COLLABORATIVE REFLECTION: NURTURING STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN SELF-ACCESS CENTRES

Daniel Hooper | Hakuoh University, Japan | tywardreathdan@gmail.com
Satoko Watkins | Kanda University of International Studies, Japan | watkins-s@kanda.kuis.ac.jp

Daniel Hooper (MA TESOL, Kanda University of International Studies) is a lecturer in the Education Department at Hakuoh University in Japan. He has taught in Japan for 16 years, predominantly in higher education and English conversation schools. His PhD research (in progress) at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies is an ethnographic case study of a student-led learning community in a Japanese university self-access centre. His research interests include learner and teacher identity, communities of practice, and the English conversation school industry.

Satoko Watkins (MA, Hawai'i Pacific University) is a Principal Learning Advisor in the Self-Access Learning Centre at Kanda University of International Studies. Her research interests include learner autonomy, advising, self-directed language learning, learning communities, and inclusive practice. In her centre, she has developed student-led prosocial learning communities through peer advising services, tandem language exchange programs, interest-based learning communities, and student-led events.

In this perspective article we reflect on Intentional Reflective Dialogue (IRD) (Kato & Mynard, 2016) sessions that we undertook to achieve a deeper understanding of the experiences of Daniel Hooper, one of the authors, as a self-access manager. We focus on Dan's attempts to develop one learner's autonomy-supportive leadership practice in relation to an emerging community of student self-access staff members. In this paper we have identified two salient themes from our IRD sessions: power dynamics and individualistic approaches. We feel that our collaborative reflection led us to deeper insight into our respective roles and unearthed implications that are likely to resonate with other self-access practitioners.

Satoko's Introduction

Since the significance of the social dimension of learning was highlighted by researchers of learner autonomy (e.g., Dam et al., 1990; Little et al., 2017), self-access centres (SACs) have become recognized as not only a space to facilitate individual learning needs but also a community where learners can learn collaboratively with others (Murray, 2014; Mynard et al., 2020). Recent concepts also suggest that SACs should be learner-defined spaces (Murray, 2018) and consider the psychological needs and well-being of learners (Hobbs & Dofs, 2018; Mynard, 2021).

As a learning advisor in charge of fostering social learning in a large SAC, I have supported various student-led activities such as interest-based learning communities (Watkins, 2022), tandem learning (Watkins, 2019), peer advising (Curry & Watkins, 2016), events, and workshops to promote social autonomy and psychological needs fulfilment. Working with student leaders who organize these activities, my colleagues further expanded the idea that an SAC should be a community where learners practice prosocial learning behaviours and contribute to others' learning (SALC mission, 2022). Thus, I started a project to train student leaders who are already autonomous themselves to be "autonomous-supportive" (Reeve, 2016) of other learners (see Watkins, 2021 for the first project). As a part of the project, I asked Dan, a former colleague and

researcher of student-led learning communities (Hooper, 2020a, 2020b), to share his experiences at his new institution. We believed that having Intentional Reflective Dialogue (IRD), a collaborative reflective process involving the use of advising skills (Kato & Mynard, 2016), would allow us to further understand where these students' leadership and communities emerge and how we can nurture them.

Dan's context

When Satoko contacted me about this project, I had just begun working at a new job at a private university in rural Japan. At my new institution, I was tasked with helping to relaunch a small SAC that, due to flooding and the COVID pandemic, had been out of action for roughly two years. One facet of SAC management that I focused a great deal on from the very start was promoting the need for student staff and student-led learning communities. In my IRD with Satoko, I spoke about Kouta (pseudonym), a freshman student who had shown a keen interest in self-access learning and had quickly signed up for a student leadership position within our fledgling SAC. I hoped that, through our reflective discussions, we could more deeply interrogate the 'whats' and 'hows' of supporting student-led community leadership.

Dan's reflection: Leveling the playing field?

As Kouta was a student of mine in several different classes, I became increasingly cognizant of the need to acknowledge and address the inherent power imbalances that our relationship was built upon. In this short reflection, I will discuss our fluctuating power dynamic and how I attempted to bring it into an increasingly egalitarian realm more congruent with an autonomy-supportive developmental approach.

Although the predominantly hierarchical teacher-student relationship was one of the central reasons for our power differential, I did not feel it was the only issue and believed that there were numerous ways that Kouta and I shared a sense of powerlessness and uncertainty. As we were both newcomers to the university, we were both negotiating a transition into a new sphere of experience (Zittoun, 2006). I believe this sense of in-betweenness, or "liminality" (Stenner, 2017), provided a degree of commonality for Kouta, and me that may have challenged what might have been a clearer superior-subordinate relationship.

More specifically relating to self-access, neither of us was entirely sure what our SAC would become. In Kouta's case, this was his first time encountering such a learning space, and for me, the barebones SAC at my new university was a different planet compared to the state-of-the-art facilities and services that I had experienced in my previous workplace. We were, in a sense, both trying to work out "What is this place?" and "What can we do here together?" I saw us as bringing two different, but equally vital, types of knowledge to the table. In my case, I was bringing experience from a well-established SAC, insights from the broader self-access community, and academic knowledge from my research history. Kouta, on the other hand, provided a localized and emic perspective that allowed us to develop new ideas tailored to our context. Put simply, I provided 'old' knowledge that would allow reproduction of successful past cases, whereas Kouta was a source of 'new' insights that could stimulate innovation. A community of practice involves both elements (Wenger, 1998) and it was for this reason that I regarded our relationship not as teacher and student, but rather 'colleagues'.

One area in which I attempted to level the playing field somewhat was the arena of language. My anecdotal experiences as a Japanese learner and my mindfulness of native-speakerism in language education made me keenly aware of the relationship between power and language. I therefore made the conscious decision to relinquish linguistic power to Kouta in our meetings and conduct them almost completely in Japanese. Although this was at times perhaps a little stressful for both of us, I felt that this switch served to both demarcate our SAC relationship from our classroom relationship and put Kouta in a position of authority in relation to me. I hoped that my adoption of a relative 'position of weakness' would model to Kouta the importance of ceding power or control to create a more democratic and autonomy-supportive environment. It was my hope that, through this act, he would not only feel increased ownership and legitimacy within our SAC, but also that he might later reproduce a similar mindset when engaging with future generations of SAC student staff.

Building personal bonds is the basis for student empowerment

Satoko's reflection: Nourishing the seeds of autonomy in individual student leaders

One of my 'Aha!' moments occurred when Dan described his different relationships with students

in class and in the SAC. Teachers expect students to do well in class so that they can pass with a good grade. As a teacher, Dan had a role to play in his students' academic success. On the other hand, Dan was describing his relationship with Kouta as being a big brother. He felt responsible for his younger brother's wellbeing, and he believed that Kouta should stop being a leader if the role became a burden, even though the loss of an enthusiastic leader might cause the SAC to suffer. He was seeing his student leader as a whole person, considering his individual needs and happiness. I know Dan is a caring teacher who goes above and beyond to get to know the students and support them in his classes; however, the one-on-one relationship he gradually developed through IRD with Kouta created a much stronger bond and allowed him to see Kouta's true needs.

Dan's experience of developing a person-to-person level relationship with SAC student leaders resonated with me and I became more aware that building personal bonds is the basis for student empowerment. Being free from the responsibility of assessment, I can take an inclusive approach with leaders in the SAC and consider more long-term benefits than achieving fixed learning outcomes. I am not here only to help them become effective language learners; I am here to assist them to learn more about themselves, develop learning strategies, build confidence, and become life-long autonomous learners and leaders at their own pace. The idea that our SAC is a community which aims to facilitate prosocial learning encouraged me to ask the students more about who they are and what kind of interests, strengths or even difficulties they have so that I can help them identify the opportunities where they can contribute to others' learning and practice autonomy-supportive behaviours with other learners.

Create a more egalitarian interactional space where both 'old' and 'new' knowledge can be harnessed

I often use 'autonomy farming' as a metaphor for working with students. As an advisor, I do not suggest to my students what they should do. Instead, I assist them to envision what they can do (planting seeds), check on them frequently and facilitate their needs (watering) and elicit opportunities and choices when their motivation decreases (fertilizing). From Dan I learned an additional farming technique to use to pull students back when they are working too much and at risk of burning out (pruning). Do all leaders need pruning? Probably not. That is why it is important to learn about the depths of our students as individuals. What kind of soil do they like? How many times do they want to be watered? How do they handle tough weather? They may not have the answers yet and it is my role to facilitate the self-discovery process alongside them.

Implications

We believe that our IRD on Dan's support of Kouta revealed several salient points that may be relevant to others in SAC contexts hoping to develop student community leaders. The first is the importance of having an individualistic approach that is distinct from the management style required in most classrooms. Rather than pushing students to achieve more, it might be that, in self-access environments where students are participating voluntarily, one may need to engage in 'pruning' – ensuring they do not overburden themselves and burn out. Furthermore, SAC support for student-led communities may benefit from considering the linguistic and professional power dynamics within their interactions with student leaders. This is important to create a more egalitarian interactional space where both 'old' and 'new' knowledge can be harnessed for the development of inclusive and prosocial SACs where all voices are heard and respected.

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