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# *The Learner Development Journal* (LDJ): Problematising Practices

*Tim Ashwell, Andy Barfield, Huw Davies, Darren Elliott, Hugh Nicoll, Alison Stewart, & Koki Tomita*

The following discussion between members of the LD SIG committee focuses on publicly documenting the ongoing development of *The Learner Development Journal* (LDJ) and shedding light on important questions about the future direction of the journal.

Launched in November 2017, the LDJ is the Learner Development SIG's online, open-access journal. It is published once a year and is devoted to practitioner-driven research, reviews and interviews exploring learner development issues in second language education. The inaugural issue of the *The Learner Development Journal* on "Visualising Learner Development" (issue editors: Darren Elliott & Hugh Nicoll) appeared in November 2017. A year later the second issue on "Qualitative Research into Learner Development" (issue editors: Chika Hayashi, Masuko Miyahara, & Patrick Kiernan) is approaching publication, while writers for Issue 3 of the LDJ on "Learner Identities and Transitions" (issue editors: Christina Gkonou, Jim Ronald, & Yoshio Nakai) are currently sharing first drafts with the journal's editors and Review Network members for open or blind peer review.

Looking ahead, the first Call for Papers for Issue 4 on "Exploring the Supervision Process Across Diverse Contexts: Collaborative Approaches" (issue editors: Sabine Little and Michelle Golledge) went out in September 2018, and in early 2019 the Journal Steering Group (JSG) will be appealing for editors to tender proposals for Issue 5 and to bring together a group of contributors to explore a different learner development theme.

Unlike most other journals, the LDJ is committed to group-based professional development and shared exploration where members of the SIG and others can inquire into specific learner development themes in a collaborative and supportive environment. Not unsurprisingly, this shared commitment does not come without a bewildering array of challenges—and opportunities—for writers, reviewers, and editors, as well as the Journal Steering Group (JSG) that oversees each issue.

We hope that this discussion—which took place online between July and October 2018—helps readers of *Learning Learning* and all the members of the Learner Development SIG become more familiar with the range of concerns that people working on the LDJ currently have, and why.

We warmly encourage you to share your thoughts and questions in response to this discussion (in the next issue of *Learning Learning*). We hope too that SIG members will step forward and take part in future issues of the LDJ as writers, reviewers, editors, or steering group members. We're looking forward to hearing from you!

### Discussion

**Alison** (founding member of the Journal Steering Group)**:** We wanted to let you know that the Call for Proposals for Issue 4 of the Learner Development Journal resulted in 4 proposals, all of them from outside Japan. We have now accepted a proposal by Sabine Little and Michelle Golledge at the University of Sheffield on Learner Development in Supervisor/Supervisee Relationships, and are looking forward to meeting them on Skype in the next week or so. We have also invited the authors of another proposal to send in their proposal again next spring for consideration for Issue 5. Meanwhile, Issue 2 is coming on apace and we have just received copies of all the articles for proofreading.

In our discussions with each other and other SIG members, we've come up against some issues that we feel merit some wider discussion by the SIG. We wonder what your views are on the following:

1. Should we be trying to give priority to SIG members in choosing editors? In fact, for Issue 4, there were no LD or Japan-based proposers, but we wondered whether we should try to promote grass-roots proposals from the membership in general and from the get-togethers in particular? Or is the LDJ a more "international" publication, where the main criteria for acceptance are the quality of the proposal and likeliness of the editorial team to attract good researchers and to manage the project to completion in accordance with the collaborative principles that we have established?

2. Where we do accept non-LD members as editors, should we ask that the editors join the SIG for the duration of the project (since it's possible to join a SIG without joining JALT)? Should this include editors in teams where one or two of the other editors are in fact LD members?

3. Should we ensure that all steering group members are always SIG members? Could this role be opened up to previous editors who are not members of the SIG?

Basically, what is at issue here is to what extent we see the new journal as an independent publication, albeit one that promotes LD SIG values and collaborative practices, or as a publication that benefits members of the SIG first and foremost.

**Koki** (SIG co-coordinator): Thanks for the questions!

1. I personally do not know the history behind the start of LDJ, so my contribution to this topic is minimal. From PR and administrative perspective, I feel that the promotion of the journal can be done in both domestically and internationally. JALT has been facing the decline of members and failing to explore new members for the past few years. This, as a result, put us into debt for the last fiscal year. So, I found that appealing to the world is a wonderful idea to keep the standard and expectations of the journal high (Hopefully they will become a JALT and LD SIG member in the future). In the meantime, we need to think about ways to energize our local members and encourage their contributions to the SIG in any shape or form. I believe that writing articles to the journal is part of their contributions to the SIG, which might lead them to be more involved in JALT and SIG administration. Local members' articles/proposals might get rejected in the screening process, but they can re-submit them to other journals or the JALT international conference or Pan SIG.

2 & 3. Just a quick question, can non-JALT member join a SIG? As far as I know, SIGs are made of JALT members. Please go to the URL for your reference https://jalt.org/main/sigs.

Sounds like we are facing a tricky situation. Do non-LD members want to pay and join the SIG temporally for their volunteer work? Maybe only a few. Should we pay their membership fee to join the editorial team? I don't find any particular risk of paying their fees from our budget. Any thoughts?

**Huw** (SIG treasurer): To be a member of the SIG, a person needs to be a member of JALT. However, we can sell an annual subscription which is a way to satisfy what Alison suggests (see p. 13 of the new treasurer handbook). The only problem with doing this from overseas is that they would need to pay from a Japanese bank account or in cash, which makes it quite an annoying process.

**Andy** (founding member of the Journal Steering Group, SIG publications co-chair): Alison, thank you for raising these questions. I've been trying to imagine how the LDJ would work if its anchors to the LD SIG were cut. I guess it might become something like *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rill20/current or *The JALTCALL Journal* https://jcj.jaltcall.org/index.php?journal=JALTCALL, each with an editorial board and standardised editorial procedures - but little linkage to local practices and members of a SIG investing their interests, time, and efforts to explore particular themes and issues together.

Looking at, for example, at (a) the aims and scope of the LDJ, (b) the LDJ peer review process, and (c) and the explanation to potential editors, we have something different from most other journals, but it's also an approach that needs further commitment from members of the SIG to make it sustainable. So, although it's not without its own challenges and difficulties, my initial response would be that it's worth talking together more about what can be done to make the LDJ work better as originally intended, rather than raising the anchor and setting sail for the apparently glistening seas of globalised academic publishing ...

**Darren** (co-editor of Issue 1 and Journal Steering Group member)**:** Let me join with my thoughts on the main three questions.

1. Should we be trying to give priority to SIG members in choosing editors?

Yes, but practically speaking we have to go outside. The SIG has 200 (?) members, many of whom do not play an active role. The editors job is fairly demanding, and although we want to support less experienced editors through the steering group, it is inevitable that there will be a limited number of SIG members who want to take on the position.

Probably the best way of addressing this is to take a more proactive stance in recruiting by approaching potential editors directly. (That's how I became editor of issue one!) Whilst I don't want to cut ties with the SIG, I do believe that opening up to the outside world is very healthy. We can certainly gain new insights into our own beliefs and practices by explaining them to a reader / reviewer / editor who is not familiar with our context.

This is slightly tangential, but I think related. As I have mentioned, I find the necessity for Japanese abstracts a little limiting - I know that the SIG was founded with the bilingual principle as central, and in general SIG business ("*Learning Learning*" and so on) I believe it is still a very positive and inclusive practice. However, in sending our message outside Japan, does the use of Japanese become alienating or limiting? To some extent we are positioning ourselves as a regional journal, as opposed to an international journal. This is a difficult question, and I am not entirely comfortable with it, but I feel I should ask.

Looking back at the aims and scope, none of those ideas necessitate any connection to the SIG. That doesn't mean we should 'cut anchor', but I do think we should allow ourselves to be open. It is not the fact that the journal is an LD SIG publication that makes it special. It is that it follows LD SIG principles of collaboration, supportiveness, and community.

2. Where we do accept non-LD members as editors, should we ask that the editors join the SIG for the duration of the project (since it's possible to join a SIG without joining JALT)?

3. Should we ensure that all steering group members are always SIG members? Could this role be opened up to previous editors who are not members of the SIG

Practically speaking, Huw has already addressed the difficulties in temporary SIG membership.

As for the SIG membership and the steering group, emphatically yes. This is how we maintain ties to the SIG, and maintain some institutional memory and consistency. The three of us (me, Alison, and Tim) are still learning, but I think each issue is benefitting from the mistakes we have made previously. However, I feel that there is a danger we end up operating in a bubble. I'm not sure how well most of the SIG understands us and what we are doing. Sadly, I have to say that part of that is probably down to lack of interest. But we also have to take responsibility for not communicating loudly and clearly enough.

Tim and I were talking about "jumping off the roundabout" at some point. At the moment we have three issues in progress at different stages, and that will be the norm now we are up and running. So where is the line of succession. The SIG has always been very good at bringing people in and keeping the organisation fresh (without losing sight of the ways things have been done). Who is up next for the Steering Group?

**Hugh** (co-editor of LDJ, volume 1, and Review Network member): I'm going to have a go at answering Alison's 3 questions regarding the relationship of editor and steering committee roles to SIG membership all in one go, as I see them as somewhat overlapping.

A first principle for me is that SIG members have some role in editing all issues of the journal, though I would add the caveat that I see no problem in having editors and/or steering committee members from outside the SIG (most likely from "outside Japan") participate as equal partners, so long as we maintain a primary commitment to a dialogic and/or inclusive practice as the key aspect of the journal's identity/agency/founding principles and praxis.

Alison concludes the primary questions section on what is now page 2 with the summative exploration "to what extent we see the new journal as an independent publication, albeit one that promotes LD SIG values and collaborative practices, or as a publication that benefits members of the SIG first and foremost." Having read ahead, I think Darren's notion that we "have to" go outside the SIG in recruiting editors is germane here as both a practical and philosophical framing of what "benefits members of the SIG first and foremost." The answer/perspective that seems most useful to me here is that our publications should simultaneously encourage/support SIG members' development as writers but also (inevitably, perhaps) and simultaneously help SIG members connect with the discourses on autonomous learning and teaching, critical pedagogies, reflective practice, exploratory practice, etc. in non-Japanese or more international settings.

**Andy:** On the language question that Darren raises, I'd like to refer back to a discussion with the editors of LDJ1 and LDJ2 in August and September 2017. At that time, both editorial teams recognised the value of having a third language option (English + Japanese or a third language), but raised practical concerns about how an editorial team would be able to check the quality of abstracts and key words written in a third language that they were not academically proficient in themselves.

From this, we thought that abstracts and keywords should be written in English and Japanese as the default option, with writers having the choice of writing the abstract and keywords in a third language, if they wish. We felt it is probably unlikely that many writers would choose the third-language option, so it would be interesting if and when writers did do that. Our position, in the end, was that it's important to have the "third-language" option there, rather than completely excluding it.

My sense would be that, as a number of people involved in LD publications are willing to help with translation from English into Japanese and Japanese into English, having bilingual keywords and abstracts remains very much do-able. I guess you and I see things differently here, Darren, and that's quite OK. I find discussing the question of language(s) really central to the imagined identity and readership of the LDJ that we each have.

**Hugh**: The language question is always somewhat vexing, but my nutshell take is in 2 parts: (1) As we are based in Japan, it is both practical and politic (realpolitik?) to continue to offer abstracts in Japanese, as that may help in indexing, getting LDJ noticed in Japanese university settings, and may (yes I know this is a stretch) but just may help the journal contribute to education policy discussions that have some weight in the broader community. Such abstracts, for example, just might help progressive Japanese teachers of English share the SIG's narratives with teachers that might not ordinarily pay attention to the arguments we have to contribute.

And, (2) an anecdote: a month ago I enjoyed a post ILA lunch and chat with Jo Mynard, Christian Ludwig, and Giovanna Tassanari. They are planning on publishing a multilingual collection of papers on learner autonomy in part to honor the readers/

speakers of non-English as L1 researcher/writers by encouraging them to publish in their own first languages. When Christian asked what I thought of the idea, I gave my support immediately. While English is the dominant lingua franca in our globalizing world, I am grateful for every chance to puzzle over non-English texts for the learning experience on offer, and feel that given the easy access we have to online dictionaries, translations engines, etc. that we should be as open to puzzling and learning together as possible.

**Andy:** That's a great project that Christian, Giovanna and Jo are planning to do. Looking to the future with the LDJ, what practices (writing, editing, reviewing, and "steering" practices) do you each see as important to focus on with Issues/Volumes 3 and 4, and why?

**Tim** (founding member of the Journal Steering Group)**:** I am a little late to the party here, but I very much concur with what has been written so far regarding what the Journal is, what it does, and what is should be. Personally, I would very much like the LDJ to retain strong and clear links to the SIG and for editors to principally come from among its membership although I fully recognize Darren's point that a limited number of people are likely to step forward. One of the main parts of the ethos of the LDJ, and something that distinguishes it from other journals, is that it actively seeks to nurture people as writers and editors and we hope to be able to provide a framework in which people new to writing and editing feel they can hone their skills. Without a strong Steering Group of SIG members, I fear this direction might be lost and we end up with a journal which is every bit as remote as all those other journals out there.

Darren and I discussed whether it might be a good idea, as a rule of thumb, to try to ensure that, if we continue to get more proposals for issue editorship from overseas than we do from within Japan, we at least alternate between an issue edited by overseas editors and an issue edited by SIG members. At the same time, I think we need to strongly encourage as many SIG members as possible to consider contributing as writers and to target SIG members who could be persuaded into editing an issue.

On a very practical note, and resulting from experience with Issues 1 and 2, I think that the Steering Group (SG) members really need to see the first drafts of papers as soon as they are submitted to the editors and at the same time as the Review Network (RN) members so that we can check that there are no major problems with papers at that early stage. We would then be able to nip these problems in the bud and iron them out with still 10 or 11 months until publication (as opposed to the 4 months or so we presently get).

Another thing we can do is to go back and revise the guidelines for reviewers. I have the feeling that our advice to them is a little too idealistic and that we need to strongly urge them to take a robust, critical stance when reviewing papers in the interests of pushing the writers to up their game. Of course. we want the feedback to be supportive and constructive and, if possible, to be offered in a collaborative way, but if it doesn't hold the writers and editors to account, it isn't, in my view, doing its job.

**Darren:** I agree with Tim in regard to tightening up the reviewers' guidelines. One problem is that the reviewers are not operating on the usual "accept/accept with changes/reject" system. All these papers will be published, so earlier intervention would be better for both writers and editors. Hopefully, getting the steering group involved sooner will help us to guide authors more effectively. Late rewrites are too stressful for everyone….

**Alison:** It's very helpful to talk openly about these problems. As Tim and Darren have said, some tweaking of the process, such as earlier involvement of the SG and tightening up of the reviewer guidelines would be some good practical measures we can adopt from the next issue. Andy, you bring up the identity of the journal: it seems to be that this involves not only the finished product that we send out into the world, but also the roles and identities of people involved at every stage of the production process. At present, I would say that the names we have given these roles are actually misnomers. In particular, the Journal Steering Group has been doing a lot more than just steering up to this point;  the journal's reviewers are not gatekeepers, as they would be in a traditional journal. I'm sure that people come into the journal with beliefs and expectations about their roles that are mainly formed by their previous experiences. This might help explain why, even with clear written principles and procedures, we still find it difficult to keep reviewers and editors (and sometimes authors too!) on track. Hopefully, building up a community of practice is the answer, as I think we may have said in the past. But I wonder if it's also worth considering changing the name of the role "reviewer" to something that's closer to what we intend? Mentors, perhaps?

**Darren:** But is that the intended role? I see the reviewers as 'outside eyes' who offer a fresh perspective. Asking any more of them is unfair. The editors are the mentors, ideally… but this hasn't been working. Expecting less experienced editors to mentor less experienced writers is unrealistic…..

**Hugh:** I would hope that the intended role of editor for the Journal could include the concept of said editors as peers/collaborators – perhaps extending almost to co-author to the extent that a mentor is like a midwife in the learner development/writer developing process and/or practices. There will always be tension between what Andy is referring to below as a conventionally organised academic journal and the more improvisational processes/practices of what Pennycook frames as "a cultural alternative." This, it seems to me, is a principle of learner development, of what we do when we learn together with our students as well as with our fellow researchers -- messy, yes, but inspiring in the ways that dance, music, and theatre are in both practice and performance.

**Andy:** Yes, the way we label what people do and what happens with the LDJ is really important for thinking about the questions that come up and understanding what can be done. It strikes me that in this discussion we are perhaps focusing on gaps in what we imagined would happen (i.e., what editors, reviewers, writers, the journal steering group would be doing) as we created "a cultural alternative" (to use Pennycook's phrase) to how an academic journal usually functions and is conventionally organised.

While everyone is committed to creating a viable cultural alternative, we are realising all the time just how complex it is to create and sustain it when so many different "actors" are involved, each with their own understanding of what they are doing within the general framework that has been set up for the LDJ. Without some *minimal* and ongoing dialogue with *all the different* parties, I guess gaps are likely to continue to come up between what is planned/imagined and what happens, in any case.

Is there some way for the journal steering group to have a set of interactions with each group of actors for each issue at particular points in the production of an issue (with the editors for the respective issue cc-eed on the interactions that take place)? For example:

- Year One May: with writers?
- Year One July/August: with editors?
- Year One October: with members of the Review Network?
- or ... Year One July-October: with all three (see further below)?

Alison, you mentioned finding a different name for what Review Network members do—yes, you're right, the label needs to have a better fit, but the idea of mentoring may be putting an extra layer on things, as Darren points out. Would calling this key process something like "Reader Responding/ Engaging with the Writer" help? Isn't that what basically "[alternative] reviewing" involves in a peer-equal, collaborative community of practice with writers and readers? The assumption is that the reader's primary goal is to engage with what the writer is saying, make sense of it, respond as fully as possible with the development of the writer's writing, for example:

- What is the writer trying to say here?
- How is this engaging me (or not) as a reader?
- What responses and questions are coming up for me as I read this?
- How can I share those responses and questions with the writer in a critically minded/supportive, empathetic way?
- What questions do I have for the writer about the further development of their research and writing?

Perhaps these kinds of question help to frame a stance and position where a reviewer might concretely achieve an appropriate quality of reader responding and engagement with the writer?

Would that go some way to "holding to account", as Tim mentioned, reviewers and editors with writers, as well as to setting a direction for dialogue with writers, reviewers and editors about how to engage with writers about their texts? If so, a primary process for the Journal Steering Group would be then not to focus first on identifying "problems", but rather on talking with writers, editors, and reviewers about responding and engagement. That may be the kind of common meta-process that we are missing as a shared practice, as an area of mutual interest, activity, and negotiation, if you will, and which it might be good to bring more into focus?

One other thing that strikes me is that it may be helpful to question the expectation that writers should produce a full-first draft by the end of July of the first year. It could be that requiring writers to do so at that point is in some ways counter-productive. I wonder whether it would be better to limit the length here and say "an incomplete first draft of 2000-2,500 words that you will then share with (a) other contributors to the same issue, (b) the editors, and (c) members of the Review Network, during the period August to October, and develop into a full draft by the end of December of the first year." Might that help to (a) underline an incremental developmental process of writing, responding and engagement, (b) guard against writers following conventional genres too narrowly and prematurely in the writing process, and (c) encourage experimentation with genre by writers? That might be another way to help create a stronger sense of community of practice, dialogue, responding, and engagement for all the parties concerned, which I feel this discussion is trying to grapple with.

**Darren:** It has been very difficult to get full drafts from the writers at the same time due to the nature of the journal. Some of our more experienced writers, and those who have been working on a topic which happens to match the theme, have submitted well-developed papers on completed research at the very first stage. However, we have also been encouraging people to submit more speculative works in progress, and these writer-researchers have often required a lot more support. This is not something I think we should change, but it is something that we (as editors and 'steerers') need to work around. Andy, your suggested process makes sense in that regard.

**Tim:** Apologies for using the dreaded word "problem" above. What I perhaps should have said was that it would really help if the Steering Group (SG) can see the writing in its early stages (for example, when it is sent out to the Review Network) so that they can provide comments to the editors when necessary if they feel the writing lacks clarity, coherence, or direction, for example, because the piece of research has not been fully conceptualized. I think it is difficult for editors sometimes to be able to step back and look at the writing dispassionately when they have spent a long time developing a relationship with the writers working on their Issue. At one step removed, the SG can offer supportive feedback which it might be difficult for the editors themselves to provide.

To add one more idea that has come up in our various discussions, it may be better for us to think about inviting more people to join the Journal Steering Group (JSG) so that more of their work as secondary reviewers and proofreaders can be shared around.

**Andy:** One other idea for the mix is creating on the LD website some "publication resources" with links to different kinds of exploratory writing about learner development - within different SIG publications and in the wider field. Those kind of near-peer role models could be a useful reference for helping writers to break into new kinds of writing. "Developing (multi-interactive) communities of exploratory writing, responding and editing practices" seems a rich area for ongoing discussions - and feels closely connected to moving beyond reifying "full-length papers" as the requirement for first drafts by LDJ contributors.

**Hugh:** (not feeling sure if he wants to give the appearance of having the last word) . . . but as I read/scroll through this lengthening text, am grateful for the wide-ranging scope of the discussion, and the fact that after several weeks of development, this document has grown more and more dialogic. We have, for example, Darren pointing out the practical difficulties for editors as writers with different experiences and histories of 'academic' writing contribute to the journal, and the challenges that are the inevitable result. This perspective, considered in relation to Tim's and Andy's observations (above), suggest to me that some practice/perspective of expansion (of inclusiveness?) is the key to meeting the ideals we are struggling to articulate and realise as we work towards the publication of volume 2 and focus on the necessary next steps in bringing volume 3 towards completion. Though it remains difficult for all of us to allocate time and energy – and to coordinate the efforts our SIG projects require, the models of co-operation (of "working in teams") both in the SIG as a whole, and on finalizing individual publications, offer the best models of practice for the future. Perhaps the Google Docs model we're using to work on *Learning Learning* offers one simple solution to the "near-peer role models" approach Andy describes as a practical way forward in the development of "multi-interactive communities of interactive writing (and editing)."

# Tokyo July 2018 Get-together Reflections and Plans for 2019

*Andy Barfield, Martin Cater, Ken Ikeda, Kio Iwai, & Koki Tomita*

Note: These reflections focus on discussions at the July get-together about learners' linguistic repertoires and plans for the get-togethers in 2019.

**Koki:** I joined the Get-together a half hour late. The members had already started their discussions about Andy's ongoing research. It was pleasant to see that the research has evolved since Andy shared it with us during the April Get Together. The main topic was Andy's student research participant's language identity and her perceptions of standard Japanese and her Japanese dialect. Here, Lee talked about the hard time he had in his childhood in formulating his identity in the U.S. as a son of an Australian mother and an American father. This involved selecting "appropriate" lexicon and avoiding deviating from social norms to blend into the culture and the society. Ken also shared a story from his childhood where his teacher in the U.S. told his parents to use only English in their household to improve Ken's English competency because Ken was not linguistically functioning well at school at that time. Both cases exemplify how much the standard language(s) pushes off other politically, socially and economically weak dialects or deviated languages in a society.

In the second half of the meeting, we talked about the continuity of future Tokyo Get-Togethers and CCLT4. We agreed that we need more communication and a different way to attract more members to come to the get-togethers. One of the ways to achieve the goal is dividing the meeting into the input and discussion parts. In the input part, we will have a few presenters and get them to share their research-oriented or practical hands-on presentations to the audience, and discuss the content with more depth.