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Jo Mynard, Kanda University of International Studies,
Chiba, Japan

Dominique Vola Ambinintsoa, Kanda University of
International Studies, Chiba, Japan

Ena Hollinshead, Kanda University of International Studies,
Chiba, Japan

Ward Peeters, Kanda University of International Studies,
Chiba, Japan / University of Antwerp, Belgium

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Jo Mynard, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan

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Ena Hollinshead, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan

Ward Peeters, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan / University of Antwerp, Belgium

Abstract

The field of self-access has spanned 50 years, and in this report, the authors give a brief overview of a recent event organized by the Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education (RILAE) with the theme of ‘Landmarks in self-access’. The authors also make reference to some landmark and recent publications in learner autonomy and self-access that have influenced the field.

Keywords: self-access landmarks, learning communities, role of self-access

The 6th ‘LAb Session’ (Learner Autonomy webinar) was organized by the Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education (RILAE) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Japan and was attended live by 73 participants based in at least 12 countries in different regions of the world, from Mexico to New Zealand. The theme of the event was selected to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) at KUIS. The intention was to provide an opportunity to look back at the field of self-access in general and reflect on the journey and some of the publications and trends thus far. In this paper, we will give a summary of the event as a more detailed account of the presentations and the themes of the event will be published in the next issue of *Relay Journal* as there will be a featured section on ‘landmarks in self-access’.

Landmark Publications in Self-Access and Learner Autonomy

To highlight 2021 as a landmark year for learner autonomy and self-access, the 6th LAb Session website (<https://kuis.kandagaigo.ac.jp/rilae/lab-sessions/LAb6>) listed some influential publications. For example, forty years ago, in 1981, Henri Holec published his classic book ‘Autonomy and foreign language learning’ which could be argued to be the trigger for what would become a wide-reaching and extensively discussed academic field.

Ten years after this first publication, in 1991, David Little published his well-referenced and influential book ‘Learner autonomy 1: Definitions, issues and problems’; Anita Wenden published her book ‘Learner strategies for learner autonomy’ then ten years later Phil Benson published the first edition ‘Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning’ (updated and republished ten years later in 2011).

Turning more specifically to self-access, thirty years ago (also in 1991), Susan Sheerin published a ‘state of the art’ paper on self-access in *Language Learning*, and in 1999 David Gardner and Lindsay Miller published the milestone volume ‘Establishing self-access’. The (initially) rather niche field of self-access later became incorporated into the broader and more mainstream concept of ‘learning beyond the classroom’ with the publication of ‘Beyond the language classroom’ edited by Phil Benson and Hayo Reinders in 2011.

Recent Publications in Self-Access

Interest in learner autonomy and self-access continues; to mention a few recent publications, in 2020, an edited volume by Manuel Jiménez Raya and Flávia Vieira was published; it contains several relevant chapters which take stock of the field of learner autonomy, including two specifically on self-access. The first is by Katherine Thornton who takes a narrative approach to explore the ‘changing role of self-access’ through interviews. She comments on the “ideological shifts and practical considerations” (Thornton, 2020, p. 157) which have promoted changes in the relationship between self-access and learner autonomy. In a chapter by Maria Giovanna Tassinari and José Javier Martos Ramos (2020), the authors also note how the field of self-access has evolved and has drawn increasingly on trends in research from other disciplines, particularly psychology. The authors explore changes in the roles of key people, i.e., teachers, managers and learners. They also consider conceptualizations of ‘places’, approaches to evaluation and some ideas for future developments.

Another volume, edited by Jo Mynard, Michelle Tamala and Ward Peeters (also published in 2020), explored some of the theoretical, empirical and practical considerations when supporting educators and learners in promoting language learner autonomy, with two chapters that apply these considerations to self-access. The chapter by David McLoughlin focuses on the role of learners’ ‘interest’ to develop self-regulation of motivation, where the author points out that the people and support systems in such environments “can help some learners move from a situation where interest is triggered to one where they are able to generate their own interest and remain motivated” (McLoughlin, 2020, p. 73). Jo Mynard and

Scott Shelton-Strong present an investigation into the autonomy-supportive nature of self-access environments and apply a novel self-determination theory approach to the evaluation of a SALC.

Other ideas are also influencing the field. For example, Phil Benson (2017) has suggested that it is no longer useful to think in terms of language learning as occurring solely within or outside the classroom; rather, we can take a more holistic and ecological perspective on learning. Garold Murray and Terry Lamb (2017) helped us understand the underlying conceptualizations of space and place in relation to autonomy in language learning in their edited volume. Finally, Jo Mynard (2021) has tracked the phases of self-access through the decades from personalized learning in the 1970s to computer-assisted learning in the 2000s, to the current phase which incorporates a focus on emotions, basic psychological needs and wellbeing in language learning.

The Theme of the 6th LAb session

The purpose of the 6th LAb session was to share some specific examples of landmarks in different contexts as a way of uncovering shifts in the field in general. The presenters and participants were invited to consider the following questions:

- How was self-access in your context originally conceptualized? What changes has it experienced over time?
- What are some key features of your SALC? How and why were these initiated? How do these work in practice?
- Through your practice, what have you noticed about the ways in which the field of self-access has developed or shifted?
- What are some ways you or your colleagues have conducted research in self-access which have illustrated some kind of development of the field?
- What effects do shifts have on language learning?
- What does the future hold for the field? What are your predictions for the next phase of self-access? What are some challenges and opportunities for the future of self-access?

Presentations took the form of featured sessions, narratives/reflections, descriptions of practice, theoretical conceptualizations and reviews. Narratives featured prominently at the event in line with previous approaches to uncovering trends and experiences (e.g., Navarro & Mynard, 2011; Thornton, 2020). In the following sections, we will briefly summarize each of the presentations, and then we will end with a few of our ‘takeaways’ from the event.

Featured Presentations

JASAL: Supporting a Growing Self-Access Community in Japan by Katherine Thornton, Otemon Gakuin University, Osaka, Japan

In her talk on supporting the growing self-access community in Japan, Thornton elaborated on the general trends she has observed in the self-access field over the years and tapped into her experience as a board member of the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) to highlight where she feels the field stands today, and where it could be heading in the years to come. One of the major trends that Thornton has observed in Japan is the concentration of self-access centers (SACs) in private universities, as opposed to public institutions, with some exceptions. Furthermore, one of the major points for growth is that these centers are sometimes isolated from academic departments and academic staff in those departments may not be aware of the role that self-access can play alongside (or as part of) the curriculum.

SACs often serve three distinct, yet interconnected purposes: target language communication, support for learner autonomy development and intercultural exchange (Thornton et al., 2021). It is, therefore, important to note the added value of self-access in this regard, as it offers possibilities for faculty to help activate students' agency and make them productive participants in their learning processes through a SAC's advising services and student-led communities.

Interview with Phil Benson (Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia) About His New Book 'Language Learning Environments: Spatial Perspectives on SLA'

(Interviewers: Phillip A. Bennett and Amelia Yarwood, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan)

In this interview, Benson talked about theories of space, which is the theme of his recent book, *Language Learning Environments: Spatial Perspectives on SLA* (2021). He explained the issue of space being neglected and often associated with emptiness. Yet, space is an important factor in language learning, as language is attached and integrated in space. Moreover, the perceptions of affordances in a given space may differ from one person to another and learners can construct their own environments in which to learn languages that fit their everyday routine. Although there is not a section on self-access in the new book, in the interview Benson suggested that we should consider the role of the (self-access) space in relation to other spaces in which a student might (or might not) be learning languages. We can ask: "how does a self-access center or learning space fit into the wider environment of the students and what kind of strategies should we be adopting?" For example, should we try to

replicate an environment by making self-access resources and opportunities convenient to learners? Should we try to make up for what is *missing* in the environment outside? Or should we just use a SALC as a place for students to talk about their ideas for learning?

After Establishing.... By David Gardner, Hong Kong University and Lindsay Miller, City University of Hong Kong

Gardner and Miller talked about developments in the field after the publication of their book *Establishing Self-Access: From Theory and Practice* (1999). Miller acknowledged that in the earlier approaches to self-access, the focus was on the physical space. Originally, a SAC was seen as a bridge linking a structured learning environment (i.e., a classroom) with out-of-class learning. However, in recent years, these boundaries have become blurred and Miller talked about the importance of the integration of structured (in-class) and unstructured (out-class) learning and of students' involvement through project work, particularly using technology (Hafner & Miller, 2019; Miller & Wu, 2022).

Gardner suggested that 'old-style' SACs have either disappeared or have been transformed and that 'good' SACs can be incorporated within the Learning Beyond the Classroom model (Benson, 2011a; Chik, 2014). For example, well-organized, well-run SACs provide:

- learning beyond the classroom that can also be linked to classroom learning,
- a wide range of settings,
- opportunities for self-instruction and for naturalistic learning,
- support for learners to take control of their own learning,
- engagement over time.

Gardner noted that these features can be offered virtually or physically and that the key to success is the involvement of good pedagogical staff: "the role of people is paramount to good self-access".

Narratives / Reflections

**Starting to Work in a SALC Without Being in the SALC by Dominique Vola
Ambinintsoa Razafindratsimba, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba,
Japan**

In her short presentation, Ambinintsoa shared her rather unique experience of starting to work as a learning advisor at a 'virtual' SALC during the pandemic. She used the metaphor of a transition bridge (not belonging to either her former life or to the SALC) to

talk about her feelings and the challenges she had. She emphasized that the key to crossing the bridge was mainly self-reflection, coupled with the virtual support she received from mentoring sessions and peer collaboration.

A Decade of Self-Access Experience: The Story of the Independent Learning Center at AYBU by Tarik Uzun, Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Ankara, Turkey

Uzun provided a brief history of the Independent Learning Center (ILC) at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University (AYBU) in Turkey, which is celebrating its ten-year anniversary this year. He focused mainly on the transformation undergone in that time at the ILC and then offered several tips for self-access center management.

From the Ashes: The Rebirth of the LC by Lorraine Reinbold and Daniel Hooper, Hakuoh University, Tochigi, Japan

Reinbold and Hooper shared the journey their self-access learning center, the Language Commons (the LC) at Hakuoh University, has been through. After a series of devastating setbacks, they have started reviving their space with the help of a community of practice, through research, inter-faculty communication and a range of awareness-raising activities.

Adapting our SAC in Nuevo León, Mexico Through the Years by Elva Elena Peña Andrade, Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, México

In this talk, Peña Andrade described the changes that occurred at the Self-Access Center at Nuevo León University. Specifically, the speaker outlined the ups and downs of her own center in the chemistry department and shared some of her hopes for the future of their SAC.

Going Virtual: Opening up Spaces for Self-Access by Giovanna Tassinari, Freie Universität Berlin, Sprachenzentrum, Berlin, Germany

Tassinari discussed how the pandemic accelerated a change of focus for her self-access center. Like many others, her SAC was facing challenges by going virtual, but thanks to the creativity of both learners and SAC practitioners, they were able to overcome these challenges. She emphasized that in order to move forward (post-pandemic), it is important to integrate physical and online environments, redefine the focus of self-access and to ensure the SAC practitioners' well-being.

Descriptions of Practice

From Seed to Plant: Reflection on Developing a SAC Under COVID-19 by Kie Yamamoto, Assistant Professor, Wayo Women's University, Chiba, Japan. Doctoral candidate, University of Bath, UK

Yamamoto used the metaphor of planting seeds in a desert when describing her experience of making a SAC operational during the pandemic. Determined by the belief that learners are central in the SAC, she followed four steps using the metaphor of planting seeds and growing plants to represent her approach to fostering learning. The steps were: engaging learners in reflective dialogue throughout asynchronous learning, supporting learners in summer English learning events and teletandem learning with other universities, forming groups through a student community (which was led by third-year students) and getting more people involved. She also managed to secure some valuable funding to support the development of the SAC.

The Importance of Journaling in Self-Access Learning: Encouraging a Learner's Transformative and Critical Reflections by Huw Davies and Yuta Homma, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan

In this presentation, Homma, a university student and Davies, a learning advisor, discussed how written dialogue through a journal can support and enhance reflection, according to Homma's learning experience. Through the reflection, along with the learning advisor's support and encouragement, Homma developed self-awareness, self-confidence and critical reflection in his English language learning.

Peer Conversation Groups by Patrycja Czarniecka-Brandt, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

In her presentation, Czarniecka-Brandt discussed how her self-access language center has overcome the challenges triggered by the pandemic through the organization of peer conversation groups for different languages. The peer conversation groups did not only foster cooperation, but also independent and self-directed learning.

Theoretical Conceptualizations

The Nested Contexts of Self-Access, Educational Institutions, and Society: What Learner Autonomy Means for the Future by Curtis Edlin, Chiba University, Japan

In his presentation, Edlin pointed out the ever-changing nature of society due to technological change, advancement and increased longevity. In order to maintain sustainability in such a changing world, he emphasized that educational institutions, or more

precisely, SALCs, should provide students opportunities to develop their self-regulation of learning, including the regulation of their motivation, effort, attention and learning strategies, which will help them “learn and re-learn”.

Conceptualising Research on Informal Language Learning Through Self-Determination Theory by Artem Zadorozhnyy (Archie), Education University of Hong Kong

Drawing on large-scale statistical data collected from university students in Kazakhstan, Zadorozhnyy suggested that more effort should be dedicated to bridging out-of-class activities within formal education contexts. In particular, by taking a self-determination theory perspective, he suggested that more attention should be paid to satisfying the basic psychological need of relatedness by and creating a sense of belonging to a community.

Thinking About Self-Access from a Self-Determination Theory Perspective by Jo Mynard and Scott Shelton-Strong, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan

In this session, the presenters provided a rationale for taking a self-determination theory perspective (Deci & Ryan, 1984; Ryan & Deci, 2017) in order to support self-access language learners. They presented a theoretical model which draws on three psychological needs, in addition to three inner motivational resources, and showed how this model can be applied in practice to four key self-access language learning (SALL) support systems. These SALL areas are: advising in language learning; structured awareness raising; conversation lounges; and interest-based, student-led learning communities.

Review

Language Center Handbook 2021 by Betsy Lavolette, Kyoto Sangyo University, Kyoto, Japan

Lavolette introduced a co-edited forthcoming publication, *The Language Center Handbook 2021* (Lavolette & Kraemer, 2021), which covers diverse language spaces in various countries. She explained some of the chapters in the volume which includes origins, fundamentals of language spaces, designing and redesigning these spaces and technologies in self-access learning contexts.

Conclusions

The event featured a wide variety of talks about the history, the current state and the future of self-access. These topics were discussed both from a practical point of view, as well as from a theoretical, more conceptual angle. Some of the main trends that could be observed

during the event were the importance of people, the role of self-access in an institution, the focus on community and conceptualizations of space.

When considering the people involved in self-access, all the presenters placed the learners at the center of the operations and discussed their role in shaping the services, communities and practices. In addition, the important role of pedagogical staff was acknowledged.

Related to this, the concept of community was raised throughout the event and presenters have not only drawn on their own communities of practice when establishing their centers and programs, but are also fostering student communities within their spaces. Examples of this were seen through bottom-up student-led communities, peer collaboration and peer conversation groups—both in online and offline contexts—where students get the chance to take charge of their learning, build agency and develop new skills (Mynard et al., 2020).

The role of a SALC was also discussed in terms of the ways in which learning centers in general have established their presence within institutions. Staff working in self-access may be striving for proper inclusion within daily practices or raising awareness of well-being and basic psychological needs within learning, teaching and advising.

Finally, the concept of space was discussed. Phil Benson addressed his spatial perspectives on SLA and stressed the importance of thinking about space as a concept that offers a realm of possibilities for learners and practitioners working in self-access. One of the major take-aways is that the perceptions of the kind of affordances a given space has may differ from person to person. This opened up a question: should SACs be spaces where everything one needs to learn, grow and flourish be available and at the ready, or should they be spaces where we can guide and advise people on where to find the tools, resources and opportunities they need?

The various narratives showed how self-access is thriving around the world despite considerable setbacks in some cases. Colleagues have overcome challenges such as a global pandemic, budget constraints, restricted access to technology, declining learner motivation, lack of understanding from administration, earthquakes and even floods. Yet dedicated and enthusiastic educators and learners are finding a way to continue to develop the field and make a difference to students and their language learning experiences.

In terms of directions for the future, some initial impressions are that SACs are becoming more context specific and support services may differ widely as more learning opportunities and avenues present themselves. It is clear that online SALCs and the use of

technology for supporting learning will continue to play a significant role, but the actual role of technology may vary from center to center. In addition, as Thornton mentioned in her featured talk, innovation in the field has always originated from those who are willing to go the extra mile when it comes to creativity, determination and relevance. In order to keep being relevant, SALCs should focus on diversity, inclusion and on the basic psychological needs of learners and staff across the institution.

Finally, to comment on the event itself, we felt that it highlighted that the field contains supportive, creative and dedicated practitioners who remain hopeful and student centered. Despite the geographical distance between attendees, there was a sense of community, mutual understanding and support which strengthens our belief that the future of self-access, in all its facets, is bright.

Notes on the Contributors

Jo Mynard is a professor in the Faculty of Global Liberal Arts, Director of the Self-Access Learning Center, and Director of the Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education at Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba, Japan. She has an M.Phil in Applied Linguistics (Trinity College Dublin, Ireland) and an Ed.D. in TEFL (University of Exeter, UK). Her research interests include advising in language learning, the psychology of language learning, and learning beyond the classroom.

Dominique Vola Ambinintsoa is a learning advisor at Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba, Japan. She holds a PhD in applied linguistics, focusing on fostering learner autonomy in an EFL context (Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand) and a Master of Education in TESOL (State University of New York at Buffalo, US). She has a particular interest in learner autonomy, self-access language learning, advising in language learning, and positive psychology in education.

Ena Hollinshead is an assistant manager at Kanda University of International Studies' Self-Access Learning Center. She graduated from the Chinese department at Kanda University. Previously she worked at an international kindergarten in Japan. Ena also lived in New Zealand for a few years. She is currently a postgraduate student studying TESOL at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand.

Ward Peeters is a Visiting Professor at Kanda University of International Studies (Japan), and performs research in Linguistics at the University of Antwerp (Belgium) and at Leiden University (the Netherlands). His main interests revolve around studying the impact of social networks in foreign language learning contexts, digital text analytics and computer-mediated communication for academic purposes. Ward has conducted research projects in Belgium, Japan and South Africa as part of an extensive study on computer-supported collaborative work and currently coordinates a Quality Education study in the Netherlands.

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