

## LD SIG GRANT AWARDEE REPORTS | LD SIG 研究助成金受

### PanSIG 2022 Conference report

### Poster title: The Critical Role of the Teacher in the Self-directed Learning Class

Lorna Asami, *Keisen University*

Email: [asami.lornasachie@gmail.com](mailto:asami.lornasachie@gmail.com)

#### Overview and feedback from several special University of Nagano volunteers

Seeing the announcement for the Learner Development SIG's conference grant was my impetus to apply and attend the PanSIG conference for the very first time. This grant has covered my transportation, application fees, as well as books and printing costs for my poster presentation. As I teach as an adjunct without research funding, this support is much appreciated.

The theme of the 2022 PanSIG conference was, “(Re)-Imagining Language Education.” Prospective research presenters were asked to consider the future of teaching after the pandemic, “What new connections will be made among learners, educators, and researchers within and beyond our classrooms and communities?” The focus of this conference was on the future so I geared my poster “The critical role of the teacher in the self-directed learning class,” to show an evaluation and reflection of my Self-Directed Learning (SDL) classes at Keisen University to provide ideas for anyone interested in teaching self-directed learning in the future and hopefully when everyone is back to face-to-face classes for good.

With this focus on the future, the thing I last expected to happen at the conference was a delightful surprise from the past. When I disembarked from a little local train in Nagano and exited the station, leaving my paper ticket in a box that looked rather like a mailbox, I felt I had left the digital age and stepped back in time. I rounded the corner of the exit and immediately came upon two volunteer students from the University of Nagano, who were handing out directions to the university venue. It was a scorching hot summer day in July and I waited my turn to receive a map. Suddenly, one of the students startled me by calling out my name. I looked at her and she smilingly said, “I'm Kanami!” which suddenly took me back five years to the junior high school where I used to be a full-time teacher. It's no wonder I didn't remember her as she was all grown up.

Kanami's name is in the PanSIG handbook list of volunteers and she brought a bunch of other University of Nagano (UON) student volunteers to see my poster presentation. Before talking with me, they learned about SMART goals and some of its benefits from Marisa Lucian who was giving her poster presentation on the opposite side of the room from me. The students were surprised to hear that I also was using SMART goals in my class and asked me many questions. I told them that my students have consistently told me about its value in assessing their project along the way and also at the end. The challenge for students is not to make a vague goal such as “I want to learn to speak fluently” but rather, specific and measurable goals like “learn the meanings and pronunciation of 15 new words and try out each word in conversation.” Then, by reflecting on this SMART goal at the end of a learning cycle, students can know exactly what they have accomplished. I gave the UON students a few more pointers to writing their own SMART goals and several of them said they would try it out. The students also asked about the other points in my SDL class' learning cycle: the types of projects the students did, the progress report in the middle of the cycle used by students as a tool to reassess and adjust initial goals and as a formative assessment tool for me, as well as the final reflection for everyone. You could see them thinking about each step as they

expressed their opinions and thought about their own learning. It was refreshing to talk with such active listeners face-to-face and they helped me to see all over again what students' first impressions and questions are about the self-directed learning projects in my class.

### **The critical role of the teacher**

In the self-directed learning class, the aim is to keep the focus of the class on understanding and improving self-directed learning skills and competencies. During the period when our classes were forced to go online, there were various new obstacles to learning that teachers had not encountered in physical classrooms. Students' daily routines were upended, students who depended on the physical presence of their classmates and teachers to help keep them on course were isolated, and problems with a stifling environment were some of the issues that interfered with online learning (Bessler, Flett, Ziegler-Hill, 2020). For some students, the teacher was critical to helping them focus in spite of the distractions and adapt to this new style of learning. For others, it was enough that the teacher outlined the structure of the class and let the students fill it in according to their needs.

After the end of every SDL class semester whether online or not, I send out a voluntary survey to my class and ask them to complete it for my reflection purposes. The results of one semester of 18 surveys received out of a class of 34 in January 2022 are provided with a link and QR code on my poster. I have removed the names and email addresses of the students to protect their privacy. The respondents understood that I would use their answers to evaluate my classes and that they would be shared with other people. It was a terribly busy time of the semester and several students apologized that they could not take the time to answer my survey. The comments that made the biggest impression on me was how much the students appreciated that I answered their questions even when they did not understand the first time around. Providing examples, explaining in different ways, and explaining one on one in breakout rooms were sometimes necessary to make an assignment easier to understand. Receiving such positive feedback is affirming and I need to make sure to continue to do this for my classes. Dewaele and Mercer's (2018) study concluded that it requires a high level of emotional intelligence (EI) and self-efficacy to connect with students. This human connection between teacher and student is critical in all modes of education, face-to-face, online, blended, hybrid, or hyflex for students to be able to learn. However, that self-efficacy for me comes from these student comments that assure me I am on the right track. This reflection on my SDL class shows me the critical role of the teacher, but it also shows me places for improvement.

It was satisfying to read what students thought was the role of the teacher in the SDL class because I felt that the class had grasped the meaning of SDL and the purpose of my class. One student said that the teacher's role was to "tell students how to find the answers to questions themselves," another said that "the teacher's role is helping students to find out the best way of learning," and yet another said "I think it's about helping each student to be independent and learn on their own." Of course there had to be that one that said, "I have no idea" which makes me reevaluate all my lofty reasons for becoming a teacher.

There were several other teachers at PanSIG who have been influential in my own teaching career and who kindly stopped by to check out my poster and chat. Katherine Thornton, Jo Mynard, Andy Barfield, Louise Ohashi, and James Underwood all teach classes that especially foster autonomous learning. Many work with SDL type classes or self-access centers and have helped to shape my thinking by their examples. Louise Ohashi invited me to check out some of her back work for her SDL classes at Gakushuin University which is particularly helpful for my reflection. And of course there is Dexter da Silva at Keisen University who introduces me to various events or challenges me with new opportunities. Without all of these people, my present SDL class would not be the same. There were so many others who also stopped by, asking questions and allowing me to explain what I had discovered in the evaluation of my classes.

### **Evidence of the teacher's role and influence**

Some of the immediate evidence of the teacher's role and influence in the SDL classroom was when the pandemic began and it was up to us to conduct classes online. It was crazy and unpredictable at first but thankfully my students were very flexible and we laughed our way through some of the funny online mishaps that frequently happened in the beginning of the pandemic. The research by Martin et. al (2013) on student adaptability to uncertainty and novelty gives insight into this situation and by using their research results suggest an adaptability intervention in several steps:

- 1) the individual is taught how to realistically and effectively recognize uncertainty and novelty that might require adaptability,
- 2) he/she is taught how to make appropriate adjustments to behavior, cognition and/or affect,
- 3) these adjustments assist the individual to deal with uncertainty and novelty,
- 4) he/she is encouraged to recognize the value of these adjustments and then refine and/or progress them, and
- 5) This continuous refinement and implementation of behavioral, cognitive and/or affective adjustment sustains the individual's ability to deal with ongoing uncertainty and novelty in academic and non-academic life.

After telling my students that I would never get angry at them for not knowing what to do when we had technical difficulties in our online classes and that they can just call back into our class if they suddenly got disconnected from us or email me and tell me what happened, the stress level dropped. When they saw me loudly laughing when problems arose, they relaxed and we all just tried our best under the circumstances. When we returned to the classroom after two years of online learning, it was very strange not to have those technical difficulties any more. One thing Martin's research shows me is how the teacher can help students to adapt to unfamiliar situations, it will help them to stay resilient in the face of uncertainty, even after this terrible pandemic has passed.

At Keisen University, I introduced concepts such as SMART goals, PDCA, surface, deep, strategic learning, learning styles, learning skills and competencies, ways to improve collaborative work, among other things to think about our own learning. My students were all first and second year students and for the most part they were open to trying out these new ideas and techniques. I am so proud of them and the growth they showed as they shared about the new things they were learning about their learning. One character trait that I realized early on as crucial to our success to improving ourselves as learners is the need to have an open, flexible and teachable mindset. As we were online for two years, we needed extra patience and the ability to listen well as we were not physically sitting next to each other. The students who were willing to make necessary changes to their goals, to their ideas, and willing to work hard when it required them to overhaul their SMART goals or plans for their learning, were the ones that showed the greatest improvement. Many students were willing to give this project their all and it was energizing to me to see the changes happening right in front of my eyes.

### **Evidence of students' achievements**

Students that were willing to reflect on themselves and their learning and sometimes make hard assessments about themselves and their learning were the ones to improve the most. We all struggled to define metacognition and think of ways to change our learning in positive ways that would affect all of our classes at Keisen University. I include myself in this regard as the students taught me so much and what I learned along the way of developing this course has changed the way I see learning.

At the halfway point in a cycle, students assessed their projects to see where they had come and where they were going. They were given a choice of simply continuing with their project, or revamping it by readjusting their SMART goals and finding better ways to demonstrate evidence of their learning. This

formative assessment point is so important to the success of this project. A cycle goes by so quickly and it is good to take a breather for a location/status check before continuing on the journey.

In the end, many students described an improvement in the way they were learning and/or their attitude towards their learning.

### For future classes and teachers

In reflecting on the types of comments that I received from the many kind people who stopped by to listen to my presentation, I sorted everyone's comments into three groups: teachers who had never heard of an SDL class, teachers who had taught an SDL class at another institution, and students who were interested in SDL but had not heard of it before. Talking objectively about my class and receiving impressions from people was stimulating and helpful for my reflection on this class.

Teachers who had never heard of SDL before were intrigued with the idea of having students examine their own learning styles and skills and be accountable to demonstrate learning and improvement of those skills. Having the illustration of a typical cycle of my class (Picture 1) on my poster made it easier to explain and discuss the individual parts of a cycle. The arrows made it clear that this cycle was repeated over the course of a semester as well as also over the year.

It is important for teachers to use assessment methods that foster trust in their classroom because more than other types of classes, the SDL class often asks people to reflect and self-assess. Allowing everyone to make mistakes, to accept everyone for who they are is the first step to helping learners improve their learning. Tools such as surveys, progress reports, questions that can be answered quickly, are helpful to this end. Allowing students room to form a goal for themselves, seeing success in the improvement of their learning skill, repeating this cycle again in the same semester may very well be setting subgoals for a student's larger goal and possibly helping them to make learning, and even learning in English, a part of their identity, or "possible selves" as discussed by Muir and Dornyei (2020). Seeing students overcome problems in their learning by understanding more about how learning works and gaining new study skills and competencies, will hopefully encourage students' motivation to become life-long learners.

### References

- Besser, A., Flett, G. L., & Zeigler-Hill, V. (2022). Adaptability to a sudden transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic: Understanding the challenges for students. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 8(2), 85-105. <https://doi.org/10.1037/stl000019>
- Dewaele, J., & Mercer, S. (2018). Variation in ESL/EFL teacher's attitudes towards their students. In S. Mercer & A. Kostoulas, *Language teacher psychology* (pp.178-195). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783099467-015>
- Hattie, J., and Clarke, S. (2018). *Visible learning: Feedback*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429485480>
- Martin, A. J., Nejad, H.G., Colmar, S., & Liem, G.A.D. (2013). Adaptability: How students' responses to uncertainty and novelty predict their academic and non-academic outcomes. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 105(3), 728-746.
- Muir, C. (2020). *Directed motivational currents and language education: Exploring implications for pedagogy*. Multilingual Matters.