ISSN 2185-3762

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To cite this article

Sigala Villa, P., Ruiz-Guerrero, A., & Zurutuza Roaro, L. M. (2019). Improving the praxis of conversation club leaders in a community of practice: A case study in a self-access centre. S*tudies in Self-Access Learning Journal, 10*(2), 165-180.

To link to this article

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Abstract

The role that a conversation club plays in the improvement of foreign language proficiency of its users in a self-access centre varies according to the strategies a conversation club leader applies. This paper reports the changes made by conversation club leaders (CCLs), who formed a community of practice (CoP) under the methodology of Knowledge Management (KM) to become aware of the effective and non-effective practices they employed through recording themselves, sharing their experiences, listening to each other, and analyzing their performance. A total of six conversation club leaders participated in the case study that took place in 2016. The outcome was a series of strategies generated by the CCLs and shared with all new CCLs in the self-access centre.

Keywords: conversation club, self-access centre, community of practice, knowledge management, reflection in action

Background

The Self-Learning Language Centre (*UNIDAAL: Unidad de Aprendizaje Autónomo de Lenguas*) at ITESO, The Jesuit University of Guadalajara (Jalisco, México) has played a major role in supporting its users to improve their language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing in foreign languages. This self-access centre provides different services to its learning community, such as personalised tutoring, language learning advising, free access to didactic materials, technological resources, and conversation clubs.

A language self-access centre is a space that provides a wide selection of resources to its users, it is open and flexible to the different type of learners it attracts, and it considers users' diverse objectives, interests and, skills. In addition, learner autonomy is one of the main goals to develop in its participants (Cotterall & Reinders, 2001). Conversation Clubs are one of the services that a self-access centre can offer in order to provide opportunities to

practice speaking in any language, conversing about different topics of interest in a relaxed atmosphere (Ewens, 2013). Moreover, conversation clubs are one effective way to support users in their language learning process aiming for improvements in their speaking skills (Govea, 2007).

Leading a successful conversation club requires certain strategies, skills, and abilities that leaders must perform. In many cases, these skills are not learned from theory, but more so from daily practice and some intuition. Therefore, they can easily be confused with what regularly happens in a language classroom, where "teaching" takes place. This was the main reason the present research was conducted since studies on the learning and facilitating process of a conversation club are scarce.

This paper aims to explain the process experienced by a group of conversation club leaders in a university self-access centre, who formed a community of practice (CoP) under the KM methodology. The purpose of forming a CoP was to improve their own practice and document it, based on the model of Reflective Practice (Farrell, 2004) and considering the explicit needs of the users.

Framework

Knowledge Management emphasizes the importance of sharing knowledge and learning in a collaborative manner in organizations of any type. "Knowledge Management (KM) is the deliberate and systematic coordination of an organization's people, technology, processes, and organizational structure to add value through reuse and innovation. This is achieved through the promotion of creating, sharing, and applying knowledge as well as through the feeding of valuable lessons learned and best practices into corporate memory in order to foster continued organizational learning" (Dalkir, 2005, p. 3). This methodology was considered applicable, since the leaders of the conversation club had the knowledge and experience required to provide this valuable service, however their implemented strategies had not been made explicit. According to Nonaka (1994, p. 17), "Knowledge is created by individuals. An organization cannot create knowledge without individuals. The organization supports creative individuals or provides a context for such individuals to create knowledge". The tacit knowledge each CCL had could be observed through the performance of the CCLs in the conversation club but had not been documented before.

KM gave the leader of the project the tools to document the knowledge and experience the CCLs had.

KM introduces the development of communities of practice to foster the necessary elements for sharing knowledge. Through the work within a CoP, individuals are able to share their knowledge and good practices, interact among colleagues, learn through collaboration, decide on the objectives to be met as a team, and lastly, discuss and evaluate their performance (Wenger, 1998). Changes are not imposed from a higher hierarchy, but decided horizontally, in collaboration and as a team.

Reflecting on personal practice was one condition that needed to be met in order to become aware of the effectiveness of these practices. This was done following the framework of Reflective Practice in Action proposed by Farrell. According to Farrell (2004, p. 27), "We cannot hope to bring our beliefs and values about teaching from a tacit level without systematically looking at our teaching". Farrell proposes answering the following questions, to start with the reflective practice: What am I doing? Why am I doing this? What is the result? Will I change? These questions can be represented as following: Method-Reason-Result-Justification. Farrell (2004, p. 31) also poses a reflective cycle or the action research (Figure 1), which enables individuals to reflect on their personal practice following a series of steps.
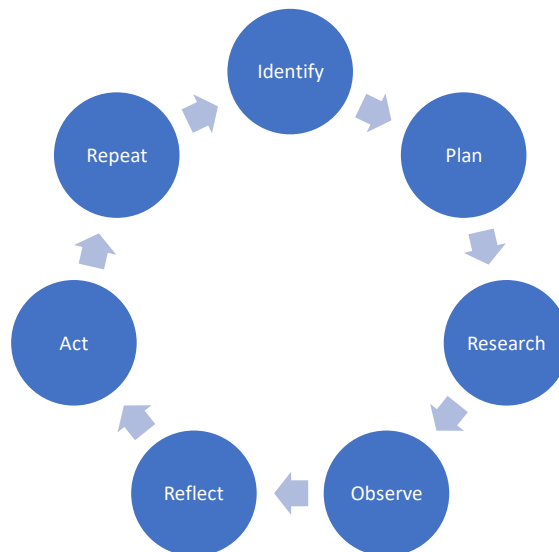

Figure 1. Reflective Cycle of Action Research

CCLs had the opportunity and motivation to reflect on their practice following Farrell's cycle, first working as a CoP in the face-to-face sessions, and later elaborating guidelines (Refer to Table 2) which directed them towards the goals they set up as a CoP.

Methodology

The present case study was conducted from February 15 to August 5, 2016. The participants were undergraduate language users and professors who attended the conversation club, and the conversation club leaders. The CoP, consisted of the coordinator of the self-access centre, the leader of the study, and four conversation club leaders. Three of these members were also authors of the present article: the leader of the study, the coordinator of the self-access centre, and one conversation club leader.

The questions addressed in the study were the following: *What is a conversation club? What are its objectives? What are the implications of the conversation club being in a self-access centre? What should the leaders know? What are the good practices a leader should apply? What practices are not so effective in the club? What do the users want or expect? How can the conversation club leaders help users reach their goals? How can the conversation club leaders improve their practice?*

These questions were answered by the CoP following the KM methodology. The CCLs were asked to meet several times face to face during the semester and work online in a platform called Schoology. The intention of the meetings and the online work was to explicitly reflect on their performance and practice, following Farrell's model of Reflection in Action (2004). CCLs accomplished this, by analyzing and socializing (sharing) the areas to be improved, their successful practices and lastly, writing a definition and the objectives of the conversation club based on the user's perspective (Refer to Appendix B).

Phase 1: Forming a community of practice

KM methodology emphasizes the importance of working together in a collaborative way. Decisions during the process are made as a team, objectives are decided together, and changes are made depending on the encountered needs, problems, achievements, and discussions. The first step of the project was inviting the CCLs to be part of a community of practice, this was done personally and by e-mail. Sharing the benefits of being part of a CoP was fundamental to form the community, and for it to succeed and accomplish its

negotiated goals. In total, 6 CCLs decided to join the community and worked together during a semester.

Phase 2: Meeting, negotiating meanings, deciding objective, and mapping knowledge

After forming the CoP, it was necessary to meet regularly to discuss the practice as a CCL. The discussion topics included negotiating the definition of a conversation club, what it required, and how it could comply with the requirements of the self-access centre's objectives. These discussions offered the possibility to change without impositions, or to set rules by realizing what CCLs did in a tacit way. These explicit findings would serve as guidelines for future CCLs.

There were a total of six face to face sessions of two hours each. The relevance of these sessions was crucial for negotiating meanings, socializing knowledge and good practices, as well as discussing objectives in the semester. During the process, the CoP realised it was difficult to meet personally on a regular basis, so it was decided to work on Schoology. Schoology provides the option of working on forums, uploading audio files and documents, in order to collate data associated with this study.

The specific tasks performed by the CoP during the semester were the following: attending face to face meetings to reflect on experiences, practices, effective strategies, and encountered obstacles. Other activities included recording weekly conversation club session which lasted one hour, uploading the session to Schoology, listening to oneself in order to make personal reflections, listening to fellow conversation club leaders to give feedback and generate discussion towards good practices and practices that could be improved, performing voluntary peer observations, reflecting on practice by analyzing performance, and writing in the Schoology forums.

One of the needs that needed to be addressed was the lack of information regarding the perception language teachers and users had about the conversation club. Due to this, a questionnaire was created for both. The questionnaire for the language teachers was sent via Google forms. In this questionnaire language teachers answered five questions about their points of view regarding the conversation club at the UNIDAAL (See Appendix A). Users' views via questionnaires were also solicited. These questionnaires were placed

where the conversation club takes place at the UNIDAAL and CCLs asked the users after having finished the session to answer it. A total of 32 responses were gathered from the language teachers and 31 from the language users (Refer to Appendices A and B).

Phase 3: Data analysis

Information was collected in three different ways: Google forms, printed questionnaires, and diaries. There was a total of 32 responses from Google forms, 31 responses from the questionnaires and 14 diaries that narrated the interactions from the CoP in face to face meetings, online work, and informal encounters. The data was analyzed, and the most frequent answers were grouped together. From the diaries which narrated all the work done by the CCLs, it was possible to create a list of the most effective strategies performed by CCLs.

Findings

The information gathered from the teachers, users, and the work from the CoP resulted in generating a definition and objectives for the conversation club at the self-access centre of ITESO, as well as establishing effective guidelines for CCLs.

By the end of the semester, the CoP gathered and revised each answer given by the users and summarised their opinions (Refer to Appendices A and B). From this work, the definition and objectives of the conversation club were generated (Table 1) and socialised (shared) to every conversation club leader.

Table 1. *Definition and Objectives of the Conversation Club at UNIDAAL*

Definition	A one-hour space where you practise the language you desire in a dynamic way. A way to meet new people and interact. This space provides the opportunity to improve vocabulary, fluency and pronunciation for language users. A place where you practise the skills for communication through open topics of common interest. A practice group where through conversation, a dialogue is generated with feedback from others.
Objectives	• Develop fluency • Broaden vocabulary • Improve pronunciation • Increase listening comprehension • Interact in the target language • Strengthen communicative skills (listening and speaking) • Understand and explain ideas clearly • Become aware of points of improvement • Increase confidence when speaking the target language

Effective guidelines for conversation club leaders

The following questions were addressed by the CoP: *What is a conversation club? What are its objectives? What are the implications of the conversation club being in a self-access centre? What should the leaders know? What are the good practices a leader should apply? What practices are not so effective in the club? What do the users want or expect? How can the conversation club leaders help users reach their goals? How can the conversation club leaders improve their practice?* The results from the obtained data were summarised in a list of strategies (Table 2). These strategies were shared among CCLs every semester along with the definition and objectives mentioned previously.

Table 2. *Developed Strategies from the Conversation Club Leaders as a Community of Practice*

Conversation Club: List of strategies

1. To begin the session (setting an open environment):
   • Smile: have an open, friendly attitude.
   • Welcome students, ask them their names, and ask them to share some information about themselves.
   • Ask about their expectations for the session:
      ○ What do you want to talk about?
      ○ What do you need?
      ○ What do you want to do?
      ○ What is useful for you now?
   • Call users by their names

2. To correct users:
   • Ask them if they want to be corrected
      ○ Indirect correction
      ○ Paraphrasing
      ○ Providing examples

These findings required the collaborative work of the CoP along with the information provided by the users. Negotiating meanings, reflecting on one's practice, and conversing about the self-access centre and its principles were some of the activities that took place to generate this list. Deciding on how to reach the users' objectives, and discussing the conversation club leaders' performance, were some of the ways valuable tacit information was made explicit and this knowledge was shared with the conversation club team.

The complete table of the strategies can be found in Table 2.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to improve the practices of the conversation club leaders at the Self-Learning Language Centre (UNIDAAL-*Unidad de Aprendizaje Autónomo de Lenguas*) at ITESO, The Jesuit University of Guadalajara (Jalisco, México) through collaborative work, and under the principles of KM considering the explicit needs from the users of the conversation club.

Strategies developed by the conversation club leaders as a community of practice

The most relevant work was done by the CoP. According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002, p. 4) communities of practice are "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". Next, an extract from a CCL who mentioned the benefits of working as a community of practice during one of the face to face sessions:

> "I think that is mostly one of the big things about working as a community, that you learn from experience and then it's your years of experience, then multiplied by the number of people who work in the community that makes it bigger and better, because it's not what you just have done, but you get to learn from somebody else's experience and that is what enriches the whole thing, so that is why it's fun to do it this way".

CCLs learned to reflect on their performance while and after the conversation club had taken place, as well as, learn to share ideas, compare meanings and socialise experiences. This was done after they had acquired the necessary trust in each other in order to externalise points of view, doubts, and good practices. According to KM members of a CoP require regular interaction to collaborate and reach their negotiated goals. Here follows an extract of a discussion from a face-to-face session with CCLs that shows the negotiation regarding the objectives of the conversation club:

> "For me it's a place to practice and hopefully improve fluency, but I also feel it's important to improve accuracy, because there are so many who think oh, let them just talk and they might be making the same mistake a million times and I mean I understand them, but they are not planning on improving".

The most significant result was being able to generate a set of guidelines for CCLs and from CCLs. Here is an extract from a face-to-face meeting where this was discussed among CCLs:

"The other thing is you have to be a good listener. Being a good listener is not just going (nods), there has to be a sense of this person knowing he or she is interacting with me. Even if they are just listening to me, to be able to show that interest is what probably keeps a conversation going".

Another CCL mentioned: "Something that I have also noticed, they really feel much better when they are called by their names, they don't need to say my name is… they feel better, welcomed". Externalizing thoughts and experience was crucial in the face to face sessions, this was the environment which truly fostered the socializing of ideas, negotiating meanings and creating a common repertoire between CCLs. According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice need to meet the following criterion to be considered an authentic community of practice: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. CCLs met this criterion, since they engaged in their practice as CCLs, negotiated their objectives and were able to develop their own repertoire (routines, words, tools, ways of doing things) through their face to face and online interactions.

Reaching regular interaction was a complicated endeavour since all CCLs had different schedules and had to set their free time to meet up with their peers. This was one of the achievements the CCLs reached, and it showed the commitment each member had about improving their practice as individuals and as a team. Working online in Schoology was another proof of commitment, considering that CCLs dedicated non-remunerated time and work with the objective of improving their practice.

According to Farrell (2004) reflecting on one's experience is more helpful than having the experience without thinking about it. Observing and listening to each other after having recorded their session became a useful tool for the CCLs, in order to become aware of their practices. It must be noted that recording the conversation club session was an accomplishment all by itself, since most of the CCLs reported becoming extremely self-conscious of their performance. As one leader stated: "I feel observed when I am recording myself, it is not a nice feeling. I think I can't make mistakes because someone else will listen to me". Overcoming the obstacle of recording oneself and later listening to one's performance was one major accomplishment for all CCLs.

Discussing through forums and in face-to-face meetings provided the leaders of the conversation club the opportunity to learn from each other and generate guidelines on

how to conduct the conversation club in a more efficient manner. Collaboration, socialization, and negotiating meanings of successful and inhibiting practices, were the tools and sources of information for these CCLs.

Results are considered relevant since they are the current guidelines for newcomer CCLs. The generated definition, objectives and list of strategies, which are shared every semester, provide direction to the leaders on how to conduct their club and become aware of what is expected from them. This is done considering the setting of the conversation club and the principles of this space.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates the benefits of forming a community of practice under the principles of KM to improve the performance of CCLs. Communities of practice are characterised by processes which foster socialization, effective communication, active listening, discussion, sharing of meaning, and horizontal decision making. This methodology also provides the possibility to collaboratively generate the organization's own goals and objectives, based on the truly observed needs, and being able to map users' perceptions in the learning environment.

Mapping users' perceptions was fundamental, since these results gave direction to the objectives that the CoP aimed towards, and thus meaningful changes could be made by CCLs, to enhance their practice and performance. Being able to develop guidelines for the CCLs was a significant accomplishment, since it required collaboration, reflection, commitment, hard work and self-evaluation from the leaders.

Notes on the Contributors

Pamela Sigala holds a BA in English Language Teaching and a BA in Psychology. She has recently graduated from the MA in "Educación y Gestión del Conocimiento" at ITESO, Universidad Jesuita de Guadalajara. Pamela Sigala has 15 years of teaching experience and has been a teacher trainer for future language professors. She is a tutor and advisor at ITESO's self-access centre.

Adelina is a social psychologist, holds an MA in ELT and is about to complete her Pd.D. in Education with a focus on Learner and Teacher Autonomy from the University of

Nottingham. She is an academic coordinator for the *Programa Certificado de Inglés* at the Language Department, head of the Self-Access Lab, and main tutor for the *Diplomado* in Language Learning Advising at ITESO, the Jesuit University in Guadalajara.

Laura is a graphic textile designer and has been an English teacher for 34 years. She is completing an MA in Human Development with a focus on teachers' well-being through personal reflection at ITESO, The Jesuit University in Guadalajara. She is also a member of the first ITESO's Language Learning Advisor Diplomado cohort, and currently advises at ITESO's self-access centre.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Questions and answers from the language teachers

These questions were: *What is a conversation club? What should it focus on: fluency, accuracy or both? What do you think the conversation club should answer to? What is the aim of the conversation club? What strategies are important to put in action as a leader?* And lastly, *in your opinion, from your experience or from what you have observed, what should be improved in the conversation club?* Useful information was gathered through this questionnaire regarding the Teachers' perception about this language learning space.

Perspective of Language Teachers at ITESO

Thirty-two language teachers answered the Google form with five open-ended questions. For question 1: *What is a conversation club?* Answers varied from teacher to teacher, six answers were: "It is an opportunity to have oral practice with other ESL students and a guide", "A club that promotes the use of proficient and fluent English in communication", "It's a group where students have the opportunity to develop their speaking skills", "It's an opportunity for students to practice their language skills proactively, by expressing their own ideas as they come to mind, in addition to listening to and comprehending others", "A space in which the participants can communicate in a laxer and maybe informally manner compared to a class", "The conversation club is a space where lab users can use and practice the language they are studying in an informal environment that mimics in as much as possible a natural use of the language in real life".

For question number two: *What do you think the Conversation Club should answer to? What is the aim of the Conversation Club?* Five answers to these questions were: "The aim is to practice spoken English skills: asking questions, giving opinions, fluency, etc.", "Provide students with the opportunity to practice meaningful conversations and interact with peers. The goal is for students to become more confident in the language and improve their speaking and listening skills", "The aim is to allow students to practice their speaking skills, without worrying so much about accuracy. The objective is to communicate ideas, even if they are not always grammatically correct", "As there are not many opportunities

for English students in Guadalajara to practice their ability to express themselves in English, Conversation club seeks to fill that void. It should do this by giving students as much of a real-world scenario as it can, while also providing feedback on vocabulary usage, structure and pronunciation that will further prepare the student for real world communication", and "The aim is to offer an informal space for use and practice of a language in the hopes to provide lab users with the experience of having to deal with a "normal, real world" conversation".

Question number 3: *What should the conversation club aim towards fluency, accuracy or both?* Most answers aimed towards fluency and both. Accuracy alone was not an answer teachers chose. Question number 4 asked about the important strategies to set in action as a leader. A brief description of the most relevant answers included: "letting students speak more, practice active listening, having a series of activities, keeping them focused on subject matter that interests them enough to want to share their ideas and opinions, being flexible and able to do what the students want to do that day, having the skills to discuss and exploit topics that come up and are interesting for some or all members of the club".

Lastly, question number 5 was about what should be improved in the club. Six answers were the following: "We could have a more diverse bank of possible questions and issues to discuss", "The time could be split between fun, informal activities (conversations) and more academic activities (conversations). Another option would be to interview individuals who attend the club and get their feedback", "Moderate the speaking time of each students. I have seen that sometimes a few students are the protagonists, while the others only listen. Since this is a conversation club, I think each student should speak a minimum amount of time. In order to achieve this, I believe the leader must moderate the time", "It would be good if teachers were trained beforehand", "A clearer understanding of the basic goals of a space, such as the conversation club in the context of a Self-access facility", and "In my opinion the Conversation Club works well, what I think needs is more promotion, and more information provided to students, so they realise the benefit they can obtain by joining".

Appendix B

Questions and answers from the users

Users were asked to answer a questionnaire with three questions which were*: what is the conversation club? what are your personal goals for coming to the club? from your point of view what can be improved in the club?* The questionnaires were placed on the table where the conversation club takes place surrounded by comfortable chairs in the self-access centre. At the end of the session the CCLs asked the users to answer the questionnaire. In total, thirty-one questionnaires were gathered in a five-week period, which started from March 7th to April 13th ,2016.

Perspective of conversation club users at ITESO

The next part of the findings was the perception users of the conversation club had about this space, their personal objectives for participating, and what could be improved in the club. There was a total of 31 answered questionnaires. Answers also varied, the first open-ended question was: *what is the conversation club?* Four users answered: "A way to practice the language we want to learn with fluency", "A way to practice the language and at the same time meet new people and improve our vocabulary", "It's a service where students, teachers and staff can practice languages with other students, teachers and staff", and "It's a place where we can practice languages and talk about topics of common interest".

Question number two was: *what do you want to accomplish when you participate in the conversation club? What is your objective?* Four users mentioned: "Have more fluency when speaking, more vocabulary, and more security", "My objective is to put into practice my knowledge of the language, listen to others speak it, and at the same time meet new people and ways of thinking", "Improve my level of the languages I speak, so I can live in another country in the future, moreover, it helps me to communicate and meet people", and "Practice the language to obtain a certificate to study a Masters".

The last question was: *From your opinion, what can be improved in the conversation club?* One user mentioned: Talk with more depth about conversational topics to think more, and learn more vocabulary, and at the same time, practice tenses. In general,

it is very well", a second user: "Include more vocabulary and how to use it in daily situations", a third user:" I would keep the variety of languages and schedules". Lastly a fourth user replied: "I wish they would be longer, because for me it is fun".