ISSN 2185-3762

Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal

<http://sisaljournal.org>

A Review of The Plenary Talks on Advising and Self-Directed Learning: Two Important Systems for Learner Autonomy

Neslihan Atcan Altan, Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University,
Ankara, Turkey

Corresponding email address: nesliatcan@gmail.com

Publication date: September, 2021.

To cite this article

Atcan Altan, N. (2021). A review of the plenary talks on advising and self-directed learning: Two important systems for learner autonomy. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 12(3), 295–300. <https://doi.org/10.37237/120308>

To link to this article

<http://sisaljournal.org/archives/sep21/altan>

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

Scroll down for article.

A Review of The Plenary Talks on Advising and Self-Directed Learning: Two Important Systems for Learner Autonomy

Neslihan Atcan Altan, Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Ankara, Turkey

Abstract

This paper presents a review of the plenary talks at the Self-Directed Learning and Advising in Language Education Conference, one primarily on advising by Jo Mynard of Kanda University of International Studies and the other on self-directed learning by Lawrie Moore-Walter and Christian Ludwig of IATEFL Learner Autonomy Special Interest Group. It offers a brief overview of both sessions as well as underlining the highlights and the takeaways.

Keywords: learner autonomy, self-directed learning, advising in language learning, reflective dialogue, strategy and tool use

The conference mainly focused on the major concepts of self-directed learning, advising in language education, and autonomous learning. Teachers, learning advisors, learning coaches, researchers, and trainers who are interested in and / or already familiar with these concepts had the opportunity to reflect on and revisit the foundations of these notions.

As the speaker in the first plenary session of the conference, Jo Mynard of Kanda University of International Studies, after her opening remarks, started her presentation titled *Advising and Self-Directed Learning: Two Essential Systems for Language Learners?* She highlighted her intention to bring two important things together: Self-Directed Learning (SDL) and advising. She stated that her presentation would be more on the latter, whereas the second plenary session would focus more on the former.

She gave an overview of her talk consisting of four headings: Advising (Definitions), Self-Directed Language Learning (SDLL), the chance to bring it together with dialogue and other tools, and finally, which tools to use and when and how to use them. Mynard then went on to ask two warm-up questions inquiring about the current level of knowledge about advising in language learning (ALL) among the audience and what we hoped to get out of the session. This latter question represented an excellent example of a highly reflective question as she

emphasized, she didn't expect answers right away. Responses to the first question varied mainly between *a good understanding* and *some understanding*, while a few of the responses indicated a beginner level of knowledge. For the second question, responses mostly leaned towards the desire to learn more about advising and understand the connection between ALL and SDL.

Under the first heading, Mynard introduced an earlier definition for ALL as being the process and practice of guiding students towards their own paths to becoming effective and autonomous learners (Carson & Mynard, 2012). Then, she moved on to a recent one, encompassing the outcome of going deeper into this definition through the work of Satoko Kato: the use of intentional dialogue to encourage deeper thought so that learner autonomy could be promoted (Mynard, 2019). Mynard stated that, together with Kato, they have developed transformational advising for over ten years and more, hoping that it would make a fundamental change for learners in the nature of their learning. They thought transformational advising would raise their awareness of learning and use it to take action. (Kato & Mynard, 2015).

Mynard mentioned two models she developed for advising and demonstrated the differences between them. The first one, developed in 2012, entitled *The Dialogue, Tools, and Context Model*, was influenced by sociocultural theory. In contrast, the one developed in 2020 took a more ecological perspective emphasizing the multitude of environments where learning can take place, be it in and outside of a classroom, online, or at workplaces. However, one thing remained the same in both models: the learner being at the center while the advisor is listening and thinking to encourage the learner to reflect deeper on the process, which is called intentional reflective dialogue (IRD), thanks to Satoko Kato's work.

Mynard furthered the definition for IRD by highlighting the fact that what the advisor is doing is *intentional*; the discussions are structured in a way to help learners think and reflect deeply on their learning processes. She also demonstrated the differences between teaching and advising by a dialogue in which a teacher and an advisor's responses differ to a student who asks for help to improve her speaking skills. While the teacher would merely make helpful suggestions, the advisor would involve the student in the process by using some advising strategies such as repeating what the student said, which would trigger other thoughts in the learner. Advisors would also assure students that they are being heard, which would be followed by a powerful thought-provoking question. This is the genuine point where reflection and the actual session begins.

Mynard then described the advising process by mentioning the steps involved. To put it simply, these are finding out who the learner is, what the learner's issue is, broadening the learner's perspective, achieving a shift in their viewpoint, and building an action plan and taking action on it with the help of a declaration tool that holds the learner accountable for their actions. Mynard also stated that this cycle is generally not fulfilled in a single session.

The next part of the presentation began with a reflective question directed at the audience: *How do you structure one-to-one dialogue with your learners?* After reviewing some of the responses, Mynard explained how they adapted SDL to SDLL - Self-Directed Language Learning- which involves self-access, self-instruction, and learner autonomy. She described an effective learning module students could complete and earn credit for, mainly consisting of advising, strategies to raise awareness, and skills for SDL. The research conducted showed that after one semester of this module, learners grasp the routine of the process and get good at SDL.

The role of an ongoing dialogue between the learner and the advisor is vital to the process, which Mynard demonstrated with three case studies. One student had no advising apart from the first meeting, another had two online meetings with weekly written advising, and the last one had two in-person meetings along with weekly written advising. The research questions were as follows: 1. Do the participants demonstrate a growing sense of awareness and control over their self-directed learning? If so, what are the contributing factors? 2. Do the participants improve their English skills?

The results showed that all three participants had become more aware of their learning and had improved their English skills. They were also asked whether dialogue was necessary, to which they all agreed it was.

The third part of the presentation started with two reflective questions: 1. What kinds of self-directed skills do your learners need? 2. How can you best introduce them? Mynard mentioned cognitive (tools that help learners to think more deeply such as confidence-building diary), theoretical (providing pedagogical and practical knowledge) and practical advising tools (learning plan, logs, diaries, etc.). Mynard stated that these tools enhance reflection and self-awareness in learners and create a foundation for dialogue.

Mynard's final part opened with the idea that some tools will come more naturally to each learner depending on their needs, meaning that throughout the seven steps in advising, different tools will be used. However, Mynard stated that it is not always necessary to use tools,

meaning the dialogue could just be improvised; yet, the dialogue between the advisor and the advisee should remain directed mainly by the learner. She also reviewed the steps to follow while introducing the tools to learners.

In conclusion, Mynard stressed the importance of dialogue and reminded the audience that these tools work better with individual sessions rather than with the whole class, as not everyone might be willing to use them. When used at workshops, tools should be customized to make them appealing for everyone, such as goal setting – a tool anyone can relate to.

In the second plenary session of the conference, the joint coordinators of the IATEFL Learner Autonomy Special Interest Group, Lawrie Moore-Walter and Christian Ludwig of the University of Applied Sciences Vienna, opened their session by stating that the objective of their session was to create curiosity about SDL, which they have been using in their classes. Ludwig then continued with a goal-setting activity by asking, *What is one thing you'd like to achieve in the next month?* After eliciting some answers from the participants, he presented some criteria for goal setting, such as *Is your goal specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound?* Ludwig then asked participants to reformulate their goals based on the criteria, which demonstrated the difficulty of goal-setting, especially for our learners.

Ludwig made a brief introduction to the SDL theory by stating that it establishes that learners need to be ready to diagnose their own learning needs, set their own goals, pick appropriate learning strategies, and actively engage in their learning process. Then, he highlighted the importance of learner autonomy, which is the main goal of SDL. After this introduction, he asked participants to form groups and answer the following questions on SDL samples taken from three students.

1. What elements of SDL and autonomy do you notice?
2. How would you as a teacher give guidance?

Most participants seemed to agree that for autonomy, the freedom to choose learners' own tasks was quite relevant. For question 2, encouraging learners to reflect more on their learning was a suggestion with which Moore-Walter concurred. She also talked about the replies they received for an informal questionnaire composed of five questions in which students were asked whether SDL was a fulfilling process, to which the students replied yes.

However, another question revealed that it was difficult for learners to find tasks as they didn't know where to start, which should be compensated by some guidance from the teacher.

An additional question inquired about the most valuable aspect of the SDL process. Figuring out a timetable on one's own, choosing tasks by oneself, and not just doing mechanical exercises were some of the things learners found to be valuable. Nevertheless, the fourth question asking about the relationship between reflection and SDL portfolio received vague responses due to the misleading nature of the word *reflection* in German. This handicap could be redeemed by formulating reflection guiding questions to offer a framework for learners such as *What I liked*, *What I learned*, *What was easy/ difficult for me? Why?* Yet, identifying what is difficult and easy could be challenging for learners, Moore-Walter stated. She added that this could be overcome by comparing two tasks, one earlier and one recent, to see progress and to understand the level of difficulty.

The final question was, *Will you continue to do portfolio-type tasks after the course is finished?* Learners replied *maybe*, primarily due to the heavy documentation. In the conclusion, Ludwig asked participants what one thing they would try from the conference, directing us to reflect on the things discussed throughout the conference.

To wrap up, advising, which involves intentional reflective dialogue, and self-directed learning are vital tools in language learning for learners. Through these tools, learners can analyze their own needs, set their goals, and develop personalized strategies to achieve them. This, in the big picture, means the emergence of learner autonomy, which is the ideal condition to nurture the language learning process.

Notes on the Contributor

Neslihan Atcan Altan is an EFL instructor and a learning advisor at the School of Foreign Languages at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University. She holds a BA, MA, and Delta Module 2. Her interests include testing, advising, and literature.

References

- Carson, L., & Mynard, J. (2012). Introduction. In J. Mynard & L. Carson (Eds.), *Advising in language learning: Dialogue, tools and context* (pp. 3–25). Longman.
- Kato, S., & Mynard, J. (2015). *Reflective dialogue: Advising in language learning*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315739649>

Mynard, J. (2019). Advising and self-access learning: Promoting language learner autonomy beyond the classroom. In H. Reinders, S. Ryan, & S. Nakamura (Eds.) *Innovations in language learning and teaching: The case of Japan* (pp. 185–220). Palgrave Macmillan.