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Autonomous Space Exploration Online in a Writing SAC or OWL

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Abstract

Virtual spaces to help learn a language or write autonomously have become common and are only likely to increase. Multiple resources can be placed on a site easily accessible 24/7 and computer mediated communication in various forms can supply needed human interaction spaces. But how are these sites used by the local students? Following the path of several individuals in detail can allow more understanding and depth of the precise usage of space.

This paper tracks two Arab students exploring and using a newly formed online self-access centre (SAC) for writing or online writing lab (OWL) for the best part of a semester. As an exploratory action research study, it was data driven and multiple data sources were mainly unobtrusive so that the study could proceed very naturally. The choices, learning style, autonomy types and personality differences between the two students suggest a range of support is ideal in an online SAC to cater for individuals in this context, including resources, how to learn, 1-1 asynchronous with advisor (emails), forums, electronic writing raters, and a high profile test. Ongoing action research should help to keep the online facility relevant to needs and open to new ways.

Keywords: autonomy, bottom-up development, L2 writing, online SAC/ OWL, space to place

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Introduction

This study is a small part of a bigger study in an Arab English medium university in Qatar investigating using virtual spaces for out of class autonomous second language (L2) writing aid. A double action research cycle with 14 followed by a new 14 participants plus nine repeaters from cycle 1 revealed most participants (70%) used a combination of 1-1 asynchronous sessions and resources, followed by a much smaller number using just resources or just 1-1 asynchronous (Denekamp, 2016). As an ad-hoc facility continued use and retention was high with success shown by increased writing proficiency and autonomy. Such use and retention is not the norm with these facilities (Neilson, 2011). Students would have to consider this virtual space as a good personal learning place for this to happen. It is also consistently shown that learners need to have quite a high state of autonomy already, which generally only a minority of learners have, to use these centres successfully and autonomously (Benson, 2011). The autonomy of students in this study was therefore considered from the beginning and throughout the programme from a full repertoire of autonomy perspectives including technical, psychological, sociocultural, political, reactive and proactive (Benson, 2001; Little wood, 1999; Oxford, 2003). The priority use for 1-1 asynchronous advice sessions chosen by the participants was also unusual, especially the textual asynchronous mode (Darasawang & Reinders, 2010; Thompson, 2014). Advice sessions like this are called the deficient mode compared to face-to-face sessions in a physical writing centre (WC) or SAC (Hewett, 2015). Numbers and statistics can only show a portion of what is happening. Following two successful participants closely can increase our understanding of what was making the online SAC space a successful personal learning place for them. Hence, M1 and A6, two successful but different individuals were followed using diverse data supplied regarding them to find out in detail how they used the virtual space successfully.

Methodology

Action research allowed the author of the research to concentrate on understanding and improving the dynamics within the everyday life of a SAC by closely knitting action with research through exploring the uses made of the facility but also responding to the data as it emerged. Participating students were conceived in the roles of informants, whose documents, activities, perceptions, feelings, suggestions and evaluations were all forms of key data. The researcher was a direct data source as an insider-researcher with an important emic role as regards to gathering information. Multi-methods, including mixed methods, and triangulation were used to validate the research and to gain a wide, comprehensive understanding of the evolving situation.

The 14 different data sources included online synchronous chats, 1-1 asynchronous interactions, forums, student drafts, participation frequencies, resource and tool use, pre- and post-questionnaires and test essays, and the field notes of the advisor-researcher. All of these sources were unobtrusive or naturally part of the learning or writing processes except for the pre- and post-questionnaires and essay tests. Data sources were analyzed in various ways including combining and separating under case summaries and content analysis content.

Results

First student

M1, a Qatari sophomore who proved to be quite an extrovert, made high use of writing support via human interaction and community. She participated in asynchronous advisory 1-

1s with the advisor-researcher and tried the forums to get peer perspectives. In 1-1s, she sent chunks of text from two term papers, paragraph-by-paragraph, for feedback and discussion. She seemed able to self-manage her assignments to work in this consistent manner rather than a last-minute, desperate check. When she sent in draft chunks, she also frequently included questions regarding specific concerns. For example, she asked:

*“** is the highlighted sentence correct ?? It seems that there is something wrong with it ?!!!!”*

The advisor’s comments to her could be quite metacognitive and metalinguistic. Her display of reflection stood out through her interactions via questions with metalinguistic and critical dialogue. Some examples include:

*“**I read in my book about the tips of making a coherence essay ,, and putting similar starting phrases for the paragraphs was one of them ?? Did I use this strategy in a good way??”*

*“**I read about proof reading ,, and I tried to fix some errors,,”*

She did not just accept suggestions and directions, but rather queried or asked for more explanation for some.

She made higher and lower order errors. Though she was quite fossilized with some basic grammar and mechanical points, it was easy to code indirect feedback repetitively in order to awaken her to these lower order errors and afterwards expect her to correct many of them herself. She was motivated to learn to enhance her awareness to overcome her weaknesses. When comparing initial and post essay draft analysis over cycle 1, she moved from 15 errors per 100 words to three words per 100 words, showing good language development improvement over a semester. Defossilization had occurred to a satisfactory level where she could concentrate more wholly on content excellence.

She expressed that the SAC was very useful for developing her writing, especially the 1-1s with advisor, for which she conveyed gratitude many times. She strongly agreed in both pre- and post-metacognitive questionnaires that she needed a teacher to help with writing development. This could give the idea that she was depending on the advisor too much, but the advisor did not feel or experience that. Her sociocultural autonomy was not just reactive – growth was noticed over the cycle, where repetitiveness did not feature and proactivity was interlaced. She was able to use the asynchronous mode as a dialogue in which she was very reflective, exerting critical thinking, and the advisor found it very easy to promote autonomy in a natural progression with her.

Though she tried out peer forums three times, unfortunately her peers did not respond (yet quite a few read the posts). She was one of only three students who used these forums. Her only suggestion for improving the SAC was that students should participate more in forums.

She also sampled a range of electronic resources and tools on the site, but mostly in the first half of the 10 weeks when she had more time, rather than the last pressurized 5 weeks. Her resource exploration included specific topic and skill resource aid including essay, term paper and grammar help. Under grammar help, she interpreted the proof-reading resource wrongly, expecting it to have tools to check her work rather than information and

exercises to help her do her own self-editing. Later in the post evaluation however, she mentioned proofreading as a new strategy she had learned. One part of the site she revisited three times was the ‘how’ of self-learning, where autonomy fostering ways were outlined. She tried out an electronic paper-checking tool dubiously, expressing her distrust of such tools. Appreciation was shown when the advisor encouraged her to take a few hints at a time from this tool rather than being overwhelmed by all the problems it might identify.

Overall, she seemed to show a large degree of self-motivation and autonomy from a variety of perspectives (technical, psychological, sociocultural and pro-active). Her writing proficiency had increased in content sophistication and depth, organization, range of vocabulary and accuracy.

Second student

In contrast to socially interactive M1, the more introverted A6, a Palestinian student doing an intensive English course in order to get a place in an undergraduate programme, preferred the use of resources and tools. He did not chat or participate in forums himself, but spent much time lurking/checking over what others had contributed in forums, chats, assignment drafts and profiles. 1-1 asynchronous interactions with the advisor were used, but only near the beginning to affirm what to do. After receiving 1-1 feedback from his pre-test IELTS essay test, for which the advisor also complimented him and encouraged him to work on his grammar via the site, he shared:

“Thank you for your comments on my IELTS essay and I promise you I will solve my problem in grammar and vocab”.

This feedback seemingly spurred him to regularly use the resources and tools throughout the semester. He mostly concentrated on grammar (moving up the levels), and to a lesser extent vocabulary resources, despite the wide range of other resources. He did, however, visit eight times the special parts of the site focusing on the ‘how’ of self-learning. In the post-evaluation questionnaire he acknowledged working on the SAC was very useful and would be in the future too. He reported particularly useful:

“the tools such as the sites”

He strongly affirmed in both the pre- and post-metacognitive questionnaires that he did not need a teacher, verified by his constant use of resources and tools rather than 1-1s. The advisor-researcher offered him a synchronous advisory chat (a mode offered to half of the participants), which he did not take up. Comparison of his answers to the pre and post-metacognitive questionnaire showed he perceived he had increased his metacognitive abilities. He demonstrated a good degree of autonomous behaviour, but in an entirely different way than M1, seemingly contented to work from a technical and proactive perspective.

Comparison by quantification

Quantified content analysis from both students’ case summaries are represented in Figure 1 for nine themes that were identified as affecting writing and autonomy development success. It affirms variances between M1 and A6. One-hundred percent represents the total content of a case summary, with the quantification of themes done by NVivo (software for aiding

storage and analysis of qualitative data). Explicit content was coded as well as latent (inferred) content (Fraenkel&Wallen, 2009), which meant the researcher used NVivo strictly as free node containers for manual coding. Manual coding counters the limitations of the decontextualization rendered by a computer programme, where underlying meanings and conceptual decisions are unable to be made yet (Denscombe, 2007). The majority of each case summary was covered by the final themes showing that they were well chosen or exhaustive (Gratton& Jones, 2003). The sum for themes theoretically could exceed 100% as content was often aligned to more than one theme due to much interrelatedness. Comparison between the students could be made as each one was analyzed the same way offering an objective, systematic, quantitative comparison to increase confirmation of other analyses (Franzosi, 2007). The analysis particularly confirms M1's use of 1-1s advisory sessions for writing help and collaborative sociocultural autonomy versus A6's silent independent autonomy.

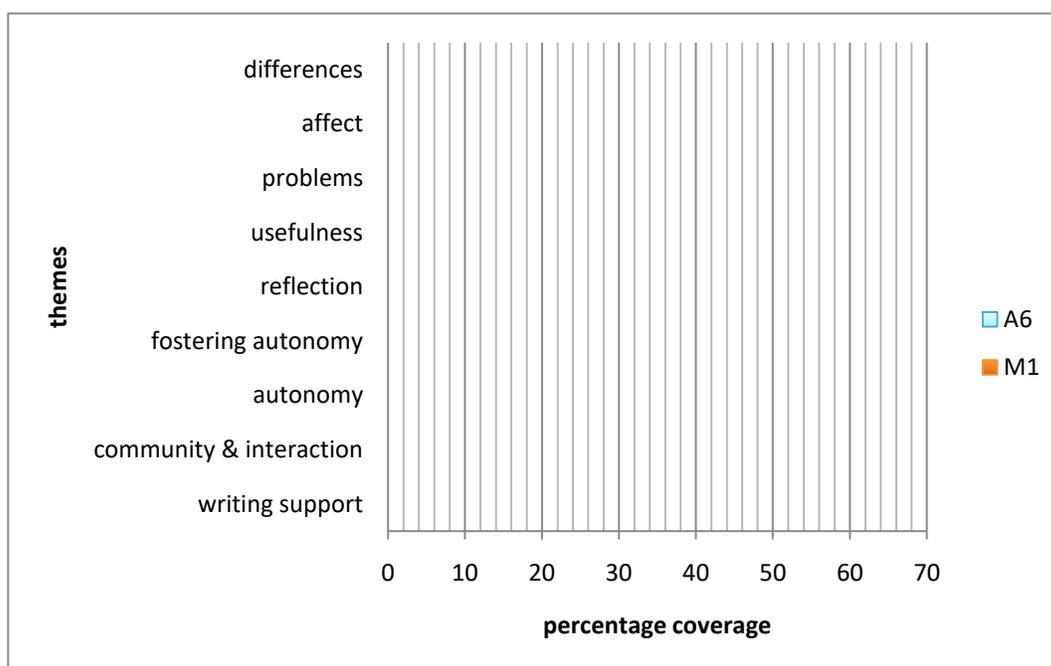


Figure 1. Comparing the different frequency of success themes for participants M1 & A6

Discussion

Much was learnt following these two individuals and their use of the specific space afforded by the virtual writing SAC. Their exploits added to the information derived from the general trend of participants. The depth of qualitative data and each individual's experience can not only increase understanding into how the site was being used, but also offer insight into how to cater for, rather than crush, the individual. Furthermore, by working on and learning from some of their outcomes and concerns, more individuals with all their idiosyncrasies may be catered for.

Individual respect

Individual regard is important for the very fact that humans are unique individuals with a unique combination of learning needs and ways of learning. This study shows that what Bowie

said concerning making up an online writing course applies also to online SAC and OWLs. He encourages teachers and designers to consider a “universe of users” rather than a universal L2 language user (cited in Miller-Cochran, 2015, p. 294). Perceiving individual needs and catering for them can actually be done to some measure more easily online. The perception of individuals occurs effortlessly because of the unobtrusive observation allowed by teachers and the automatic records given by the online platform. Catering for individuals is made simple because of the array of tools available online at a click and through the speedy adjustments and access possible.

Bottom-up development

Bottom-up development of a SAC is the way to provide a useful niche for a local student population, rather than complying to a standard model that has been generated in a domain where student wants and needs are different, as from a Western education system. An imposed standard model becomes a biased top-down development model. Figure 2 compares the models.

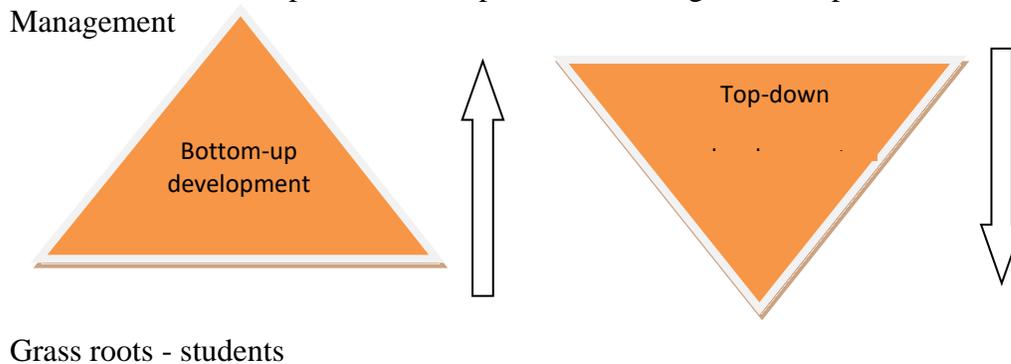


Figure 2. Comparing development methods

Sloan (2013) encourages the awareness of true student-centredness where students’ wants and needs are known. However, he stops short of acting on them instead encouraging sharing and explanation by teachers/advisors to students as to why the standard way was better. Wilson (2012) is more student-centred and flexible, arguing for a bodega (local market) type WC to suit the backgrounds of local population. Changes are easier to implement in this kind of arrangement for as Wilson further identifies, standards can endorse a status quo whereas change is expected and thus implemented as the norm by “local bottom-up neighborhood cosmopolitanism” (para.6) development. It works as a heteroglossic, democratic, ecological system.

Space as a personalized place

This study goes further than a localized system though, endorsing a valuing of the local individual – an individual student-centredness and agency. The online space for the individual can then be a customized niche or personalized place for the individual.

Murray, Fujishima, and Uzuka (2014) relay the importance Japanese learners attach to having language interaction spaces in physical independent learning facilities to increase their language ability and autonomy. Such a use of space was definitely portrayed by M1 in her practice and full dialogical employment of 1-1 asynchronous sessions. This happened, despite being only textual and online without the additional aids of gestures and facial expressions. To her this mode was far from being deficient.

However, both A6 and M1 showed their customized choices and array of places in the overall virtual space stretching past just the social. The online SAC/OWL space for them was their own efficacious niche composed of a complexity of parts making it their place. As active agents in a learning-conducive environment they were able to exercise self-directed agency which sometimes consisted of reactive/assisted/compliant/social agency. Such an agency according to van Lier (2010) can promote “significant progress” in language learning, rather than just success, and enduring, lifelong learning “strides” (p. 5).

Individual’s offerings to site

There were special offerings each learner brought to the site that aided its improvement. Following M1’s highly successful use of the 1-1 asynchronous sessions in which she made them high dialogic rather than a default of teacher instruction, I was able to encourage others to adopt her chunk by chunk paragraph technique to promote this doable interaction.

Likewise, following A6 morphing the pre-IELTS essay test results into his autonomous language aims, others were similarly motivated with a little encouragement.

Multi-dimensional autonomy

Autonomy is a multi-dimensional capacity (Benson, 2001; Oxford, 2003) and was displayed as such in this study. Forms of technical, psychological, sociocultural, re-active, and pro-active autonomy were healthily displayed. Both students were interested in the psychological realm of metacognition, evidenced by their dipping into the learning-to-learn resources. As a free, open learning environment it could be said political autonomy was exercised too, where students were emancipated to make the environment work for them and suggest/flex changes. The voice of the individual learner is not stifled, but cherished and allowed to expand and flourish and lead the way.

Future Foci

Some uses of the space would suggest future foci when studying the online SAC/OWL environment. M1’s endeavors with forums and peer collaboration suggest an intervention is needed with this focus to bring it on board. A6’s regular lurking role suggests some creative ways could be used to exploit this activity also. Students learning from other students or just sharing via textual talking can all enhance writing proficiency, give the needed practice, and make learning a more enjoyable, social experience.

Conclusion

Following closely two individuals’ space exploration of an online SAC/OWL yielded rich findings beyond statistical trends. Support was utilized in the form of specific resources, how to learn strategies, 1-1 asynchronous with advisor (emails), forums, electronic writing raters, and results of a high profile test essay. However, deeper ramifications were also confirmed. Individual respect by perceiving and catering for individual needs is required, something easily carried out online. Bottom-up development from the students for decisions involving change in the online SAC/OWL make-up is more important than top-down development from the executive advisor. Bottom-up development captures true student centredness for a localized living system, meaning the facility will be considered a suitable niche for local students. Nevertheless, this does not mean every decision must have joint involvement from the majority of students because for the space to be a personalized place, local individual’s student-

centredness and agency must be valued. Each student will find his/her personalized place – their own efficacious niche conducive to their self-directed agency. Individual's offerings to the site can stimulate the possibilities of others' growth. Increase in students' writing proficiency and autonomy as a multidimensional capacity verifies the online situation need not be a deficient mode but rather a very useful personalized choice for a support niche and facility. Ongoing action research will allow its relevancy to continue to evolve.

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Dr. Carmen Denekamp is a lecturer at Qatar University in Qatar, where she has worked for over seven years. She has wide experience teaching also in Brunei, China, Taiwan and New Zealand. Her doctorate is from Massey University, New Zealand. Her research interests include autonomy, CALL, second language acquisition, advisement and L2 composition.

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