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Self-Access Environments as Self-Enriching Complex Dynamic Ecosocial Systems

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Abstract

The central argument of this paper is that self-access centres transformed into social learning spaces have the potential to become self-enriching complex dynamic ecosocial systems. As such, they can support the emergence of a wide variety of affordances for language learning. While complex dynamic systems cannot be created and the process of emergence cannot be engineered, research suggests that both can be facilitated. To illustrate these points, I draw on the findings of three studies carried out in a social learning space at Okayama University in Japan: a five-year ethnography, a multiple-case study, and a narrative inquiry. I begin by describing the social learning space, outlining the studies and providing an overview of the theoretical orientations which guided the interpretation of the data. Informed by these bodies of theory and results from the studies, I then discuss why it is important to have a social learning space with the potential to become a complex dynamic ecosocial system. The paper concludes with an exploration of how educators might go about facilitating the emergence of self-enriching complex dynamic ecosocial systems.

Keywords: affordances, autonomy, communities of practice, complex dynamic systems theory, self-access learning, social learning space, space and place

Change is a prevailing characteristic of self-access centres. In recent years educators working in the area of self-access language learning have witnessed a major shift in the purpose and functioning of these facilities. In 2004, when I developed the first self-access centre at Akita International University in northern Japan, my focus was on meeting the needs of individual learners enrolled in the English for Academic Purposes programme. Later, when we received a substantial grant from the Japanese Ministry of Education to develop a second centre in the heart of Akita City, my focus was on meeting the needs of business people whose schedules and workloads would not permit them to enrol in regular language courses. Although the facility targeted the business community, people came from all walks of life – retired people, housewives, high school students, and young doctors from a nearby neurological institute. The people coming to the centre ranged in age from 17 to 77. These people were coming to learn, but – perhaps ironically – they taught me very valuable lessons about the potential role of self-access centres in language learning.

The people coming to the centre changed my whole mindset in regard to self-access learning.

In addition to a wide selection of materials for language learning, the facility offered a range of activities: conversation groups, workshops and special events. Individuals would come for self-study or a conversation group and then, afterwards, go off with others for coffee, lunch or afternoon tea. There were all these networks of social activity that emerged around the centre. These networks constituted small communities of learners. The thing that I learned from this experience was that, for these people, the social interaction and the learning opportunities generated through their engagement were the most important aspects of the centre. Through observation, interviews and casual conversations with regular users of the facility, I came to see the value of the self-access centre as a *social learning space* (Murray, 2011).

Four years later, when I moved to Okayama University, it was an exciting time. The university was developing a centre which would actually be a social space for language learning. I immediately proposed doing an exploratory ethnographic inquiry. This study was to be the first of three spanning an eight-year period. The more my colleagues and I studied the social learning space, the more it revealed itself to be a complex dynamic ecosocial system.

The central argument in this paper is that self-access centres transformed into social learning spaces have the potential to become self-enriching complex dynamic ecosocial systems. To illustrate this point, I will first describe the social learning space at Okayama University. I then outline the three studies that I draw on to support my argument: a five-year ethnography, a multiple-case study, and a narrative inquiry. The synopsis of the studies is followed by an overview of three theoretical positions that are key to understanding social learning spaces, why they are important and how they function. Informed by these bodies of theory and results from the studies, I then discuss why it is important to have a social learning space with the potential to become a complex dynamic ecosocial system. In the final section of the paper, I address the question of how educators might go about facilitating the emergence of self-enriching complex dynamic ecosocial systems.

The Social Learning Space: The L-café

The social learning space at Okayama University is called the L-café. Basically, the L-café is a multilingual space for international students and Japanese students to come together. They come to relax, chat with friends, have lunch, and just to hang out. At times, they come to study or work on assignments. There are materials for language learning, but the L-café seems to be primarily a social place.

The L-café started out in 2009 as the English Café. Like many facilities of this kind, it had a very modest beginning as a long but cramped narrow room. The original idea was to create a space where Japanese students could practice their English skills in a relaxed, comfortable environment. However, this meant welcoming international students. International students wanted to improve their Japanese. They also brought with them other languages: German, French, Korean, Chinese, Thai, Turkish and Serbian. In time, the English Café moved to a much larger venue and transformed into the L-café.

A key feature of the L-café – as well as the former English Café – has been the small-sized, non-credit language classes, which are mostly offered in the late afternoons and early evenings. These classes, which focus on conversation and test preparation, are taught by students, both Japanese and international students, many of whom hope to become teachers in the future. In addition to the classes, events are held throughout the year: a welcome party for the new international students, a Hallowe'en party, a Christmas party, a cherry-blossom viewing party, and so on. Students are hired on a part-time basis to help with these events, welcome and orient newcomers, and perform other tasks related to the day-to-day operation of the centre. Overseeing all of this is a full-time manager with two administrative assistants.

The Studies

Over an eight-year period two colleagues and I carried out three studies in the L-café[i]. The first one was a five-year ethnography which began in the English Café shortly after it opened. Its purpose was to explore the learning opportunities on offer. The first year turned out to be a pilot study because in the following year we were the recipients of a substantial grant from the Japanese Ministry of Education, which enabled us to extend the study for an additional four years and to expand it to include a multiple-case study. In the multiple-case study we tracked the language learning trajectories of thirteen Japanese students over a four-year period from the time they entered the university through their participation in the L-café. The principal means of data collection for these studies was the same: participants wrote language learning histories, we interviewed them near the end of each semester, and our research assistants (senior students whom we also interviewed) did participant observation.

As we carried out a thematic categorical content analysis the data, we realized that there were so many people involved in the L-café on so many different levels, and that each of these individuals had their own story of how they experienced the L-café. This inspired us to initiate a narrative inquiry which resulted in a collection of stories by administrators, teachers and students (Murray & Fujishima, 2016). These stories trace the development of the

L-café, provide insight into its day-to-day operation, and illustrate the impact the L-café has had on the lives of the students. Before I discuss what we learned from these studies, I would like to outline the bodies of theory which informed our interpretation of the data.

Theoretical Background

Three theoretical perspectives guided our interpretation of the data: communities of practice, complex dynamic systems, and space and place.

Communities of practice

Not long after the English Café opened, colleagues and I were going there at least once a week to lead a conversation group with anybody who was interested in joining. What I observed was that a community had formed. At this point I was looking at the English Café from a community of practice perspective. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) define communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p. 4). At the English Café and later at the L-Café, there were groups of students who shared a common goal, learning a foreign language – as well as other interests. These learners deepened their knowledge and expertise as they interacted and participated in everyday activities and special events. What we saw were people interacting, helping each other and sharing their knowledge and experience (Murray & Fujishima, 2013).

Complex dynamic systems

The more we studied the English Café and L-café over the years, the more they revealed themselves to be a network of complex dynamic systems. While much has been written about the relevance of complex dynamic systems theory in relation to the social sciences (see Burns & Callaghan, 2014) and to language education in applied linguistics (Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2014; Larsen-Freeman, 2014; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Mercer, 2017; Murray, 2017; Murray & Lamb, 2018), here I will limit the discussion to six characteristics, which have been particularly germane to our understanding of the L-café as a social learning space.

First and foremost, a defining feature of complex dynamic systems is that they are made up of many components, which interact with each other. Second, as the components of a system interact, they can self-organize to produce new phenomena all on their own without outside direction. The element of self-direction being conducive to self-organization is

reminiscent of the role of autonomy in language learning (see Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981). Clearly, autonomy has to be present for elements to self-organize. This process, in which the components self-organize to produce something new, without external direction, is referred to as emergence.

Third, it is important to recognize that emergence is possible because complex dynamic systems are comprised of different levels of organization. Elements on one level self-organize to produce something new on a different level. This is exactly what we saw happening at the English Café. On the physical level, the university administration made the space available. Then, students started coming and, on social and semiotic levels, through their interaction they created a kind of learning space that the university administration and the English Café management had not foreseen. The manager of the English Café wrote that she could not have predicted what the learning space would become (Uzuka, 2016).

Fourth, because complex dynamic systems do not always follow a linear progression, it can be difficult to predict which direction a system is going to take or what it is going to become.

The issue of prediction is further complicated by the fifth point: complex dynamic systems are open. By this, I mean that they draw on energy and resources from outside the system. Again, this is what we saw happening at the L-café. It draws on the resources of everybody who comes there: the international students, the Japanese students, the teachers, the administrators and us as researchers. Drawing on outside energy and resources subjects the various components of the system to external influences to which they must adapt. Because the components of a dynamic system are interrelated, a change in one can precipitate a change in the others. Hence the sixth point, change is a key feature of complex dynamic systems. The processes of change complicate the possibility of making accurate predictions concerning the trajectory of the system.

Space and place

Another body of theory we drew on surrounds the constructs of space and place. Early on in our inquiries it became apparent that the objective was to study the space, not individual students or groups of students. Turning to the literature on space and place in the field of human geography, we were surprised to discover that places are social constructions (Cresswell, 2004; Massey, 2005). Places are created through action, "by people doing things" in a particular space. People then identify or define this space as a place in which these actions or activities are carried out (Carter, Donald & Squires, 1993). Therefore, a space is

transformed into a place by talking about it as an environment in which certain activities occur. This point has a special relevance for social learning spaces because what educators and learners do in the space and what people say about they do will define the facility as a particular kind of place for learning (Murray, Fujishima & Uzuka, 2014). Places are the product of action and discourse.

Why? Why a Social Learning Space?

The studies we have been carrying out suggest that the optimum kind of place a social learning space can become is one that supports the development of communities of practice and concomitantly facilitates the emergence of complex dynamic ecosocial systems. But, why would the learning space have to be a complex dynamic system? Or, for that matter, why would it have to be a *social learning space*? The studies we have been conducting point to a clear and concise answer to these questions: a social learning space as a complex dynamic ecosocial system has the potential to support the emergence of all kinds of possibilities for learning and personal growth – including ones that we, as educators, might not anticipate.

When we started to study the English Café around 2009, we were interested in identifying the learning opportunities available in the facility. As we worked on developing the study and did participant observation, it became clear that what we were studying was the facility itself, or the space, as opposed to individual students or a group of students. Around that time, ecology was trending in the field of applied linguistics (see Kramsch, 2002; van Lier, 2004). An ecological approach seemed to be a good fit for studying the English Café as a learning environment. We began to view the L-café as an *ecosocial system* (Lemke, 2002) comprised of the learners and their interaction.

The ecological approach not only gave us a fresh look at learners but also their learning by introducing us to the concept of affordances. In an ecosystem, affordances are possibilities that emerge from the animal's interaction with the environment (Gibson, 1986). Affordances are tricky because they are not just there in the environment waiting for animals or students to come along and take advantage of them. Moreover, affordances are not necessarily something that teachers or self-access workers can put in place for learners to act on (Menezes, 2011). What we discovered in our research was that, when learners engaged with the environment, the L-café offered them a wide variety of affordances for learning. To reiterate the point made above, this is why it is important to have a social learning space that is a complex system: as a complex dynamic ecosocial system, a social learning space has the

potential to offer a wide variety of affordances for all kinds of learning. By embodying the potential for the emergence of these affordances, the social learning space can be self-enriching.

In the English Café and the subsequent L-café, we identified a wide variety of affordances (Murray & Fujishima, 2013). In fact, in all the years of our studies, in all the interviews we conducted – well over 125 – each time, one affordance stood out as *Number One* for the students: the possibility to make friends! These students, whether they were international students struggling to adapt to a foreign culture or Japanese students from another city, they were away from their family, their friends and all that was familiar. They were reaching out! They wanted to make friends. Within this affordance, the possibility to make friends, there were any number of nested affordances. Among these, the following were prominent: possibilities for language practice and use, possibilities for intercultural exchange, and possibilities for getting and giving support and help.

In interviews during the pilot study, the participants not only drew our attention to these affordances but suggested how they materialized out of day-to-day interaction. Concerning the possibility for language practice and use, Ahmed, a graduate student from Kuwait, summed it up nicely when he said:

> When I make new friends at English Café, I talk to them in English, but outside, if we go out for dinner, we talk in Japanese. And, that's of course improve my Japanese. Because first time when I came to Japan, there is no English café, there is no place together. Just Japanese class …and my lab…. I was a little bit disappointed, I'm in Japan, difficult to make friends. But after English Café opened, I met many friends.

Commenting on possibilities for intercultural exchange, Dongik, a student from Korea who was not only a regular at the English Café but who offered a highly popular TOEFL preparation class, had this to say:

> In Café, I always had many friend there… I could learn their background in U.S., Britain, or Germany. Not only the language, but the culture. That kind of experience, it couldn't be learned on the textbook.

Regarding the third point, getting and giving help and support, the L-café came to be a place to talk about learning – a place to be heard. Addressing this point, the English Café and L-café manager said:

> Between Japanese students especially they often talk like, 'I can't do listening well, my TOEFL score is not good,' and usually the other student gives advice. And it's the same… 'You spend more time, you focus on the learning.' It's the same, but they repeat so many times, I hear it a lot. But, still they ask. I think… they want to be heard, their struggles or their worries or their difficulties.… And if some students say, 'I learned this much this week,' and everybody feels, 'Oh, you're great!' [laughs] Then maybe, other students say, 'Oh, maybe I should do better at ….' – that kind of like peer pressure.

Learners want and need to be heard. They came to see the L-café as a place to get and give advice, support and encouragement. Furthermore, they could bolster each other's motivation through their performance by serving as models of success, which could inspire other students. As complex dynamic ecosocial systems, social learning spaces are self-enriching through their potential to generate a wide range of affordances for learning and improving the quality of university life for both local and international students.

How? Fostering Complex Dynamic Ecosocial Systems

Now that a rational for creating social learning spaces has been established, the next question to be addressed is the following: how can educators create a social learning space that has the potential to become a complex dynamic ecosocial system? My argument is that for social learning spaces to become self-enriching and to provide a wide range of benefits, they need to be complex dynamic ecosocial systems. However, the problem is that complex dynamic systems cannot be created; nonetheless, their emergence can be encouraged or facilitated.

Murray and Fujishima (2016) present a provisional model designed to serve as a guide for educators wishing to create social learning spaces with the potential to become complex dynamic ecosocial systems. The model draws on research in mathematics and English language arts classrooms carried out in Canada by Davis and Sumara (2006), who identify elements which support complex emergence in educational contexts. In what follows I provide an abridged version of our model for a social learning space, focusing on six key

components: randomness, distributed control, and neighbour interactions, which were highlighted in the study by Davis and Sumara (2006); augmented by vision, space and reciprocity, which we deduced from our research.

Vision

The starting point for a social learning space should be a vision of what can be. Educators will need to engage their imagination and think outside the metaphorical box. The Indian poet, Tagore wrote, “The strong the imagination, the less imaginary the results.” In order to achieve something worthwhile, we need a clear vision. However, vision alone is not enough. We need to take that crucial first step and let our vision continue to develop as it is realized over time. Our research has taught us that it is important to let time, change and imagination be our friends.

Randomness

As visions for the social learning space take shape and start to become reality, developers should be open and flexible. One of the key features of a complex dynamic system is change. We need to be able to see opportunities in changing situations and circumstances. We need to go with the flow. It is essential to be mindful that the underlying goal in creating a social learning environment is to open up a space for possibilities, including unanticipated ones.

Space

It is not enough to take space into consideration or to pay attention to space. We need to view space as an active agent (Oblinger, 2006). Spaces communicate. They speak to our imagination (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Massey, 2005). Furthermore, they speak through our feelings to our sense of self. Canadian media expert, Marshall McLuhan, is remembered for his famous quote, "The medium is the message." In this context, the social learning space becomes the medium. With apologies to McLuhan, "The space is the message."

The space has to speak to learners’ imagination. It has to suggest possibilities. The more the space looks institutional, like a classroom, for example, the less interesting it will be for the learners. In practice, viewing space as an agent means that we need to groom the space and dress it. This point is supported by comments participants made during interviews after the English Café moved to a larger venue and became the L-café. We asked if the space had an impact on students’ impressions. Shinpei, one of our research assistants, responded by

saying, "They can see pictures and colourfulness from outside. It looks fun… fashionable, even like furniture and chairs, couch is fashionable, colourful. Of course, it is attractive for students." Claire, a part-time teacher who volunteered at the L-café, also talked about the influence of colour and design on perceptions. She said, "The bright and cheerful colours of the L-café feel warm, make it feel like variety is encouraged. You can be different." Claire's comments suggest that interior design has the potential to open up a space of possibilities for the self. How we feel in a space is important. Depending on how we perceive a space, it can make us feel free to take risks, or it can be an instrument of control (Murray & Fujishima, 2016).

Decentralized/distributed control

Control or, more specifically, decentralized control, is an important feature of a social learning space. At the English Café and later at the L-café, the manager distributed control. In our research, we documented three principal ways in which she did this. In the first place, the students hired as part-time help were given the title "Assistant Manager". In fact, they were her assistants, aiding her by performing management related tasks; however, the title carried an additional symbolic significance, suggesting they were valued members of the L-café team. Secondly, she empowered students by prompting them to engage and contribute to the community. Instead of her proposing and planning events, she encouraged the students to do this. She also invited them to take part in decision-making. For example, when the university proposed moving the English Café to a new, larger location, she had the students submit designs for the new venue. Through these strategies, which distributed control, the manager fostered the emergence of a community to which the students felt a sense of belonging.

Neighbour interactions

In the process of distributing control, the manager encouraged neighbour interactions or social networking. In interviews during the pilot study, we asked the participants what the manager had done to create the sense of community. Lena, an exchange student from Serbia doing a PhD in cultural theory, worked at the English Café as an assistant manager. She had this response:

> She's always trying to connect people. Like, 'You, why don't you try to talk to him about this?' Or, 'You know, actually he's really good at playing something'…. So, she's connecting people that are there...which is kind of the community creates itself.

Lena makes a good point; the community does create itself: it emerges. Information sharing is an important aspect of community building. The manager is promoting social networking and she is also fostering learning. As she does this, she is drawing on resources from outside the system. Students bring a lot of diversity to the L-café: languages, interests, skills, talents, knowledge. The manager is drawing on that diversity. Instead of relying on her, she is encouraging students to learn from each other. Through the help they receive they are able to do more things for themselves and in the long run become more autonomous. She is promoting peer mentoring and enabling students to get the help they need when they need it within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Reciprocity

Through her strategies, which distributed control and fostered neighbour interactions, the manager was also laying the ground work for a spirit of reciprocity: I help you, you help me, we help each other. Learners' comments in the interviews as well as their narratives describing their experiences at the L-café suggest that reciprocity – manifested in regular exchanges of information, mutual assistance, and emotional support – was a crucial element in the emergence of the communities of practice, which comprised the complex dynamic ecosocial system (Murray & Fujishima, 2016). While demonstrated through actions, reciprocity is closely linked to feelings, such as gratitude, appreciation and belonging. The experiences of the learners in our studies suggest reciprocity is one of the elements which served as a cohesive force by bringing people closer to each other and contributing to a collegial atmosphere.

Conclusion

Atmosphere – how people feel in a space is important. Our experience at the L-café suggests that it is important to create an atmosphere in which learners feel comfortable enough to take risks in order to act on the potential they perceive in the environment. As a first step in establishing such a space, educators will need to reflect on their vision of the kind of learning environment they hope to create. Secondly, they will need to focus on the physical space and design an interior that will facilitate the emergence of the kind of place they envisage. In their day-to-day practice, to further support the advent of affordances for learning, they should employ strategies that distribute control and encourage neighbour interactions. They will also need to embrace randomness by being open to the possibilities learners bring to the environment. This will mean being flexible and at times suspending

judgement; or, at the very least, reflecting on personal biases that might inform judgements. In addition, educators should incorporate strategies and activities which encourage people to work together and support each other; in other words, they should cultivate reciprocity. Vision, space, randomness, decentralized/distributed control, neighbour interactions, and reciprocity – all these components can work together within the social learning space to support the ongoing emergence of affordances for learning and personal growth. In this way, self-access centres transformed into social learning spaces have the potential to be self-enriching complex dynamic ecosocial systems.

Notes on the Contributor

Garold Murray is associate professor in the Center for Liberal Arts and Language Education at Okayama University. He holds a PhD in language education from the University of British Columbia. In addition to having taught EFL courses in undergraduate, graduate, and teacher education programs, he established and managed two self-access centers – one of which was open to the general public. He has served as convener of the AILA Research Network on Learner Autonomy in Language Learning (2005-2011) and president of the Japan Association of Self-Access Language Learning (2005-2010). 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 the books 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 (2018).

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