

**Feeling Seen: Visual Displays, Affect, and Belonging in a Self-Access  
Learning Center**

**George Hays**

*Tokyo International University*

*ghays@tiu.ac.jp*

**Author Biography**

**George Hays** is an associate professor in the School of Language Communication at Tokyo International University and acting director of the Global Teaching Institute. He supervises student staff and faculty advisors in the Learning Commons and English Plaza. His professional interests include the affective dimensions of self-access learning, learning space design, and reflective practice in language education.

### Abstract

This reflective article explores the potential role of student-generated visual displays in shaping the emotional climate of a self-access learning environment. Drawing on professional practice at Tokyo International University's Learning Commons and informed by scholarship on space, affect, and learner ownership, I consider how intern photos, comics, and student artwork may contribute to perceptions of belonging and emotional readiness for communication. Through practitioner observation and engagement with self-access learning center (SALC) literature, I reflect on how visual design elements appear to influence atmosphere, approachability, and learners' willingness to participate in informal language use. Rather than presenting empirical findings, this article offers a practice-based inquiry into the possibilities and limitations of visual space design, including the challenges of interpreting emotional impact without systematic data and ensuring inclusive representation in student-facing displays. The article concludes with practical considerations for educators interested in co-designing self-access environments that attend to learners' emotional experiences while maintaining reflective humility about the limits of practitioner interpretation.

本稿は、セルフアクセス学習環境における学生生成型の視覚的掲示物が、学習空間の情緒的雰囲気にとどのような影響を与え得るかを省察的に検討するものである。東京国際大学ラーニング・コモンズでの実践経験と、空間・情意・学習者主体性に関する研究を踏まえ、インターン学生の写真、コミック風デザイン、学生作品などが、所属感やコミュニケーションへの情緒的準備性にとどのように関わり得るかを考察する。本研究は実証的研究ではなく、実践者としての観察と理論的枠組みに基づく実践的省察である。あわせて、情緒的影響の解釈の難しさや、多様性を踏まえた表象の課題についても検討する。最後に、学習者の情緒的経験に配慮したセルフアクセス空間を協働的に設計するための示唆を提示する。

*Keywords:* self-access learning, learning space design, affective dimensions, learner belonging, visual environment

Self-access learning centers (SALCs) have evolved from resource repositories into social learning spaces that shape how learners experience participation and belonging. Murray (2018) argues that self-access environments can function as complex, dynamic ecosocial systems—spaces shaped by the interaction of social, environmental, and spatial factors that influence the affordances available to learners. From this perspective, space is not neutral; it communicates messages about what kinds of engagement are possible and whether learners feel comfortable taking risks.

As a facility supervisor working in Tokyo International University's (TIU) Learning Commons, I have become increasingly interested in the emotional dimensions of self-access space design. Over time, I have observed that students respond differently to various visual features in our center: Some displays invite engagement and spark conversation, while others go largely unnoticed. These observations have led me to explore what student-generated visuals might contribute to the emotional atmosphere of a SALC, particularly in terms of belonging, safety, and welcome.

Informal learning spaces that incorporate student-led displays and visual personalization have been shown to support emotional well-being and foster stronger identification with the learning community (Kashiwa, 2021). However, the mechanisms through which visual features—especially intern photos, comics, and student artwork—influence emotional readiness for communication remain underexplored.

This reflective article emerges from my ongoing work designing and maintaining visual displays in the TIU Learning Commons. I consider three questions: (a) Do recognizable peer- and learner-created visuals help visitors feel seen and welcomed? (b) How might color, design style, and content shape learners' emotional state and openness to communication? (c) What practical design principles can support emotionally responsive and inclusive self-access environments?

## **Literature Review**

### **Affective Factors in Self-Access Learning**

Affective dimensions, including motivation, anxiety, confidence, and emotional well-being, are increasingly recognized as important in self-directed language learning (Shelton-Strong & Mynard, 2018). Research suggests that learners' emotions and psychological states play an important role in autonomous learning processes and can influence how learners approach and manage their learning (Tassinari & Ciekanski, 2013). Tassinari and Ciekanski

(2013) argue that SALCs should address not only cognitive and metacognitive aspects of learning but also affective and subjective dimensions. They suggest that language advising provides an appropriate context for learners to reflect on the affective implications of learning, express feelings and beliefs related to their learning experiences, and develop strategies for coping with emotional challenges that arise during the learning process.

In response, many SALCs have incorporated affective support through advising, reflective activities, and other learner-supporting initiatives. Practical support such as guided reflective journals and one-to-one advising sessions have been successfully used to help learners monitor and develop awareness of their motivational and emotional states (Shelton-Strong & Mynard, 2018).

This body of research has shaped my thinking about the Learning Commons as not merely a collection of resources but as an emotionally attuned environment. If emotions are central to self-access learning, then every design choice, including what we display on walls and bulletin boards, carries potential affective significance.

### **Physical Environment and Visual Displays**

Design and visual displays play a particularly important role in shaping the emotional tone of learning spaces. Asta and Mynard (2018) examined how self-access environments can support learners' basic psychological needs, providing a useful framework for understanding how such environments may foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Multimodal visual methods, such as language mapping activities, help learners externalize emotional associations with languages and prompt reflective engagement with the space (Yao & Jin, 2024).

These insights have prompted me to pay closer attention to what is visible in our Learning Commons, not just informational content, but the emotional messages conveyed through imagery, color, and representation.

### **Personalization and Student Ownership**

Learner ownership of learning spaces has been associated with greater agency and meaningful engagement in self-access contexts (Kashiwa, 2021; Shelton-Strong & Mynard, 2018). When learners have opportunities to shape their environment through visible contributions and creative expression, they may develop a stronger sense that “the SALC is mine” (Kashiwa, 2021). This sense of ownership is theoretically grounded in self-determination theory (SDT), which posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fundamental psychological needs that drive intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

When learners contribute to the design and social life of a self-access environment, they may experience greater autonomy and relatedness, particularly when their voices and identities are visibly represented within the space. Institutional practices that intentionally enable students to shape the social and material environment promote sustained engagement and deeper identification with the learning space (Kashiwa, 2021).

This literature has reinforced my intuition that featuring student voices and faces in our displays is not merely decorative, it may be a powerful way to signal that the Learning Commons belongs to students, not just to staff or administration.

### **Theoretical Framework**

My reflections are grounded primarily in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation, and in Murray's (2018) conceptualization of self-access environments as spaces that communicate possibilities for engagement. Together, these frameworks allow me to consider both how the Learning Commons affords opportunities for participation and how these are experienced affectively by learners.

## **Context and Reflective Approach**

### **Setting**

My reflections emerge from ongoing work at TIU's Learning Commons, a SALC that serves undergraduate students across disciplines at the Ikebukuro campus. The center features study areas, resource collections, technology stations, and social zones designed to support autonomous language learning. Visual displays throughout the space include photos of student interns (who staff the center and assist visitors), comic-style graphics with speech bubbles, student artwork exhibited in a rotating "Commons Gallery," and informational posters about resources and events.

During the creation of the Learning Commons, feedback from faculty was actively sought; however, little feedback on design and aesthetics was elicited from students. While the space has some features that are welcoming, the overall environment can be described as industrial or lacking in warmth. Now that the Learning Commons has been operational at the Ikebukuro campus for 2.5 years, I have begun to examine more deliberately the overall feeling of the environment and students' emotional connection to the space. This reflective turn has been prompted in part by noticing differential patterns in how students comment on the space: International students tend to focus on the environment or notice the art displays,

while Japanese students seldom make comments about the physical space. These patterns have raised questions about whether the emotional atmosphere resonates differently across cultural contexts and whether our design choices inadvertently privilege certain ways of experiencing and responding to space. As shown in Figure 1, student-generated displays take multiple forms within the Learning Commons.

**Figure 1**

*Examples of Student-Generated Visual Displays in the Learning Commons*



(a) Student photography and artwork displayed in the Commons Gallery

(b) Interactive “Good Vibes” message wall featuring student intern and peer messages

(c) Collaborative message tree with handwritten student reflections

*Note.* Photographs taken by the author (2025).

### **My Approach to Observation and Reflection**

My reflections draw on informal conversations with students, observations of how learners move through and interact with the space, and ongoing reflection on design decisions. The student quotations presented below are verbatim excerpts from informal conversations with students, all of which were conducted in English. These insights are informed by engagement with SALC literature, which has helped me interpret patterns I initially noticed intuitively. This is not formal research; rather, it represents practitioner inquiry grounded in accumulated experience and theoretical framing.

## Reflections From Practice

### Learner-Related Factors: Seeing Peers and Interns

One of the most consistent patterns I have observed concerns student responses to photos of peer interns. The Learning Commons employs undergraduate student interns who staff the center, assist visitors, and facilitate conversation practice. We display photos of these interns near the entrance and on bulletin boards throughout the space, often in comic-style frames with speech bubbles introducing their names, languages, and interests.

Students frequently comment that these photos make the center feel approachable. One student mentioned, “When I see the intern photos, I know there are friendly people here who can help me.” This anecdotal comment suggests that seeing recognizable faces may reduce the intimidation some students feel when entering a new space. The intern photos seem to communicate: “This space is staffed by people like you, students who understand the challenges of language learning.” From an SDT perspective, this can be understood as the basic psychological need for relatedness being supported: Seeing familiar, peer faces signals social connection and warmth, conditions that Deci and Ryan (2000) identify as central to relatedness need satisfaction.

Similarly, I have noticed that comic-style design elements tend to draw positive reactions. The playful aesthetic, bold colors, speech bubbles, and informal fonts seem to signal that the Learning Commons is not a formal, evaluative environment. Several students have described the space as “fun” or “relaxed,” and I wonder whether the visual design contributes to this perception. The informal aesthetic may communicate that this is a space for experimentation and enjoyment rather than high-stakes performance. In SDT, intrinsic motivation—the form of motivation most strongly associated with deep engagement and well-being—is fostered when activities feel enjoyable and self-directed rather than evaluative or obligatory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). If the visual environment of the Learning Commons signals “play” and “low stakes,” it may be contributing to conditions that support intrinsic motivation for language practice.

### Visual Environment: Color, Art, and Atmosphere

I have also reflected on the role of color and visual vibrancy in shaping emotional tone. After redesigning several bulletin boards using brighter colors, students appeared to attend more closely to these areas, and some commented that the space felt more energetic and welcoming.

The “Commons Gallery,” which rotates student artwork every few weeks, has prompted similar reflection. Students occasionally stop to examine the displayed pieces, and some have expressed appreciation for seeing creative work by their peers. One student remarked, “It’s nice to see what other students are making. It makes me feel like this place is for students, not just about English.” This response aligns with research on student ownership: When learners see evidence of peer creativity and agency, they may feel greater identification with the space (Kashiwa, 2021).

At the same time, I recognize that student artwork does not always produce positive or calming effects. While some displays may foster a sense of belonging and curiosity, others may be perceived as ambiguous, provocative, or even unsettling, depending on the viewer’s background and emotional state. This variability highlights the importance of approaching visual curation with sensitivity to inclusivity and emotional safety. In practice, this has involved selecting and rotating artwork with attention to diversity of style and tone, while also remaining open to how different learners may experience these displays in unexpected ways.

### **Emotional Readiness for Communication**

A third area of reflection concerns whether the visual environment influences students’ willingness to engage in conversation practice. The Learning Commons offers informal opportunities for interaction: Students can chat with interns, join drop-in conversation tables, or practice with peers. I have wondered whether the colorful, informal atmosphere—featuring peer faces and student-created visuals—helps reduce the anxiety some learners feel about speaking English.

Several students have described the space as “less scary” than a classroom. One explained, “In class, I feel nervous to speak because everyone is listening. Here, it feels more casual, so I can try.” While this perception may stem from the voluntary structure of the space, the visual environment may also contribute. Together, these elements may signal a low-stakes setting where experimentation feels safe.

However, I cannot isolate the effect of visual displays from other factors such as staffing, activity structure, or peer culture. These reflections suggest a plausible connection, but they do not constitute evidence of causation.

## **Tensions and Ongoing Questions**

### **The Challenge of Measuring Emotional Impact**

One persistent tension in this work concerns how to understand emotional impact without formal research methods. My observations are based on informal comments, behavioral cues, and intuition, all valuable sources of practitioner knowledge, but insufficient for making strong claims. I often wonder: Are students genuinely feeling more welcomed and emotionally ready because of the visual displays, or am I projecting my intentions onto their behavior?

This uncertainty has led me to adopt a stance of “reflective humility.” I can observe patterns, notice what seems to resonate, and make design decisions informed by the literature and experience. However, I must remain open to the possibility that my interpretations are incomplete or that different students experience the space in ways I have not anticipated.

### **Inclusivity and Representation**

Another ongoing question concerns whose faces, voices, and aesthetics are represented in our displays. The intern photos currently feature students who volunteered for these roles, a self-selected group that may not reflect the full diversity of our student body. Similarly, the “Commons Gallery” showcases students who chose to submit artwork, which may inadvertently privilege those who are confident in their creative abilities or familiar with gallery submission processes.

These considerations have prompted me to think more deliberately about co-design processes. Rather than making design decisions unilaterally, how might we invite broader student participation in shaping the visual environment? How can we ensure that diverse voices, aesthetics, and cultural perspectives are represented?

Inclusive design cannot be one-size-fits-all. What feels welcoming to one learner may feel overwhelming or unfamiliar to another. Differences in how students experience and respond to learning spaces, including their preferences for visual design and their willingness to provide feedback on aesthetics, must be acknowledged and respected. Moving forward, I am committed to creating more structured opportunities for students to share their perspectives on the visual environment and to co-create displays that reflect the diversity of the learning community.

### **Implications for Practice**

Based on my reflections and engagement with SALC literature, I offer the following recommendations for practitioners interested in designing emotionally supportive self-access environments:

#### **Feature Recognizable Peers and Staff**

Displaying photos of student interns, advisors, or peer mentors may help visitors feel that the space is staffed by approachable, relatable people. Consider using informal, friendly imagery (such as comic-style frames or candid photos) to reduce perceptions of formality or hierarchy.

#### **Use Color and Visual Vibrancy Intentionally**

Bright, varied colors may contribute to an energetic, welcoming atmosphere. Consider moving away from neutral or institutional color schemes toward displays that feel warm and inviting. However, balance vibrancy with visual clarity: Overly cluttered displays may overwhelm rather than welcome.

#### **Showcase Student Creativity and Voice**

Rotating displays of student artwork, photography, or creative projects can signal that the space belongs to learners. Consider creating a “gallery” or “student showcase” area where learners can share their work. Ensure submission processes are accessible and invite diverse forms of creative expression.

#### **Design for Emotional Safety**

Visual cues can communicate whether a space is evaluative or supportive. Informal, playful design elements (such as comics, speech bubbles, or hand-drawn graphics) may signal that the space is low-stakes and welcoming of experimentation. Avoid imagery that emphasizes high achievement, competition, or perfection, which may increase anxiety.

#### **Invite Co-Design and Iterative Feedback**

Rather than making design decisions unilaterally, involve students in shaping the visual environment. Consider hosting design workshops, feedback sessions, or “suggestion walls” where learners can share what makes them feel welcomed. Be responsive to cultural differences in how students experience and comment on space.

#### **Acknowledge Limitations and Remain Reflective**

Recognize that emotional responses to the environment are highly individual and context dependent. What resonates with one learner may not resonate with another. Maintain

a stance of reflective humility, observe, adapt, and remain open to learning from students' experiences.

### Conclusion

This article has reflected on how student-generated visuals—intern photos, colorful displays, and artwork—may contribute to belonging, reduced anxiety, and emotional readiness for communication in a self-access context.

My observations suggest that learner-related visuals, particularly photos of peer interns, help visitors feel that the space is approachable and staffed by people like them. Colorful, playful design elements may signal that the Learning Commons is a low-stakes, supportive environment where experimentation is welcomed. Student artwork showcased in rotating displays contributes to a sense that the space belongs to learners and values their creative voices.

However, I also acknowledge ongoing tensions and unanswered questions. Measuring emotional impact without formal research methods is challenging, and I remain uncertain about the extent to which visual displays, as opposed to other factors such as staffing, activity structure, or peer culture, drive the patterns I observe. Additionally, questions about inclusivity and representation persist: Whose faces, voices, and aesthetics are featured in our displays? How can we ensure that diverse students feel equally welcomed and represented?

Future research could build on these reflections by incorporating learner perspectives more systematically, for example through interviews or other qualitative methods that explore how a wider range of affective elements—such as plants, music, lighting, or other sensory features—interact with visual displays to shape emotional experience in self-access spaces. In addition, the cross-cultural differences observed in this context suggest a need for research that explores how learners from different backgrounds perceive and engage with SALC environments, and how design choices may resonate differently across cultural groups.

Moving forward, I am committed to more deliberate co-design processes that invite students to shape the visual environment. I recognize that inclusive design cannot be one-size-fits-all and that cultural differences in how students experience space must be acknowledged and respected. By creating structured opportunities for student feedback and participation, I hope to develop a Learning Commons that feels emotionally supportive to a broader range of learners.

For practitioners, these reflections offer an invitation to look closely at the affective dimensions of self-access space design. Small, everyday design choices—what we display, how we frame student presence, and how we use color and style—may shape how learners experience the space. By designing with intentionality, inviting student voice, and remaining reflectively humble, we can create SALCs that support not only learning, but also well-being and belonging.

### References

- Asta, K., & Mynard, J. (2018). Exploring basic psychological needs in a self-access learning center. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 9(3), 195–212. <https://doi.org/10.37237/relay/010213>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104\\_01](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01)
- Kashiwa, M. (2021). “The SALC is mine!”: Supporting the development of learner agency and reconfiguration of language learning environments beyond the classroom. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 12(4), 319–340. <https://doi.org/10.37237/120402>
- Murray, G. (2018). Self-access environments as self-enriching complex dynamic ecosocial systems. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 9(2), 102–115. <https://doi.org/10.37237/090204>
- Shelton-Strong, S. J., & Mynard, J. (2018). Affective factors in self-access learning. *Relay Journal*, 1(2), 275–292. <https://doi.org/10.37237/relay/010204>
- Tassinari, M. G., & Ciekanski, M. (2013). Accessing the self in self-access learning: Emotions and feelings in language advising. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 4(4), 262–280. <https://doi.org/10.37237/040404>
- Yao, Y., & Jin, Y. (2024). “My Japanese is blue, because it makes me blue”: Centering emotion in language practices through language mapping. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 15(3), 529–559. <https://doi.org/10.37237/150311>