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Learning Spaces and Curricula: Models for Enhancing LLS Usage and Learner Autonomy Development Through Integration

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Language learning spaces (LLSs) are established with many different aims in mind and vary drastically from one institution to another. They may have been established to cater for a specific part of the student population, such as a foreign languages department or international students on non-degree programmes, or they may also be open to the general student population, staff, and even the general public. They may focus primarily on providing opportunities for target language interaction, especially in EFL environments where English is not commonly used outside the classroom, or have the development of learner autonomy as their main mission.

Depending on the institutions in which they are situated, and their primary focus, language learning spaces have different kinds and degrees of integration and cooperation with academic departments and other areas of the host institution. Target groups of learners may be required to use the facilities in some form, or there could be a policy of voluntary usage, or some kind of incentive system. In each of these cases, careful thought is necessary to determine the degree of integration and its possible effect on the autonomy of the users, often a key part of a LLS's mission. If badly managed, a model of integration which requires students to spend a certain amount of time or to complete certain activities in the LLS can turn into little more than a homework club with little or no space for the development of self-directed learning skills. On the other hand, facilities with no form of integration at all may find themselves isolated from key academic departments, which can affect their ability to reach potential users, and may result in a lack of understanding about the services they offer and low usage from the target population. Getting the right balance between these two extremes is crucial, but often challenging for managers who many times have to please multiple stakeholders.

The papers in this instalment of the Language Learning Spaces: Self-Access in Action column all address this issue of integration and describe different initiatives which have been introduced to increase student understanding of the facilities

available, prepare students to use those facilities effectively, and make informed choices about the language learning options available to them.

While many institutions choose to bring the students into the centre with some kind of required or incentivised usage policy, Elaine Wright and Kayoko Horai at Sojo University in Kumamoto, Japan brought the centre to the students, in the form of learning advisor. Elaine, an English teacher, and Kayoko, a learning advisor, describe a collaborative project in which Kayoko conducted several class visits to introduce learning advising to students through reflective activities about language learning and group advising sessions. While all students are familiar with teachers, the role of an advisor is often less easily understood (Carson, 2012), and learners may not understand how consulting an advisor can help them. Through this project, Kayoko and Elaine hoped to make the role of the advisor less opaque and help students understand how they can benefit from the process. While the project has not resulted in significant further uptake of the advising service, students generally responded positively to the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their learning, and both the teacher and the advisor felt that they increased their understanding of their students and were able to support each other better as a result of the collaboration.

The target group in the paper from Vanessa Mar-Molinero and Christian Lewis from the University of Southampton, UK, is a group of pre-sessional international students, who attend courses to raise their English proficiency before starting undergraduate programmes. The Language Resource Centre (LRC) at Southampton has developed and runs a course for these students, entitled *SotonSmartSkills*, which aims to help students develop the study skills necessary for academic success. Through this course, designed using the Personal Learning Styles Pedagogy model (Evans & Waring, 2015) students become more familiar with the services provided by the LRC, and have advising sessions with Independent Learning Facilitators, often older students who have been through the same transition that they are experiencing. Vanessa and Christian also touch on another area of integration, reflective of a growing trend in the UK (Allhouse, 2015): the physical integration of the LRC with Library services. They reflect on what effects the loss of a dedicated language learning environment may have on *SotonSmartSkills* in the future.

Finally, Ann Mayeda, Dirk MacKenzie, and Brian Nuspliger from Konan Women's University in Kobe, Japan, reflect on the process of integrating their self-access centre, e-space, into their first and second year English language curriculum

through the use of a stamp card system. In order to introduce the students to the services available, students were required to complete a learner profile and attend an initial advising session, join the centre's English conversation service three times, and complete several learning activities or join events of their choice while tracking their activity on a stamp card, which made up 20% of their class grade. While student responses have been largely positive, the study highlights the difficulty of integrating a new self-access centre with a pre-existing, albeit reformed, curriculum taught by mainly part-time teachers with varying degrees of understanding of the benefits of self-access language learning.

In the case of both the classroom advisor visits and the stamp card system, these integration initiatives have not resulted in a huge increase in uptake of the services. While students may be more aware of what is available to them and more able to make informed choices about whether to use the services, this positive aspect of better awareness may be compromised by a perceptual shift among learners that these are not activities to engage in voluntarily, as their introduction was part of a compulsory class activity. In the case of *SotonSmartSkills*, the authors report that some students acknowledge the benefits of the skills learned in the course only several years after they have completed it.

Few would argue that an isolated language learning space with no connections to academic departments or administrative areas is able to serve its target population effectively. The papers in this instalment offer some suggestions for how certain levels of integration may be achieved, but remind us that we need to be aware of the possible negative effects of any usage requirement or incentivisation, in addition to the positive outcomes that can be expected in terms of learner awareness.

It must also be acknowledged that curriculum integration is not the only way to influence the uptake of LLS services, and many initiatives showcased in previous instalments of this series, such as peer-learning initiatives and the high profile given to student staff, have been introduced at least partly with the intention of making the LLS more attractive to potential users. The growing understanding of self-access centres as social learning spaces (Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, 2014) highlights the powerful role that learners can play on each other's learning experiences. The next instalment of this series will focus specifically on this issue of promotion and attracting users.

Notes on the editor of the series

Katherine Thornton has an MA in TESOL from the University of Leeds and is the founder and Program Director of English Café at Otemon, a self-access centre at Otemon Gakuin University, Osaka, Japan, where she works as a learning advisor. Prior to her current position, she worked as a learning advisor at Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan. She is the former president of the Japan Association of Self-Access Learning (JASAL), and a regular column editor of *Studies in Self-Access Learning (SiSAL) Journal*. Her research interests include self-access centre management, advising for language learning, and self-directed learning.

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