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Abstract

Over the past four decades, learner autonomy in language learning has been quietly moving across what might be viewed as three paradigms in applied linguistics. When learner autonomy was introduced in the late 1970s, language classrooms were largely teacher-dominated. At that time, learner autonomy offered a much-needed focus on learners as individuals capable of accepting responsibility for all aspects of their learning. Later, as Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) neo-constructivist theories became known, learning came to be seen as being socially mediated; and the field of applied linguistics experienced 'a social turn'. Now it is widely recognized that learner autonomy develops more through interdependence rather than independence. Currently in the field of applied linguistics, ecology and complexity thinking are becoming more widespread. This article explores the impact that this theoretical shift might have on the work being carried out in social learning spaces.
By drawing on themes arising from an ethnography, a multiple case study, and a narrative inquiry investigating a social learning space, this article looks at how managers might facilitate the emergence of affordances for learning by fostering conditions for complex emergence. It begins by situating the research within the literature, and providing an overview of pertinent aspects of theories of complex dynamic systems and space and place. Then, illustrating the points with themes and anecdotes from the three studies, suggestions are made as to how learning space managers might support the emergence of affordances for learning through attention to distributed control, neighbour interactions, reciprocity, randomness, and physical design features of the learning space.

Key words: autonomy, affordances, complexity, emergence, space and place

Learner autonomy could be described as a concept in motion. Its movement across a theoretical landscape has meant that the way educators look at learner autonomy has changed over the years and this has influenced practice (Lamb, 2015). When Holec (1981) introduced the construct of autonomy to language learning in the late 1970s, he defined it as "the capacity to take charge of one's learning" (p. 3). In a field characterized by the teacher-centred classroom, Holec wanted to shift the focus to individual learners whom he saw as capable of accepting responsibility for all aspects of their learning. Holec's theories reflected work that was being done to establish self-access centres designed to meet the needs of self-directed learners in various parts of the world.

Later, through Vygotsky's work (1978, 1986), academics came to see learning as being socially mediated. In the area of learner autonomy, educators proposed a definition of the construct which emphasized learners' capacity and willingness to not only learn independently but also to cooperate with others as socially responsible people (Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander, & Trebbi, 1990). The subsequent work of Little (1991, 2000, 2007) and Dam (1995), which explored the social aspects of learner autonomy from theoretical and practical perspectives, was instrumental in raising awareness and the gradual acceptance of the idea that autonomy is developed through interdependence (Benson & Cooker, 2013). In response to this shift to a focus on the social dimensions of learner autonomy (Murray, 2014), self-access centres began to offer individual, self-directed learners a range of social activities. Currently in the field of applied linguistics, ecology and complexity thinking are becoming more recognized (de Bot, 2008; Kramsch, 2002; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Menezes, 2013; van Lier, 2004). How might this shift in theoretical orientation influence practice? More specifically, while the current literature provides guidance on self-access learning management (Gardner & Miller, 1999, 2011, 2014), what might be learned from complexity theory that could support managers' efforts to provide learning opportunities in self-access centres and social learning spaces?

In this article, these questions are addressed by drawing on the findings from a series of three research projects which aimed to explore a social space for language learning. These projects are a longitudinal ethnography, a multiple-case study and a narrative inquiry. The article begins with a description of the learning space under investigation, the L-café, and follows with an overview of the research projects. Then, an interpretation of the findings is provided from the perspective of complex dynamic systems theory. The article concludes by offering specific suggestions to managers of social learning spaces.

The Social Learning Space: A Description

The L-café is a social learning space located on the campus of a large national university in Japan.[1] When it was first conceived in 2009, the intention was to provide Japanese English foreign language learners with a comfortable environment in which they could practice their nascent oral communication skills. Should you visit the L-café, you would have difficulty distinguishing it from a self-access centre. You would

see materials for language learning, desktop computers and laptops available for student use, and, perhaps, even see students studying. However, whereas the focus of self-access centres has generally been to support self-directed learning, the emphasis in the L-café is on learning through informal social interaction.

The L-café is primarily a social space in which students can learn with and from each other. Students gather to have lunch, spend time between classes, and to meet up with friends. The L-café has developed a reputation as a place to make new friends, especially with students from other countries. A popular feature of the L-café, which provides an additional vehicle for meeting new people, are the small-sized, non-credit bearing language classes. Taught by proficient Japanese students or international students, these classes are delivered in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere devoid of the pressures of homework assignments and tests. In addition to the affordances for social interaction provided by the classes, a series of events is offered throughout the year: welcome and farewell parties for the international students as well as new and graduating Japanese students, a cherry blossom viewing party, a Halloween party and a Christmas party. In addition, students, if they wish, can suggest, plan and carry out other events and activities. With approximately 200 students visiting on average per day, the L-café is a busy, lively space.

The Studies

Shortly after the L-café opened, two colleagues[2] and the author undertook a preliminary exploratory project in order to identify the opportunities for language learning available in this space. There were eleven participants, including a mix of male and female international and Japanese students as well as two administrators. The students began by writing language learning histories. All the participants were interviewed at the end of two semesters and the researchers engaged in participant observation. This one-year inquiry served as a pilot for a four-year ethnography of the social learning space and a multiple case study tracking the language learning trajectories of thirteen Japanese students from their first to fourth year at the university, through their participation in the L-café. As in the exploratory study, the participants wrote language learning histories and were interviewed at the end of each semester. In addition, participants in the case study sat the TOEIC test once a year. Another change was that we were able to hire senior students to conduct the

observations and write up field notes. Once the longitudinal ethnography and case studies were concluded, the researchers embarked upon a narrative inquiry, in which the stories of nine students, four teachers and three administrators responsible for the establishment and ongoing management of the L-café were collected. The data from the three studies were interpreted through a thematic content analysis informed initially by the community of practice perspective (Murray & Fujishima, 2013); later, theories of space and place (Murray, Fujishima & Uzuka, 2014); and, finally, complex dynamic systems theory (Murray & Fujishima, 2016).

Theoretical Perspectives

Through observation, which began as the initial exploratory inquiry was being prepared, it seemed obvious that a community of learners had formed. At this point the theoretical orientation was informed by the community of practice perspective. There were groups of learners who shared a common goal, learning a foreign language, and who developed their knowledge and expertise as they worked their way to full membership in this community through participation in everyday activities and the special events (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Later, as the learning space became the focus of inquiry in the ethnography, theories of space and place from the field of human geography were explored. The researchers began to see how places are social constructions (Carter, Donald, & Squires, 1993; Cresswell, 2004) – the product of action and discourse (Scollon, 2001). In brief, spaces are transformed into places by people taking action in a space and then defining this space as a place where these actions or activities are carried out. The data collected at the L-café led to the following conclusion: "How learners imagine a space to be, perceive it, define it, and articulate their understandings transforms a space into a place, determines what they do there, and influences their autonomy" (Murray, Fujishima & Uzuka, 2014, p. 85). Gradually, the L-café and the communities of learners it encompassed came to be seen as complex dynamic systems.

Several key features of complex dynamic systems (de Bot, 2008; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008) were reflected in the L-café. One noteworthy characteristic is that these systems are comprised of many elements which interact. Through this interaction, the elements self-organize to produce something new – a process called emergence. It is important to point out that, as the word 'self' suggests,

the elements reorganize themselves without outside direction. Autonomy – in some form – is an essential component in the process of emergence.

Manifestations of autonomy and the process of emergence – in relation to learning opportunities – were observed at work in the L-café. Of course, at the L-café, the many elements that interact are the students. As the manager responsible for its creation pointed out, it is the students that make the L-café (Uzuka, 2016). Left to their own devices, the students were interacting and all kinds of possibilities for learning were emerging. From an ecological perspective, these possibilities are referred to as affordances. Affordances are tricky because they are not features of the environment. In other words, they are not necessarily something that teachers or self-access and social learning space workers can put in place for learners to take advantage of. At the L-café, affordances, such as the potential to make friends and engage in intercultural exchanges, translated into a variety of learning opportunities on a daily basis, including conversation practice, vocabulary acquisition, and broadening cultural understanding. These affordances and the many learning contexts they engendered, emerged as the learners interacted with the environment (Gibson, 1986; Menezes, 2011).

However, while it might not be possible to offer affordances to learners outright, research suggests that educators can incorporate elements into the learning environment with the potential to facilitate their emergence. In a study examining teaching and learning from a complexity perspective, Davis and Sumara (2006) have identified several elements that support complex emergence in educational settings: amongst these are *decentralized control*, *neighbour interactions* and *randomness*. Through research in the L-café, *reciprocity* and *design elements* of the physical space have been added to the list (Murray & Fujishima, 2016). Fostering these five elements can trigger and facilitate the emergence process.

Facilitating Complex Emergence

One of the things observed very early in the pilot study was that the manager of the L-café decentralized or distributed control amongst the students who played an active role in the day-to-day life of the facility. Realizing that she needed help with the daily operation and recognizing that funding prohibited hiring fulltime professional staff, the manager hired students and gave them the title 'assistant

manager'. Ironically, while on the surface the title might appear to be largely an empty symbolic gesture in view of the university's stringent hierarchical administrative systems, its significance was not lost on the students. In the first place, it recognized their contribution to the operation of the L-café through the actual administrative assistance they provided the manager. Secondly, it fostered a sense of belonging: the L-café was their facility. Their sense of ownership was strengthened by the manager including them in decision-making processes. This was particularly evident on occasions when the university administration decided to expand the physical space of the facility. The students were actively engaged in most decisions pertaining to its expansion and to interior design (Uzuka, 2016). Thus, the manager shared control with the students, not just on these special occasions, but through the daily operations of the L-café.

Of particular significance was that through these opportunities to share control, the manager also encouraged neighbour interactions. Again, drawing on the expansion phases as examples, the manager encouraged students to work together in order to generate ideas for the best use of the enlarged space and to work collaboratively on designs for the layout. Furthermore, on a daily basis when students came to her with requests for information or help, she would often refer them to other students whom she knew had knowledge or expertise that could prove useful. Learners could help each other, learn from each other and were then able to do things for themselves. By encouraging students to get the help they needed, when they needed it, within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) – that metaphorical space between what learners are able to do on their own and what they can accomplish with the guidance of a more competent other – the manager was initiating a process with the potential to enhance their autonomy. In other words, the assistance they received would enable them to act on their own in the future and, hence, be more autonomous (Kohonen, 2010).

Through these exchanges, a spirit of reciprocity developed – people helping people, sharing ideas and information. Elsewhere in relation to these studies, reciprocity has been defined as "contexts of mutual exchange or benefit in which people support or help each other in similar ways or to more or less the same degree" (Murray & Fujishima, 2016, p. 143). Discussing human sociality in relation to learner autonomy, Lewis (2014) points out that for these kinds of interaction to be successful and sustained, people need to experience a sense of fairness and mutual benefit.

Emerging from neighbour interactions, reciprocity retroacts – or feeds back on itself – encouraging further and sustained acts of requited support.

This atmosphere of mutual support, distributed control and neighbour interactions opened up a space of possibilities. This is where randomness enters the picture, in that there has to be an openness to unexpected possibilities. Randomness allows the system to adapt and take advantage of changing situations and circumstances. For example, through their interaction at the L-café, the students came up with ideas for activities and events, which the manager encouraged them to plan and carry out on their own. With distributed control, neighbour interactions, randomness and reciprocity working together, the learning opportunities seemed to multiply at the L-café.

As one final point, it is important to note that these elements did not operate in a vacuum. Rather, this research shows that they worked in tandem with physical space. This became apparent when the L-café was moved to a much larger venue (Murray, Fujishima & Uzuka, 2014). The increase in the size of the space, the physical layout and the arrangement of the furniture contributed to a change in the patterns of interaction. People had room to spread out and a number of groups formed based on shared language goals and other mutual interests. The vibrant colours of the furniture and wall decorations supported the notion that this was a different kind of place from others on campus where they could take risks and push personal boundaries (Kuwada, 2016; Miyake, 2016; Nakamoto, 2016). The size of the space, the layout, the arrangement of the furniture, the colours and wall decorations all have an influence on learners' interaction and interrelated elements in the social learning space.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on these observations, how might complexity thinking support managers' efforts to provide learning opportunities in self-access centres and social learning spaces? Data from the three studies outlined suggest that by fostering elements conducive to complex emergence, managers can support the development of learning spaces in which learners, through their active engagement with these environments, can experience a variety of affordances for language learning. With this outcome in mind, it is suggested that managers support learners' autonomy by distributing control, promoting neighbour interactions and encouraging reciprocity. At

the same time, managers need to be open to unexpected opportunities and embrace the unanticipated possibilities that arise through students' interaction in and with the environment. In addition, managers should pay attention to the physical space and its design features. They should be encouraged to view the space as an active agent in the processes of emergence and, thus, as an agent for change. Lastly, managers should be mindful that, while affordances are not necessarily something which educators can put in place for learners to take advantage of, affordances can, nevertheless, be occasioned by fostering elements which support complex emergence.

Notes on the Contributor

Garold Murray is associate professor in the Center for Liberal Arts at Okayama University, Japan. His research interests focus on learner autonomy, social learning spaces, imagination, and semiotics of place. He is editor of the book *The Social Dimensions of Learner Autonomy* (2014), and co-editor of *Identity, Motivation, and Autonomy in Language Learning* (2011), *Social Spaces for Language Learning: Stories from the L-café* (2016) and *Space, Place and Autonomy in Language Learning* (in press).

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[1] For more information and photographs of the L-café, the people and events, visit the L-café homepage: http://l-cafe.ccsv.okayama-u.ac.jp/english/activities.html
and on Facebook, type 'L-café Okayama University' into the search window, or type the full address into your search engine: https://www.facebook.com/lcafeokayamauniversity/
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