

# An Ethnography of Place: Understanding the Building 6 Self-Access Learning Centre at Kanda University of International Studies in the 2016-2017 Academic Year

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# **An Ethnography of Place: Understanding the Building 6 Self-Access Learning Centre at Kanda University of International Studies in the 2016-2017 Academic Year**

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## **Abstract**

Self-access Centers (SACs) and Self-Access Learning Centers (SALCs) are places developed to support student learning outside of class, most notably with regard to language learning and development. They often developed as constructivist learning environments. Viewed through an ecological lens, they are environments boasting a large semiotic budget and range of affordances—opportunities for action and interaction (between learner and others, the environment, and other artifacts). This paper presents notable results from an ethnography of place conducted in the Kanda University of International studies SALC in its final year in Building 6, during the 2016-2017 academic year, as part of an effort to better understand the SALC as a place.

## **Background**

### *Self-Access*

Self-access Centers (SACs) and Self-Access Learning Centers (SALCs) are places developed to support student learning outside of class, most notably with regard to language learning and development. The first documented self-access center was the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues (CRAPEL) at the University of Lorraine in Nancy, France which was established in 1969 (Holec, 2000: Mynard, forthcoming). There are now many centers at universities and some high schools around the world, and "... notably in Mexico, the UK, France, Thailand, New Zealand and Hong Kong, self-access and advising have had a place in language education for decades." (Mynard: forthcoming). Mynard

continues, “There are around 800 universities in Japan, yet only 35 have registered a self-access facility on the Japan Association of Self-Access Learning (JASAL) registry (<https://jasalog.com/lls-registry/>).”

### *Context*

One of the progenitors or prototype SALCs in Japan has been the SALC at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Chiba, Japan. With a 16-year history and a level of institutional support that few SALCs in Japan enjoy, it has developed its physical and human resources over time, and generated research which both drives and is produced alongside its development. This led to what has been referred to as ‘the Kanda model’ for SALCs, which among other traits is notable for its focus on advising and learner support. The Building 6 SALC in this study was in fact the second SALC at KUIS, opened in 2003 and the natural progression from original SALC. The first KUIS SALC was created in 2001 and occupied two adjoining rooms in the older Building 4. Building 6 was then home to the SALC for a period from 2003 until the end of the 2016-17 academic year, at which point it moved into the new, purpose-built Building 8. That middle, Building 6 SALC is the focus of this paper.

The university, itself is located Makuhari, Chiba City, Chiba Prefecture, Japan. The institution had nearly 4000 undergraduate students at the time of this study. The university’s departments are primarily geared toward language education, with some additional focus given to business and communication. English courses are a mandatory part of the curriculum for all first- and second-year students. The Self-Access Learning Centre in Building 6 was meant to support language education, and it also included advising services focusing on learner development.

## **Theoretical Underpinnings**

### *Constructivism and Sociocultural Theory*

Today, most SACs are grounded in theories of learner autonomy and constructivism, which undergird, to varying amounts according to center, the design and management of the space. Constructivism is an ontological view in which meaning making and learning is inextricably connected to a learner's prior framework(s) of knowledge. It is context-dependent, and the process is likely to be different for each learner, particularly as learners bring with them a rich and varied tapestry of prior experience, knowledge, beliefs about, and attitudes toward learning. Vygotsky (1962, 1978) expands on this, arguing that learning is also inherently social. We can observe an interplay between participants and context as learning occurs.

### *Learner Autonomy*

Learner autonomy has been around as a subject of study since the late 1970s (Murray, 2017; Lamb, 2015), having been studied in parallel with many SACs. The very definition of autonomy has changed or otherwise been expanded upon over time. An early, distinct definition by Holec (1981: 3) defines autonomy as "The ability to take charge of one's own learning." Little (1991: 4) offered a provisional definition suggesting:

*... autonomy is a capacity - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts.*

This focus on autonomy as a capacity has remained for some time, as with Benson's definition of autonomy as "The capacity to take control of one's learning" (2011: 58). In some cases, the motivation or will to act is subsumed in the definition of 'capacity,' while others assume the will to act to be a separate issue, and that a capacity may exist even when a learner does not decide to act on it. An important note is that autonomy assumes learners' background knowledge and framework (ala constructivism), interests, and needs will be varied, so each learner's path to development, in language and as a learner, will be different and unique. Capacity and choice is, in essence, the appropriate answer to a question with varied intricacies from learner to learner.

While self-regulation is often referred to in psychological traditions of inquiry into learning, autonomy is often studied hand-in-hand with language learning and development. It is likely a reaction to the complexity of language learning, accounting not only for metacognitive skills and strategies, but also taking identity and interaction into account in an area of subject matter that is non-linear and emergent (distributed). This means that, while autonomy is often conflated with independent learning, it need not always be independent—groups of learners can express their autonomy as well. Murray (2017) and van Lier (2004) both view autonomy as social construction as well.

### *Ecological Perspective*

Ecology is concerned with how animals are situated in an environment, and viewing environments in terms of *affordance*, "which means a relationship between an organism (a learner, in our case) and the environment, that signals an opportunity for or inhibition of action" (van Lier, 2004, p. 4). This also draws on the field of semiotics, sometimes called the science of signs, to show that, for example, a body of water is not simply water, but rather it can signal

different things (and have different affordances) to different organisms: To some animals, water signals safety, to others it might signal a place to hydrate or cool off, and to others yet it may signal a hunting ground. In the case of SACs, the prior knowledge and internal context does vary from learner to learner, which is important because something only becomes an affordance to an individual when it can be recognized as such. An affordance is implicitly contained in neither the actor nor the object, but in the relationship between the two. In terms of autonomy, this assumes that a capacity and will or motivation are separate in that “An affordance affords further action (but does not cause or trigger it)” (van Lier, 2000: 252).

An ecological perspective on language learning (and indeed learning in general), accounts nicely for implications from constructivism and social constructivism, as well as for learner autonomy. It accounts for learners’ attention and context, as well as language development itself occurring through socially mediated affordances (see Gibson, 1979) and as a non-linear, emergent endeavor. “Both [*emergence and affordance*] are part of the foundation of ecology: affordance because it is at the roots of the relationship between the person and the physical, social and symbolic world; emergence because it characterizes the development of complex linguistic abilities.” (van Lier, 2004: 79).

An ecological lens may also be useful when applied to concepts of space and place. Leo van Lier (2000) even asserts that Vygotsky’s inquiries into learning were in fact ecological in nature. Van Lier continues, “From an ecological perspective, the learner is immersed in an environment full of potential meanings” (2000: 246), with the following implication:

*From a pedagogical perspective, the message may be to provide a rich ‘semiotic budget’... and to structure the learner’s activities and participation so that access is*

*available and engagement is encouraged. This brings ecological language learning in line with proposals for situated learning (and 'legitimate peripheral participation') by Lave and Wenger (1991) (van Lier, 2000: 253).*

### *Space and Place*

This study is interested in the Building 6 SALC as a place. It is important to disambiguate what is meant by those terms. Murray (2014) tells us, “Ultimately, what makes these [self-access] facilities places are the actions people perform in these spaces and the meanings they ascribe to them” (p. 82). Put more succinctly, “Place is space to which meaning has been ascribed” (Carter, Donald, & Squires, 1993: ix). A study of the SALC as a place will entail both learner perception and action in the space, as “Two important concepts for investigation in an ecological view are perception and action (and the relations between them)” (van Lier, 2000: 257). This ethnography, however, can only be a sort of snapshot of a certain moment in the life of the SALC, because places are “The product of everyday practices and discourses, places are dynamic and ever-changing” (Murray, 2017: Kindle version location 397/7609). He continues, “As we participate in these processes, we appropriate spaces, embody them, impose our identities on them and at the same time have our identities shaped by the places we inhabit and the practices we engage in.” This means that a place is ever-changing and alive in a sense, and continuous study is necessary to continue to understand a place as it is over its lifetime.

### **Question**

This study sought to gain more understanding of the author’s institution’s Self-Access Learning Centre (also SALC) in its old location up through early 2017—Building 6. While exploratory in nature, there was a primary question that could be answered, at least in part, by questionnaire data:

How do students notice, orient themselves to, and use affordances in the SALC, including those provided by its people, places, and materials?

## **Methodology**

This study is a sort of ethnography of place, which means it is exploratory in nature, and more than having specific questions, looks for intricacies and interesting connections. In a sense, it began as an effort to paint a mental picture of the space and relationships that exist in it. As a follow-up to, a questionnaire was created to both help fill in the details of that picture, and better understand how students are perceiving and using a range of affordances in the SALC. With prior-available data that is qualitative in nature—meaning this picture is illustrated with a mixed-methods brush—the qualitative nature as an ethnography is more dominant. The data available at the start was for user numbers in the center and for different areas over various times of day and throughout the school year. This data was available for large reach of time prior to the study, but the rest of our data for the Building 6 SALC is relevant primarily for the 2016-2017 school year, for which this study took place. It would be beneficial to understand how learners think about and interact with three types of resources in the space—people, places, and materials, which parallels the social, physical, and symbolic worlds mentioned by van Lier (2004). To generate enough data to look at interesting intersections of beliefs and actions of users, a questionnaire proved helpful. In order to generate additional relevant ideas for questionnaire items, as casual users may not recognize many opportunities for using the center, a set of affinity users were asked to help with semi-structured interviews. These interviews could also show us what some of these “super users” were doing that casual users were not, which could then possibly inform recommendations and interventions for other and future users. The questionnaire was formed with 60 questions and offered in both Japanese and English. It was created with feedback from learning advisors, SALC student staff, and assistant managers,



and then piloted with a group of affinity users. After the pilot, several items were fixed or edited for clarity in Japanese, English, or both, and then it was opened to students for one month via Google Forms. Additionally, to temper the information included in the user numbers, field notes were taken by a learning advisor to try and describe the types of activities taking place and number of users working together.

## **Results and Analysis**

### *Usage numbers:*

Data on overall student usage of the SALC and its areas have been collected for an extended period of time, dating back to 2012. The current study focuses on the 2016-2017 academic year, which is notable in comparison to prior years in that it saw both an increase in overall SALC use, and a drastic increase in the use of advising services by students. Near the beginning of the academic year, advising services were booked at a rate of nearly three times the previous academic year. There just over 2000 users counted per week on average in the first semester, however, as it was a simple head-count system for different areas at intervals throughout each day, it is possible that users could be counted multiple times if there on different days or for long periods of time. The user numbers dropped overall in the second semester by about one third, and they conformed to other holiday and testing periods (i.e. less usage just before Hamakaze, the school festival, with a notable uptake just after that festival finished). This does not seem out of the ordinary and runs parallel to trends we have seen in other years. The most popular area by far was the multi-purpose rooms (MPRs), followed at some distance, but in a strong second, by the Group Access Area. Other area usage was vastly less than these two.

### *Field notes:*

To further qualify the usage numbers and try to better understand and illustrate what sorts of

action were taking place in the SALC, a learning advisor collected field notes at various points of the second semester, at varied times of the day. More than just the numbers of users, the field notes paid attention to how students were or were not grouping themselves in various areas, and also to what sorts of work or activities they were taking part in. Takeaways from these field notes were that, while there were different trends for different locations in the SALC, students tended to work or act more often in groups, with relatively few solo users. Solo users did not tend to stay in a space as long (though there are some exceptions of course), and most often appeared to be doing homework or coursework. Some solo users, as we also heard in the semi-structured interviews, preferred sitting in an area with outlets for their electronic devices. In lieu of another person to work with, they appeared to use their digital equipment more. Learners working with others, to no surprise, were more verbal (whether in English, Japanese, another language, or some combination). Japanese use appeared to be more common in the MPRs or other private or semi-private areas. It should also be noted, too, that the Group Access Area was near capacity at times, and so even though its raw usage numbers were significantly behind those of the MPRs (around one half), this may not be a reflection on the area's popularity as much as spatial limitations.

*Semi-structured Interviews:*

The semi-structured interviews with five affinity users give us an interesting picture of the variety of ways in which the SALC is and can be used by even some of the highest achieving students. The results of the interviews were greatly varied, with some overlap between some interviewees, but almost no overlap in the usage and practices by others. One common opinion of members in this affinity group was that they felt they wanted SALC to be an all-English space, which would certainly support them at their linguistic level. Even though this was the policy in the Building 6 SALC (and has since been changed to be delineated by area in the

more recent Building 8 SALC), we know from prior studies that the English-only policy was one reason students with a low level of confidence in using English did not visit the SALC at the time. The interviewees all expressed concerns about the physical environment (lighting, comfort) and to varying degrees, some desire for private spaces within the SALC (one user mentioned that it feels strange being in MPRs or speaking booths [SBs] and feeling like they are being watched, as if in a zoo). Preferred areas varied drastically, with some users loving the yellow sofa area for conversations, and others avoiding it entirely. The same was true for SBs and MPRs—each user seems to have found a part of the SALC that was ‘their place’ which they would most often default to. Universally, physical factors were a concern, and in some cases, they found themselves using areas despite feeling uncomfortable in them due to uncomfortable seating, poor lighting, uncomfortable temperatures, lack of privacy, etc.

#### *Questionnaire:*

##### Demographics

The questionnaire garnered 177 responses. While it was hoped to also get the perspectives of faculty and staff, only three staff and two other faculty responded, which is not enough data to draw generalizations from, so those responses have been omitted from the final data, meaning N = 172 for the purposes of this study. 40.1% were first-year students at KUIS, comprising the largest group of respondents. This largest group of respondents was followed by second-year students (28.5%), third-year students (22.7%) and fourth-year students (8.1%). The respondents were mostly from majors where English is the primary language studied, accounting for 75.5% of respondents (54.1% English majors, 25.6% International Communications majors, and 5.8% International Business Communications majors). The other languages together comprise the remaining 24.5% of respondents, with at least one but no more than seven respondents in each of these other majors. Only 2.3% of respondents were non-users of the SALC. 40.7% of

respondents had not taken a SALC course (Effective Language Learning Course) or Module (Effective Learning Module). There are two tiers of these courses and modules, and 39% of respondents had completed tier 1 courses or modules, but not the second tier. Another 17.5% had completed both tiers 1 and 2 in some combination of modules and/or courses. 2.4% of students indicated they had bypassed the first tier and completed module or coursework from the second tier.

#### Personal Outlook and Campus Press

The first next section of the questionnaire wanted to gauge student outlook regarding what they felt was deemed important around campus, and if they felt opportunities for those things were provided by them. The goal here was to help understand how the SALC might fit into the expectations by students of the greater campus at large. The students marked their perception of various activities' importance in responses on a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important). Follow-up questions regarding opportunities to pursue these aspects were also rated on a scale of 1 (no opportunities) to 5 (plenty of opportunities for me) to help gauge what is called or environmental press, or that "These perceived characteristics of the environment, in turn, exert a directional influence on behavior" (Strange & Banning, 2001, p.85: see also Moos, 1986).

The categories they marked were the importance they (and the school) placed on learning, social activity, expression, and job hunting. Aside from job hunting (3.78 average rating), students mostly saw other activities as important at KUIS: a 4.15 mean response for learning, 4.33 for social activities and socializing, and 4.39 for performance and expression. This may reflect the respondents' current academic standing/year of study as job hunting would be most

pertinent to upperclassmen. Indeed, seniors rated it the most important of any class of students (4.00). Juniors rated job hunting the lowest (3.51).

Student perception of opportunities made available to them were somewhat in-line with their perceptions of importance, with a mean response of 4.13 for learning opportunities (to a mean 4.15 response for perceived importance), with 4.10 opportunities (to 4.33 importance) for socializing, 4.10 in opportunities for performance and expression (to 4.39 importance), and 3.13 in opportunities for jobhunting (to 3.78 importance). In all cases, the respondents rated opportunities for these types of activities as slightly behind the importance placed on them. This may be a common pattern of mind and thought, though. When controlling for tiers of SALC curriculum completed, we find that those who have taken some part of the SALC curriculum see more learning opportunities than those who have not taken some of the SALC curriculum (mean 3.96 for those who have not taken a course or module, compared with 4.22 for those who have completed a tier 1 course or module, and 4.32 for tier 2. This mirrors an increased perception of the importance of learning at KUIS, with 3.99 for those who have not taken any part of the SALC curriculum, compared with a mean rating of 4.29 from those who have finished a tier 1 course or module. For those who had finished a tier 2 course or module, their perception of the importance of learning at KUIS actually fell slightly, back to 4.21, making that the only class as organized by this section of curriculum that believes there are more opportunities present than indicated by environmental press from around campus in general, which may not be such a bad thing—this could be an illustration of students taking control of their own learning, recognizing and using learning opportunities themselves, opposed to waiting to have them pressed upon them. Across the board, students who completed either first- or second tier SALC modules or courses saw overall both more importance and

opportunity for each activity questioned. Of these, fields, the perception of learning as important at KUIS was the most statistically significant, with  $P = .027$  in a two-tailed test.

### SALC Spaces and Study Spaces Outlook

The questionnaire also included questions regarding respondents feeling about the SALC, as well as what they rate as important in looking for spaces within the SALC to work/study/act/be. Respondents indicated what was important in finding a space to work on a 1 (Not important at all) to 6 (extremely important) Likert scale, and separately indicated from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) whether the SALC had some particular characteristics. The results of these two sections are best understood in juxtaposition with each other to see any gaps between what students found to be important in choosing some space to work, and what they actually had to work with within the SALC. Among the things that students found important in finding a place to study, the highest rated were comfort (mean response 5.64/6) and if there was a surface to write/work on when needed (5.59/6). These were followed, according to order of importance according to responses, having enough seating (5.35), privacy (5.23/6), temperature (5.19/6), an acceptable noise level (4.85/6), having enough light (4.83/6), the language used in a space (4.55/6), if there was a computer they could use (4.44/6), and finally, if there were other people in the area (3.98/6). We can see from these data that physical attributes of a space are important for students in deciding where they will study. Their responses regarding the Building 6 SALC suggest they found it easier to find places for large groups (3.23/5) and small groups (3.59/5) than to find somewhere to work solo (2.87/5). Likewise, regardless of group size, they found it difficult to find somewhere private (2.81/5). They seemed somewhat satisfied with the lighting (3.84/5), temperature (3.52/5), and noise (3.38/5). This suggest that there are opportunities for improvement in all areas, but particularly

with regard to individual work spaces and privacy afforded to learners in the center (including groups).

Respondents indicated that they mostly agreed that the SALC was a good place for them to learn (3.87/5), and also that it was a reason that they decided to attend KUIS (3.48). Most indicated it was at least somewhat comfortable (3.26/5) and mostly disagreed that it made them stressed (2.45/5). That given, they did not find it particularly relaxing (2.91/5). Seating in the Building 6 SALC was regarded as somewhat comfortable (3.66/5).

The area within the Building 6 SALC most positively rated by students were MPRs, which received high ratings across the board, which were also the most commonly used space. The yellow sofas seemed somewhat polarizing, with learners who either really liked the area, or others who relatively unsatisfied with it. The edutainment booths also had mixed ratings, but the DVDs and movies used in those booths were the most popular resources in the SALC (students could also watch them in the MPRs). Along with responses regarding privacy, which was coveted by most, this might indicate that while learners enjoyed using the movie and DVD resources, they disliked being in such an open space. Even though users indicated a variety of different areas that they preferred, they nearly universally indicated that the various aspects of comfort were important to them. Though learners wanted some degree of privacy in the spaces within the SALC, the vast majority also indicated that they wanted to meet and talk to other people in SALC, with the most popular groups being international students and learning advisors, followed by teachers and then other domestic students.

### **Discussion:**

One of the things that stands out most clearly in this study is that it is hard to understate the

importance of comfort, both physically and psychologically, in the development of a SAC as a space into a place. While a center otherwise accommodates a variety of learner backgrounds and preferences, the desire for a physically comfortable place seems to be universal. This also extends to psychological comfort in that students greatly value being able to find spaces which give them a sense of privacy, either to help with concentration or lower their affective filter (due to potential anxieties regarding observation or judgment). Further, the students from the questionnaire, overall, find some parity between the importance they place on learning and what they feel the campus offers. However, this parity is not reached by the group of students who have not taken some aspect of the SALC curriculum. Across the board, students wanted more opportunities than they perceived they were afforded for social activity (community), expression, and job hunting (even though the students themselves valued job hunting as less important than the other aspects they were asked about). Students who had taken some SALC part of the SALC curriculum, in the form of classes or modules, both had a higher personal outlook on the importance of learning, and overall saw more opportunity at it for the school. This suggests that their criteria for choosing or doing learning activities accounted for a semiotic richness that allowed them to see more affordances on average than those who did not partake in some SALC curriculum.

**Limitations:**

There are natural limitations in studying learning environments, particularly when they are not smaller, physically, or pedagogically bound areas (meaning a classroom may be easier to study than a large center). Environments tend to be complex, and so the sheer volume of information to collect and analyze can be daunting. Strange and Banning say this makes such campus research ‘unwieldy’ (Strange (2001). Future research in the new building may be able to include systems approaches to researching the space, or even use complexity or chaos lenses (Larsen-



Freeman, 1997) to better understand the interplay between what is happening inside and outside of the space (as the influence on students to and from the rest of their lives does not end at the bounds of the physical space of or time in the center). One more limitation is that the majority of respondents tended to be SALC users, and there was little data provided by non- or very infrequent users (only 4 respondents, accounting for only 2.3% of total responses). This means the data is not entirely representative of the student population. In future studies, it would be beneficial to try and target a larger portion of non- or infrequent SALC users as well.

We also have a chicken or egg question—did students who took the modules and courses become better able to perceive the opportunities for action around them, or were those who were better able to perceive opportunities around them more likely to take the SALC modules or courses? As the truth often lies somewhere in-between, one might assume it is a bit of both, though to what extent is not known. As correlation does not inherently mean causation, before and after studies should be conducted. This may be fertile ground for future and ongoing study and could be approached by more longitudinal inquiry into such areas.

### **Conclusion:**

As our understanding of self-access and learner autonomy has developed over the years, so has our ability to pursue further and deeper inquiry into what is promoting and supporting development of autonomous learners, and the results of such inquiry can be applied as interventions to then be implemented and analyzed (to make sure they have the desired effect, or find out what effect(s) they may have had otherwise). The present study suggests that environment and action in the Building 6 SALC fit with our understanding of both autonomy and language learning. It fits with a view toward autonomy in that learners are able to make decisions regarding their learning and their decisions regarding where to use, what to use, and

how to use it in their learning that will vary by learner, need, and interest, among other influences. It fits also with what we know about language learning in that it is a non-linear endeavor, and in ecological terms, language is emergent. The SALC, with its large semiotic budget, allows for a wide plethora of [inter]actions to take place, which can accommodate the interests, needs, and preferences without overtly prescribing some particular developmental path. Future focus may be on paying greater attention to learner comfort in the spaces, and providing ample environments that afford students some sense of privacy while they work, whether solo or in groups. This all underscores the importance, too, of continuing to develop SACs and the future SALC with an orientation toward opportunity and variety.

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