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Abstract

This article reviews the first learning advisor education program graduation symposium which was held online on March 14, 2021. The purpose of the symposium was to celebrate the first cohort of graduates from the program and also celebrate participants who graduated as advisor educators. The event featured six speakers from five countries who are leaders in the field of advising. This review will begin with details about the learning advisor education program. Then, it will include a summary of the events of the symposium and the authors' takeaways from each speaker. Finally, it will end with the authors' final thoughts.

Keywords: Advising in language learning, professional development, learner autonomy, language learning, self-access centres

The Learning Advisor Education Program

Self-access centres (SACs) which facilitate autonomous learning are becoming more prevalent in higher education institutions (Morrison & Navarro, 2012). I believe that this means the educational role of the learning advisor will become more common.

Delivered by the Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education (RILAE) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) and run by very qualified instructors with advisors assisting, the learning advisor education program consists of five courses (Getting started, Going deeper, Becoming aware, Transformation, Becoming an autonomous teacher leader). The aim of the program is to gain skills in becoming an advisor, mentor and leader. By completing all five courses, participants will be qualified learning advisors and able to better promote learner autonomy. Having completed all five courses myself, I can say that the journey to complete the program was one in which I welcomed the chance to venture into new grounds as an educator. The courses were very well run, and I enjoyed each one as I participated and completed each assignment.

The Symposium

This symposium was organised in order to celebrate the graduates of the first learning advisor education program and also learning advisors who had qualified as advisor educators. It was held online and it was well attended. Similar to a conference, it had several plenary calibre speakers. Dr. Jo Mynard, Dr. Satoko Kato and Dr. Hayo Reinders, the instructors of the advisor program, led the symposium. The president of KUIS and the director of the MA TESOL program both made appearances to say a few words congratulating those graduating as advisors and advisor educators. After that there were two sessions of speaker presentations with the awards nestled nicely in between. There were closing words to end and an after party for anyone who wanted to stay and casually chat more. I unfortunately could not attend the after party, but I hope, despite people attending the symposium from many time zones around the globe, that it was well attended and enjoyable.

The Featured Speakers

The first featured speaker was Kerstin Dofs, who is currently the coordinator of the Language Self Access Centre (LSAC) at Ara Institute of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand. Dofs talked about her experience with advising, advisors' roles and the potential future of the field. She began by recalling one of her advisees, who asked her, "*Can you promise I will pass the exam after three months?*" She then talked about her efforts to gently encourage him to recognise that the responsibility was his to pass, without directly stating so. Although simple, this point stuck with me as it highlighted the fact that in life many people seek out authority figures to solve their problems when in fact, they have the ability within themselves to solve them as long as they can recognise this and take action.

The second featured speaker was Leena Karlsson who worked at the University of Helsinki's language centre as a lecturer for three decades and co-founded the autonomous learning modules (ALMS) there. Karlsson talked about her experiences, concerns and understandings working as a language counsellor/advisor in ALMS. What stuck with me from Karlsson's was that counselling and advising have more similarities than differences. She also said we should keep in mind that we are promoting the learners' autonomy and thus be mindful of what we are suggesting, inspiring and possibly demanding of them. Additionally, she talked about the concept of the 'beginner's mind' (Goldberg, 2016); by this she meant to treat each new advisee as a new journey, and during this journey, we should co-learn with the advisee.

The third featured speaker was Garold Murray, who has established and managed two self-access centres in Japan and also advised learners taking self-directed learning courses which he developed and delivered. Murray talked about three roles of a learning advisor: mentoring, encouraging reflection and leadership. What stuck with me from his presentation were the ideas of being a mentor and reflecting. One part of the learning advisor certification course was related to peer mentoring, which is a potentially invaluable, but possibly overlooked tool in the TESOL field. Murray said he was grateful for his mentors in the past as he had no literature to turn to, and they guided him as he progressed as an educator. In my opinion, many people can have a significant impact on our lives and being a mentor does not have to mean that a position of knowledge and power has to be exuded. I believe that mentors who are encouraging and approachable while still open to learning themselves from mentees have the biggest impact in a mentoring relationship. Murray talked about documenting reflections and the use of a reflection feedback loop. I have been doing some research related to encouraging students to reflect, and this part of his presentation resonated with me. Not only students, but I contend that everyone could benefit from reflecting deeply about themselves and their lives and also benefit from looking back at previous reflections to reflect on how they have changed.

The fourth featured speaker was Adelia Peña Clavel, who is an English professor and coordinates the self-access centre (the Mediateca) at the Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City. Peña Clavel talked about her case study at the Mediateca concerning the challenges and professional growth of the advisors there. It was impressive that in her SAC there are 15 advisors, and they advise in eight languages. The takeaway for me was the need for constant evaluation of what SACs and advisors are doing and the extent of its effectiveness. Peña Clavel mentioned recording advising sessions. Similar to classroom teaching, I think recording practice like this can be extremely revealing in many ways. There may be things not noticed at the time, and tendencies or habits might be highlighted for improvement after listening to the recordings.

The fifth featured speaker was Maria Giovanna Tassinari, who is the director of the self-access learning centre at the Freie Universität Berlin in Germany. Tassinari talked about her personal growth as a language learning advisor and how she sees the future of advising. It was inspiring that she set up her own self-access centre fifteen years ago. What stuck with me about this presentation was when she said she focuses on transforming beliefs and attitudes of language learning. If you are in the learner autonomy field, this may not be news to you. However, it can be useful for any educator, and in advising it seems many learners have

ingrained beliefs and attitudes that could potentially impede them from developing as better learners and people.

The final featured speaker was Hisako Yamashita, who has been an advisor, advisor educator and teacher and was formerly the president of JASAL (Japan Association for Self-Access Learning). Yamashita talked about her interest in the Vygotskian concept of ‘prolepsis’ (Walqui & van Lier, 2010) and supporting learners’ emergent autonomy. Yamashita seemed to be passionate about the concept in relation to learners and advisors. It reminded me of the old adage “fake it ‘til you make it” in the sense that we have it within ourselves to do something we want, we just have to realise it. This point was further cemented when she said she always tells learners, “*You know what best works for you,*”, which I think could be a powerful mantra to remember for myself progressing as a novice advisor and to impart on my future advisees.

All six speakers communicated their ideas in a very succinct and comprehensible manner. There were a variety of backgrounds, experience and points they made which made it all the more engaging. The sections I included above from each speaker stuck with me from their presentations, however other elements are likely to have resonated with other participants in different ways. Suffice to say all presentations were engaging and most importantly thought provoking.

Conclusion

When I made the decision to take the first course in the learning advisor education program, I was not sure what exactly to expect in terms of expectations, workload, how the content would be presented and discussed, and the format of activities delivered. However, after completing course one, I was happy that I found it worthwhile and manageable. I became more eager to keep going through the remaining four courses. After completing all five courses, I did not expect there to be a symposium for graduates, but I was happy there was. Even though the courses have finished, I have learnt a lot and find Jo Mynard and Satoko Kato’s (2016) book ‘*Reflective dialogue: Advising in language learning*’ to be very practical.

Over the course of four years teaching at KUIS and now qualifying as a learning advisor, this symposium was the cherry on top that has solidified my interest in the fields of advising, learner autonomy and self-access learning. I think the future is bright globally for advising in language learning whether online or face to face, and I am eager to see where it goes.

Notes on the Contributor

Ross Sampson is a lecturer at Kanda University of International Studies. He holds an MEd in TESOL from the University of Glasgow and has worked in the TESOL field for 12 years. His research interests are learner identity, learner autonomy and reflection.

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