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Going Beyond Brick and Mortar Self-Access Centers: Establishing a Satellite Activity Self-Access Program

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Abstract

Providing self-access learning opportunities in the form of brick and mortar self-access centers has long been part of universities. However, other self-access learning program options are available for contexts where limited resources may not support such structures. Accepting this, this paper describes the creation and operation of an alternative model, a satellite activity self-access program at a North-East Asian (Taiwanese) university. The paper also discusses the model's generalizability to other contexts and offers suggestions for further study.

Keywords: self-access center, lean management, satellite activity, brick and mortar

This paper describes how our team, using a lean business management model, worked together to propose, design, and run a satellite-activity self-access program at a North-East Asian (Taiwanese) university. The impetus for this innovation was the brainstorming resulting from a question posed at our first meeting, the purpose of which was to create an environment that encourages unrestricted ideas: *What sort of self-access program (SAP) would you design if you had to start from scratch, no restrictions, no boundaries, and almost no budget*? In this paper, I will describe each component of our journey and, most importantly, what we learned and how it may be helpful to others on their self-access journeys.

Background

Our story begins with an annual assessment of an underperforming brick and mortar university self-access center provided by a university language center in eastern Taiwan (Tzu Chi University of Science and Technology), which showed poor usage statistics and low student, staff, and teacher satisfaction. In response, the consensus of the language teaching faculty was a recommendation for an innovation-driven renewal strategy based on a combination of

management theories and strategies that would be applied to create and assess a lean management-based, satellite activity self-access program. This program would be independently managed and operate in a cost-efficient manner by utilizing a variety of locations around campus. In addition, it would provide activities (and materials and staff) using an efficient "just-in-time delivery" scheduling system.

The Elements of the Program Design

The following sections describe the elements of the renewal design in chronological order: needs of the learners, our team, lean management design, satellite activities, scheduling, student orientation, program promotion, choosing materials while considering student levels, mandatory or voluntary participation, record keeping, and day-to-day operations.

Needs of the Learners

When considering our proposed design, we wanted to cater to a broad range of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners (Gilles, 2010) as a SAP provides a wide selection of resources suited to many different types of learners (Sigala et al., 2019). Thus, we aimed to deliver activities typically found in traditional brick and mortar SAPs but through an alternative satellite activity design fitted to our context's resources.

Our Team

Dale Carnegie wrote in 1936 that if you can work with people, you can accomplish anything, and this is certainly true of establishing SAPs today. Accepting this and drawing on Agar's (2008) cultural broker stratagem (i.e., outsiders partnering with insiders can bridge a variety of gaps) and the past experience of directing centers (Baker & Chung, 2018; Baker & Hung, 2004), I, a western TESOL educator, learned early on that a cultural broker can help a new director operate effectively in international contexts and thus agreed to accept the position if a local co-director would come on board.

Accepting that our proposed satellite activity program's administration (e.g., place within the university's organizational structure, funding, budgeting, costs, stakeholder relationships, assessment/results-based reporting) has much in common with service provider organizations, a business administration-centered approach was applied to our team design. Specifically, desiring

group cohesiveness that facilitates decision making and task completion, we opted for Bezo's small group team structure (Giang, 2013) (two co-directors and five supporting teachers). Moreover, as teachers can strongly affect student SAP usage/acceptance (Gardner & Miller, 2009; Lai, 2007), we adopted a form of participative management to empower our team in the continued generation of original ideas and promote balanced participation throughout the planning and implementation processes.

Lean Management Design

With our planning model and team in place, we continued our business administration approach and conducted a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats (SWOT) analysis where we identified our biggest challenge: The university language center, like most self-access language learning (SALL) providers, was constrained by space and budget (Krauthaker, 2017). To address this, we reviewed SAC literature, examined descriptions of the stand-alone brick and mortar centers of the 1980s and 1990s provided by early texts, e.g., Gardner and Miller's (1999) Establishing Self-access: From Theory to Practice, and appointed a team to review more recent brick and mortar centers' layouts, both in Taiwan and in other global contexts. The result of this was that we soon realized that the self-access space provided by the language center did not have the resources to accommodate the components of our intended design (e.g., number of expected users and the variety of activities we were considering).

The lack of resources, which might be considered a weakness, however, was a strength as it drove our innovation further toward a lean management design. The idea of lean management is not new. It is one that began in manufacturing and is often used in a variety of industries to optimize efficiency by streamlining organizational structure/ infrastructure and reducing wasted (underused) resources but has only recently begun to find its place in higher education (Höfer & Naeve, 2017; Klein et al., 2021) and is underexplored in self-access program designs.

Our first step in our lean management approach was to look past the traditional constraints of brick-and-mortar university department organizational infrastructure. Following this, we proposed, and the university administration accepted, that our team (headed by two co-directors) and staffed with five teachers and TAs (who acted as part-time satellite activity support), would, as is common in developing SACs, move beyond our university's traditional organizational framework (Mynard, 2019). Specifically, we would, utilizing a leaner structure,

report directly to the director of the Holistic Education Division (responsible for general education) instead of being a component of the language center.

Free from the language center's management chain but without its resources, however limited, it became urgently clear that space and funding issues would be a pressing challenge. However, with challenge comes innovation, which led us to develop the model described in this paper: a leanly managed satellite activity SAP. To operationalize our design, we adopted an often-used lean management design (Toyota's Lean Management Model), which focuses on reducing wasted resources through "just-in-time delivery" of space, materials, and staff (Monden, 2011).

Following the just-in-time delivery model, we, thinking about space, decided to move our thoughts beyond the stand-alone fixed brick and mortar center model. In line with this, considering the activities we intended (see next section), we reached out to department heads and proposed using existing spaces on campus to provide a series of independent activities at a variety of locations (e.g., the library, computer labs, small meeting rooms, presentation halls) to be utilized only when students were available to use them.

The boon of shared spaces for our program was much-needed space at no additional cost (e.g., constructing and furnishing new brick and mortar facilities; operating costs, e.g., electricity, air-conditioning, cleaning, administration). For the department and facility stakeholders, the joint venture provided support for funding agendas, as the activities could produce additional usage counts for the respective facilities (Werner & Von Joo, 2018). Students, too, were expected to benefit, as satellite activities offer convenient locations (Sanford, 2012). In this stage, working with people (stakeholders, e.g., department directors, teachers, staff, outside hires (presenters), and the community beyond the university) was crucial, as social capital is essential to SAP development (Carson, 2015), especially when attempting to garner support and reduce resistance to change.

Satellite Activities

To provide a wide selection of activities suited to many different types of learners, we, understanding students have individual needs and wanting to let them create their own L2 SALL worlds (Nakai, 2011) and considering our team members' backgrounds and experience, the day-to-day practicalities of running the program, and stakeholder resources, opted for a broad

spectrum of activities found to have a place in SALL programs: (a) extensive reading (ER), (b) extensive viewing (EV), (c) computer-aided language learning (CALL), (d) chats, (e) remedial instruction, and (f) presentations. These are described in the next sections.

Extensive Reading

The ER program operated on half a floor provided by the library, as libraries have the means to maintain books and provide convenient and comfortable access (Shibata, 2012). After checking library holdings and working with library staff to move a small number of previously cataloged texts, additional abridged (graded readers) and authentic texts (novels) were purchased at all levels from Lexile BR to 1300L to meet a range of learners' needs, and, once cataloged, became permanent library holdings. A supporting teacher and TA were on hand to support the activity and show students how to self-select books and gauge reading levels, as students may be unfamiliar with reading autonomously, and empowering students to make material choices supports autonomy (Barr & Lyon, 2017).

Extensive Viewing

The EV program was operated in computer-equipped classrooms provided by the computer center and several departments, as rooms, equipment (e.g., computers and headphones), and technical support were in place. In addition, a large number of DVDs were made available, and a supporting teacher and TA assisted students in checking out DVDs, attending to technical issues, and monitoring computer use to ensure students used computer resources for the intended tasks (McMurry, 2005).

Computer-aided Language Learning

Computer-aided language learning was also held in the aforementioned computer-equipped classrooms, as materials and support services were in place. In addition, a self-access learning web page was created that contained images with URL links to no-cost self-access language learning-related sites. As with the EV activity, a supporting teacher and TA were available to assist students and ensure students used computer resources for the intended tasks.

Chats

Chats were held in the language center's small chat rooms and a larger meeting room, as here too facilities and support services were in place. Chats were offered at different language levels, but students could self-select, and a group size limit was set. Respecting the value of native speaker (NS) and nonnative speaker (NNS) teachers and staff (Braine, 2013), sessions

were staffed by using a combination of university staff and outside hires, and topics were preannounced but easily moved in other directions to accommodate users' wants. A supporting teacher and TA were also present to guide students to appropriate language level chats.

Presentations

Presentations were given in the target language (English) in the language center's meeting room and school auditorium several times a semester. Here, too, facilities, equipment, and support services were in place. Presentations were given by staff, outside hires, and community members (based on their areas of expertise) and included a variety of titles (Baking, How to Be a Better Writer, Increasing Reading Speed, Improving Your TOEIC Score, The Life of a Nurse in the USA, Western Holidays). A supporting teacher and TA were also present to introduce speakers and guide foot traffic and seating.

Scheduling

Taking our lean business model further, as our budget primarily consisted of funds for paid TAs' hourly assistance and outside hires (chat providers and presenters), we explored students' potential usage patterns (Simpson, 2012) to fit students' availability (i.e., as evidenced by students' class schedules) as cohorts took classes collectively. The result was an 11 hour a week schedule that allowed us to accommodate all of our target group's availability (N = 242) in a variety of no additional cost locations, each of which could accommodate between 12 and 110 students at one time (Table 1). In addition, such scheduling also benefited our extremely limited budget, as it provided cost reduction, as, adapted from Toyota's just-in-time model, activities were only offered during times during the school day when students were available (e.g., not physically in classes).

Table 1

Weekly Timetable

	Mon	**Tue**	**Wed**	**Thur**	**Fri**
11:30- 12:20				English Chat	
12:30- 13:20	Extensive Viewing	Extensive Reading	Computerized Language Learning	Extensive Reading	Japanese Chat

		Remedial Instruction	English Chat	English Chat	
13:30-14:20			English Chat	English Chat	

Note, Presentations were scheduled several times throughout the term and thus not represented in this schedule.

Student Orientation and Program Promotion

To facilitate student participation, as students are often unfamiliar with SAPs (Hutchinson, 2014), students were introduced to the program during freshman orientation. In addition, to promote advertising, the schedule of activities (Table 1) was provided through a program webpage (McMurry et al., 2009), and A4 posters were placed in each classroom and at regularly frequented locations around campus (Baker & Chung, 2018).

Choosing Materials While Considering Student Levels

A wide variety of abridged and authentic materials for each activity were chosen to meet students' wants, needs, and language levels (Tomlinson, 2011). As prior language proficiency assessment indicators were unavailable, two assessments commonly used with EFL learners were administered: The Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) and Betts' (1946) Five Finger Method. The SRI provided a Lexile measure which is commonly used with EFL materials and correlates with other assessments (CEFR, GEPT, IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC), and the Betts' test supplemented the SRI, as many reading materials (e.g., graded readers) were without Lexile levels or other indicators. These assessments were also chosen because they provide usable data at no additional cost (i.e., the researcher owns SRI licenses, and Betts is a no-cost assessment). In addition, teacher recommendations guided best-fit decisions for other materials (e.g., videos, web pages) (Bell & McCallum, 2008).

Mandatory or Voluntary Participation

Some argue that mandatory usage of SAPs goes against the purpose of self-access learning; however, getting students in the door is often one of the biggest challenges as some students never consider using SAPs unless pushed (Parsons & Warrington, 2019). Thus, like many SAPs, we required mandatory participation (Navarro, 2014; Tassinari & Ciekanski, 2013), 15 50-minute visits per semester. As motivation toward using SAPS is often connected with

student motivation toward course requirements (Chung, 2013; Gillies, 2007; Lai, 2007), it was agreed that SAP visits would be included as a considerable portion of students' EFL course grades. We also worked with teachers to integrate the activities' materials into their courses (Shibata, 2013).

Record Keeping

Record keeping is a core concern in all SAPs, as to whether a new center becomes a permanent part of an institution is highly dependent on whether its director can prove its success to funding sources (Thornton & Noguchi, 2011), evidence of which is typically measured by the yardstick of usage (Baker & Chung, 2018). Therefore, following other centers' practices (Parsons & Warrington, 2020), we invested in portable student ID card readers, and steps were put in place to ensure that they were utilized (e.g., strategically placed lanyards to guide foot traffic and helpful guidance from supporting teachers and TAs). Additionally, students and teachers could check student records online, and mid and end-of-term records and reports were sent to teachers and stakeholders.

Day-to-day Program Operations

Day-to-day program operations were administered by the codirectors (compensated by a teaching hour reduction, i.e., one hour per week), supporting teachers (compensated in lieu of other administrative duties), and hourly paid TAs. Co-directors created the semester's schedule, collected and disseminated student usage reports, placed posters around campus, and approved TA payroll; and supporting teachers and TAs helped monitor and support the activities. The language center staff laterally assisted by posting the schedule online and providing storage space for equipment (card readers, etc.),

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper has described the creation and operation of a satellite activity self-access program using a lean business management approach proposed as a viable alternative (or complement to) traditional brick and mortar SAPs, even on a shoestring budget. However, this paper has limitations and thus provides opportunities for further research. The paper, for instance, has not presented an assessment of this approach. Additionally, the presented model is

potentially generalizable to other contexts; however, as no two SAP programs are alike, generalizability may be limited to the typology presented here. The context, too, a university in North-East Asia, also needs to be expanded with additional research, as SAPs are now becoming commonplace globally in all sorts of institutions (Mynard et al., 2015), but different situational contexts may offer dissimilar experiences.

Having described each component of our design journey, keeping with the center tradition of "helping one another and sharing what we have learned" (Harris, 1990), this paper now shares the most valuable thing we learned in the hopes it will support others who are at different stages of their journeys: Go beyond constraints. Ask, What sort of self-access program would you design if you had no restrictions, no boundaries, and almost no budget? And then work together, because if you can work with people, you can accomplish anything.

Notes on the Contributor

John R. Baker has worked with self-access and writing centers and taught writing, ESOL, and literature courses in the U.S.A. and Asia (Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam). His research interests include self-access and writing center administration, second language reading and writing, various literature interests, research methods, and how these come together in an interdisciplinary nature. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3379-4751

Disclosure statement

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