
The End of Self-Access?: From Walled Garden to Public Park

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I'll admit the title is deliberately trying to provoke a reaction but it reflects a genuine concern I have had for some time. To my mind, self-access is in danger of slipping far away from the forefront of educational innovation it once occupied. In this short discussion piece, I'll argue that there are 'push factors' for this — reasons why self-access may no longer be a satisfactory approach for its intended purposes, and 'pull factors' — more promising alternative solutions to the development of language learning skills.

Let's start by looking at the pedagogy of self-access learning. When it first emerged in the 1970s, self-access was grounded in clear pedagogical convictions about what education should look like. In this view, language learning was a profoundly personal enterprise, one that belonged to the learner, and not to an institution, a teacher, or national curriculum. Learning was seen as the ultimate individual expression of our humanity, and as such could not be held captive by external forces, other people's standards, or national tests, to determine what we should and should not learn. Instead, self-access as a pedagogical approach to individual learning was designed as a way to empower the learner, both in practical terms as well as through the development of the learner's ability to take responsibility for his or her own learning. To start with the first of these, the practical aspect, self-access as an environment often took the form of a dedicated room, frequently on the back of the slowly disappearing language laboratories, where learners would have a space for themselves, where the power of the teacher, and the institution, was not visible to the same extent as in the classroom. These spaces, or Self-Access Centres (henceforth, SACs), had the potential to contribute to creating an environment for learners where they themselves were in charge of the language learning process, where they themselves were able to decide the 'what', the 'how', and the 'when' of learning. In other words, a space where there was an integration of learning and life.

The second aspect of self-access learning, the pedagogic aspect, followed on from this. It emphasises the need for learners to develop the necessary skills for reflection and awareness, both of their learning and of themselves, in order to ultimately be in charge of their own learning. In this sense, the pedagogic aspect of self-access is very closely related to political developments that took place at the time, such as the empowerment of minorities. Education was seen as a key tool in developing in individuals the ability to play an active and positive role in society. Self-access would enable learners to take control and to develop the ability to take an active role in society. As such, self-access implied the need for support and for learners to be helped to develop themselves. Readers may see some clear links with the pedagogical concept of learner autonomy, with its similar emphasis on the preparation of the individual for lifelong learning and development as an individual.

This was the ideal. In practice, things turned out rather differently.

At a personal level, I was naively shocked several years ago to discover that many centres in Australia and New Zealand (and, as I later found out, also in many other countries in the world), were not at all grounded in the pedagogic principles discussed above (Reinders, Jones-Parry, Anderson, & Hobbs, 2004). To give one practical example, in Australia we found many centres that included time in the SAC, usually at the end of the day, as ‘self-study time.’ On observation it was clear that no support was offered, and no learner direction took place. Essentially, the SACs were used as glorified homework rooms. In more than just isolated cases there were clear, financial reasons for this: ‘full-time education’ in Australia at the time was defined as 25 hours of instruction per week, of which 5 hours could be ‘guided self-study.’ Unfortunately, not much guidance was offered, let alone opportunities for genuine self-access learning. Essentially, the SACs were used as a way of charging learners for education they did not receive.

In a number of countries (with Thailand perhaps being the most visible example), self-access has been imposed from the top down, usually by ministries of education. The people involved in the implementation of self-access often carried out its development at a mechanical level only. The physical elements of self-access that are the most visible are relatively easy to copy. This has led to the establishment of hundreds, if not thousands, of SACs the world that on the surface seem to offer an individualised learning environment. In practice, however, there is

no clear focus on the development of the individual. In many cases, choices of what is to be learned in the SAC are made by teachers, and students are simply told to complete their work in the SAC. There is no emphasis on the political aspect of self-access learning, in the sense that learners are not made aware of the critical aspects of learning, of the value of education, and of the choices that are available to them for their own personal development. In many cases, a SAC is simply a kind of language laboratory, if not an actual one, where pedagogic materials are made available. Students are free to use these, as long as the result of their work suits the administrators in the educational system.

Also, at a more practical level, most SACs do not actually support learners during their learning. They provide a range of materials, which in turn have a pedagogic voice that directs the students in terms of the content to learn and the way to learn it. Most of these materials are not actually suitable for self-access learning. Marilyn Lewis and I found that neither print (Reinders & Lewis, 2005a) nor digital (Reinders & Lewis, 2005b) materials provided adequate instructions, answer keys, feedback and so on to be useful to learners working without the direct supervision of a teacher. SACs themselves do not do enough to fill the obvious gaps in the materials. For example, few centres have actually attempted to record and to analyse the learning process, and to guide learners in their individual learning. Studies Noemi Lázaro and I conducted showed that the majority of self-access centres we looked at (46 in 5 different countries) did not even bother to attempt to assess student learning at all (Lázaro & Reinders, 2008).

Self-access language learning has simply not developed itself as a sustainable pedagogic alternative or complement to formal, regular education. An important reason for this is that self-access as a field has never applied the type and quality of scientific analysis and research that it should have. Yes, self-access is difficult to investigate. Because of the individual nature of self-access language learning, factors such as prior learning experience, learners' beliefs, motivation, and many other factors, play a role. Isolating these factors is undoubtedly an extremely challenging task, but a crucial one, and one that the field has had 30 years to resolve. Three decades on we still have no methodologies to help us determine the effectiveness or efficiency of self-access learning. In fact, there is no single study on self-access that has passed the rigorous scientific quality control of the leading journals in language education (including my own!). Unlike other fields, which have to prove and

continuously re-prove themselves, and which are subject to constant critical analysis, self-access has been able to feed upon the enthusiasm of individual teachers and the desire for administrators to appear to keep up with the times. Enormous amounts of money have been poured into the establishment and running of SACs over the years, without clear accountability or investigation of the outcomes.

So what are some of the alternatives I mentioned at the start? To my mind the real cutting edge in supporting (rather than teaching) language learning is in the ‘new learning environments.’ In recent years, so many new ways of connecting with learners and connecting learners with other learners have emerged that the need for a physical space, or a gated community online (no matter how low the barriers to access may be) seems unnecessary and restrictive. Social and mobile technology is, to my mind, gradually replacing the access and support aspect of much of self-access to the informal space. Reliance on the teacher, or facilitator, is being reduced with the increase in ‘horizontal’ communication between learners. Rather than *going to a* support centre, learners can now *connect* with *multiple* communities of students, teachers, target language speakers and materials. SACs largely appear to have missed the boat on social and web 2.0 technologies. Most SACs are still full of students sitting alone in front of a computer, doing drill-and-practice exercises. How many SACs facilitate the sharing of resources, communication and collaborative problem-solving, both inside and outside the institution?

Similarly, location-based services combined with mobile technology allow for the support of true situated learning, not the mimicked reality of SACs. No longer do we have to guess what our learners do outside the classroom or the SAC as ‘reality mining’ will allow us to get the full picture of learner use and learning of the target language. Learning moves away from the institution into the informal domain, and teaching develops into supporting more authentic forms of communication rather than directing learners to inadequate self-study materials. These new learning environments will come with their own challenges, and will require the development of new pedagogies to ensure learners know how to make use of them, but at the moment I see more promise in converting the walled garden that is self-access into a public park. This is particularly true for developing contexts. For the billions of people who do not have easy access to education, the open, social, and mobile qualities of new forms of learning

offered in environments such as Telecentres, Community e-Centres, and Community Learning Centres, possibly offer greater potential indeed.

I realise that things are more complicated than the way I have presented them here and my own views are more nuanced than this. There are indeed pockets of true excellence in many countries with truly innovative SACs engaging in very interesting work. But they are the exception, and the purpose of this brief piece was simply to encourage readers to think about their own views. Does ‘self-access’ still have life in it? Does it need to be revised? Replaced with something else? Neither? It will be interesting to see where future developments take us. It certainly is an interesting time to be a language educator!

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