

Book Review

Social spaces for language learning: Stories from the L-café

Editors:

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Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan, London, UK, 2016

ISBN:

978-1-137-53009-7

Pages:

154

What Garold Murray and Naomi Fujishima have compiled in their new 2016 book *Social spaces for language learning: Stories from the L-café* is a selection of personal, experience-based essays that describe and discuss the creation and evolution of a social space for learning foreign languages at the Okayama University in Japan. The phenomenon at hand, that is *social language learning space* (SLLS), is defined by the authors as a physical space allocated by the university for informal use by local and international students with “a focus of on language learning through informal social interaction” (p. 2). The SLLS discussed here shares certain similarities with self-access centers we know from many universities, but the emphasis placed on *social* and *language* aspects makes it unique in that they highlight the significance of learning through interaction with others rather than with library materials. In other words, the volume is an intriguing account of a heterotopic transformation of a physical space into a thriving community of practice, where social interaction leads to language being practiced in a semi-controlled manner by local, Japanese, and exchange students (and teachers). The book is divided into three major parts, each of which represents a view of the development of English Café (later changed to L-café) from a completely different

perspective. Hence, it is likely that each part will appeal to a different audience from language teachers and students, through university policy makers and administrators, to researchers in the field of SLA and beyond.

The book opens with an introductory essay from the editors that sets out the idea of the collection and provides the necessary theoretical background for the entire volume. The key section here, titled *From community to complexity*, discusses the editors' search for a theoretical base on which to build the study of social spaces. What is necessary to be noticed is that the umbrella approach used in this study is complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) but the repertoire of concepts that the editors utilize as their research foundation is truly wide and deriving from a variety of disciplines. In building their conceptual frameworks, Murray and Fujishima evoke Lave and Wenger's (1991) *community of practice*, Scollon's (2001) *nexus of practice*, Dörnyei's (2014) recent *retrodictive modeling*, the concept of *ecosocial systems*, and other research notions of autonomy, L2 identities, or L2 self, more typical of SLA. A brief discussion of these is followed by the discussion of the main data collection tool used within the book, that is the narrative inquiry.

Part I of the collection (Chapters 2 through 4) gives insight into the perspectives of L-café administrators who discuss the beginnings of the social space, its planning, financing, managing, and hiring staff. Largely related to logistic and managerial issues, the chapters collected in Part I form an interesting peek at what an educational endeavor looks like from the standpoint of administration and what are some of the issues that academics usually do not see. Some administrators (e.g., Masumi Fujimoto in Chapter 4), however, go beyond that and make valuable observations on the interaction between Japanese and foreign students, and their reciprocal efforts to help each other with learning a language.

This is followed by Chapters 5 through 8 that form Part II of the collection, presenting teachers' perspectives. The essays gathered in this part of the book range from very personal and emotional accounts of SLLS experiences (e.g., Bob Lamitie in Chapter 5) to more practical reports, such as Masumi Igarashi's discussion of introducing her English writing tutorials at the L-café (Chapter 6). The definite highlight of this part is Chapter 8, written by Claire Ushida, whose text, well-grounded in literature, offers a look into how a digital add-on to the SLLS would help transform the space into a more effective learning environment, answering the demands of modern-day college students.

The most extensive and perhaps the most significant section of the book (Part III, Chapters 8 through 17) is a collection of students' firsthand narratives exploring their own experience within the context of the social learning space. Here, the reader gets a wide assortment of views from those who participate, create, and are supposed to benefit from a SLLS. This part should therefore be

of great interest to researchers as well as those who might plan on opening a social space for learning within their own institutions. What needs to be underlined is that the essays in this part of the volume are far from being simply words of appreciation; the students are often very critical of the (particular) social space and eager to express their negative emotions, which only adds to the appeal of Part III. Generally, the themes that students cover in their narratives touch upon: (1) the cultural differences between Japanese and foreign students, which oftentimes got in the way of successful language learning (e.g., Chapters 9, 10, or 15); (2) the way in which the social learning space helped students build up their motivation and identity as learners of English (e.g., Chapter 16 and 17); and (3) difficulties adjusting to the realities of a social learning space (e.g., Chapters 13 and 14).

The book closes with Chapter 18, written again by the two editors, who provide a discussion of the narratives collected in earlier parts from a broader, research perspective, and give meaning to the seemingly scattered voices of administrators, teachers, and students. What is particularly important for the concept of this book is the “provisional model for social language learning spaces” (p. 141), which is offered as a final subsection and which gives a wider, bird-eye view of the potential of social learning spaces in general. This subsection is in fact a manual, a practical realization of the confluence of theoretical perspectives used by the editors in their research design, multiple affordances of the space, and potential future developmental paths for spaces of this kind.

When reading *Social spaces for language learning*, one needs to realize that the bulk of the book is not a traditional research study that you expect from a teaching/learning a foreign language domain in the sense that it is a collection of personal essays from participants and organizers of a particular social space at the Okayama University. In fact, such an extensive presentation of personal narratives is something that one would see in appendices following a research article. My first reaction after going beyond the first chapter was that of ambivalence. The question that suggested itself was: “Do I really need to go through so many personal stories in order to see the editors’ conclusion?” In fact, I still have my doubts about how significant it is to get a detailed account of the managerial side of setting up L-café or logistic problems of moving the space to a different location. Perhaps an executive summary of these narratives would be a better choice. Similarly, I thought originally, a discussion of teachers’ and students’ experience at the L-café, perhaps with extensive illustrative quotes from their narratives would suffice and help to maintain a certain focus across the entire volume. However, as one gets further into the book, especially towards the students’ narratives, it becomes clearer that there is a good reason for such a presentation of data. With the narrative inquiry approach, Murray and Fujishima give their research a certain human touch by presenting unabridged versions of

the accounts delivered by participants. In that sense, the book is refreshing; we get to see an intimate depiction of an experience by, for instance, a real student instead of a nameless S1. Understandably, the narratives will contain irrelevant information (e.g., Chapter 12) and will be ill-focused at times (e.g., Chapter 7) but, taken collectively, they form a powerful picture of the process. In other words, even if there are serious limitations to narrative inquiry as a research tool, which is cautiously pointed out by the editors themselves (p. 141-142), one does have the feeling that without taking the narrative path, the book would not have had the holistic dynamics that it has. On the whole, such a personalization nicely harmonizes with researching what is, after all, termed a *social* space. As Diana Laurillard of the Open University once observed, we do not have the evidence for the “stable individual learning characteristics” and students and their approach to learning “is most *meaningfully* seen as being interactive with particular learning situations” (Laurillard, 1993, p. 34, my emphasis). Also, it is a good reminder to us, academics and educators, that learning a language is believed in this day and age to be intricately tied to social interaction and should be considered in a wider context of human experience.

What also needs to be noted is that the editors offer a broad, rather than focused, approach in their research, implementing the still fresh in applied linguistics paradigm of the CDST but not in terms of searching for particular attractor states and studying the system’s parameters. Rather, CDST is utilized here as an overall tendency to look at the phenomenon studied from the general perspective of change and transformation over time. With the addition of other conceptual frameworks, such as the aforementioned community of practice, ecosocial systems, the concepts of L2 identity and L2 self, or retrodictive modeling, we get the impression of wide interdisciplinarity which, by many, might be considered a weakness because, as such, it places the reader in a web of reference points rather than on a straight line of reasoning based on a selected model. To tell the truth, with my initial reservations, I believe that using this “wide shot” in studying the evolution of the English Café/L-café, was the right choice. The transdisciplinarity gives a fuller picture and captures the dynamic character of this educational situation from the perspectives that you normally do not see in EFL research. It shows that learning a language always takes place in a context-rich system that needs an array of conceptual frameworks in order to be researched more effectively.

The only aspect that could be commented on more extensively by the editors of *Social spaces for language learning*, especially in Chapter 18, is the actual linguistic development of the L-café frequenters. Such a development is, indeed, declared openly or hinted at by some of the narrative writers but the book does not attempt to measure it or at least characterize the improvement,

or lack thereof, of language skills among selected participants. It is perfectly understood from the very outset that the focus of the book is placed upon the *space* for learning but since the space is used for *language* learning, a more in-depth treatment of this aspect would appear only natural.

In conclusion, Murray and Fujishima offer an informative and multifaceted journey into the creation and evolution of a place that finally became more than yet another learning facility on the campus; it became a space, a social learning environment where social interaction is the key facilitative force behind learning a foreign language. The narrative section of the book in itself is worth looking into as it gives an unprecedented access to a dynamic system through the eyes of the actual participants of that system. Yet, once we look at the narratives as spanned by the conceptual framework presentation and the discussion based on that framework, that is Chapters 1 and 18 respectively, we are given an opportunity to see how powerful transdisciplinarity-based qualitative research can be. The book is certainly recommended for educators, academics, college administrators, as well as language and culture teachers who may be planning on developing a social space for learning but it should and will also appeal to SLA researchers who consider taking a broader perspective in researching language acquisition.

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