Report on the JASAL 2020 National Conference

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Author Biography

Dominique Vola Ambinintsoa R. is a learning advisor at KUIS in Chiba. She holds a PhD in applied linguistics, focusing on learner autonomy (VUW, New Zealand), and a Master of Education in TESOL (SUNY Buffalo, US). She has a particular interest in learner autonomy, self-access language learning, and advising in language learning.

The JASAL 2020 National Conference was held online on December 5, 2020. It included informative presentations related to self-access centers (SACs) and beyond the SACs. This paper will talk about four presentations, which were chosen to promote diversity in terms of situations, settings, and voices. The first presentation is the plenary talk by Satoko Kato and Hisako Yamashita, which focused on the importance of reflective dialogue, the crucial tool in advising and in the development of learner autonomy. The second presentation, by Curtis Edlin and Phillip Bennett, also included reflective dialogue with the use of advising tools to solve issues related to motivation. The third presentation is by Yusei Takahashi, a student, who shared his experiences in leading events and a learning community in a SAC during the pandemic. The fourth presentation is by Anna Husson Isozaki, who described the challenges she faced as a teacher during the pandemic and the realizations and the adaptations resulting from those challenges in a non-SAC site. Though three of the presentations were linked to SACs, the implementations suggested in them can also be adapted to non-SAC settings. Furthermore, from the four presentations, practical ways to support students both in "normal" times and in times of pandemic can be learned.

Satoko Kato & Hisako Yamashita - Reflective Dialogue and Learner Support in Self-Access Language Learning

In this plenary talk, Satoko Kato and Hisako Yamashita discussed the importance of reflective dialogue, not only for learners but also for advisors. They shared practical ways to implement reflective dialogue in the classroom, in SACs, in advising, and in advisors' mentoring.

Implementing Reflective Dialogue in the Classroom and in SACs

Hisako stressed the dialogical feature of autonomy. She highlighted that learner autonomy, "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3), does not develop instantly. Moreover, students' preconceived beliefs about themselves and their learning can deter them from using their full potential. Students who are convinced that only special students can succeed need to be reassured that this is not true. They need assistance to help them see their day-to-day achievements in order for them to build confidence (Yamashita, 2015) and eventually take ownership of their learning. This assistance can be done through reflective dialogue.

To implement reflective dialogue in the classroom, Hisako suggested promoting scaffolded peer reflective dialogue. The findings from her one-semester project involving in-

class peer reflective dialogue showed that the latter resulted in the emergence and multiplication of affordances. Each affordance triggered another affordance, which was in line with what van Lier (2004) stated: "The affordance fuels perception and activity, and brings about meanings – further affordances and signs, and further higher-level activity as well as more differentiated perception" (p. 96). In the SAC, reflective dialogue can be fostered through interactive displays. One example given by Hisako was a "motivation display", in which students visiting the SAC shared what motivated and demotivated them. The display triggered dialogue among students and reached those who were not regular users of the SAC.

Reflective Dialogue for Learner Autonomy and for Advisor Development

Satoko focused on the significance of Intentional Reflective Dialogue (IRD) in the development of learner autonomy and advisors' professional development. IRD is a dynamic process, in which the advisor promotes reflection through dialogue that is structured "intentionally" (Kato & Mynard, 2016). The aim of IRD with learners is to raise their awareness of their learning, which may challenge their beliefs and values, leading them to take actions and then make changes related to their learning. It, thus, leads to "transformational learning" (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p.9). In IRD, the advisor needs to ask questions, starting from easy ones (yes/no questions) to more open-ended questions ("Why do you think…?"). The depth of the reflection may vary from one learner to another and increase with practice. Satoko talked about four phases, stressing that they are not linear: getting started, going deeper, becoming aware, and transformation. For each phase, the advisor has some specific roles. For instance, with learners in the "getting started" phase, the advisor may need to help them set goals and, most importantly, to build trust and rapport. When learners reach the phase of "becoming more aware", they can be encouraged to build on their strengths; and when they are in the "transformation" phase, they can be introduced to the concept of self-advising.

Reflective dialogue in a form of relational mentoring can also be considerably beneficial for advisors in terms of professional development. Relational mentoring improves relationships, fosters self-reflection, builds confidence, enables mutual learning and growth, and promotes advisors' well-being (Kato, 2017). Thus, both the mentor and the mentee benefit from such mentoring. On the other hand, there is what is referred to as "reverse mentoring", in which the mentee is the more experienced person (Murphy, 2012). Reverse mentoring is rewarding as it allows the mentee to gain new perspectives (Kato, 2018).

The plenary talk highlighted the power of reflective dialogue. It demonstrated how reflective dialogue can lead to learner autonomy for learners and to professional development for advisors. Reflective dialogue is, thus, transformational and contributes to well-being, and needs to be promoted. While advising may not be available in every school in different settings, the implementations suggested by Hisako and the mentor-mentee relationship stated by Satoko can be developed in any education setting. The next presentation by Phillip Bennett and Curtis Edlin also discussed the use of reflective dialogue with reflection tools to tackle the issue of amotivation and demotivation.

Phillip Bennett & Curtis Edlin - Addressing Demotivation and Motivation in Self-Access Language Learning

In this presentation, Phillip Bennett and Curtis Edlin discussed motivation, demotivation and amotivation. They talked about the similarities and differences of demotivation and amotivation and the possible causes, followed by some examples, key concepts, and approaches and tools that can be used to address demotivation and amotivation.

Motivation is determined by expectancy and value. Expectancy includes confidence, experience, performance, success, and environmental factors, such as time, energy, resources, and tools. Value includes extrinsic factors, such as rewards, intrinsic factors, like joy and pleasure, social factors, and achievement factors. The absence of motivation is implied in both demotivation and amotivation. The difference is that demotivation implies the prior existence of motivation which has faded out due to some negative experiences or influences (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Examples of factors that may cause learner demotivation can be a humiliating experience, a lack of support, ineffective strategies or resources, or a lack of goal attainment. On the other hand, amotivation refers to the unwillingness to take actions due to (1) a feeling of lack of competence, (2) a lack of interest or value, (3) defiance or resistance (Ryan & Deci, 2017). One example of amotivation related to the second reason would be to decide to neglect language skills that one considers unimportant. Another example of the third reason would be a learner who decides not to learn a language simply because he feels forced to learn it.

Understanding the origins of demotivation and amotivation is important in order to address them effectively. As each student's situation is different, it is essential to help them reflect so as to identify and raise their awareness of the causes of demotivation and amotivation. Some reflection tools presented in Kato and Mynard (2016) can be used for dealing with amotivation. The tool referred to as "confidence building diary" can help

students reflect on positive learning experiences. Another tool, called "vision board", allows students to reflect and visualize the connection between their learning and their future. Simply introducing them to something new, such as resources, learning communities, and tools, can also help solve the problem of amotivation. For demotivation, the tool called "viewpoint switching" (Kato & Mynard, 2016) can be used to help students change their perception. It is a tool enabling a learner to imagine the viewpoint of another person (of their choice) regarding the situation.

In SACs, the approaches and tools mentioned above can be used in advising. They can be integrated in Intentional Reflective Dialogue (Kato & Mynard, 2016), and can also be part of the resources of the SAC. In addition to those approaches, human resources in SACs such as learning communities can be a way to solve demotivation and amotivation. Those communities, led by students, can provide a feeling of relatedness. Also, giving students a voice enables them to feel ownership of the communities, which are part of their learning environment and their resources.

The presentation gave us insights on how to tackle demotivation and amotivation. It highlighted the importance of understanding students and helping them understand themselves through reflective dialogue and tools. As educators, though we have years of experience dealing with students, we cannot assume what a student is going through. We need to give them opportunities to express their feelings and concerns, to reflect on what is important to them, and to provide them with a supportive environment. The next presentation by Yusei Takahashi is about one such supportive environment.

Yusei Takahashi - Organizing an Online Event and a Community for Learners During the Pandemic

Like all services at the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), students' events and learning communities were held online in 2020. In this presentation, Yusei Takahashi, a senior student and a peer advisor at KUIS, shared his experience of organizing events and running a learning community in the pandemic situation. His presentation was particularly insightful, as he showed how students can help other students take charge of their learning in a collaborative way in times when face-to-face meetings are impossible.

Yusei and another peer advisor were the organizers of the Talking Activity and Collaborate with Others (TACO) events, which took place monthly. The purposes of the events were to provide students with opportunities to meet and share experiences, to help one

another solve problems, and to use English outside class. In normal situations, TACO events were held in the SALC, where students met at lunchtime, but this did not mean that there were free tacos (smile). Each TACO event had one specific topic, and all the topics fostered reflection on learning. They were related to goal setting, motivation, task management, end-of-year reflection, and future vision. In the pandemic situation, Zoom was used for the discussions during the events. The whiteboard function of zoom was particularly helpful, as it enabled the students to brainstorm ideas. To keep the discussions run smoothly, the organizers played the roles of moderators by asking follow-up questions when necessary. Outside the discussions, Google Docs and PDF files were used for sharing useful materials, such as motivation charts, and Google Forms was used for collecting participants' feedback after each event with a survey. Additionally, emails were sent to the participants after each event to thank them and to build rapport. As Yusei was a peer advisor, this was a way for him to promote peer advising, consisting of one-on-one spoken advising sessions.

In addition to TACO events, Yusei ran a learning community, called Study Buddies (SBs), aiming to help students improve their English conversation skills and make friends through casual gatherings. The online SBs community met once every week. Yusei used the same platforms and materials as the ones used in TACO events (Zoom, Google Docs, PDF files, and Google Forms). The difference was that, in SBs, Google Docs were used to share vocabulary related to each topic, and Zoom breakout room sessions were used to maximize students' opportunities to speak.

The online adaptation of the TACO events and SBs was Yusei and his co-organizers' response to the COVID-19 situation. They decided to do that adaptation to continue providing their fellow students with learning opportunities that feature collaboration and interaction. They demonstrated that such adaptation was not only feasible but also satisfying to the student participants, as shown in the results of their surveys. Furthermore, Yusei felt that organizing those events had enabled him, as an organizer, to acquire skills related to the planning and organization of events and, as a student, to adapt himself to different types of learning environment.

With a strong collaboration within the learning community and with the support of the SAC staff, such as learning advisors and admin staff, Yusei and his collaborators were able to adapt their learning community and events to the pandemic situation in a SAC. How about teachers and students outside a non-SAC setting? How did they cope with the pandemic situation? That was what Anna Husson Isozaki described in her presentation.

Anna Husson Isozaki - Grasping the Moment in Non-SALC Sites: Strategies, Successes, Regrets and Reflections

In this presentation, Anna Husson Isozaki discussed how her teaching life has drastically changed overnight because of the pandemic. Finishing her class one Friday evening, she had no idea that she would not meet her students in the classroom again. She had to ponder what to do and what she had learned from self-access learning centers, from colleagues, from researchers, and from every resource she had encountered and had at hand. Most importantly, she had to think how to help her students with this sudden "ultra-self-access."

The Most Essential Feature of Teaching and Learning

Inspired by Watson-Gegeo's quote, "Grammar is a matter of highly structured neural connections", Anna thought that the most important thing was to structure a connection between the students and to put all the scattered elements together. She said to herself, "Okay, we can do this." However, with some technological failure, too many platforms to use, a progressively changing syllabus, students' focusing more on "making and doing" rather than on feedback, and the tendency to keep things short and fast (no more face-to-face negotiation), it was difficult to structure the connection. She felt that she had to become a completely different teacher. Firstly, she was not able to show her care to her students through email, for instance. Likewise, through email, her students could not show their usual politeness. That made her realize how communication through e-mail can be so limited: "e-mail can be emotionally impoverished when it comes to nonverbal messages that add nuance and valence to our words. The typed words are denuded of the rich emotional context" (Goleman, 2007). Secondly, with the existence of multiple online materials and platforms, it was not easy to decide what to use and how. Every teacher in her school had their own way to teach, and some teachers were really creative with technological tools. To find her way, Anna reflected on what was the most essential about her teaching. Once again, she identified connection as the most essential feature of teaching and learning. To establish this connection, she combined activities enabling exchanges and sharing, such as Ishikawa's (2012) diary exchange. She engaged her students in free journaling and in weekly oral journal exchanges.

What About Dreadful Reading?

While it was easier eventually to find activities and materials to engage students with speaking, listening, writing, and self-management, it was not the same with reading. It was

not because of lack of materials, as there were 1,200 books and audiobooks available online for students to use. The problem was students' motivation, or more precisely, their hatred towards reading. It is hard for students to track their progress in reading in general, and it was even harder in isolation.

Drawing from research on reading (for example, Chang & Millet, 2015; Ramonda, 2020; Shelton-Strong, 2012), and her knowledge of her students, Anna was able to collect activities that would make reading appear less dreadful and less time-consuming. She introduced books and audiobooks from the virtual library of graded readers (Xreading.com) to her students, which the latter could access to on their smartphones anytime and anywhere. It also had a function that enabled her, as a teacher, to check what her students were reading, and it allowed students to visualize their progress. She also encouraged her students to pair the audio with the print, which helped students with reading rates and comprehension (Chang & Millet, 2015). Instead of asking students to write book reports, she gave them opportunities to discuss their reading and to use visual aids (for example, manga memos) when discussing. She also integrated topics related to worldwide current situations, such as racism and the pandemic, in the reading activities.

Every educator in 2020 can relate to Anna's story. What the pandemic has forced us (educators) to learn was quite overwhelming. The multiple options available to us (in developed countries) made the decision-making difficult and were, at some point, distracting us from the most important element in teaching. Anna showed that in case of crisis or unexpected events, we need to go back to the essence of our teaching and start from there. We need to engage our students in activities promoting connectivity through exchanges, which eventually motivates them.

Conclusion

As a first-year learning advisor in a SAC (at the time of the conference), I was especially interested in knowing more about advising and SACs, which explains why three of the presentations I chose were related to SACs. I was already aware of the importance of reflective dialogue, which I had been implementing in my advising sessions, but from Hisako Yamashita's presentation, I was able to learn more practical ways to promote reflective dialogue among students in class and in SACs. She pointed out the important fact that students themselves are the best resources in the classroom. Yusei Takahashi's presentation also demonstrated that students are indeed useful resources, hence the necessity for educators to support learning communities in SACs and outside SACs.

As an educator, it was important for me to choose one presentation on teaching and learning outside SACs, which, I think, represents the struggle of many educators during the pandemic. As the world suddenly changed in a drastic way, teachers were expected to turn physical classrooms and resources into digital ones. However, the most challenging was not to become a digital expert in an extremely short time. The most challenging was to find ways to engage, motivate, and build the connection with students, which are the most fundamental things in teaching and learning.

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