task. Not only is it important to train the student workers, but the users also require training in order to make the best use of the L-café.

If the L-café is to remain a learning environment that can adapt over time, depending on the participants, interactions and relationships (Murray & Fujishima, 2013), then rather than workers having to strictly adhere to a manual, giving student workers some general guidelines would seem more pragmatic. The vision held by the university vice-president, to create a space where students can go to practice English in a relaxed, comfortable environment (Tahara, 2015), needs to be explicitly stated. In addition, a clear mission statement, which is lacking at this time, needs to be created. Students, both users and workers, need to be aware that the L-café is a place where students help each other learn and learn from each other in a relaxed atmosphere. Sharing this vision more widely among students would certainly influence the student workers' training process in a positive way.

Conclusion

Careful consideration of the data suggests that the manager needs to carefully supervise the use of a detailed manual, while keeping in mind the organic nature of dealing with people in an environment meant to promote learning through interaction. The L-café is a dynamic place in which both visitors and workers prompt change. The manager could be considered as the only constant unit, in a sense, as she remains in the L-café throughout the

years while the student population changes over time. It is hoped that the university administration recognizes the complexity of this social learning space and listens to the voices of the students and manager. Not only should the administration listen, but they must also take action by providing enough support and better guidelines for the manager to be able to train student workers effectively. Moreover, the manager needs to maintain the essence of the L-café as a delicate ecosocial system (Murray & Fujishima, 2013), enabling it to thrive for many more years to come through the training and support given to both student workers and users.

Notes on the contributor

Naomi Fujishima is a professor at Okayama University, Japan, and teaches general English courses in the Language Education Center. Her research interests include learner autonomy, student motivation, and lifelong learning.

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