A Self-Access Center's Response to COVID-19: Maintaining Stability, Connectivity, Well-being, and Development During a Time of Great Change

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Abstract

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic created disruption in many of the institutions we regularly rely on, including universities. While disruption may often bring with it a myriad of possible pitfalls, it affords potential opportunities for change and development by reflecting on and modifying practices. In this article, a group of learning advisors and administrators from a self-access center at an international university in Japan reflect on the ruptures we experienced as a result of changes due to unexpectedly working remotely and our attempts to find stability, the pitfalls we sought to avoid, and the opportunities that we found amidst the disruption. Specifically, we illustrate our experiences related to student-led learning communities, self-access curricula, and learning advising, considering the effect on students and advisors alike. We advocate that self-access practitioners actively promote the use of language, encourage the development of communities of learners who focus on their interests, offer full online services even when the center is open, and use the same effective practices whether supporting learners online or offline. Our intention is that this article will help others to support stability, connectivity, and positive development in their own contexts.

Keywords: advising, learning communities, remote education, self-access, well-being

This paper contains reflections written by a group of eight learning advisors (LAs) and one administrator on practices at a self-access learning center (SALC) in a mid-sized university in the Greater Tokyo area of Japan. In April 2020, we were given three weeks' notice that we were to move our services online because of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This caused a *rupture*, or a disruption to our lives that required adjustments to create a new

stability (Zittoun, 2006). In this paper, we express our shared experience of running a SALC remotely in the first semester of 2020, our search for a new stability, and our opinions on how advising students in the midst of a global crisis can spark improvement of future practices in the field of self-access.

There is little research from Japan on offering self-access services online. However, our online services seemed to have fewer technical issues than those described by Andersson and Nakahashi (2019). We contend that one of the reasons for this is that our institution had long required all students to have an iPad, so we were confident that students would have some way to access our online services. Additionally, the university management demonstrated prompt leadership by confirming whether all students had access to wi-fi, announcing that Zoom would be the main tool students would use to contact academic staff, and having the existing technology support team provide faculty and students with training before the semester began. These measures meant that on day one, students could be expected to have some familiarity with the tools they would use to communicate with us and speak with one another.

We focus on three of the services offered when the SALC was moved online, namely student-led learning communities (LCs), modules and elective classes, and the booked advising service. In the three sections that follow, we look at how effective these services were in encouraging learners to make connections with one another and facilitating well-being in learners and advisors, and in doing so promoting conditions that foster learner autonomy.

Connecting Learners

One key aspect of the role of LAs is to encourage self-monitoring and self-reflection in language learners. However, with students learning remotely, encouraging active use of the target language also became a priority. This section discusses how SALC team members helped language learners find the available resources to help them practice outside class. It also details how LCs, the mission of which is to connect learners with similar interests to one another, functioned during the pandemic.

The Importance of Practice

In order to improve expertise and the performance of a particular skill beyond a rudimentary level, one inescapable fact is that practice (as opposed to merely studying) is necessary for engendering positive effects, even at a deep, neurological level. Language use and its subsets of skills require practice akin to learning how to play an instrument or a sport.

While many language learners may be accustomed to only studying, at some point if they wish to improve their skills associated with the target language and their overall ability to use it, they need to practice using it.

LAs help students in reflecting on their experiences learning other skills and identifying for themselves the necessity of practice. Our physical SALC has been designed and managed with social resources in mind, offering options and opportunities for practice that some learners may not have had in their previous learning environments. However, a common need while learning remotely was for advisees to understand and acknowledge the importance of practice and to recognize that they had spaces where they could practice with people online. We believe that the university, its English lecturers, and SALC practitioners (including advisors) recognized this need for practice outside the classroom. Thus, one important role we all had was to explicitly show learners who they could meet to practice with, how to find them, and finally how to connect.

The Role of Learning Communities

One of our successful means of connecting learners was interest-based LCs. The LCs in our SALC consisted of three to 40 members, and students autonomously managed learning about various content related to their interests while using English as an authentic communication and learning tool (see Figure 1). Mynard et al. (2020) suggested that the members of these LCs often have high-quality learning behaviors due to their fulfillment of their basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. When the university administration made the decision to go online, we envisioned that these LCs would be essential outlets for our students to connect with others, practice their skills, and maintain their motivation.

Figure 1

Examples of Posters Created in Collaboration with Community Members to Promote Their Learning Communities

Through advising sessions with community leaders, we raised awareness of the importance of leadership to nurture members' potential so that these students could take a crucial role in providing valuable social learning opportunities while learning remotely. Subsequently, some leaders were eager to learn and utilize the technology (for example, Zoom, Google Forms, and Canva) and generated innovative ideas that improved their communities' effectiveness online. It also appeared that students were craving social interactions, and the urge seemed to compel them to join LCs for the first time.

Moreover, students took advantage of the opportunity afforded by LCs to manage their time and increase their productivity while staying at home. Although this observation was anecdotal, students we met were flexible and responsive to the situation. We believe that even under the challenging circumstances arising from the pandemic, valuable new friendships were built through the LCs. We propose that these relationships, due to shared passions and goals, will flourish through this pandemic and enrich members' university experience and lives beyond.

Fostering Well-Being

In this section, we consider changes experienced by students and LAs to the implementation of the SALC curriculum that stem from the shift to remote learning due to COVID-19, as well as the changes we have noticed in the well-being of LAs and students.

We then suggest how all this may affect our practices in the future. Two areas of the SALC curriculum we focus on are an elective class for upperclassmen which requires students to reflect on the use of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) of their choice (see Edlin, 2018; Stevenson & Davies, 2019) and the self-directed learning modules, which are open to all members of the university (see Curry et al., 2017; Morrison, 2011). We adopt Marks and Shah's (2004) definition of *well-being*, which states that it is "more than just happiness. As well as feeling satisfied and happy, well-being means developing as a person, being fulfilled, and making a contribution to the community" (p. 2).

Student Well-Being

The pandemic had a strong impact on student well-being. Students can build communities in classrooms and physical SALCs, where they can develop fulfilling relationships formally and informally. However, in an online environment, their opportunities to build relationships with others are limited, and they may only see certain classmates during their shared class periods. We observed cases of students needing more psychological support to feel safe and included in an online learning environment. In order to satisfy this need, we found that some students discovered their own ways to promote well-being. For instance, students built relationships through the LCs. Additionally, we heard of multiple cases of students holding regular learning gatherings with friends on Zoom in order to recreate the experience of studying with them in the SALC.

In the MOOC elective, perhaps in reaction to the social and educational changes they experienced by moving online, a number of students decided to improve their own personal well-being by taking MOOCs on diet or exercise and then sharing what they learned and did with family or friends. Others focused on contributing to the wider community by selecting MOOCs about global issues such as human rights or sustainable development. As for well-being within the class, time was set aside for informal conversations and job-hunting discussions. This indirect learning helped to develop a sense of community and a friendly atmosphere for collaboration, leading to several students working together, more so than previously observed in the face-to-face class.

Like the MOOC elective, the self-directed learning modules were delivered fully online for the first time. The modules had been taught in a blended fashion before, first by using an iPad application (see Lammons et al., 2015), then by some advisors deciding to deliver parts of the course through a business communication tool, Moxtra, and finally by creating an online space for module students to interact with each other (Peeters & Mynard, 2019). The decision was made for all advisors to use Moxtra with their students and to have

the interactive online space available to module takers while the campus was closed. We observed high-level reflection in some students' modules, beyond what we would have expected during a regular semester. More research is needed, but we posit that students valued the module more because they had a greater need to manage their own learning while working remotely and that the lack of extracurricular activities meant fewer distractions and more available time. However, we have sensed that our workload in responding to modules was heavier than usual, and this adversely affected advisor well-being.

Advisor Well-Being

One way in which our well-being was negatively impacted was a lack of fulfillment: In trying to give students a complete learning experience as they would have received on campus, we were left feeling that we had not done enough. In addition, it was challenging to find a good work-life balance while working from home, and it was difficult to maintain our sense of community and learn from one another informally (see Davies, 2019). Without our shared office spaces, the extra steps required to reach each other made it feel burdensome to ask about even simple things, meaning fewer chats about our practice.

On a more positive note, working remotely encouraged us to try new things and find alternative methods for reaching students and supporting learning: We created videos and developed an online resource bank to support remote learners (see Advising in Language Learning section, below). The community of advisors connected informally via Zoom and Moxtra, and our regular weekly meetings began with savoring features of positive psychology. In addition, opportunities to reach out to other practitioners beyond our community were provided by academic forums and conferences moving online.

Moving forward, we argue that it is important to monitor both learner and advisor well-being and that there are several things SALC practitioners need to be vigilant about. Firstly, psychological support and sharing aspects of positive psychology can create a mindset for sustainable personal development. There is a need for health and balance; this is important when considering advisor workload and the expectations we have of class and module takers. Secondly, as we realize that part of fulfillment lies in feeling effective in our work and completing what we set out to do, we need to consider expectations for ourselves when working remotely and temper curricular expectations for students, understanding the importance of extracurricular activities for students' sense of fulfillment with their university life. Thirdly, creating and nourishing community remains a key factor and challenge in online or offline SALCs. Community is a driver of progress in learning and in well-being, both for students and educators.

Advising in Language Learning

Advising in language learning with full-time LAs is a core service provided to students by the SALC. Defined as "the process of helping someone to become an effective, aware, and reflective language learner" (Kato & Mynard, 2015, p. 1), advising promotes well-being by fostering personal development and supports language learning by promoting learner autonomy (SALC, 2020). When it was announced that SALC services were moving online during the COVID-19 pandemic, we speculated about the effect this would have on the number of students reserving advising sessions with LAs, how student perceptions of advising might shift, and how we would adjust our practices. In this section, we describe our initial findings in these areas, first by examining some advising reservation data and reflecting on in-session feedback from students and then by presenting some observations on our online advising strategies.

Student Uptake of Online Advising Services

Prior to working remotely, we questioned whether students would use advising services, due to potential issues such as awareness of available services, anxiety about talking online, resistance to the digital environment, and never having met the LAs in person. However, as the advising reservation numbers, retrieved from internal data used by administrators to monitor SALC usage (Terao, 2020), illustrate the number of booked advising sessions in the first eight weeks of the school year increased from 422 in 2019 on campus to 537 in 2020 online (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Number of Advising Reservations by Week in Semester 1 of 2019 and 2020 (Terao, 2020)
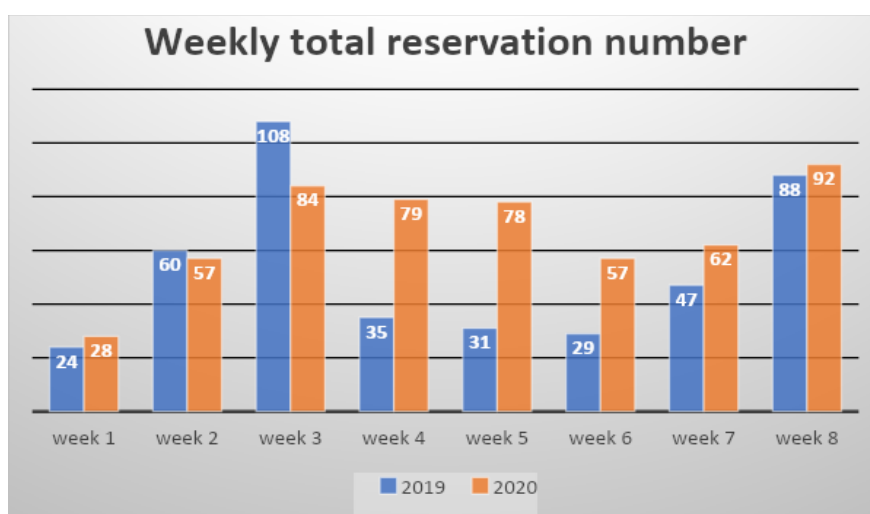
When we examined the advising reservation data in more detail, we noticed that there was a 108% increase in bookings by third-year students in 2020 compared to 2019. This was unexpected because upperclassmen had tended to make far fewer appointments for advising on campus than underclassmen, with previous years following a similar pattern to the 2019 data shown in Figure 3. With the increase of appointments of upperclassmen, it appears that advising sessions might have served as an affordance which filled a gap that presumably would not exist in a typical semester. Such actions could be indicative of students exercising their learner autonomy in that they identified problems or needs in their learning and intentionally took action (i.e. meeting with LAs) in order to address those needs. Examples of topics introduced by third-year students include:

- future study-abroad plans,
- finding a suitable learning space at home,
- affective issues (e.g., low motivation in the online learning environment), and
- making the most of opportunities during the second half of their degree.

Figure 3

Number of Advising Reservations by Year of Students in Semester 1 of 2019 and 2020 (Terao, 2020).
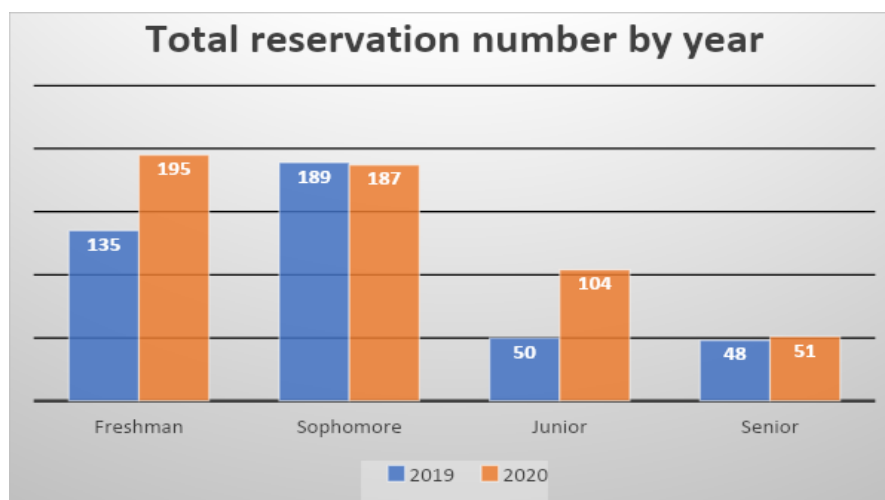
The shift to online advising did not seem to have any negative impact on students' "attendance" in advising sessions. As mentioned above, 2020 actually saw a rise in advising reservations. This rise happened despite a lack of opportunities for LAs to casually meet and talk to potential advisees or to have informal chats with students in the SALC between sessions (see Davies et al., 2019).

More research is needed on students' perspectives on remote advising during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, our impression, based on feedback received during sessions, was that the rupture from physical advising sessions to digital ones required little adjustment on the students' part, and for new advisees, nothing in particular about the digital setting seemed to impact advising. However, some students expressed their apprehension about the eventual return to a non-virtual world. Having never experienced face-to-face sessions, some students stated they had become accustomed to not only online advising sessions but also online classes in general. One suggested measure was to continue offering online booked advising even after students return to campus, in order to support students meeting their teachers and advisors and attending university in person for the first time.

Approaches Taken when Advising Online

We used a number of strategies in our online advising to provide a quality service to students. Here we describe some of the approaches we took and consider how they compare to practices we previously employed when advising on campus.

We utilized some of the affordances of Zoom in order to match the level of support in on-campus advising. Firstly, we used the whiteboard and screen annotation tools during advising sessions. The whiteboard functioned in the same way a notebook and pen would in person and was particularly helpful in stimulating reflection through the use of visuals or metaphors (Kato & Mynard, 2015). We also made use of the chat and screen-sharing functions in order to share information and resources, akin to walking around the physical SALC.

In our sessions, we found a tendency to be more directive, explicitly suggesting more learning resources, activities, and strategies to students (Mynard & Carson, 2014). This may suggest an urge to have students leave sessions with something in return for their time. Furthermore, the lack of access to on-campus resources meant that advisors were more proactive in introducing learners to online resources, such as websites, applications, and videos. We updated the SALC's website to function as a resource hub that advisors used in order to further support students' remote learning.

Away from the busy self-access center, with both LA and student able to select a quiet, private environment, there have been some focused and smooth sessions. However, the limitations of talking through Zoom were sometimes evident; technical and connection issues occurred (Anderson & Nakahashi, 2019). The chat function of Zoom could be used to clarify some points at such times. However, face-to-face advising sessions completely in English are already challenging for students, and this was magnified by the acoustic limitations of the

digital environment, which made comprehension an even more difficult task, particularly for lower-level learners. Therefore, some of us found that we conducted sessions bilingually or in Japanese far more frequently than we had on campus, particularly for advisors who speak Japanese as an L2 and tend to conduct face-to-face sessions almost completely in English. These LAs used their linguistic resources to support student needs, both at the student's initiative and their own. Advisors adapted and used the tools available to them to offer the students support.

Conclusions

We set out to document our shared experience of adapting SALC services and LA duties remotely during a period of instability stemming from a global crisis and consider how this enforced change could influence future practices. We explored three areas: connecting learners, fostering well-being, and advising in language learning. An important part of the advisor role is to encourage learners to practice as well as study their target language, and the LCs can play a big part in facilitating this by encouraging learners to connect with others with similar interests. New members sought out LCs, and community leaders adapted to facilitating activities online. We described how an elective class on MOOCs helped to foster student well-being through changes to in-class activities and students selecting appropriate content and noted that managing self-directed learning modules negatively impacted LAs' well-being. Reservation data were interpreted, revealing that there was an increased uptake of advising sessions, particularly in third-year students, and we reflected on similarities and differences between online and face-to-face advising. From these data and the responses from our learners, we feel hopeful that we have managed to restore a large degree of the stability that both we as practitioners and our learners were seeking going into the uncertain new online environment. Future research, when more complete data on students' learning and perceptions is available and can be analyzed in relation to the online period as a whole, should focus on the extent to which learner development was facilitated by the SALC services provided remotely.

Based on our experiences, we recommend that in the future, in both online and in-person environments, self-access practitioners should:

- promote places and people to practice the target language,
- encourage student-led LCs to promote meaningful social interactions and encourage autonomy and friendship,

- prioritize learner and advisor well-being and consider how the curriculum can be adapted to do this,
- offer an online advising service,
- develop and utilize the tools available to support learners; practices that are effective offline will work online and vice versa, and
- consider providing additional support in the learner's L1 when providing services online.

Notes on the Contributors

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