

JASAL Student Conferences: Providing Opportunities for Students to Learn and Grow Together

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Author Biography

Hisako Yamashita is an associate professor at Kobe Shoin Women's University and is the former president, and current Student Involvement Coordinator of the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL). She has worked in four different SACs and has conducted over 4,300 learning advising sessions.

Students are at the heart of self-access centers (SACs). SACs are dynamic in nature. While the facilities, resources and language learning support services in a SAC provide learners with a variety of options and ways to learn their target languages, students and the community of learners who use the space bring with them creative, interesting energy and vibrations into the learning space. When SACs have active users and/or student staff members, they help create motivating, enjoyable and challenging learning opportunities for their fellow students.

In developing learner autonomy and in language learning in general, the social dimensions of learning have been increasingly recognized (Murray & Fujishima, 2016). A learning space such as a SAC can support the development of learner autonomy and language learning by developing and encouraging communities of practice. Having students' voices heard in this development process is of great importance and value. The "people" and "community" lead to the development of vibrant, successful learning spaces. Student staff are often key members of these communities.

Student staff members are usually undergraduate students who are often regular users of the SAC and enjoy being in the SAC. Many of the student staff members find SACs to be a comfortable and motivating learning space where they can find like-minded peers who strive to achieve their respective language learning goals (Thornton et al., 2021).

The ways in which SAC student staff are treated differ among institutions. Some institutions have their student staff members work under a fully-paid system and others recruit students as volunteers. A small-scale SAC, start-up SAC, or SAC with little institutional support may not have a student staff system in place, and students are often involved in doing some activities voluntarily without any formal structure or recognition from the institution. In other situations, teachers or learning advisors in the SAC may have invited SAC users to get involved in planning seasonal events for special occasions such as Halloween and Christmas—anything from decorating the space to developing games. Whatever the route and the ways in which students are involved in running the SAC, some students join simply because they enjoy being in the SAC, and some join because they want to help and support their fellow students enjoy learning English as they have and improve their language skills. Such students also want to meet more like-minded peers who are interested and motivated in learning the language.

The Importance of Information-Sharing and Communication Among Student Staff

While the student staff members work on developing their learning communities and create vibrant and stimulating learning spaces, they often work in isolated shifts and may

not know one another well. Student staff training in SACs is very important, but many SACs struggle to bring all the student staff members together at once for a meeting or a training session as everyone has different class schedules and busy lives outside the school. Therefore, SAC staff members can benefit from opportunities to communicate with other student staff members. Providing such opportunities might be one of the important roles of an organization like the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL).

JASAL, as an academic association devoted to promoting self-access language learning in Japan, has been providing a forum for our members to disseminate knowledge and share ideas about self-access language learning, running self-access centers and developing learner autonomy since 2005. As student staff members are one of the key players in running successful SACs, JASAL has also been actively involved in supporting and providing learning opportunities for these students who are involved in SACs in universities across Japan. In 2013, JASAL supported the *Student Involvement in Self-Access Centers Conference* which was held at Nanzan Kenkyu Center in Nagoya, and the *Empowering Students in Self-Access Conference*, which was organized at Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba in 2016. In terms of student involvement in events specifically organized by JASAL, in 2015, a *JASAL Student Show and Tell* event was held at Okayama University with 13 student presentations representing seven institutions. Following up on the successful outcomes of these events, since December 2016, JASAL has been offering undergraduate student staff presentation slots at our annual conferences. Every year since 2016, we have given opportunities to students who work in SACs to present about their staff work and projects or activities they have planned and conducted in their learning spaces. We also include student staff get-together time during our annual conference so that student staff can have a chance to meet and share their challenges and their ideas with students from SACs at other universities.

Given the popularity of student presentations and their role in enriching learning opportunities for both students and teachers/advisors, JASAL hosted a larger-scale student conference, *JASAL Student Conference 2019*. Forty-six students from 13 university SACs in 10 prefectures in Japan came together and presented about their respective SACs and their projects, engaged in active Q&A sessions, and discussed action plans for their respective centers, then shared and discussed further with students from other universities. A total of 72 participants attended this student conference full of students' passion and energy.

As the Student Involvement coordinator of JASAL and the organizer of this event, I tried to make this student conference, not just a presentation opportunity, but an event that offered participating students something they could take away. I set up the activities so that I could enable the students to connect their experiences and learning, engage in reflection, develop an action plan, and potentially carry it out in order to improve their respective centers. To accomplish such an aim, I planned the event so that the student conference started with a pre-conference activity, where students were asked to set their goals for participating in the student conference and identify what they would like to ask student staff members from other universities. All the activities I developed were in a workbook which was distributed to all student participants beforehand. We included memo-taking pages so that students could take notes during presentations on what they heard and what they noticed or wondered about. After the presentations, we had very exciting Q&A sessions. Then, students were asked to engage in cross-institutional discussion sessions in which they discussed a variety of issues and questions they had, as well as heard more about the creative things other SAC student staff were doing. After that, students sat with their own school members (if they were the only one from their SAC, they joined another institution's group), and brought back ideas and thoughts they gathered from the previous interactive sessions. Then they created an action plan that they could implement at their respective schools when they went back to their SACs after the conference.

In addition to the above designated “activities,” I created as many opportunities as possible for the 46 students from the 13 universities to talk with and learn from each other. This included organizing a “lunch mix chat”—setting up groups of students from different institutions to eat lunch together.

Making the action plan and carrying it out in their respective institutions was not the end. I wanted to provide an opportunity for participants to report back on their progress in a future student forum. Therefore, one month after the JASAL SAC Student Conference 2019, JASAL scheduled another student event, *Student Forum in JASAL 2019*, so that students could come back and report back on their progress in implementing their action plans that they set up at the student conference.

In the follow-up student forum (<https://jasalorg.com/jasal2019-osaka-november30-december01/>) held on November 29, 2019, SAC student staff from five universities who had participated in the *JASAL Student Conference 2019* did poster presentations about the progress of the action plans they had set, and engaged in an open discussion session where students could further meet, share and exchange ideas about various issues related to SAC

operations from a student staff perspective. Many JASAL 2019 participants (teachers, advisors, and administrative staff) also came to observe the student forum and had opportunities to hear student staff members' voices directly and learn about their creative ideas as well as honest reflections and thoughts about their learning spaces.

Student presentations represent "student voices." Listening to students' presentations allowed SAC faculty members, including directors, administrative staff, and learning advisors, to see their operations and the workings of SACs from perspectives that differ from their own, and provided many insights.

The survey at the end of the *JASAL Student Conference 2019* showed how much this student conference inspired both students and faculty members with new ideas and motivated them to improve their SACs. Following are some of the comments from the participating students:

Student A: "It was a great chance to know people from different university. And talk to people who have awesome ideas."

Student B: "It's great to know about other center and staff. Some university has same problem with our uni and it's helpful to talk about solution and share opinion."

Student C: "It was fantastic! I could meet a lot of people and share each experience. Each of us has different/same idea/challenge. We discussed about that to improve us."

Student D: "It was very meaningful event for me. I got so many ideas for the events. Also, I was encouraged by other participants."

Student E: "It was inspirational, with what they said 'having expected learning outcomes'."

One of the participants who was the only one who came from his university commented, "I was nervous before coming here, but it was memorable and good experience to broaden my perspective. I don't want to go back to Tokyo. Sad..." (Student F).

Since JASAL set the policy of using English in this conference (of course, students could also use Japanese as necessary), students kept everything in English and for some, this had a positive effect. Some of the comments from the student surveys show how the use of English motivated them to study even more:

Student G: "I was moved a lot. Student conference inspired me strongly. And encourage me to study English."

Student H: "I think it is stimulated. I have to learn English more...!"

We also received comments from teachers, learning advisors, and administrative staff:

Teacher A: "I was impressed that my students raised their hands to ask questions during Q&A time."

Teacher B: "This conference was a wonderful model of what a meet and share should be."

Teacher C: "Despite their initial concerns about presenting to groups from other universities, they rose to the challenge and did their best."

Teacher D: "It was fantastic to watch students discussing, how they manage their own learning."

Administrative staff A: "As administrative staff, I was very happy that my students and I could participate in this event—I have always thought it would be great if students can talk with student staff members from other university SACs."

Administrative staff B: "This kind of meeting is very effective to know different circumstances at each center and gain some innovative resolutions to develop more by stimulating one another."

From the feedback comments from students, teachers, and administrative staff, we can see the positive influences the events have had on the participants.

Student Forums Moved to Online Platform

With the COVID-19 pandemic, our plan to host the JASAL Student Conference in a face-to-face format was not possible in 2020, the following year, but instead, JASAL hosted JASAL Online Student Forums on July 4, 2020 and on February 6, 2021. In the first-ever Online Student Forum on July, 4, 2020, 22 students from seven universities, and 22 teachers and administrators from 13 universities in Japan joined. Student staff in SACs and active student users shared their online activities and issues and enjoyed coming up with new ideas. Teachers, learning advisors, and administrative staff had the chance to discuss with others but also some opportunities to observe some of the student group discussion sessions.

In our *2nd JASAL Online Student Forum* themed "Bringing fun and community back" in February 2021, we gave the students the opportunity to plan the forum by themselves. The forum was largely planned and run by three very capable student volunteers from three universities in Japan, who had never met each other before, but nonetheless were very interested in running such a forum. Fourteen student participants came from six universities across the country. After their active sharing and discussion time, the forum concluded with a brainstorming session focused on SAC welcome events for the new school year.

In these online forums, students shared issues and ideas for their SAC during the difficult times they faced in running student events, as well as maintaining and developing learning communities during the pandemic. The discussion topics were not rigidly set, and they reported that they talked and exchanged ideas on the kind of events suitable for using Zoom, popular online events for students, and how student staff members could promote their initiatives using SNS services, as well as how they could get regular participants involved in an event or a community. A student participant commented on the feedback survey:

Due to the current COVID-19 situation, although it is struggle to talk [to] other people in English, I had a really great opportunity to share with other university students about each English center. I appreciated all not only group leaders but also other students in my group session. Thank you! (Student I)

While the feedback survey was distributed by the organizer for participants to fill it out, some participants raised their hands to write reflection articles of their experiences in JASAL student online events. The resulting articles were published in academic journals (Tashiro, 2020; Mizoguchi, 2021; Yamane, 2021).

The Most Recent JASAL Student Conference

The *5th JASAL Student Conference 2021* was held online on November 27, 2021. Forty-five participants including 34 student presenters and 11 teachers, learning advisors and administrative staff gathered from 11 universities in Japan and two universities in Mexico. It was a great surprise that more students than expected applied to and joined this conference. The conference started off with a warm-up activity, followed by presentations and three group discussion sessions each with different groupings of students. In a similar way to the *JASAL Student Conference 2019*, I set up the group sessions so that student participants can be in a new group every session and engage in discussions with students from as many universities as possible. The conference encouraged students to think of solutions for the issues that they have at their respective SACs, develop action plans, share them with other participants, and put their plans into action when they go back to their respective SACs.

Conclusion

No longer is a learning space a space in which students wait and receive services; rather, students play a big role in coming up with ideas to make their learning spaces and services more meaningful and enjoyable for themselves. Just as we educators learn a lot from our professional conferences, it is important that we provide opportunities for our

student staff members to also engage in inter-collegial learning experiences so they can grow as SAC student staff members to create an even better motivating atmosphere and provide energy into their respective SACs.

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