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Considering Context: The Importance of Specific Institutional and Learner Contexts When Researching the Set Up of a Self-Access Centre

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Abstract

This article describes how a language learning centre was researched and set up at a performing arts academy in Hong Kong. The Language Learning Centre (LLC) at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts opened in December 2012, after five months of research and planning. During the research phase, specific aspects of the institutional culture and of the learners themselves were identified and compared with examples found in relevant literature and with other self-access centres in the region.

During the planning phase, much was unknown about the purposes that the LLC would serve, since new programmes were being introduced throughout the Academy and the incoming cohort was the product of a new secondary school syllabus. While necessary decisions were made at the outset to establish the space, others, particularly those relating to pedagogy and the provision of advising and learner training, were taken in stages, as information became available.

Keywords: language learning centre, Hong Kong, performing arts academy

The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (APA) is a unique institution in many ways. It offers the world's only bachelor degree in Chinese Opera, as well as diplomas, bachelor's and master's degrees in Dance (ballet, contemporary and Chinese folk), Music (Western and Chinese), Drama, Film & Television and Technical & Entertainment Arts (sound, lighting, set & costume design and construction, and stage & events management). With fewer than a thousand students, mostly local but with significant numbers of mainland Chinese and some from other South-East Asian countries, the Academy receives funding from a different branch of government to other tertiary institutions in the region and has a separate governing council.

These differences in structure, funding and disciplines are reflected in the nature of APA students who, while varying widely in terms of academic sophistication and ability, must demonstrate high levels of competence and experience in their chosen discipline to be admitted. This expertise, and the

confidence it imparts, impacts student-teacher relationships; the most respected and effective teachers at the Academy being those who manifestly respect their students and position themselves as learning facilitators, rather than authority figures.

Context

The Language Learning Centre (LLC) at the APA opened in December 2012, two years after it was proposed to the governing council by the Head of the Department of Languages. His vision was for a self-access centre that would support and extend the department's work, offering students virtual and physical self-study resources, together with advisors to help develop and oversee study plans and train independent learning skills, while working with individuals and small groups towards specific learning outcomes. The role of an academy encompasses both academic and vocational training so preparing learners for their industry after graduation is as important as supporting their studies.

My role as LLC Coordinator commenced at the beginning of July 2012, prior to which I had been a part-time teacher at the Academy for several years. I was familiar with APA students; how they work, what kind of teaching approach they respond to and what they often need. This knowledge was invaluable when it came to the design of the learning space and the structuring of the services the centre would provide. However the start of the academic year in September would bring significant changes, as we welcomed the first graduates of the new Secondary Syllabus (NSS), with only six, rather than the previous seven, years of high school education. Consequently, along with the other Hong Kong tertiary institutions, the Academy was rolling out a new four-year degree and revised diploma programmes. The entirety of services required by the LLC could not be predicted while the centre was being established, although a key motivator was to provide language learning opportunities to motivated students who were to study only half the mandatory language courses of their old-system counterparts.

The Academy has three official languages for learning and teaching: Cantonese, English and Mandarin. Students could require LLC support for writing and presenting in Chinese or English and for listening and reading in English, depending on major-study requirements. Additionally, the Department offers popular courses in other languages: Korean, Japanese, Italian, German, Spanish and French.

The LLC would offer support in all nine languages to learners from all the Academy's schools.

Researching the Learning Space

When I took up the role, the location of the LLC hadn't been decided and most stakeholders were away for the summer, including the Head of Languages. There were no known deadlines to work towards and many practical decisions had to be delayed. This allowed for a valuable period of research, during which I read about independent language learning, advising and self-access centres and discovered the *Studies in Self-Access Journal* to be a terrific resource. Key texts that I found useful included those of Gardner and Miller (1999; 2010). Mynard (2011) and Mozzon-McPherson (2011), among others.

I also visited a number of self-access centres in other tertiary institutions and talked with centre managers and administrative staff. I am lucky to be based in Hong Kong, which can, according to Little in his endorsement for Gardner and Miller's recent book about managing self access "fairly claim to be the SALL capital of the world" (2014, p. i). There were many centres to visit, although I was dismayed to be told that some institutions had downsized or closed the physical SAC and that others had reduced or stopped advising services for reasons of cost reduction and competing demands for space. I developed a questionnaire, based on both my reading and my knowledge of the Hong Kong context (See Appendix A), to cover the key points I wanted to find out from the SAC Coordinators at these centres.

Applying what was learned from research

The overriding message to come out of the reading and site visits was that, in terms of setting up a new self-access centre, context is king. Institutions larger than ours rely on fresh graduates from overseas, on scholarships or short contracts, to undertake most advising work and to entice learners with the prospect of working with young foreigners. SACs in institutions with student accommodation, far from the city centre, have busy social and cultural programmes, while those closer to town do not. Every institution I visited incorporates self-access study into credit-bearing courses. I discovered that, where students dislike mandatory language courses, that prejudice extends to non-mandatory SAC activities. Where there are language or language teaching majors, much higher visitor numbers can be anticipated.

The Learning Space in Action

At the end of the summer 2012, it was decided that the LLC would be located, for several years at least, off-campus in an office building ten minutes' walk away, across three main roads. The space allocated was 25% smaller than expected, at 75m². I was, unsurprisingly, disappointed by these decisions. However, with what was already known about APA learner needs, together with what had been learned through site visits, my colleagues in the Estates Department and I made best possible use of the space. With a concrete floor and only vinyl and leather furniture, the LLC is food- and drink-friendly, which partially offsets the disadvantages of location and packed student timetables.

From a design point of view, I had seen from the visits how successful it was to use different types of furniture, flooring and lighting to create separate areas for different activities. We now have several distinctive areas in a fairly small space. First of all, the sense of spaciousness is maximised by the treatment of floor and ceiling. There is no false ceiling but exposed pipes and rough, painted concrete, while the floor is polished concrete throughout, which wears extremely well and still looks fresh, three years on. Three round student worktables, an L-shaped bench along two walls for five student computers and a large set of enclosed bookshelves for physical resources inhabit around half the area. In the space in front of a large window are beanbags, a leather sofa and matching armchair and magazine racks. Along the back wall is an advisors' workstation, together with long, open shelves for teacher resources and LLC files. In front of those are the Coordinator and Administrative Assistant's desks, facing into the main space. See the included floor plan (Appendix B) for the exact design of the centre. The lighting is in three sections and often switched off in one area to create a more restful working environment. Floor and table lamps been added to further differentiate sections of the centre.



Figure 1. Inside the LLC

Several centre managers had stated that learners prefer advising to take place in the main space, rather than a separate room. They note that seeing advising in action encourages other learners to use the service. It was recommended to have administrative staff, advisors and centre managers in full view of the learners. In larger institutions where managers have separate offices, they spend part of the day in the centre, available to engage with staff and learners alike. My experience indicates that learners can engage in self-study while others work with advisors nearby and that learners and advisors both enjoy being able to interact with centre staff informally. However, I have also found that not having a quiet space to retreat to makes it hard to think and write when the centre is busy.

The APA is too small for the kind of overseas graduate advisor scheme popular in several other Hong Kong institutions; advisors are part-time teachers, together with whom I continue to develop the most effective advising techniques and learner training for APA students. These are teachers who regularly top polls in formal student feedback questionnaires, capable of developing the kind of rapport necessary for effective learner-advisor relationships (Lee, 2015).

Social and cultural events in the LLC were originally planned but student timetables are prohibitively packed for now, especially when production practice,

rehearsals and performances are added in. Regular LLC visitors, when asked if they would support such events, express enthusiasm, but say they have no time.

Range of Activities

Once the academic year began, we had the first of many surprises. A significant proportion of the new intake did not meet admission requirements in either Chinese or English language and this has continued to be the case. The LLC was soon running credit-bearing courses for these Conditional Admission learners, in addition to devising study plans and running exam preparation workshops. This, fortunately, keeps us busy, as the location in combination with student schedules, mean the centre doesn't receive the traffic that was hoped for. In a recent survey, 80% of students who don't currently use the LLC said that they would do so, were the centre to be on campus.

The LLC also works with faculty to identify areas where language support could benefit major studies and provides workshops or short courses to address these needs. The only mandatory visit most learners make to the LLC is during their first semester, when attendance for one lesson is given on the basis of the visit and successful completion of a Treasure Hunt, a thinly disguised introduction to the physical and virtual resources, with some fun activities thrown in. These visits are scheduled over several weeks, to manage numbers.

The LLC also runs credit-bearing Guided Independent Learning (GIL) courses in English and Chinese. Conditional Admission students are currently the main, but not exclusive, participants. Learners, singly or in small groups, meet with advisors for only half the contact hours or less of a regular course and are encouraged to take increasing responsibility for their own learning, to set goals and select suitable resources to achieve them. The scheme is still developing but shows promise according to advisors, who use the attached guidelines (See Appendix C) with learners to monitor progress, as well as give grades, and to learners themselves, who give predominantly positive feedback about progress. Learner training is to become a significant part of the first-year APA curriculum, the need for it having been identified since the introduction of the NSS, and the success of the LLC GILs may result in courses of a similar structure being developed in other subject areas.

Advice and Suggestions

Detailed knowledge of the learning context and specific learner characteristics is essential so that principles governing the centre, its resources and services can be aligned. Adjustments can and should be made once operations have started but it is worth taking the time, if you have it, to get as much as possible right from the outset. This includes considering what kind of physical self-study environment will appeal to your learners.

If you are new to the institution, I recommend spending time with language teachers and talking to major subject teachers too, if these are different. They have a working knowledge of the students that may be more useful for your purposes than senior management's institutional viewpoint. Observing a variety of classes gives a sense of the learners and their preferences. Noting where students currently congregate for self-study and to discuss their studies is helpful too, to give an idea of the physical environments they find conducive to learning. This kind of data gathering will reveal more than student surveys if, as is the case for the APA, the learners have little experience of independent study.

People involved in self-access language learning, be they centre managers, administrators or advisors, are both knowledgeable and passionate about what they do. Talk to as many people as possible, perhaps with a questionnaire as a starting point. If you can't visit in person, ask questions by email, and request a live tour using technology such as FaceTime or an informal recorded version, with a staff member filming the centre, while offering a narration and perhaps interviewing other key personnel. Compare their context with your own and decide which practices and recommendations are indispensable, what you can adapt and what is not helpful.

Despite student and advisor training to foster independent learning, the majority of LLC visitors want to spend as much time as they can with advisors, who don't like refusing them. This tendency amongst learners, possibly Chinese learners specifically, was flagged during my visit to the Hong Kong Institute of Education by SAC manager, Helen Lavender, who expands on the issue in a case study (2014, pp. 143-155), where she talks about the range of learner and advisor attitudes to independent learning that can coexist in one institution and the difficulties inherent in the learner-advisor relationship. Many of our students, who demonstrate independent learning skills in their own field, revert to dependency when it comes to language learning. To address this, advisors have utilised the can-do statements from the

Common European Framework of Reference, together with the University of Helsinki's self-assessment tool, Kaleidoscope (Karlsson & Kjisik, 2007). They report that learners respond well to undertaking projects, similar to those described for young learners by Thomsen (2011), where learners choose their own topic. Major study-related topics are selected, researched, written about and presented, incorporating elements of critical analysis and personal response. Components of both process and product are negotiated between the learner and the advisor, with independent language study positioned as a means to an end, necessary for task fulfilment.

Building mandatory self-study, SAC-based components into credit bearing courses has both advantages and disadvantages. Managers at several of the centres I visited stated that compulsory visits were as much about balancing SAC costs with visitor numbers as promoting independent learning. Some teachers I spoke to who run courses incorporating independent study components were quite dismissive of potential learner benefits. However, it may be possible to be creative and cost-conscious in this area, if your academic board is amenable to arrangements such as the Academy's GILs.

Lastly, I strongly recommend staying open to new opportunities that may integrate the SAC into your learners' lives and to be proactive in seeking ways to support major study or postgraduate plans, both with faculty and the student body. Your centre may, as a result, expand its operations beyond what was originally envisaged, but play a much more vital and integrated role in the institution as a result.

Notes on the contributor

Kate Allert is Coordinator of the Language Learning Centre at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. Prior to taking up the position in 2012, she had been a language instructor and corporate trainer in Hong Kong for fifteen years. Her research interests include learner autonomy and learner-advisor relationships.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Questionnaire for SAC Managers/Coordinators

Questionnaire for Coordinators of other SACs

Administration

1. What is the total number of students in your institution?
2. How many students can study in the centre at one time?
3. How do you track student usage?
4. What are the opening hours of the centre?
5. Are students given an induction to the centre and its resources before they can use it?
6. Is use of your centre sometimes mandatory or always by choice?
7. When was the centre established? Has it undergone expansion or metamorphosis since its inception?
8. Do you ever open or run activities outside of term-time?

Location and physical set up

1. How close is the centre to the different departments and to what extent do you think distance makes a difference to usage?
2. What size is the centre? How many computers does it have? What other hardware does it have?
3. How would you describe the approach that has been taken to creating the environment of the centre?
4. Do you think the environment and ambience is important to the students when they are choosing whether or not to use the centre?

Resources

1. What languages does your centre support?
2. What cataloguing system do you use for your resources?
3. What are the key resources for students to use? Printed materials/CDs & DVDs/software/online materials? Which are most popular?
4. Can students check material out of the centre? If so, for how long?
5. How much of your material is generic and how much generated by your institution?

6. Any specific recommendations for materials or resources that have proved their worth with students?
7. How was your own material generated and over what timeframe?
8. Are there any initiatives you have introduced recently or are planning to that we haven't talked about already?

Staffing

1. What forms of professional development has your full- or part-time staff undertaken?
2. Is there further professional development or training planned for staff in the future?
3. How do you recruit and utilize student helpers?

Students

1. How do you prepare or encourage students to be **independent** learners and users of the Centre?
2. Do you use study guides or learning pathways with them? All users?
3. How do you evaluate progress?
4. What degree of resistance to SALL do you experience from your students and/or teachers? And what measures have you taken to overcome this?
5. What kind of students tend to use the centre most? Major subject? M/F? Year of study?

Study related issues

1. Is any aspect of centre usage credit bearing? How do you determine and track that?
2. What degree of buy-in do you receive from teachers of other major subjects? Do they encourage students to use the centre?
3. If you have users who are not majoring in Language, do they seek advice to support any language course(s) they are taking only, or are there aspects of major subjects that require language support too? For example, a key text that is only available in English.
4. How about preparation for tests such as TOEFL & IELTS? How does the centre support this and how popular is this kind of preparation among students?
5. Do students also prepare for tests in Mandarin and third languages through your centre?

Advising

1. Do you undertake adviser training before your advisers start work at the centre?
2. Is there a particular pedagogy or philosophy you follow in terms of advising?
3. How many advisers do you use? Are any full-time?
4. Are advisers always available on a drop-in basis, or do students have to make an appointment?
5. What do advisers do if they are on duty in the centre but without students to work with?

Events/Activities

1. Are there additional activities you organize?
2. What informal or social activities have you organized and what degree of success did they meet with?
3. Do you run workshops in the centre – and on which subjects?
4. Do you ever organize co-curricular events or workshops for or with other departments?

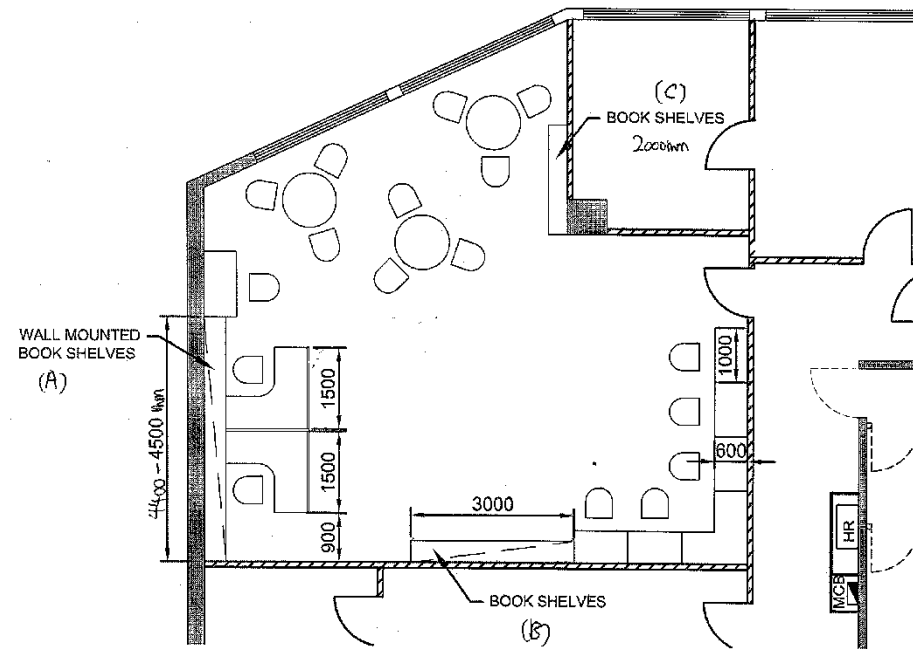
Research

1. Do you undertake research in the centre?
2. If so, what have been your most significant research findings to date?
3. What are you currently researching?

Is there anything else you think is important that we haven't already covered?

Appendix B

Floorplan of the LLC (showing student tables where sofas and beanbags are now)



Appendix C

Guided Independent Learning Grading Guidelines

GIL DESCRIPTORS

These descriptors are intended to guide teachers towards giving overall holistic grades on the performance of GIL students, and plus or minus refinements of these.

Grade	Descriptors
Straight A student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is motivated and a pleasure to work with • Is actively involved in identifying needs and setting learning goals • Is beginning to evaluate what sort of activities work for them personally and make learning suggestions based on this • Makes an attempt to source and try learning material independently • Has a good work ethic and might do more work than is set • Completes work well or if tests are devised performs well on these. • Makes the most of consultation time • Makes notable progress
Straight B student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is motivated • Needs teacher guidance with needs and goals • Works positively towards meetings goals • Is engaged during consultation time • Puts the hours in • Is dependent on the teacher for sourcing and setting work • Completes work set to the best of their ability and if tests are devised, takes them seriously and has a good go at them • Makes progress
Straight C student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is passive, but not resistant • Needs must be identified for them, goals set and progress monitored closely • Does not source learning material independently • Completes most of the work set, but is not generally hardworking • Is acceptably focused during consultation time. • If tests are set, performs averagely or erratically, but could have done better with greater application. • May find consultations difficult, but is not disengaged. • Makes patchy progress.
Straight D student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does just enough to scrape by on attendance and effort • Is hard to teach, generally, because of motivational issues • May have palpable focus and engagement problems during consultations • Does not complete work well or if tests are set performs poorly • Has retention issues or does not make obvious progress • May leave the teacher with the feeling that the course has wasted everybody's time.