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## **Maker Conversation: Successes and Challenges in a University SALC**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the implementation of Maker Conversation, a self-access learning space in a university's Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) during the 2022 academic year. Maker Conversation is aimed at promoting English language use among students through science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics (STEAM) activities and is based on the Maker Movement. After introducing the maker concept and explaining the rationale for adapting maker principles to fit into the university's SALC, two facilitators who participated in Maker Conversation reflect on their experiences during the academic year. This paper highlights the successes of Maker Conversation for both students and facilitators, as well as the challenges that facilitators faced. Future plans that address these challenges are discussed. The facilitators felt that Maker Conversation provides valuable learning opportunities and plan to further develop and enhance the program for students and facilitators. This paper may benefit educators at other institutions who are interested in implementing their own version of Maker Conversation in their SALC.

*Keywords:* makerspace, maker conversation, self-access language learning, self-access learning centers

The purpose of this paper is to show how lecturers at a private university in Japan adapted Maker principals into a Self-Access Learning space in a larger Self-Access Learning Center (SALC). This description of practice is reflective and intended to give readers insight into the process behind Maker Spaces as well as the examples of activities, benefits, and challenges that come with them. The authors are both lecturers in an English Language institute where part of their role includes working in the university's SALC leading Maker Conversations. Institutions looking to implement Maker Spaces or learn about other's Maker activities should find this facilitator reflection useful.

Maker Conversation is one of several self-access learning spaces in our university's SALC that focuses on promoting students' English language use. Our Maker Conversation concept stems from the Maker Movement and Maker Education. With the publication of *Make* magazine in 2005, the Maker Movement first promoted the ideas of tinkering, learning, and forming community (Dougherty, 2012). Since then, there has been a "growing interest among

educators in bringing making into K-12 education to enhance opportunities for students to engage in design and engineering practices, specifically, and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM, or STEAM when art is included) practices, more generally” (Martin, 2015, p. 30). Due to prior successes with maker principles, our institution adapted these principles into communicative, hands-on, creative activities that we call Maker Conversation (Lege et al., 2021). Our institution’s activity-based approach has been integrated into the broader offerings of SALC services.

Our Maker Conversation was first piloted in 2019 as a social learning space in which students could chat in English while working on a hands-on activity in a relaxed environment with a facilitator (Lege et al., 2021). After a two-year break due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Maker Conversation service was reintroduced in the spring of 2022. Each Maker Conversation is 90 minutes long, including 10 minutes for preparation, 70 minutes for the activity, and 10 minutes for cleanup. It is held in the English-only area on the second floor of the SALC, and students can join the session freely without making a reservation in advance. The facilitators are lecturers who participate in Maker Conversation as part of their compulsory weekly duties in the Academic Support Area of the SALC. In 2022, there were five facilitators participating in Maker Conversation, with one facilitator overseeing a session each day.

Unlike a traditional makerspace and other services in our SALC, Maker Conversation does not have a permanent setup; materials are kept in a teachers-only storage area, and facilitators select materials for their chosen activity each week and bring them into the SALC. Facilitators choose what to do and where to set up their activities each week and prepare enough materials for four to six students to participate.

In Maker Conversation, facilitators focus on STEAM activities. Due to the drop-in nature of the sessions, facilitators are also encouraged to come up with activities that do not require the entire 70 minutes, meaning students should be able to join without feeling obligated to stay for the entire session. Activities range from arts and crafts to design challenges to 3D printing.

We followed this format for Maker Conversation for the 2022 academic year. Based on this, we experienced several successes and challenges. We will discuss these below, as well as plans for the future and conclusions we took away from this experience.

### **Successes**

During the 2022 academic year, we felt there were a number of benefits to Maker Conversation for self-access learning; the first being that Maker Conversation was a unique outlet for social interaction and using English in the SALC. The only other drop-in service in our English-only space is the English lounge, which focuses on practicing English in an informal environment (Mynard et al., 2020). Unlike the English lounge, in Maker Conversation, students work, make, or create while using English to negotiate meaning. The hands-on nature of this service allowed students another avenue to practice their language skills beyond the self-access services already offered in our SALC. Maker Conversation also gave students an opportunity to interact with classmates and teachers while trying something new. At its best, we found that students were able to take on the role of facilitator by helping and teaching each other. This is in line with the need for a Self-Access Center (SAC) to create a learning space where students can learn with and from each other, in addition to being a space to get support and access materials (Murray, 2014). Overall, we felt that this unique space allowed students to learn with and from each other while speaking English.

We found that students who visited Maker Conversation could bring their knowledge from other disciplines, such as science, technology, or art, and use them in conversation. This connection between students' prior knowledge and English in a social learning space built students' awareness and confidence in both content matter and language skill. For example, during a crochet activity, one student had tried crochet as a child and was able to bridge the gap between native and target language use even as they struggled with specialized vocabulary. The student helped others and brought their previous experiences into the learning space. Maker Conversation gave students the opportunity to gain knowledge of disciplines that were already interesting to them, that they had experience with, or were entirely new.

Due to the hands-on nature of each session, participants who may have felt shy or hesitant to speak could feel less strain to maintain conversation. By having something to do or make, some of the pressure was removed from students, as the activity naturally inspired discussion. Students learned natural language in the context of what they were doing, and the realia at hand generated vocabulary specific to the task. For example, a craft activity involving embroidery naturally allowed students to use certain vocabulary related to both the tools for the activity, such as needle, hoop, embroidery floss, as well as specialized verbs such as to thread,

stitch, pull, etc. We think that students who may have hesitated to use other SALC services, for whatever reason, may have been more inclined to join Maker Conversation because of the creative nature of the service.

Another success of Maker Conversation was that it encouraged both creativity and curiosity. Participants were encouraged to create, think, and problem solve with each other. An example of this was the egg drop challenge, where students were given tape, paper, and miscellaneous office materials with the goal of making an egg drop as slowly as possible. Students were given total freedom to plan and prototype their ideas. Another way creativity and curiosity were fostered was through activity choice. There is a clear connection between having control over content and autonomy (Benson, 2001). Some facilitators had regular participants who joined every week, which meant that the students were able to give input on what they wanted in the next session. We felt that this element of control over their ability to follow their curiosity or to ask for and try new things was a factor in students returning to Maker Conversation week after week.

As facilitators, we had a number of successes that made Maker Conversation better for students. Not only were we able to learn alongside students, but we also became more knowledgeable about different fields as we trained ourselves in preparation for different activities. For example, we needed to learn to use a smart cutting machine and the associated software so that we could introduce it to participants. We were able to prepare a wide variety of activities each week and throughout the semester. This was partially due to our varied interests and skill sets, as well as the availability of certain materials in the storage area. Having a 3D printer, for example, allowed us to introduce 3D modeling software and printing to students. Another benefit of the 3D printer was that we could create our own materials for future activities, such as plastic mesh canvas for cross stitch or earring bases for jewelry design.

Throughout the year, we kept a log of our weekly sessions, noting the number of participants and the activities that were tried each week. All facilitators had access to the log and could see what was happening in other sessions. As there was a space to also leave notes about the activity, we could easily see which activities had been popular or successful, and what changes facilitators recommended to make an activity more effective. This weekly log was a valuable resource for planning future sessions.

### **Challenges**

While we feel that Maker Conversation was a positive experience for facilitators and students, we did experience several challenges. Firstly, other self-access learning spaces in the SALC do not require any work or time commitment outside of the allocated time, nor any need for preparation. Maker Conversation required time before and after the sessions for preparation and clean up, as well as time for facilitators to familiarize themselves with new activities. The preparation and cleanup for activities often exceeded the allotted ten minutes. Our Maker Conversation also held several facilitator meetings to help each other, exchange plans, and manage materials; this was the only of our SALC services that required additional meetings for facilitators.

We also struggled at times with the drop-in format. In practice, we found many students preferred to stay for the entire 70-minute session. We had to find a balance between selecting activities that would appeal to students who stayed for the entire session, while also having the flexibility to allow for drop-in students. This was not necessarily a negative development; however it did mean that many activities were not accessible to students who may have participated otherwise.

Due to the lack of permanent space for Maker Conversation, our sessions were held in a variety of locations around the SALC. An inconsistent location meant that we needed to move materials from storage to the session locations. Some materials were only feasible in certain locations due to their size and weight. Changing the meeting locations also seemed to leave students unsure about when and where Maker Conversations were happening; some students even confused it for other SALC services.

Finally, we experienced a wide variety of different effects on sessions depending on the activities chosen. Some activities needed more than one session, for example, 3D modeling and printing. Participants could easily spend an entire session learning, practicing, and using modeling software; however, printing their creations needed to be done outside of sessions and then picked up at a later time or processed and painted in another session. Sometimes students were so engaged in the activity that they stopped communicating. For example, some students got so involved in building with LEGO that long stretches of silence would happen.

### **Future Plans**

In the future, we have several plans for furthering our Maker Conversation sessions. Making a permanent space for Maker Conversations would allow us to mitigate some of the aforementioned challenges. By establishing a permanent space, we would also be able to store our materials in the same location where the Maker Conversations are happening. This would reduce the time needed for preparing and cleaning up after activities and offer students more control over what activities they take part in. This greater level of choice and control over Maker activities has an important place in autonomous learning, as outlined by Watkins' (2021) three-step process in her 'gardening' metaphor, i.e, planting (helping students envision possibilities), watering (giving opportunities and choices), and fertilizing (checking in to meet their needs). By having all of our materials available at the session location, students can choose an activity to pursue together. A consistent meeting location would also help with student recognition and understanding of the Maker Conversations, similar to other self-access spaces in our SALC.

Maker Conversation has also been the self-access space with the lowest frequency of weekly sessions in our SALC. Maker Conversation had only one session a day, whereas other self-access learning spaces had multiple sessions a day, some even happening concurrently. We hope to increase the number of sessions in the coming year by inviting more lecturers to be facilitators, as well as exploring the possibility of Maker Conversation facilitators overseeing more than one session a week.

Our final goal is the formalization of an activity guide for Maker Conversation activities. This guide would have a list of STEAM activity instructions, required materials, and summaries of each activity's positive features and possible challenges. A list of activities that have been evaluated is another way to mitigate the time commitment required for facilitators. This would minimize the time required to familiarize themselves with activities. Streamlining the process for choosing, preparing, and implementing activities could also help lower the barrier for entry for new facilitators who may want to lead sessions but feel hesitant or intimidated by Maker Conversation.

### **Conclusion**

After learning and experiencing so much during our first year of Maker Conversation, we are confident that Maker Spaces are beneficial for students and facilitators alike. Students are

able to explore language in unique ways and experience STEAM activities that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. Maker Conversation gives students another autonomous learning option that differs from what is already offered and allows unique learning experiences. Maker Conversation attracts students who may otherwise be underserved in our self-access learning spaces. Our future plans should expand upon our successes with Maker Conversation for students and facilitators while mitigating challenges.

### Notes on the Contributors

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