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Dialogue and Advising in Self-Access Learning: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Dialogue and Advising in Self-Access Learning: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Welcome to the special issue on *dialogue and advising in self-access learning*. Both of us have been involved in promoting reflective dialogue through advising for some time, yet we know that there is so much more to explore in this field. Through this special issue, we hope to make a small contribution to our developing profession and provide opportunities for us to learn from research and practices around the world. In this short introduction, we would like to touch on some of the key points related to dialogue and advising in order to put the contributions that follow into context. We will then

introduce the contributions to this special issue, which include three research papers focusing on areas which have not been explored in depth before: gender, emotional dynamics, and affect in advising dialogues. We also have articles featuring exciting new initiatives and updates from various parts of the world. Finally, we will conclude with some comments about future directions of this growing field.

Dialogue

Dialogue happens all the time both in our daily lives and with our learners. In self-access contexts we engage in dialogue with learners in advising sessions, at writing centers, in conversation lounges, in situations where student staff help SAC users, and when learners collaborate on work. Indeed, dialogue is a form of communication that permeates our daily lives, yet we tend to forget how powerful each dialogical interaction can be for those involved. According to Bakhtin (1986), something special occurs when one person addresses another: “an utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing outside it that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable, and moreover, it always has some relation to value” (pp. 119-120).

Dialogue is like a living being and is always in motion. Each person’s utterances represent that person’s voice which includes their perspectives, beliefs and values. In addition, the dialogue does not occur in a vacuum. The social environment where the dialogue takes place also plays an important part. Scollon (2001) refers to this kind of environment as a ‘site of engagement’ which is a place where particular social practices and use of language occur. Unique dialogues emerge from the people and the environments involved, and that is the exciting aspect of advising. However, patterns emerge in particular contexts. Goffman (1959) used a dramaturgical analogy whereby interactions taking place frequently might be compared with a script where each participant plays the dual roles of actor and audience. For that reason, in order to continue to understand and develop our field, it is useful to study the patterns and features of the dialogues being used in particular contexts and research their effect on the participants. More specifically, as Candlin (2012) writes, advising “requires us to analyse the

linguistic, discursive, pragmatic and social psychological features of such a process among persons in defined sites of engagement” (p. 13).

How can we make use of the unlimited opportunities dialogue provides in our self-access contexts? What are the ways in which we can help learners take ownership of their own learning? What are the factors that could influence the dialogic interactions? These are some of the questions this special issue tries to explore.

Advising

Esch (1996) writes that advising is a “system of interventions which aims at supporting students’ methodology of language learning by means of ‘conversations’, i.e., by using language in the framework of social interaction to help students reflect on their learning experience, identify inconsistencies and steer their own path.” (Esch, 1996, p. 42). Advising in language learning takes dialogue as a key tool for promoting reflection in order to foster autonomous language learning. Through advising dialogues, learners can raise awareness of their own learning and of themselves as language learners. Advising can take many forms including but not limited to one-to-one advising, group advising (Wilkinson, 2013), written advising (Thornton & Mynard, 2012), peer advising (Kao, 2012), L1 advising, L2 advising, voluntary advising, and credit-bearing advising. However, what all of these types of advising in language learning have in common is that they involve the process and practice of helping students to direct their own paths so as to become more effective and more autonomous language learners (Mynard & Carson, 2012). Advising often tends to be somewhat non-directive (Mynard & Thornton, 2012) and takes on practices from humanistic counselling (Mozzon-McPherson; 2012). When talking about advising, researchers tend to draw upon sociocultural theoretical perspectives which emphasise the use of language and other tools to mediate interaction in order to stimulate reflection and learning (Mynard, 2012; Wertsch, 2007). As Mozzon-McPherson (2012) notes: “it is the advisor’s skilled use of language that extends and enhances the learner’s thinking processes and helps him/her to gradually develop his/her way to self-manage learning....careful, skilled use of language, together with a balanced negotiation of roles, tasks and behaviours, is necessary to create a successful advising

session” (Mozzon-McPherson, 2012, p. 46). Having given a brief summary of dialogue and advising, we now turn to the contributions to this special issue.

About the Contributions

The special issue contains contributions from France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. The contributors explore ways in which cultural norms, gender, emotions of advisors and learners, learners’ affective states, and institutional demands intricately influence and construct the dialogic interactions in advising and in peer-tutoring contexts.

By reading through the contributions, readers will become more aware of the various components that influence dialogic interactions. They provide us with opportunities to think more about our practice, our interactions with learners, and our research.

Moira Hobbs and **Kerstin Dofs** start with an overview of the history, theories and current practices of the advising in language learning (ALL) field. Their article touches on the differences between advising and teaching, and discusses why advising is necessary. They also provide examples of advising at two New Zealand institutions. Their piece will be especially helpful for those who are new to this field.

The three research articles in this volume look at advising dialogues, all from different perspectives. **Sophie Bailly**, **Guillaume Nassau** and **Anouchka Divoux** start by introducing us to the yet unexplored topic of the gendered dimension and the psychological support in ALL. The study examined a collected corpus and analyzed the ways in which female and male advisors working in different educational contexts verbally establish a relationship where a learner’s autonomy can emerge. Specifically they looked at indirectness of the male and female advisors, psychological support strategies employed to diminish negative appraisals, and advisor-learner speech distribution. The preliminary results suggest that psychological support is provided by the learning advisors through a wide range of verbal strategies and that gender of the advisor seems less significant than age and work context to explain individual differences.

The next research article analyzes advising dialogue from yet another perspective – dynamics of emotional relationships. **Emmanuelle Carette**, **Eric Thiébaud**, and

Guillaume Nassau explore the dynamics of emotional relationships during counselling (advising) interviews in self-directed language learning. Counsellors' (advisors') and learners' emotional states were inferred from tone of voice following analysis of audio recordings of their exchanges. Emotions expressed in every turn are characterized on valence and activation scales, and emotional relationships were synthesized in a typology. The researchers found that most of the observed emotional fluctuations were learner-initiated, and that counsellors regulated emotions in order to maintain an emotional climate.

Although the above two studies are from particular learning contexts, the presence of psychological and emotional aspects in advising dialogues has wider applicability. Traditionally, learners' negative affect has been seen as something that impedes their learning process. In a previous issue of *SiSAL Journal* (Issue 4(4) edited by Carol J. Everhard), Maria Giovanna Tassinari and Maud Ciekanski (2013) emphasized the importance of the affective dimension in self-access language learning, and noted that many learning advisors "do not feel at ease dealing with the psychological aspects of learning" (p. 272). It causes us to think about the ways in which learning advisors can support learners' affective dimension.

In the third research article on advising dialogue, **Hisako Yamashita** provides a new perspective on how advisors can deal with learners' affect and how advisors can support learners to become autonomous in that process. She considers learners' affect, both positive and negative, as an "essential resource" that advisors and learners should make use of in developing metacognition and in helping learners become autonomous so that they can achieve their learning goals in a self-fulfilling way. The author shares a case study, and encourages advisors to help learners express their affect and engage in a cognitive-affective meaning-making process.

As noted by Rubin (2007) in her introduction to a special issue of *System* on language counselling, situations differ and this affects practices and challenges. The next article shows us ways in which advising caters for the needs of the learners within a given context. In an intensive program where learners are expected to study rigorously and on a tight schedule, the advising dialogue may need to be more structured. **Donald P.**

Harootian and **Erin N. O'Reilly** share their ready-to-use 8-step interview protocol they

developed in response to the unique needs of learners and advisors in an intensive language program. The protocol has been used by new advisors successfully for a period of over four years in an intensive language program's self-access centre.

Advising services usually exist alongside self-access centres in order to provide support to learners adjusting to self-access learning environments (Mozzon-McPherson, 2001). As programme coordinators, it is important that the advising service functions efficiently so that those who need the support services are provided the opportunity. In their report, **Yuuki Ogawa** and **Ryo Hase** describe their advising service at a private university in Japan and share the ways in which they have kept records about the utilization rate. They also share the measures they have taken to improve accessibility of the advising service and to promote their support services to a larger student body.

The next contribution once again looks at how practices are shaped by context. **Hinako Takeuchi** reflects on how cultural and systemic aspects of the Japanese education system may impact the approach to peer tutoring in Japanese universities. In the article, the author shares her findings of some preliminary research within a peer-tutoring context in a Japanese university. The author investigated whether abolishing the senior-junior (*sempai-kohai*) hierarchical relationship in a peer-tutoring context by not allowing tutees to use formal Japanese, *keigo*, would have any influence on their interactions or on academic success. Takeuchi noticed that learners who used *keigo* with their tutors achieved more academic success than those who did not. Her research reminds us that dialogue needs to take into consideration cultural aspects.

Jadzia Terlecka and **Carolyn Schneider** describe the roles and work of the language learning adviser in the University of Leeds Language Zone, one of the largest self-access centres in the UK. The centre is used by postgraduates, undergraduates, language centre students, as well as students learning other languages, and hosts learning resources for over 40 languages. The language learning adviser provides individual advice sessions, monitors resources, compiles self-help guidance, and delivers workshops. The authors indicate the wide range of roles and responsibilities a learning adviser has. They also point to the important role of the adviser in providing necessary support so that students can make effective use of the increasing learning opportunities using technology.

In our regular column edited by Katherine Thornton, **Michael Allhouse** provides the concluding instalment of his three-part contribution giving an account of transforming an underused resource centre into 'Room 101', a social learning space at the University of Bradford in the UK. This instalment focuses on a survey of other SAC managers around the UK, which aimed to discover to what extent Room 101's journey was typical of the field.

Dialogue is not just about working with learners. We practitioners should also actively engage in dialogic interactions with each other to help us become better supporters of our learners. As advising in language learning is a rather new and growing field in language learning education, it is important that we learn from each other.

Judith Buendgens-Kosten reviews 'Exploring English: Language and culture', an example of a Massively Open Online Course (MOOC), i.e. an online course that can be taken by large numbers of learners without formal entrance requirements. In recent years, MOOCs have skyrocketed, but very few MOOCs cover language learning. The review explains the course and describes the specific challenges that language learning poses for MOOCs. This particular course provides learners with opportunities through a Facebook page and discussion threads to interact with other learners. This type of course format is something which has never been seen in MOOC format before and has set a new benchmark

Erin Okamoto reports on the annual forum held by the Japan Association of Self-Access Learning (JASAL) in November 2014 at the JALT Conference. She provides summaries of the four presentations which covered: the challenges of setting up a new self-access centre, tips for running a self-access centre smoothly, ways to attract users, and ways to evaluate self-access centres. JASAL is a growing organization with members from all over Japan and even from outside Japan. It provides members with opportunities to discuss, exchange ideas, and collaborate on initiatives to promote self-access learning in institutions in Japan.

Finally, **Carolyn Schneider** describes the process she went through in refurbishing the library at her institution in the UK into 'The Language Zone'. The Language Zone became a very active and busy self-access centre with around 400-500 users per day, where learners have access to learning materials and support services. In

the process of refurbishing the centre, the author joined several online groups on space design to help her plan out the details of the centre. She shares her strategies in working with the noise and in getting understanding from the learners during the refurbishment process, as well as in taking leadership.

Conclusions and Future Directions

We hope that you find the articles in this volume thought-provoking and enriching. Dialogue is something that we each engage in every day with learners. However, because dialogue is part of our daily lives, it is easy for us to forget the value of it, or the various components that contribute to meaningful dialogic interactions which can help in fostering autonomous and self-directed learners. For many years, the fields of self-access learning and advising have focused on the macro-aspects such as providing a physical space or setting up the infrastructure to provide opportunities for learners to get support. As these fundamentals are now established in many educational contexts, we can now turn to expanding our knowledge by looking into the micro-aspect of the dialogues and interactions that occur between people in self-access learning centres and at the processes of becoming self-directed learners. For example, we need to conduct more research in order to know *how* our advising dialogue is effective at helping learners to succeed. In order to do this, we can continue to gather evidence from our experiences of working closely with learners and observing their development, record and analyse our advising sessions, analyse learners' reflective journals, accumulate learners' responses to surveys and focus groups, and note learners' achievements such as passing exams. However, we can also draw upon research in related fields from institutions that have access to fMRI technology and are able to see from neuro-imaging actual changes in the brain. For example, research by Cesaro et al., (2010) and Jack, Boyatzis, Khawaja, Passarelli, & Leckie (2013) demonstrates that coaching which focused what they called a Positive Emotional Attractor (PEA) rather than a Negative Emotional Attractor (NEA) resulted in increased brain activity in the lateral occipital cortex, superior temporal cortex, medial parietal, subgenual cingulate, nucleus accumbens, and left lateral prefrontal cortex which are the areas of the brain that indicate visioning and positive affect. PEA coaching emphasises compassion and focuses on engaging people in thinking

about positive future outcomes, for example, by asking them about their future dreams. NEA focuses on externally determined criteria and is more present in questions often asked by academic advisors, such as “How are you doing in your coursework?”, “What else do you have to do to keep up with the work?”. These kinds of questions stimulate different regions of the brain: the medial prefrontal regions and right lateral prefrontal cortex which are regions associated with defence mechanisms and negative affect.

A team at Case Western Reserve University, USA (Boyzatis, 2015) are currently researching differences in brain activity where one group of participants are asked to write written responses to PEA prompts by themselves, and brain images are compared with a group of participants who engage in a coaching dialogue with another person. Although both of these activities stimulate parts of the brain associated with positive affect and visioning, the researchers are finding through this kind of brain imaging work that it is the *dialogue* that makes the activity even more effective than simply writing responses. These kinds of scientific studies have great potential for the field of advising.

On a final note, it has been a great privilege for us to edit this special issue and learn from colleagues around the world. The editing processes have triggered our own reflective dialogues, enabling us to come away from the experience much enriched and with a deeper understanding of our own practice.

Notes on the editors of the special issue

Hisako Yamashita is a Chief Learning Advisor at Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages, Japan, and the Membership Chair of the Japan Association of Self-Access Learning (JASAL). Her research interests include learner-advisor dialogue, affect, metacognition, advisor training, and curriculum development.

Jo Mynard is the founding editor of *SiSAL Journal* and is an Associate Professor and Director of the Self-Access Learning Centre at Kanda University of International Studies in Japan. Her research interests include affect, advising, learner autonomy, and self-access learning.

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