Report on the JASAL Forum at JALT2020: Fostering Community in Self-Access Environments

Clair Taylor

Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University

taylor@gifu.shotoku.ac.jp

Daniel Hooper

Kanda University of International Studies

hooper-d@kanda.kuis.ac.jp

Bethan Kushida

Kanda University of International Studies

kushida-b@kanda.kuis.ac.jp

Phoebe Lyon

Kanda University of International Studies

lyon-p@kanda.kuis.ac.jp

Ross Sampson

Kanda University of International Studies

sampson-r@kanda.kuis.ac.jp

Hiro M. Hayashi

Kyushu University

hiromhayashi@aol.com

Bartosz Wolanski

Kyushu University

wolanski.bartosz@artsci.kyushu-u.ac.jp

Katherine Thornton

Otemon Gakuin University

thornton.katherine@gmail.com

Author Biographies

Clair Taylor is an associate professor at Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University, Japan. Her research interests are learning space design and learning beyond the classroom. Clair is currently the president of JASAL.

Daniel Hooper is a lecturer in the English Language Institute at Kanda University of International Studies. He has taught in Japan for 14 years, predominantly in secondary education and the English conversation school industry. His research interests include learner and teacher identity, communities of practice, and the *eikaiwa* industry.

Bethan Kushida is a principal lecturer in the English Language Institute at Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba, Japan. Her areas of interest include learner autonomy, learner identity, and learning beyond the classroom.

Phoebe Lyon is a principal lecturer for curriculum and assessment at Kanda University of International Studies, Japan. Her research interests include learner autonomy, learner identity, materials development, and assessment.

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 10 years. His research interests are learner identity, learner autonomy and reflection.

Hiro M. Hayashi is a Ph.D. candidate at Kyushu University. He works as technical staff at the Kyushu University Self-Access Learning Center. His research focuses on minority groups and the atomic bomb.

Bartosz Wolanski is an assistant professor at Kyushu University. He acts as an advisor to the Kyushu University Self-Access Learning Center. His research concerns the sociolinguistics of Japanese and English, including issues of speaker identity and gender.

Katherine Thornton is an associate professor at Otemon Gakuin University, Osaka, Japan where she works as a learning advisor. She is the director of E-CO (English Café at Otemon) and

a member of the JASAL Board. Her research focuses on language policy and practice in self-access language learning.

JALT (The Japan Association for Language Teaching) became one of JASAL's partner organizations in February 2020. JALT2020, held November 16–November 23 2020, was the organization's 46th Annual International Conference. The conference theme was *Communities of Teachers and Learners,* which resonates strongly with practitioners in the field of self-access learning, where community building is at the heart of what we do in our learning spaces. This year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation, the JALT conference was held online for the first time, and JASAL was delighted and honored to be given a 90-minute time slot for a Zoom forum at JALT2020.

The JASAL forum, called *Fostering Community in Self-Access Environments,* was held on Sunday, November 22, 2020. The forum was emceed by the current JASAL president Clair Taylor, and began with brief self-introductions, followed by three research-based presentations. First, **Daniel Hooper, Bethan Kushida, Phoebe Lyon,** and **Ross Sampson** gave a presentation entitled "Examining a Community of Practice in a Self-Access Environment". Then, **Hiro Hayashi** and **Bartosz Wolanski** presented on "TA-Led Study Groups as a Platform for Language Learning." Next, **Katherine Thornton** presented on "Building Language Learner Communities Across Two Campuses." Following the presentations, there was a period for discussion involving the presenters and attendees.

Examining a Community of Practice in a Self-Access Environment
Background

This presentation was based on one facet of an ethnographic study investigating the dynamics of the English Lounge, a social learning space (SLS) in a university self-access learning center (Mynard et al., 2020). This particular area of our study utilized a communities of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) theoretical lens to explore how learners' knowledge and identity are developed through community participation. Communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1), and a number of existing studies focusing on language learning groups in self-access settings have been influenced by a CoP framework (Acuña González et al., 2015; Bibby et al., 2016).

Within this study (Hooper, 2020), three fundamental elements of a CoP: *domain*, *community*, and *practice* (Wenger et al., 2002) were explored. These are outlined below:

- *domain* —the community's area of interest
- *community*—how members interact with and support each other
- *practice*—knowledge or tools the community develops

Domain

Domain signifies a particular interest that the members of a CoP share. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) state that domain features a "shared competence that distinguishes members from other people". We intended to determine if the English Lounge featured a shared domain of interest. To do this we investigated members' reasons for using the lounge, specific traits of the English Lounge users, and any shared beliefs that they might hold.

The researchers identified how students perceived other lounge users, in particular a core group of users. This core group of the lounge were often described as being "active, motivated, good at English and sociable" (Hooper, 2020, p.113). Conversely, regular users' (not part of the previously mentioned 'core group') personalities did not share clear commonalities. However, a "desire to improve speaking skills" (Hooper, 2020, p. 113) arose as a theme. From what most students reported, English Lounge users did indeed occupy a shared domain of interest distinct from non-users of the SLS. Examples of this were their strongly international mindsets and their focus on communicative use of English.

Community

Understanding the way "members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) was important in understanding the dynamics of the English Lounge CoP. The researchers were interested in finding out what roles members were assigned within the community and the ways in which members perceived changes to their identities over time.

It became clear that a key role of some community members was that of a near peer role model (NPRM) (Murphey, 1998). Whereas students using the English Lounge may have felt, understandably, that the level of English used by teachers and exchange students was unattainable, they clearly admired the English Lounge users' use of English and felt that they might also be able to achieve similar successes. Often, members of the identified core group also became "old-timers" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), who adopted a facilitator role and helped socialize

newcomers into the environment. Some also acted as "journeyfolk" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which involved passing the baton on to newer members as a way of maintaining the longevity of the CoP.

Practice

The third facet of a CoP is the "shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The researchers investigated the approaches and tools created by the members to deal with issues and ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of the community.

The researchers found that members recognized various problems, such as the potential barrier to entry to the community caused by the sense of intimidation felt by many newcomers. Members co-created a variety of artifacts, both in order to help the community better meet the needs of its existing members and also to attract and socialize new members into the community. Examples include a study group aimed at first year students, a discussion circle for advanced students, rearrangement of the furniture to create a less intimidating space, and monitoring of the 'English-only' language policy (Hooper, 2020). Through discussion and reflection on their own experiences within the community, and in collaboration with SALC staff, core CoP members worked together proactively to ensure that their shared goals were supported.

Implications

This study could offer suggestions that other institutions could draw upon when designing or organizing aspects of their SLS. Some practical interventions potentially applicable to other learning spaces are:

(1) supporting interest-based communities

(2) empowering student leaders with the authority to influence the SLS

(3) providing multiple opportunities for student input

Even though CoPs can thrive without support, the context of a social learning space would likely require initial support and ongoing dialogue with its users in order to aid the evolution of the space as needs, desires and potential issues arise from its users.

TA-Led Study Groups as a Platform for Language Learning: Cultivating a Sense of Community Through the Implementation of Educational Activities

Kyushu University's Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) operates within Kikan Education (the Faculty of Arts and Science). The center aims to promote autonomous language learning for students outside of a traditional classroom setting while striving to support cross-cultural exchange (Ohashi et al, 2016). SALC benefits from the guidance of a director and advisor (both faculty members in the Faculty of Arts and Science). Three technical staff are based at the center every weekday, while a team of 10 to 15 teaching assistants (TAs) help support the activities and events on a part-time basis. (With graduate students completing their courses at different times, the number of TAs SALC employs fluctuates from semester to semester.) This presentation focuses on efforts made by the center to offer new opportunities to TAs and explores how, in turn, this process helped forge deeper bonds amongst staff and students.

Kyushu University restructured its TA system in October 2019. One goal of the newly introduced regulations was to encourage TAs to take on increased teaching responsibilities. Kyushu University's SALC responded to this initiative by formulating a series of TA-led study groups, which would allow TAs to develop their teaching skills, gain hands-on experience, and share research with other students. The process of implementing these educational activities provided opportunities for TAs to assume greater responsibility and facilitated language-learning opportunities for students (see Hayashi & Wolanski, in press). Utilizing TAs expertise and encouraging them to share their research with people outside their field of interest helped cultivate a sense of community at numerous stages of the process.

During the 2019 Spring/Summer Semester, SALC TAs took charge of two sessions, which were held across two weeks (one session per week). During the following Autumn/Winter Semester, TAs took charge of one-off sessions. Study group leaders were given autonomy over the name and content of their sessions. SALC technical staff were available to discuss possible topics with TAs who stated a desire to take charge of a group, but were not yet certain of the themes they wanted to explore. This proved an important phase of the implementation process as community building can involve a level of shared responsibility at the planning stage (Levine Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004, p. 82). The preparation stage of these study sessions necessitated a

level of interaction between regular staff members and TAs that fostered an inclusive environment.

The activities provided the platform for students to learn about research being carried out by graduate students at Kyushu University, develop a rapport with SALC TAs, and talk with other participants. The events also had the benefit of allowing staff within the center to learn more about their colleagues' research projects. SALC affiliated faculty and / or technical staff attended at least part of all the study groups. A number of SALC TAs also participated in sessions run by their workmates. The groups generated cross-pollination between fields and facilitated interaction between staff.

The implementation and operation of these sessions proved that Kyushu University's SALC and similar centers can create progressive educational activities that make the most of student staff's talents. Centers that operate outside of a classroom setting can utilize their status to develop flexible events that offer TAs the chance to cultivate skills that will benefit them in future endeavors. Activities that facilitate exchange help establish a sense of community between student staff and participants. This serves to create a learner friendly environment where users feel at ease to practice their language skills without having to worry about making mistakes. The open yet supervised discussions that ensued laid the foundations for similar events to take place in the future.

Building Language Learner Communities Across Two Campuses

In her presentation Katherine Thornton focused on how newcomers are welcomed and initiated into learner communities at E-CO (English Cafe at Otemon), the self-access centre at Otemon Gakuin University, and how this process had been disrupted by the addition of a new facility on a new campus at her university.

It is almost universally recognised in the literature on self-access that these social language learning spaces are "hard to enter" (Murray & Fujishima, 2018; Hooper, 2020; Bibby et al, 2016), observations supported by user accounts in several ethnographic studies (Murray & Fujishima, 2016; Mynard, et al, 2020). In student surveys at E-CO, even regular users report feeling that E-CO was "*hairinikui*" [hard to enter] at first, even if they then came to feel extremely comfortable in the space. Drawing on a theory from Foucault (1986), Igarashi (2016), posits that one reason for this might be that such spaces can be seen as heterotopias. This idea is

picked up by Murray and Fujishima in the same volume (2016, p. 126), who point out three aspects of heterotopias which may result in a feeling of displacement or discomfort in newcomers or even core users. According to them, heterotopias:

1) are reminiscent of other places but in reality none of these
2) invoke simultaneous feelings of familiarity and unfamiliarity
3) disturb regular social positioning

In order to try to alleviate this feeling and welcome newcomers, staff and student staff at E-CO engage in a number of activities designed to encourage legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and to help users of the space move between different levels of participation (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, n.d.) (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Levels of Participation in a Community of Practice (adapted from Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, n.d.)
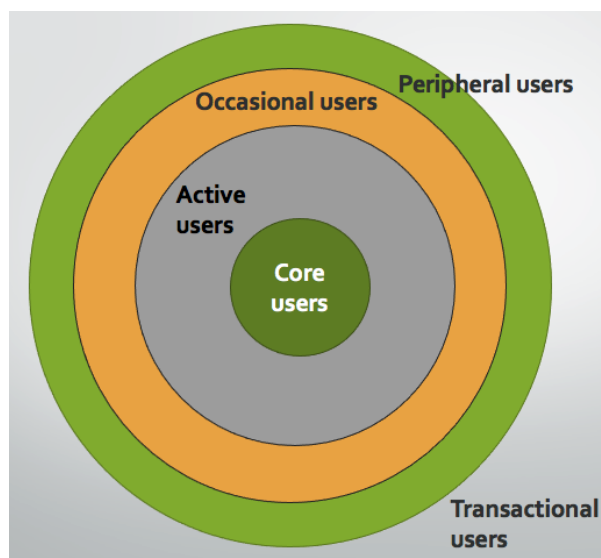
Language Policy

While English is in the name of the space and students are encouraged to use English, they are welcome to use any language in the space, and many choose to interact with their friends mainly in Japanese, while using English with staff and sometimes (but not always) student staff, in formal sessions and at the counter.

Physical Space Considerations

E-CO's layout is designed in a way that encourages students to interact, through study tables placed close together, and a Cafe Space which more than one group can use simultaneously. There are comfortable sofas and colourful chairs, and a counter near the entrance so any newcomer will be greeted, often by a student staff member.

Multiple Engagement Patterns

It is recognised that students may be interested in using E-CO for many purposes, but that they may, at least initially, need a reason to come there (Hino, 2016). For this reason, a variety of engagement activities with different purposes are offered: focused language learning, enjoyment, international exchange, and social activities. Some are formalised, with specific sessions requiring reservations, such as advising or conversation sessions, to give students a legitimate reason to use the space. Alternatively, some students come to watch DVDs, borrow or use books. An occasional or transactional user who originally comes to borrow books may start studying with them in the space, and then start talking to other users about their study. Once they become active users, user surveys show that many students come mainly to meet friends they made at E-CO.

Student Involvement and Ownership

Of crucial importance to the vitality of the space is input from students in its everyday functioning. A student volunteer group was formed soon after the space opened in 2013, and now has over 20 members. Students work at the counter and over the years have designed many events and activities that they feel will encourage new students to use the space, and deepen the engagement of existing users. These activities have included: regular seasonal parties, faculty-specific conversation sessions, a grammar study group, and shareboards where students post things such as a letter to Santa.

A New Facility—Disrupting the Existing Community

In 2019 the university opened a new campus, which would cater for all first-year students and two faculties, including the International Liberal Arts faculty which accounted for over 35% of E-CO users. Luckily, E-CO was permitted to use a space on the new facility, but had no input into its design. In addition, no extra staff were employed, so E-CO's existing three full-timers found themselves stretched over two campuses.

The new facility has reinforced the importance of space design and staff presence in successful community building. While the new facility is well located on the ground floor and has a glass wall, its very spaciousness seems to hinder interactions between users. The ceiling is high and tables are spaced widely apart, resulting in users rarely talking to each other if they are not already friends. The lack of a clear counter area means that the space lacks a focal point for new students to orient themselves to from outside or when first visiting. Most importantly, staff have to split their time between the two campuses, meaning that it is more difficult to engage with and get to know newcomers. While the space was often busy at lunchtimes in 2019, most users were second years or older who were familiar with the old facility, and few new friendships seemed to have been formed in the space.

Additionally, the original E-CO space has suffered from losing many of its core users. No new first years study on this campus, and all exchange students now study exclusively on the new campus, making the space less attractive to remaining users. This resulted in a steep drop in the number of users in 2019, from an average of 1179 per month in 2018 to 398 in 2019. Thornton noted that not all of this can be accounted for by the students who moved to the new campus.

Discussion

During the three forum presentation sessions, the Zoom chat function was enabled to allow the participants to post questions, leading to some fruitful discussions beginning in the chat which were developed later in the breakout rooms in the allocated discussion period. A number of issues were explored. One was how TA-led study groups can lead to discussions between students that go deeper than the everyday small talk or banter which characterize the majority of everyday interactions in SAC spaces. With this support, students can talk about serious issues such as homophobia/biphobia/transphobia or sexual violence against women, developing an understanding of sensitive and important topics, which is arguably one of the goals of a university education.

Other post-presentation exchanges focused on tackling problems in SACs, such as how to deal with a situation where a core group of student users dominate a space, intimidating other occasional and potential users. Practical suggestions were given, including the use of banners with messages such as "a stranger is just a friend you haven't made yet" and encouraging the

regular users to remember how daunting it was when they first started using their SAC space. Inevitably, discussion also focused on the struggle to maintain learning communities when most students are taking online classes, and SACs are forced to implement policies to reduce the spread of COVID-19, in some cases even banning conversation in physical learning spaces and moving all conversation activities online.

The forum, with its 20 active and enthusiastic participants, including both JASAL members and newcomers, was a wonderful opportunity to connect and reconnect, to explore ideas, and to inspire and support each other in this challenging pandemic period.

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