



ISSN 2185-3762

## **Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal**

<http://sisaljournal.org>

### **The Evolution and Devolution of Management and Training Needs for Self-Access Centre Staff**

David Gardner, The University of Hong Kong

Corresponding author: [dgardner@hku.hk](mailto:dgardner@hku.hk)

Publication date: June, 2017.

#### **To cite this article**

Gardner, D. (2017). The evolution and devolution of management and training needs for self-access centre staff. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 8(2), 147-156.

#### **To link to this article**

<http://sisaljournal.org/archives/jun17/gardner>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Please contact the author for permission to re-print elsewhere.

Scroll down for article

## **The Evolution and Devolution of Management and Training Needs for Self-Access Centre Staff**

David Gardner, The University of Hong Kong

### Abstract

The management of self-access centres (SACs) is often undertaken by teachers with little or no relevant management experience and it is also not uncommon for SACs to be staffed by teachers who initially have little or no relevant experience of working with self-access learning. As an attempt to identify some of the components of this dual problem, this paper presents a set of key tasks within the SAC context that require management and staff training. The emphasis is on those tasks which could not be ordinarily expected to be within a language teacher's professional training. The purpose of the paper is not to provide solutions for the problem, indeed that would be an impossible task, but to identify those tasks most urgently in need of attention by the manager and staff of a SAC. In this way, it is hoped, the manager and SAC management team can establish their own management and training priorities and look for appropriate solutions within their own working environments.

*Keywords:* management training, SAC management

In the beginning there were simple self-access centres and then there was evolution and devolution, all of which generated management training needs. This paper looks at the evolution and devolution of management and training needs for self-access centre staff. Although based heavily on professional experience with the implementation of self-access language learning in Hong Kong, it also draws on experience with, and knowledge of, similar developments in a number of other locations. The paper begins by looking briefly at the establishment of the role of the SAC manager and the management requirements of that role. It then looks at how the role has evolved, in terms of what it encompasses, and devolved, in terms of how management responsibilities are (or could be) distributed. The paper finishes with a review of the management training needs of the modern self-access centre.

### **In The Beginning...**

When self-access centres (SACs) first became popular in educational institutions in the 1990s they were, from a managerial perspective, fairly simple. They tended to be standalone operations sited in a dedicated single physical location but usually under the

control of a larger administrative unit (often a language department). They contained resources consisting of a combination of learning materials and equipment which varied considerably depending on the educational context but which were physically present and were, thus, accessible only during opening hours. These early SACs were often something along the lines of a hybrid between a small, dedicated library and an open-access language lab. They had an identified person in charge who was most commonly a teacher given a reduction in teaching hours to coordinate the SAC. Success in this role involved five distinct areas of interaction (see Figure 1) which could largely be dealt with separately.

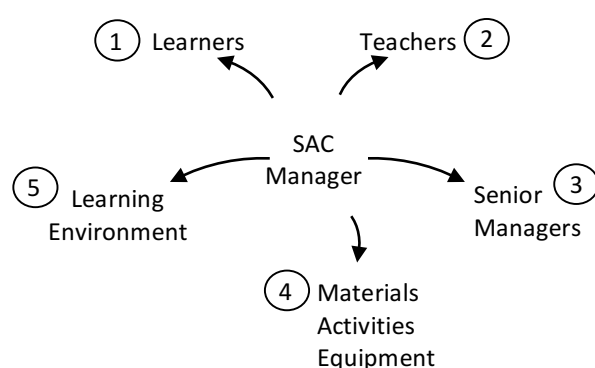


Figure 1. Aspects of the SAC Management Role (after Gardner, 2011, p. 189)

In many cases, the time allocated for the coordination role was insufficient but the role was, nevertheless, accomplished successfully because of that teacher's knowledge and enthusiasm for self-access learning (although there have undoubtedly been cases where that person had no such knowledge or enthusiasm). In a study of five SACs in Hong Kong in the mid-1990s (Gardner & Miller, 1997), these people in charge of coordinating SACs were labelled SAC managers and that term became widely accepted and will be used hereafter in this paper even though it refers to a diverse group of people with varying responsibilities, skill sets and allocation of time for the role.

The management tasks required of those early SAC managers were not massively different from those required of other educational managers (such as a head of department or a school principal) as can be seen from a list of training areas for SAC managers drawn up at the time (see Table 1). However, the SAC managers had received no training for these tasks. They moved virtually overnight from being language teachers with an interest in self-access learning to being managers of resources, people and often a large budget. While it is not infrequently stated anecdotally that across the board in education, and in tertiary education in

particular, there are many instances of managers with no training (and often no talent) for management, that is a problem to be debated elsewhere. The important point to make here is the dedication with which the early SAC managers stepped up to the task and made a success of it. And in so doing, they helped define the role of the SAC manager.

Table 1. SAC Management Training Needs as Identified in the 1990s (Gardner & Miller, 1999, p. 81)

Training Area (needs)	Consisting of:
Management systems	establishing a structure/hierarchy, job descriptions, internal reporting procedures, defining the roles of committees/working groups
Institutional procedures	institutional hierarchy, committee structure, external reporting procedures, procurement procedures
Personnel	hiring and firing, disciplining, praising/rewarding
Financial	budgets, tenders, quotes, accounting
Appraisal	establishing and making public a system of appraisal
Counselling	counselling staff, teaching staff to counsel students
Evaluation	materials, people, systems
Staff development	developing the abilities of self-access staff, running training programs for pedagogical staff, encouraging experimentation by technical staff, providing training opportunities for clerical staff
Negotiation skills	negotiating with self-access staff, teachers, higher level managers
Planning	long-term and short-term development plans, planning for the academic year
Public relations	dealing with visitors, making presentations, representing the institution

The relevance of items in Table 1 to the role of a SAC manager at the time the table was constructed, and to a large extent still today, was dependent on the institutional context. In some cases, for example, SAC managers are not responsible for hiring staff to work in the SAC. They should be because recruiting the right staff for a SAC will impact on its effectiveness. Equally, a SAC manager should be closely involved in SAC staff evaluation and development to ensure cohesion in SAC operations. However, the institutional culture

may dictate different approaches which a SAC manager will either have to accept or fight, depending on their temperament. The important point is that Table 1 contains areas of management which are key to the successful management of a self-access centre. And they are all areas which require training to implement successfully. Giving a teacher responsibility for self-access does not make that teacher a manager. Most significantly, almost none of the areas in that table are covered in a typical teacher training course. Such courses may deal with managing learners but, just to take a small example, handling an uncooperative teacher would be much more difficult.

### **...And Then There Was Evolution**

As the SACs and the role of SAC manager became established they started to evolve. Through a process of experimentation and response to student demand, SACs expanded the breadth and depth of their materials and activities. Different styles of learning materials were tried and face-to-face interactions became more important, especially with an increasing realisation that most learners could not step straight out of an often teacher-directed classroom into full learner autonomy. SACs typically added or increased language advising services, workshops and activities providing access to peer interaction.

In addition to the expansion of services inside the SACs, two major developments expanded the responsibilities of the SAC outside its physical location. Firstly, the integration of self-access into taught courses created an important link between class activity and SAC facilities. It brought with it the endorsement of the class teacher which is an important reference point for students, especially those from a traditional background. This also provided additional management complexity for SAC managers because they had to negotiate with course developers to ensure that materials and available space matched the requirements of the courses. It would, after all, be a bad advertisement for a SAC to direct the students from a large course towards it only to find a lack of appropriate resources.

The other major development that impacted on the management of self-access was the opening up of the internet as an educational tool. Many SACs had, from early on, provided computers in order to run standalone computer-assisted language learning software. They have now enhanced these computers to enable internet access and usually increased their number as such activities became popular. Opening up the internet for self-access learning brought some interesting developments. One was the predictable motivational aspect of providing a greater choice of learning materials and, probably most importantly, of

facilitating access to authentic usage of the target language. Perhaps equally predictable was the potential comprehension problems posed by authentic materials, especially for learners at lower levels of proficiency. Maybe less predictable initially, but increasingly problematic, was the difficulty authentic materials posed learners in terms of identifying good examples of language use. This latter difficulty may vary depending on the target language but in the case of English as a Foreign Language, the level of poor language use has increased exponentially as the internet has become more accessible. Finding ways to help learners identify useful authentic materials to suit their learning needs has become an important SAC management role in recent years. For SACs serving younger learners there is the additional ethical problem of avoiding exposure to inappropriate language use.

Thus, the internet serves as a motivator but also as a powerful learning tool by providing access to language in authentic contexts in a way that language learning materials could never hope to do and on a scale that such materials could not achieve. However, it has simultaneously required additional management efforts to provide recommendations that help learners find what they need and use it in an effective way, a process that is often referred to in SACs as pathways. The creation of pathways involves a certain amount of reasonably fun work surfing the internet for sites to recommend to students who wish to develop a specific language skill. However, the management challenge lies in keeping the pathways up-to-date as the internet changes. It is important to prevent the pathways becoming full of dead links which demotivate learners, although they have become such an increasingly common feature of the internet in general that their presence might be considered authentic.

Maybe the least predictable impact of the internet on SACs has arisen from the internet's multidirectional connection of the SAC to the world. That is to say, not only does the internet allow a SAC user to access materials outside the SAC, it also allows the SAC user to be outside the SAC. These days, many SACs have users who visit only virtually. In cases where SAC users visit from outside the SAC to follow pathways which lead to resources outside the SAC, it may be difficult to claim that those users are truly using the SAC, although there is no doubt that they have been facilitated to engage in self-access learning. An interesting consequence of an increased virtual presence is a reduction of the use of a physical SAC and in some cases this has led to a reduction in the space allocated to SACs with the occasional extreme reaction of eliminating the physical SAC entirely.

In different parts of the world self-access may have developed at different paces but in general, since the millennium, SACs have evolved away from being self-contained islands of language learning tranquillity with few connections to taught courses or the outside world.

SACs have evolved beyond their library-like characteristics to include a bigger emphasis on human interaction, advising and individualisation of learners. Self-access learning has become more closely integrated into courses which has created a greater usage but also a demand for specific learning. Perhaps most significantly, the internet has connected the SAC with the outside world in a two-way dialogue. This evolution has blurred the boundaries of what was once the clearly defined SAC and with that blurring comes a considerable increase in the complexity of the management role. Although far less important, it should be noted that it makes less sense to refer to the role now as that of a SAC manager and more sense to label it self-access manager because much of what is being managed is no longer physically within, or in any real sense making use of the self-access centre.

### **...And Devolution**

As the opportunities for self-access learning offered by institutions evolved and diversified, their management inevitably became more complex. Fortunately, many institutions recognised the size of the task and allocated more time to the manager, in some cases even making it a full-time position. Nevertheless, to do the job well required a range of skills beyond a single manager. The common solution to this problem has been the formation of teams to share management of self-access learning (known in the management literature as participative, collaborative, collegial or distributed management. See Bush (2011) for a fuller discussion). This devolved management is a growing trend in the field of educational management and allows the sharing of management tasks in a way that best utilises the strengths of the management team members. Individual members can develop expertise which benefits the team and provides them with professional development opportunities. In this way the simplistic model of single-manager SAC management seen earlier in Figure 1 can be recast as a form of devolved management (Figure 2) within which the manager works with a management team to interact with those five distinct areas.

With the increased complexity of the self-access provision it seems likely that a devolved approach to its management provides the best chance that management will be effective, thus improving the learning environment for students.

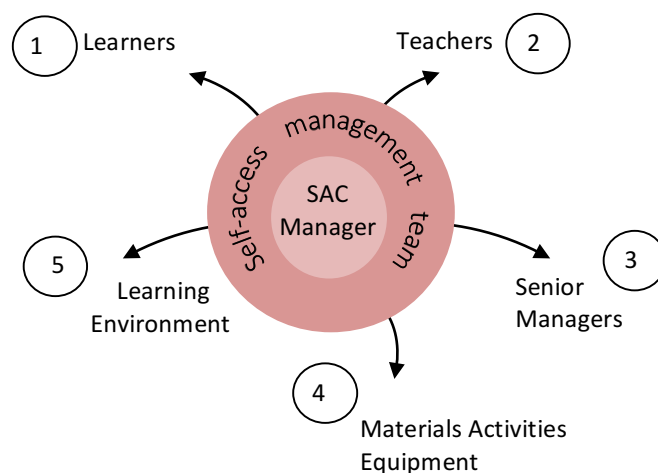


Figure 2. Devolved Management of Self-Access

### Key Tasks in the Management of Self-Access Learning

The management of self-access learning will vary according to a number of contextual factors, most notably: the number of learners, staffing levels, the level of integration with taught courses, the breadth of materials (both actual and virtual), the budget, the physical location and, perhaps most importantly, the level of autonomy granted to the self-access manager by the institution.

Given the above potential variability it is impossible to provide a definitive list of management tasks for self-access. However, it is possible to suggest a set of tasks which may be of relevance to any particular self-access operation. Table 2 provides that list by naming the task focus and then suggesting related management tasks.

Table 2. Potential Areas of Focus Relevant to Self-Access Management

Task Focus	Management Tasks
Promoting and Publicising	Planning, advertising, identifying and targeting “markets” (potential users and their language teachers), targeting influential persons (e.g. senior managers, funding bodies)
Data Collection	Identifying data collection opportunities, building data collection into SAC procedures, appointing a data collection specialist
Evaluation	Developing measures of efficiency and effectiveness
Forecasting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Predicting future learners’ needs</li> <li>• Assessing applicability of new technology and new pedagogies</li> </ul>
Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding learners’ expectations</li> <li>• Developing and promoting learners’ tools for:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Orientation to the SAC</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Goal-setting and learning strategies</li> <li>○ Planning, record keeping and reflection</li> <li>○ Diagnostics</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Identifying factors influencing users' motivation</li> <li>● Developing learner profiling</li> <li>● Identifying specific categories of learners</li> </ul>
non-SALL Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pedagogical leadership</li> <li>● Facilitating integration of SALL with taught courses</li> <li>● Addressing concerns about the novelty of SALL</li> </ul>
SALL Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pedagogical leadership</li> <li>● Understanding staff expectations of the manager</li> <li>● Understanding staff knowledge and skill-set</li> <li>● Communicating the SALL rationale</li> </ul>
Senior Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Justifying use of resources</li> <li>● Securing funding</li> <li>● Demonstrating efficiency and effectiveness of SALL</li> </ul>
Materials, Activities, Equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Documenting quality, suitability, effectiveness and popularity of materials, activities and equipment</li> <li>● Evaluating whether the SAC is meeting users' needs</li> </ul>
The Learning Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Monitoring learners' security in physical and virtual environments</li> <li>● Understanding and reacting to learners' perceptions of the environment</li> </ul>
Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Developing colleague awareness about learner autonomy</li> <li>● Developing a research agenda</li> <li>● Making public data related to use of the SAC</li> </ul>

---

### **Training Needs for Self-Access Management**

Given the increased, and probably still increasing, complexity of self-access management (for a fuller discussion on this point see Gardner and Miller, 2014), it is no longer useful to think of a single self-access manager as the management solution. It is helpful to have a nominated manager, not least of all because many senior managers may still like the comfort of an older-style system with an individual to take responsibility, and the blame where necessary, for the implementation of self-access learning. However, it is probably more realistic to think of a self-access team sharing, at least to some extent, the responsibility for the management and leadership (and hence the development) of self-access learning. Such a team could probably work most effectively by allocating responsibility for individual areas of focus in Table 2 to individual members, although this does not mean they have to work alone and exclusively within those areas.

Once responsibilities have been distributed, the self-access management team should identify their lacuna in terms of the requisite management skills and then prioritise those most urgently needed. Training opportunities could then be identified and pursued by individuals who would then train the rest of the team. In this way, a large amount of distributed training could be undertaken in a relatively small timeframe and at a relatively low cost.

Some of the potential training needs are general, for example, the task focus on data collection and on evaluation are not unique to self-access learning and could perhaps be undertaken by locating a knowledgeable colleague, or by sending one team member to join one or two workshops. Other tasks may be more specialised, like that related to SALL teachers, and may be better achieved by inviting a trainer with specialist expertise to visit. It should also be remembered that in many instances the institution will offer management training opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

The management of self-access learning has become an increasingly complex operation because it has expanded the scope of learning materials and activities, has increased the individualised focus on learners and the associated language advising, is no longer confined within the walls of a self-access centre, is being integrated into taught courses, and is moving online. This increased complexity suggests the need for a more modern approach by moving to a model of distributed management by which a management team would collectively take responsibility for the management of self-access learning. This would result in more efficient management and a greater investment by team members. This paper has suggested areas of focus which such a team may need to consider, but given the variability in the contexts in which self-access is managed, it is for those teams to establish their own management and training priorities, and to identify appropriate solutions.

### **Notes on the Contributor**

David Gardner is a senior lecturer and honorary associate professor at The University of Hong Kong. He has been involved with self-access learning for thirty years as a teacher, SAC manager, researcher and author.

### References

- Bush, T. (2011). *Theories of educational leadership and management* (4th ed.). London, UK: Sage.
- Gardner, D. (2011). Looking in and looking out: Managing a self-access centre. In D. Gardner (Ed.), *Fostering autonomy in language learning* (pp. 186-198). Gaziantep, Turkey: Zirve University. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259367359>.
- Gardner, D., & Miller, L. (1997). *A study of tertiary level self-access facilities in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong.
- Gardner, D., & Miller, L. (1999). *Establishing self-access: From theory to practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Gardner, D., & Miller, L. (2014). *Managing self-access language learning*. Hong Kong: City University Press.