Social Learning Space: Redefining Academia within a University Setting

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Abstract

'Internationalization' represents an important strategic focus of many universities around the world. To pursue this goal, many universities in Hong Kong have been committed to developing students' cross-cultural skills and bringing diverse global perspectives to the campus to inform and enrich students' worldview. Although many local Hong Kong students are enthusiastic about enhancing their English speaking skills and cultural competence, and international students are striving to integrate into the local community, there are limited social integration opportunities available on campus to bring the two groups together in everyday contexts. To this end, a Social Learning Space (SLS) has been established in a Hong Kong university, aiming to provide organic learning opportunities by enabling students to exercise their agency as they interact with each other through language learning and cultural exchange activities and discussion groups conducted by a Communication Advisor along with a team of local and international Student Ambassadors. This paper offers an account of trialling social language learning and cultural exchange activities in the SLS. Questionnaire results collected from 136 participants and feedback of committed service users collected from semi-structured interviews will be presented. Suggestions on ways to enhance the effectiveness of the SLS activities and increase student engagement in language learning will be explored.

Keywords: *Social learning space, social communication skills, student engagement, cultural exchange*

1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, 'internationalization' represents a key strategic goal of many universities. However, research has found that merely incorporating internationalization at the policy level does not sufficiently develop students' intercultural competence [1]. The evidence from research suggests that universities may need to do more to offer opportunities for both local and international students to enhance their social communication skills and intercultural knowledge in real-life contexts on campus.

The paper presents the experience of trialling social language learning and cultural exchange acitivties in the Social Learning Space (SLS) in a Hong Kong university. The Space facilitates organic learning opportunities by enabling students to exercise their agency as they interact with each other, engaging them within various stages of learning and offering them an active voice and stake in their own learning community.

2. Examples of social English and cultural exchange activities in the SLS

Activities conducted in the SLS can generally be categorized into four strands: current affairs, cultural exchange, social meet-up, and game sessions, all of which aim at providing a platform for students with different interests and cultural backgrounds to come together in a social setting.

Students exhibited a preference for activity themes resonant with their lives. Indeed, topics related to food, drinks, travel, art and pronunciation were often the most well-received. To ensure each participant has ample opportunity to speak, a limited quota of 10-12 people is applied to each session. Apart from the group activities, one-on-one speaking consultation sessions were provided to cater for students with specific needs.

3. Opportunities and Challenges

The pandemic has brought both opportunities and challenges for the SLS. Students' demand for social interaction seemingly reached an unprecedented level as many were stuck at home, isolating them from their peers and the university community at large. By switching to online activities via Zoom, the SLS served as a virtual extension of campus life to some extent.

Inevitably, however, the compromised authenticity of interaction, limited activity format and variety, lack of commitment from participants and inadequate promotion channels emerged as top challenges for the Space.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the key findings identified from the post-activity questionnaires collected and individual semi-structured interviews with four committed service users of the SLS.

Below is a summary of key items from the post-activity questionnaire:

Questions	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The content of the workshop/activity was interesting.	81.07%	16.25%	2.68%	0%	0%
The workshop/activity has developed my skills for communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds.	79.82%	17.44%	2.14%	0.65%	0%
Overall, I enjoyed the activity/workshop.	85.65%	13.45%	0.89%	0%	0%

Table 1 Summary of participants' evaluation of the SLS activitiies

Participants generally enjoyed the activities, while expressing a high degree of satisfaction with the content and skills offered within the activities.

4.1 Staying "down-to-earth" with topic selection

C: *…for me I'm not very experienced person in art and culture, then maybe when the other participants were talking about the museum art work and the pieces then I'm quite lost.*
C: *…closer relates to our life or maybe pop culture… if all are social issues topic then maybe it's too boring, like news channel.*

Participants spoke to the importance of selecting topics of optimal resonance in their daily lives. Topics perceived as relatively more "down-to-earth" were often more well-received as the focus was more on encouraging sharing of experiences or thoughts without the need for extensive background or specialist knowledge. Additionally, this view seems to lend support to the idea that topics for activities should be selected according to "students' own interests and experiences" [2, p. 308]. Conversely, more esoteric or niche topics were often accessible only to a small fraction of the participants and were thus regarded as less stimulating. With more challenging topics, many participants found they were simply unable to engage in the discussion due to their lack of knowledge base in that particular area.

4.2 Viewing "Non-academic" communication as a valuable commodity

F: *…my family knows my things already, so it's like not like, not get a very hard time to understand or like how to use the skill. but like if you knew some new, new friends or new classmates, that is a different situation like me to like, how to modify yourself to express yourself...*
F: *like even like I don't know the student or classmates, the names, but I can still chatting with them and relax myself, maybe reduce my pressure yeah.*

Participants regarded opportunities for interaction in the SLS as distinctly valuable as they viewed such communication as fundamentally different from the type of communication they experience at home or in other on-campus setting. This sentiment seemed to point to the role of SLS served as a space in which students could engage with a community to practice language outside of their family and conventional academic environments. Indeed, other studies of similar social language learning spaces have observed a similar connection between the inherent link between making social connections and language practice [3] [4].

4.3 Appreciating diverse perspectives

F: *I heard many people drink this one, but I didn't drink, some time I want to know why they really like they are really, how to say, they willing to pay like 40 dollars… I want to chat with some they are like this and then understand what they're thinking.*

C: *I think I can meet a lot of people with different backgrounds… and I wish to talk to them more in order to broaden my horizon, so I kept coming back.*

Participants spoke to the perceived value of interacting with peers from different backgrounds, as well as the experience of appreciating different points of view. According to participants, this aspect of their experience in the space afforded a unique opportunity to gain insight into viewpoints and opinions dissimilar to their own, such as understanding something as simple as the justification for making certain food purchases. This general espousing of plurality of views extended to the participants' cultural and academic backgrounds, a finding echoed by Murray and Fujishima [3].

5. Communication Advisor's reflection

Three areas were identified as key lessons learned from the project. The first pertained to student confidence. More than half of the participants revealed a lack of confidence in using English in both academic and social settings. As a result, they were less motivated in speaking English in and outside of classrooms. To address this issue, the team adopted a more interactive and inviting approach to develop a stress-free environment for the participants to practice speaking. A general increase in confidence was perhaps evidenced by an increase in the frequency of visitors to the Space.

Secondly, the activities seemed to improve the relationship between students, especially under the pandemic. Turning off cameras and microphones seemed to be the norm for students in attending online lessons or virtual events. But in SLS activities, students were willing to communicate with their camera on, thus somewhat reducing the distance to make interactions more authentic.

Lastly, inclusivity is essential. One of the aims of SLS is to connect local and international students, which requires an inclusive mindset. With the help from the Student Ambassadors, the team was able to facilitate dialogues among students from different backgrounds. Based on the current model, the team would like to build a community of practice on campus where members can learn from each other through a wide range of activities.

6. Implications and recommendations

6.1 Topics of the activities in the SLS

The popularity of the activities and feedback from committed service users indicate that topics related to students' everyday life and interest (e.g. food, music, travel, cultural differences, social media) can more successfully engage students. Student Ambassadors thus can offer the Communication Advisor key insight into interests of university students.

6.2 Format of the activities in the SLS

SLS activities during the pandemic have been conducted synchronously online via Zoom and also in face-to-face mode in the past year. It is suggested that effective and evidence-based approaches for both modes are necessary. For example, participants tend to be more quiet on Zoom. Therefore, more input of information on the workshop topics is needed to activate the participants' schemata and optimize engagement. Conversely, in the face-to-face setting, assigning students a high volume of structured activities (in pairs/small groups) appears to maximize speaking opportunities. Regardless of delivery mode, providing participants a voice and

listening to them genuinely appear to increase engagement and enjoyment. These principles seem to be requisite elements to increase future participation in SLS activities.

6.3 The 'social' value of the SLS

The SLS plays a pivotal role in creating a vibrant and supportive campus environment by emphasizing the 'social' dimension of learning, which is independent of academic studies. It fosters a sense of belonging and community among students [4], and promotes co-construction of knowledge. Therefore, to achieve the objective of promoting social language learning, the SLS should engender a conducive environment for socialisation, language development, and cultural exchange.

6.4 Learning as the production of identity

The social aspect of learning emphasizes that learners are social participants who establish identities through meaning-making in the social world [5]. All aspects of a learner experience in the process of negotiation of meaning constitute and shape the identity of a learner. The SLS provides an authentic social context for participants to interact and negotiate meaning with other learners, through which they gradually develop their identity in the knowledge building process.

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