



**ISSN 2433-5444**

## **Relay Journal**

<https://kuis.kandagaigo.ac.jp/relayjournal>

### **Observing a Social Learning Space: A Summary of an Ethnographic Project in Progress**

Michael Burke, Daniel Hooper, Bethan Kushida, Phoebe Lyon, Jo Mynard, Ross Sampson, and Phillip Taw, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan

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

Burke, M., Hooper, D., Kushida, B., Lyon, P., Mynard, J., Sampson, R., & Taw, P. (2018). Observing a social learning space: A summary of an ethnographic project in progress. *Relay Journal*, 1(1), 209-220.

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

[https://kuis.kandagaigo.ac.jp/relayjournal/issues/jan18/burke\\_et\\_al/](https://kuis.kandagaigo.ac.jp/relayjournal/issues/jan18/burke_et_al/)

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

Scroll down for article.

# **Observing a Social Learning Space: A Summary of an Ethnographic Project in Progress**

Michael Burke, Daniel Hooper, Bethan Kushida, Phoebe Lyon, Jo Mynard, Ross Sampson, Phillip Taw

## **Abstract**

This paper is a brief summary of an ethnographic research project currently in progress. Although the authors plan to present multiple papers based on the research, this paper has been written with the purpose of documenting progress so far. The main aims are to keep colleagues informed and to ensure that all of the steps are recorded to aid future dissemination of the findings.

The authors summarize a project which started in June 2017 and will continue for several years observing student behaviors occurring in one social learning space in the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS).

*Keywords:* Social learning spaces, identity, autonomy, communities

## **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief summary of a piece of research conducted in the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Japan. Although the authors plan to publish several papers exploring various aspects of this project, the purpose of this summary is to document the work completed in the first year of the project. This will serve as an update for colleagues and also an end-of-year record of the research in order to guide subsequent work.

SALCs have several functions including supporting language learning, promoting learner autonomy, and developing social learning communities (Murray & Fujishima, 2013; 2015). In order to promote target language use, it is common to include a space within a SALC where students can practice using the target language in a relaxed and supportive environment.

As KUIS specializes in foreign languages, it has provided a lounge in which students can practice speaking English for the past 20 years or so. Use of the lounge is optional and although teachers are on duty to facilitate English language conversation, English practice between students (without teachers being present) is also encouraged. However, with two exceptions (Gillies, 2012; Rose & Elliot, 2010), little research has been conducted which

investigates the dynamics of what actually happens within the space. As the KUIS SALC moved into a purpose-built new building ('KUIS 8') in April 2017, the time was right to begin a research project. Drawing on observations and interviews, the researchers explore some of these dynamics as an ethnographic study.

### **Underpinning Theoretical Constructs**

#### ***The ontology and epistemology of the interpretative paradigm***

The manner in which interpretative the paradigm has been constructed can be explained according to two concepts from the philosophy of the social sciences. First ontology, which governs questions concerning existence and being, such as “What can exist?”, “How can it exist?” And crucially, “How does it lead to consequence?” And second epistemology, which concerns questions on knowledge, such as “What can be known?” And “How can it be known?”

**Ontology.** This research is concerned with how the social structure overlaying the lounge influences students. This lends itself to a structuralist ontology that aims to understand, in a broad sense, how the social structure in question leads to consequence and what those consequences are. Within the scope of these consequences however, the specific focus is to discover how—and if— “the ordered social interrelationships, or the recurring patterns of social behaviour” that “... determine the nature of human action” (Parker, 2000, p. 125) cause changes in students’ identities (Block, 2017).

**Epistemology.** The epistemological focus of this work is to ascertain how students jointly construct knowledge based on the shared attitudes, values and practices (Schotz [1932] 1967; Winch, 1990) particular to the overlaying social structure, which lends itself to a constructivist epistemology (Hatch, 2002, pp. 15-16). By looking at the lounge’s social structure through this epistemological paradigm then, knowledge—both of and within the structure—is understood as formed subjectively, by interacting with a shared interpretation of a reality that is constructed intersubjectively by the students and teachers who use the space (Dixon & Dogan, 2005). By observing interactions between these participants, and in interviews, the hope is to better understand the nature of this reality.

#### ***Identity***

The field of identity was used to frame the research as the researchers mainly wanted to understand what was happening in the English Lounge and identity research focuses in

particular on features of human behavior. Most linguists writing about identity and second language learning take a poststructuralist approach (e.g. Block, 2007; Norton, 2000) which is a nuanced, multi-levelled and complicated framing of the world that originally emerged from the field of sociology. A poststructuralist approach sees identity as the product of the social conditions in and under which it was developed (Block, 2007). In addition, the approach suggests that individuals are determined by membership of social categories, which is relevant in our context. Although the purpose of the ethnography is to observe behaviors in the English Lounge, the researchers are likely to initiate change in collaboration with the participants and according to a poststructuralist view of identity, environmental factors can be changed in order to make improvements to a society, this in turn can influence people.

The research draws on discursive construction of ideas (e.g. Gee, 1996; Miller, 2014; Weedon, 1997) and performativity (e.g. Goffman, 1959; Miller, 2014), but was influenced in particular by work by Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, and Brown, (2013) who investigated identity according to six facets (summarized in Table 1).

Table 1. Facets of Identity (From Benson et al., 2013, p. 19)

Facet 1	Embodied identity	The self as a mobile point of perception located in a particular body
Facet 2	Reflexive identity	The self's view of the self, incorporating self-concept and attributes and capabilities
Facet 3	Projected identity	The self as it is semiotically represented to others in interaction
Facet 4	Recognized identity	The self as it is preconceived and recognized by others in the course of interaction
Facet 5	Imagined identity	The self's view of its future possibilities
Facet 6	Identity categories and resources	The self as it is represented (by self or others) using established social categories and semiotic resources

### ***Communities of Practice***

Communities of practice (COPs) 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, 2015, p. 1). Different members engaging in varying degrees of participation in a community's shared endeavors is a key feature within a COP framework and it was this that led the researchers to consider analyzing the behavior of English Lounge users through this theoretical lens.

A further reason for adopting the COP framework was that it provided the researchers with an established theoretical ‘roadmap’ for identifying, categorizing, and analyzing key

features of the English Lounge community. Wenger and Trayner (2015) argue that a COP consists of three key elements - *Domain*, *Community*, and *Practice*. They claim “it is by developing these three elements in parallel that one cultivates such a community” (Wenger & Trayner, 2015, p. 2).

Finally, research into COPs often foregrounds issues of identity, interdependence, accountability, and self-sustainability among community members (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The authors found that this was reflected in a growing focus on community building within the field of self-access learning, where the COP framework had been adopted in a number of studies (Bibby, Jolley, & Shiobara, 2016; Gillies, 2010; Murray & Fujishima, 2013), thus justifying its use in the analysis of the English Lounge.

## **Part 1: The Observation Study**

### **Observation Study: Purpose, Methods and Instrument**

A total of ten observations of the social learning space were conducted over a period of two weeks as part of the initial information gathering process to determine how the space is being used. An observation form was designed based on Spradley’s (1980) “9 Dimensions of descriptive observation” framework (space, actors, activities, objects, acts, events, time, goals and feelings) with additional considerations drawing on the literature on identity (Benson et al., Block, 2007; Norton, 2000) and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Before the observations commenced, a map was produced of the area that was divided into sections to make it easier to note down the activities in the area during each 90-minute observation period. Since all seven researchers would be conducting observations, a secondary role of the map was to help with observation consistency. Researchers signed up in advance to perform observations in order to cover as many days of the week and times of day as possible. Whilst conducting observations, researchers took notes, guided by, but not limited to the items and questions provided on the observation forms. The observations were conducted in the form of “participant observation”, whereby the researchers were active participants in the setting (Hatch, 2002). Although some notes were taken in real time, students (and instructors on duty) were not informed about the observation process. This was done to reduce the possibility of the observations affecting results. As such, an ethics form was completed and submitted to the Institutional Review Board to ensure ethics standards were met. Raw field notes were typed up as soon as possible after the observation and saved

in a Google Folder. These notes included not only what was observed, with time stamps to help show the sequence of events, but also researchers' impressions, assumptions, intuitions and reflections (Hatch, 2002). Once the observation was completed, three members of the research team conducted a qualitative analysis of emergent themes observed using a piece of software called HyperResearch.

### Observation Study: Brief Findings

A total of 45 codes emerged from 378 items. Although the observation data included notes on the activities of teachers and international students who were in or passing through the space, the analysis focused on KUIS students. Through this analysis, it was possible to identify a distinct subset of behaviors exhibited by a core group of highly frequent users, which differentiated them from the other students using the lounge. The name "Yellow Sofa (YS) Group" (taken from the lounge's unofficial name) was selected to indicate these highly frequent users. At this stage it was difficult to distinguish through the observation data alone whether the other students were frequent users or non-frequent users of the space.

The "YS Group" appeared comfortable in the space and their observed behaviors seemed to demonstrate a sense of ownership and belonging, whereas the behaviors of the other students created the impression that they revolved around the teacher as the facilitator. The most frequently observed behaviors for each group can be summarized as follows (Table 2):

Table 2. Most Frequently Observed Behaviors

	"Yellow Sofa Group"	Other students
Entrances and exits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coming, going and freely moving around without asking permission</li> <li>Leaving belongings unattended in the area, often for long stretches of time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Approaching or hovering around the lounge</li> <li>Waiting for a teacher to initiate a conversation</li> <li>Approaching a teacher to ask for help with homework</li> <li>Using exit strategies to leave politely</li> </ul>
Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being present without necessarily needing to interact with anyone</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participating in a teacher-led discussion</li> </ul>
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eating</li> <li>Keeping occupied with various projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keeping occupied with projects to hide their shyness or to allow them to observe without having to participate.</li> <li>Successful attempts to engage in conversation</li> </ul>

Posture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relaxed and confident</li> <li>• Some lying down or sleeping</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some relaxed and confident</li> <li>• A few uncomfortable/like visitors to the space</li> </ul>
---------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

## **Part 2: The Interviews**

### **The Interviews: Instruments, Methods and Participants**

The individual interviews conducted for data collection were all of a semi-structured format. This style of interview allows for the interviewer to guide the interview while also allowing the interviewee to elaborate on issues, therefore not limiting depth of respondents' stories (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 136). The reasons for this were that there were a number of questions mainly pertaining to learner identity, which were regarded as essential to the direction of the research.

The interviews lasted between twenty and forty minutes, recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed afterwards. A total of fifteen interviews were conducted consisting of first to fourth year students at KUIS. The participants were recruited through advertisements posted in the lounge itself and by an invitation emailed to whole class groups. In the response form, the students reported their frequency of use. This together with the researchers' personal knowledge of the users of the lounge, enabled three groups to be identified. These were organized in order of frequency of use, with the YS Group (five students interviewed) as the most frequent, followed by frequent users (FU) (six students interviewed) and non-users (NU) (four students interviewed). Three sets of interview questions were prepared, each tailored to one of these groups.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview data were analysed in three ways allowing for different perspectives. Firstly, three of the researchers undertook a typological analysis (Hatch, 2002) ensuring that the interview themes related to identity were analysed. Secondly, four of the researchers analysed the same interview data using a COP framework. Finally, an interpretative analysis (Hatch, 2012) was conducted by four of the researchers in order to allow for other emergent themes to be explored that were not necessarily related to identity or COP. This analysis is still in progress, but all of the researchers are involved in the process. Details of the typological and the COP analysis along with brief findings will be given in the next sections.

### ***Typological analysis and findings***

A typological analysis of the transcripts (Hatch, 2002) involved answering questions aimed at understanding student participants' perceptions of both the conversation lounge and themselves. The analysis related to the facets of identity discussed above (Benson et al., 2013).

There were a number of responses to the question of “how do you view the role of the lounge?”. These included:

- English practice
- Improving English
- Self expression
- Relaxing
- Having fun
- Meeting / Making friends
- Talking to others

However, when looking at the manner in which each identified group differed in their view of the role of the lounge, the purpose seemed quite different. The YS Group viewed it as a place to “hang out” and somewhere to meet other similarly motivated individuals. The FU Group mainly saw the lounge as a place with a functional use where you can interact with native speakers. The NU group mostly saw the role of the lounge as a place for English conversation, however some of their opinions indicated that they did not see it as a language learning resource for them.

In regards to identity, the overarching theme of this research, there were clear distinctions found when analyzing how student participants viewed themselves. The YS Group seemed to express confidence in their interviews. They appeared to seek recognition as ‘role models’ for younger students often claiming to actively invite other students into the conversation area, in order to mitigate the perception of their group as somewhat closed off and inaccessible to outsiders. In comparison, among the FU Group there seemed to be a lack of confidence with regards to both English proficiency and interacting in the wider social environment. However, students in this group also expressed motivation for using English. The NU Group had more individual answers and thus their reflexive self-perceptions could not be categorized easily. For “projected identity”, the YS Group generally seem to want others to regard them in the same way they view themselves, as confident and approachable English language users.



The findings of the typological analysis seem to reveal the dynamics of a structuralist ontology. Generalizable themes might likely have been identified in YS Group because they play the largest part in the creation of the intersubjective reality common to their social structure, these themes might not then be so easily found in the other groups because they are not so similarly invested and might thereby be more influenced by other structures from elsewhere.

### ***Communities of Practice analysis and findings***

As previously stated, following the initial observation study of the English Lounge, a number of distinct patterns of use emerged that categorized users into two distinct groups - a core (YS) group and frequent, but less active users (FU). The researchers discovered that these groups corresponded, in part, to the concept of peripheral and full participation from the COP literature (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), thus prompting them to incorporate the COP model into the study. Upon thematically coding the transcribed interview data from both YS and FU groups, salient features were identified within the data that corresponded with *Domain*, *Community*, and *Practice* - three key elements that are claimed to constitute a COP (Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger & Trayner, 2015). Interpreting participants' engagement in the English Lounge in relation to these three elements gave the researchers a robust set of criteria for analyzing the interview data.

**Domain.** In Wenger and Trayner's terms, a COP features a "shared domain of interest" and "membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people" (Wenger & Trayner, 2015, p. 2). In the English Lounge interview data, researchers were able to identify several themes that suggested participants' membership in such a domain. Two of the key findings that emerged were: (1) the presence of an imagined community in which core members shared certain perceived traits, and (2) a shared belief within the Lounge related to the desired approach to, and motivation for, language learning.

**Community.** Community describes the way in which members of a COP engage in a shared endeavor while supporting each other and sharing information (Wenger & Trayner, 2015). There also seemed to be a sense of awareness of each member's status in relation to one another and their place in the COP. The researchers discovered numerous instances of participants exhibiting awareness of their place in the English Lounge community and the corresponding responsibilities they felt were tied to that positionality. Furthermore, core YS Group members were frequently mentioned by more peripheral FU members as a source of

motivation and guidance and may have inhabited a role akin to near-peer role models (Murphey, 1998).

**Practice.** Within a COP, practice refers to a shared repertoire of “experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems” (Wenger & Trayner, 2015, p. 2). Perhaps the most salient forms that practice took in the interview data demonstrated awareness by most YS Group members of problems of integration existing in the community, problems that they faced in the past as formerly peripheral COP members. YS Group members shared several steps they had taken in response to this concern. Crucially, the YS Group appeared highly motivated to preserve the future of their community by constructing additional points of entry for new members and opportunities for socialization into the group.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This research project is expected to continue for several years. The authors expect that students will renew the learning space and the community is sustains, enabling presently peripheral members to become more central and new members to join, allowing communities of practice emerge from and collapse into the wider context of semiotic and affinity spaces (Gee, 2005) and nexuses of practice (Murray, Fujishima and Uzuka, 2018). Making a longitudinal and comprehensive record of the above, along with how this might cause changes in the attendants identities, will be a significant aim for future research. Parallel to this, the comings and goings of new researchers presents an ideal opportunity for longitudinal ethnography of the research team itself, which will explore the same themes identified above. These observations will help the authors understand how the social learning space, and the research team, fits into, is influenced by and influences the wider context of KUIS, and exploring this, too, will be an aim for future publications.

Focusing on the ontological dimension, which is what causes changes in students self-perceptions, significant work is required to understand, separate and gauge this causation, especially given the overwhelming external influences on identity that neither the authors nor even the students themselves are ever likely to be fully aware of. Consequently the authors intend to make this the focus of a book chapter, which will aim to make sense of the literature on identity as well as the epistemology and ontology of the research tools available to them. This, they hope, will help them explain what tools they use, why they use them and crucially what limitations should be placed on the knowledge claims the research project generates.

With this knowledge, the authors hope to make a detailed account of what constitutes the social structures they are attempting to describe.

### **Notes on the contributors**

Mike Burke is a lecturer of the ELI at KUIS. He completed an MA in TESOL at University of Nottingham, UK.

Daniel Hooper is a lecturer of the ELI at KUIS. He completed an MA in TESOL at Kanda University of International Studies.

Bethan Kushida is a principal lecturer of the ELI at KUIS. She completed an MA in Advanced Japanese Studies at the University of Sheffield, UK.

Phoebe Lyon is a principal lecturer of the ELI at KUIS. She completed a PGCE in Education at Monash University, Australia and an MA in Education with a focus in TESOL at Deakin University, Australia.

Jo Mynard is an associate professor and Director of the SALC at KUIS. She completed an M.Phil. in Applied Linguistics at Trinity College, University of Dublin and an Ed.D. in TEFL at the University of Exeter, UK.

Ross Sampson is a lecturer of the ELI at KUIS. He completed an MEd in TESOL at University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK.

Phillip Taw is a lecturer in the ELI at KUIS. He completed an M.A. in TESOL at California State University, East Bay, USA.

### **References**

- Benson, P., Barkhuizen, G., Bodycott, P., & Brown, J. (2013). *Second language narratives in study abroad*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bibby, S., Jolley, K., & Shiobara, F. (2016). Increasing attendance in a self-access language lounge. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 7(3), 301-311.  
[https://sisaljournal.org/archives/sep16/bibby\\_jolley\\_shiobara/](https://sisaljournal.org/archives/sep16/bibby_jolley_shiobara/)
- Block, D. (2017). *Second language identities*. London, UK. Continuum.

- Dixon, J., & Dogan, R. (2005). The contending perspectives on public management: A philosophical investigation. *International Public Management Journal*, 8(1), 1-21.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Gee, P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London, UK: Falmer.
- Gee, J.P. (2005). Semiotic social spaces and affinity spaces: From The Age of Mythology to today's schools. In D. Barton & K. Tusting (Eds.), *Beyond communities of practice: Language, power and social context* (pp. 214–232). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gillies, H. (2010). Listening to the learner: A qualitative investigation of motivation for embracing or avoiding the use of self-access centres. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 1(3), 189-211. Retrieved from <https://sisaljournal.org/archives/dec10/gillies/>
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Anchor.
- Hatch, H. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, E. R. (2014). *The language of adult immigrants: Agency in the making*. Bristol, UK. Multilingual Matters.
- Murphey, T. (1998). *Motivating with near peer role models*. In B. Visgatis (Ed.), *On JALT '97: Trends and transitions* (pp. 205-209). Tokyo, Japan: JALT.
- Murray, G., & Fujishima, N. (2013). Social language learning spaces: Affordances in a community of learners. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 36(1), 141-157. doi:10.1515/cjal-2013-0009
- Murray, G., & Fujishima, N. (Eds.) (2016). *Social spaces for language learning: Stories from the L-café*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Murray, G., Fujishima, N., & Uzuka, M. (2018). Social learning spaces and the invisible fence. In G. Murray & T. Lamb (Eds.), *Space, place and autonomy in language learning* (pp. 233–246). London: Routledge.
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning*. London, UK: Longman.
- Parker, J. (2000). *Structuration*. Buckingham, UK: Open University.
- Rose, H., & Elliott, R. (2010). An investigation of student use of a self-access English-only speaking area. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 1(1), 32-46. Retrieved from [https://sisaljournal.org/archives/jun10/rose\\_elliott/](https://sisaljournal.org/archives/jun10/rose_elliott/)

- Schutz [1932] 1967. *The phenomenology of the social world*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Weedon, C. (1997). *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory* (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. M. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015). *Communities of practice: A brief introduction*. Retrieved from <http://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/07-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice.pdf>
- Winch, P. (1990). *The idea of social science and its relation to philosophy* (2d ed). London, UK: Routledge.