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The potential of self-access language centres in fostering lifelong global citizenship: towards a community of practice approach

Towards a
community of
practice
approach

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Abstract

Purpose – Drawing primarily on the Japanese context, this study aims to highlight this setting to emphasise the potential for tertiary-level self-access language centres to develop lifelong global citizenship, self-reflection and cross-cultural collaboration.

Design/methodology/approach – This inquiry calls on the community of practice approach to account for the shared interests motivating lifelong cross-cultural participation, the quality of social engagement between actors, and the material and cognitive tools called upon to realise global citizenship's shared enterprise.

Findings – As argued here, embracing various cultures and inclusive participation can lead to a broader understanding of global citizenship, avoiding narrow-minded views of globalism through shared knowledge and critical practices. Further, self-access provides a cost-effective, technology-mediated alternative to bilateral student mobility, whereby digital community-building occasions cross-cultural practice that may be extended throughout a learner's life, irrespective of their financial status or place of study.

Originality/value – This study is one of a select few drawing on the community of practice framework within the context of lifelong global citizenship. Nevertheless, such an approach remains primed for future development. With a social constructivist philosophy in view, the authors suggest complementary qualitative research approaches that highlight the socially situated nature of both disciplines.

Keywords Self-access learning, Communities of practice, Globalisation, Japan

Paper type Conceptual paper



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Introduction

As noted by Maynard (2016), the rationale supporting self-access in foreign language education is, at this point, extensive and well-established. Defined as “language learning environments that encourage the development of learner autonomy” (Reinders, 2013, p. 5166), self-access centres (SAC) emerged in the early 1970s under constructivist-aligned educational philosophies, wherein learners actively build knowledge and meaning through adaptive and highly contextual schemata. In this regard, SAC pedagogy recognises the essentiality of lived experience to language acquisition, stressing “the individual and personal contributions of learners to learning” (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p. 124). On a practical level, SACs constitute physical and online spaces serving individual needs, allowing students to construct educational experiences through autonomous self-discovery, persistent interaction and, where appropriate, via a semi-guided instructor-as-facilitator approach. Yet, the driving forces behind the sustained increase in SACs are not solely pedagogical but pragmatic. Cultivation of the self, that is, a prolonged willingness to learn autonomously, fosters active participation in civic activities, social inclusion and integration within the job market (Alt and Raichel, 2018), but also gives rise to enduring study habits manifesting as a lifelong pursuit of knowledge (Hadley and Brown, 2007).

Given the language’s status as a global lingua franca, the internationalisation of learners through English as a foreign language (EFL) emerges as a viable strategy for educational authorities to develop internationally-minded graduates primed to take an active role in global labour markets and, indeed, self-motivated citizens maintaining a proactive approach to skill and knowledge acquisition. As part of a comprehensive strategy to enhance global competitiveness through EFL, for instance, The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) subsidised the establishment of tertiary-level SACs to better “engage, motivate, and improve students’ confidence and competence with a foreign language, which typically means English” (Birdsell, 2015, p. 272). In this sense, SACs mediate learner empowerment through informal, self-directed intercultural exchange, naturalistic target language practice and, with an eye on producing autonomous lifelong learners, development of “the skill and, somewhat more importantly, attitudes they need to work and study independently and make their own learning decisions” (Hadley and Brown, 2007, p. 30). Here, Japanese policy ties communication skills in English directly to globalisation (Dubin, 2023; Samuell, 2023; Smith, 2022) and citizens ready to “make intellectual contributions to humankind” (MEXT, 2004). Against this background, the value of global citizenship, or the fostering of “values, soft skills and attitudes among learners that can facilitate international cooperation” (Wintersteiner *et al.*, 2015, p. 7) to Japanese higher education (HE) is self-evident.

Notwithstanding the potential for such practice to engender a lifelong commitment to open, just, harmonious and transcultural citizenry (Past and Smith, 2023), pedagogic inquiry has thus far failed to adequately recognise the promise of global citizenship education (GCED) within this context. Given the contributions of social learning spaces to enhancing EFL proficiency and cross-cultural understanding (Murray *et al.*, 2017), research into SAC-induced GCED is primed for further expansion. With this disjuncture in mind, the present inquiry situates itself within Lave and Wenger’s (1991) *community of practice* (CoP) framework, wherein “a person’s intentions to learn are engaged, and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice” (p. 29). Often viewed through the lens of social constructivism (Stoszkowski and Collins, 2014; Mynard, 2019), the approach contests that, through consideration of three structural elements: the *Domain* [1] of knowledge, its *Community* of people, and their shared *Practice*, CoPs emphasise “building context and structure for participation that facilitates ongoing meaningful learning experiences for groups of individuals” (Euerby and Burns, 2012, p. 196).

Through the socially situated negotiation of meaning, one's understanding of the World and its people evolves, allowing SAC participants to form enduring multicultural identities that, per the fundamental principles of GCED, appreciate the importance of collaboration, self-reflection, global awareness and cross-cultural empathy. Indeed, as will be argued here – and per the call for this special issue (Eliyahu-Levi and Ricucci, 2023) – it is these very features that position GCED CoPs as innovative and holistic learning spaces set to cultivate the humanistic, democratic, inclusive and self-actualising values deemed central to lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2019). Thus, in using the community of practice framework, this paper highlights the potential of SACs for fostering self-reflective, interculturally competent citizens through technology-mediated platforms that transcend financial and geographical limitations. With this goal in view, we provide background information vital to understanding the discussion of SACs and the Japanese context.

Literature review

English language learning and Japanese higher education

Japan faces mounting challenges to its regional competitiveness, with the historical economic growth of neighbouring Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore drawing upon globally-oriented human resources. In each case, bilateral student mobility networks augment robust private and public language education systems. Notwithstanding significant pushes by the Japanese State and industry for study abroad (Samuell, 2023; Smith, 2022), sojourn numbers fail to meet expectations. Totalling 62,234 in 1996, this dropped to 59,166 in 2006, only to fall significantly to 30,179 in 2016 (Kuroda *et al.*, 2018) before levelling at 34,305 in 2022 following a COVID-19-induced drop-off in 2021 (JAOS, 2023). Yonezawa (2014) notes a tendency “to avoid study and work experiences abroad among a part of Japanese youth” (p. 46), with this “inward” (MEXT, 2012) orientation driven by culturally-ingrained factors. A 2013 Sanno Institute of Management survey polling the attitudes of newly employed graduates to study abroad participation, for instance, describes a lack of confidence in language skills (65.2%), uncertainty over life in foreign countries (50.4%), or simply not feeling attracted to living overseas (35.5%). In addition, a survey of Japanese graduates conducted by Yonezawa (2010) indicated that most employees did not feel obligated to learn foreign languages, given the nation's robust domestic market.

Parallel to these reports, the Japanese Government announced the *Top Global University Project (TGUP)*, its most current HE reform aimed at producing interculturality and global human resources, often translated as “global *jinzai*”, who will play an active role in Japanese development (Chapple, 2014). Specifically, the 2014 TGUP represents a 10-year, 37-university-strong investment. Selected institutions are divided into two categories, with each university allocated financial support to reform, from the quality of university courses to school governance, depending on their track type. Type-A institutions consist of 13 elite former imperial, national and private universities, each receiving 500m Japanese yen (approximately USD3.3m [2]) annually for up to 10 years. Type-A or “top type” universities focus on improving the globalisation of Japanese HE through “world-class” education and research, with institutions seeking to place in the top 100 universities globally (Smith, 2022). The 24 type-B or “global traction” institutions consist of prestigious national, public and private universities, each receiving 2–300m Japanese yen (approximately USD1.3–2m) annually for up to 10 years. Type-B colleges are charged with leading “the internationalization of Japanese HE by leveraging their strength” (Shimmi and Yonezawa, 2015, p. 27), nurturing globalised human resources locally through EFL and bilateral student mobility. With this intention in mind, MEXT reforms in HE “have been

implemented alongside, and have been driven by, business sectors calling for radical change” (Horiguchi *et al.*, 2015, p. 4).

The Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry’s (METI) *Council on the Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development* (2011), for instance, notes “linguistic and communication skills”, “self-direction and positiveness, a spirit for challenge, cooperativeness and flexibility, a sense of responsibility and mission” and “understanding of other cultures” (p. 7) as crucial to progress in a globalised economy and society. In this sense, METI (2011) factors for “global human resources” mirror UNESCO’s *Education 2030*, whereby GCED operates via the cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural learning domains (UNESCO, 2016). Nevertheless, in late 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, causing rapid and severe disruption to trade, industry and study abroad, with education subjected to drastic, forced reform. According to MEXT (2021), 1,036 of 1,064 Japanese schools (97.4%) shifted to online instruction, not necessarily entirely, but at least partially. At the same time, universities halted their international exchange programs. However, given their pre-existing commitment to internationalisation, TGUP institutions typically possess some degree of communal or self-access learning functionality, such as Kyushu University’s *Self-Access Learning Center*, Ritsumeikan University’s *Beyond Borders Plaza* and Akita International University’s *Language Development and Intercultural Studies Center* (JASAL, 2023). Despite many international exchange systems resuming their activities, self-access spaces are expected to play a significant role in the medium-to-long-term future of HE as universities seek to meet the needs of students at varying stages of their learning journeys.

Glocality and global citizenship education

To fully understand GCED (and, in turn, nascent SAC organisations or CoPs stemming from the implementation of GCED), it is necessary to discuss “glocalisation” or “glocality”. While the term “globalisation” is well established within social science literature, dating back to the 1900s, “glocalisation”, a portmanteau of “global localisation”, emerged relatively recently (Roudometof, 2015). Indeed, its use in this context is apt: “glocalisation” originated from the Japanese *dochakuka*, agricultural terminology referring to the adaption of farming techniques for local conditions and contexts (Robertson, 1995), with the term then applied to a broad range of disciplines, including business, media, religion, sociology and education. In this regard, the concept refers to the paradoxically reciprocal co-existence of the homogenising forces of globalisation on the one hand and regionally, culturally specific, local concerns on the other. In this way, we can view the “local” as being part of the “global” (Robertson, 1995), meaning that “globalization is not simply dissolving local life worlds in their traditional local structures and settings, but is interacting with them in a sort of localization, or “glocalization”” (Schuerkens, 2003, pp. 196-197).

Regarding EFL, glocality aims to emancipate learners from universalised language learning orthodoxy (Lin *et al.*, 2005). Glocality distances itself from the monolithic presuppositions of Anglospheric pedagogy, opting to facilitate the learner’s linguistic journey using the tools furnished by their lived experience and culturally unique backgrounds (Mannion, 2015, p. 15). The integration of these seemingly opposing forces has been subject to a certain degree of critique and controversy in the literature. Roudometof (2016), for instance, highlights the danger of analytical reductionism, whereby distinct aspects of globalisation and glocalisation become diluted, with the terms consequently misunderstood as interchangeable. Thus, glocality is better understood as “the refraction of globalization through the local” (Roudometof, 2016, p. 13). Of course, concerns relating to diversity, equity and inclusion during global and local integration remain (Orsini-Jones *et al.*, 2022). If properly implemented, however, this “refraction” results in a harmonious synthesis of global and local forces (Fernandez, 2009).

Fully-realised glocality may thus be understood as the ideal cultural milieu for properly constituted globally-oriented, community-based SAC.

Following MEXT's ambitions to produce "global" *jinzai* maintaining a lifelong dedication to interculturality, HE emerges as a critical site for nurturing glocal outlooks and skills (Jooste and Heleta, 2017). Seeking to promote altruistic universality, GCED centres upon "global issues and their social, political, cultural and economic dimensions; universal values like justice, equality, dignity and respect; and skills for questioning one's own situation critically, systematically, and creatively" (Křepelková *et al.*, 2019, p. 2). Accordingly, *Education 2030*, an extension of *Sustainable Development Goal 4 for Education*, which seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO, 2016, p. 20), provides the guiding structures of GCED. Yet, this convergence of policy work amongst transnational organisations guides learning authorities towards a "strident envisioning of a particular industrial future" (Hodge *et al.*, 2021, p. 193) that, while resonating with lifelong learning's humanistic and critical traditions (Eliyahu-Levi and Ricucci, 2023), ultimately subjugates learning to a competency-based blueprint for civic participation. In keeping with skill-based learning, GCED seeks to promote lifelong autonomous skills conducive to labour markets, including "resilience, self-awareness, self-management, and self-regulation", alongside a readiness for transcultural civic engagement, or "a sense of belonging to a community" and "empathetic concern and compassion" (UNESCO, 2019, p. 26). Critics of this approach (Dill, 2013; Jooste and Heleta, 2017) contend that the globalisation of learner autonomy, while ostensibly pluralistic, perpetuates a hegemonic moral order that dominates alternative epistemologies and ways of being. Indeed, hinting at the importance of glocal approaches to GCED, "the majority of the world experiences social and communal life not in terms of isolated individuals, but as *collective identities and traditions* [3]" (Dill, 2013, p. 33).

This criticism does not imply, however, that the pursuit of GCED or lifelong learning more generally is without merit. Awareness of diverse cultures and an enduring "glocal" commitment "to engage and assume active roles, both locally and globally, as proactive contributors to a more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable world" (UNESCO, 2019, p. 21) remain noble endeavour, after all. Rather, this inquiry holds that GCED is best framed not through a demand for vocational competencies but authentic multiculturalism that, in keeping with the social constructivist epistemology, embraces a thick global pluralism honouring multiple identities (Dill, 2013). In this sense, the process of GCED necessitates reflexivity, where, through the transcultural construction of meaning, stakeholders consider diverse ways of being, both in relation to themselves and their position within non-native societies. Drawing on Paulo Freire, Blackmore (2016) proposes a comprehensive pedagogical framework for GCED manifesting through four interrelated dimensions: critical thinking, dialogue, reflection and responsible action, whereby "learners are encouraged to question the political structures that underpin inequalities" (p. 40). The similarities between Blackmore's (2016) framework and the Council of Europe's (2018) identification of dialogic thinking, discussion, decision-making, collaboration and group dynamics as skills crucial to lifelong learning are manifest. Through critical engagement, stakeholders develop their abilities to inquire into global issues and themes – such as global governance, politics, history, economics and individual rights and responsibilities – in a socially responsive manner. Indeed, to explore personal beliefs and values relating to the experiences of people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, learners *must* be exposed to rich and practical understandings derived outside their traditional communities (Abdi *et al.*, 2015). Only then may learners engage their internal cultural dispositions with those of an unfamiliar external World.

Theoretical lens

Social constructivism

As noted by [Hadley and Brown \(2007\)](#), the philosophy and practice of self-access emerged to foster self-determination amongst learners, expecting graduates to develop enduring learning habits. Indeed, the [Commission of the European Communities \(2006\)](#) states a preference for lifelong learning, given its role in fostering employability, active citizenship and social inclusion (p. 1). Furthermore, in a recent edition of the Official Journal of the European Union, The [Council of the European Union \(2021, p. 5\)](#) states that lifelong learning “permeates the overall vision and objectives for education and training in the EU”, encompassing all levels of education and training in both formal and informal learning. With this intention in view, conceptualisations of the SAC have shifted from functional, self-regulated resource centres to active learning communities underpinned by social constructivist philosophies ([Mynard, 2019](#)). This shift echoes the philosophies of Vygotsky through its emphasis on interpersonal interactions, or “learning as participation” ([Eurby and Burns, 2012, p. 196](#)), which drives the creation of meaning. Thus, epistemologically, knowledge is highly contextual, “produced over historic time through exchanges between people within cultures” ([Hepburn, 2006, p. 39](#)). Here, learners iteratively negotiate, scaffold and construct meaning through shared interactions, actively building on personal experience to create collaborative knowledge. Learning environments should remain active and learner-focused, drawing on the personal conceptualisations of participants to further develop their shared schema and perceptions of the World. Accordingly, the importance of social constructivism to both SACs and, more broadly, lifelong learning is self-evident.

Community of practice framework and its applicability to self-access

CoPs seek to account for the sociocultural premise of knowledge, through which communities liaise to overcome issues of shared concern ([Lave and Wenger, 1991](#)). In this regard, the CoP framework remains inherently versatile; it may be used within a host of contexts provided the group share a passion for their respective enterprise and, most crucially, seeks to “learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” ([Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1](#)). As a social learning theory, CoP practice necessitates shared involvement that, while initially tangential, increases in terms of engagement and complexity as newcomers integrate within the community ([Giordano, 2022](#)). This principle of “legitimate peripheral participation” ([Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 29](#)) remains central to the CoP as the intention to learn is engaged and, in turn, strengthened via the incremental negotiation of meaning. Through both formal and informal learning networks, the interplay between legitimate participation and reification establishes a historical basis for knowledge that, consistent with the philosophical and practical basis of SACs, reflects a sociocultural model of knowledge acquisition ([Jeon et al., 2011](#); [Stoszkowski and Collins, 2014](#)). The concept of reification as it relates to the negotiation of meaning remains “an essential and unavoidable part of the process of social construction” ([Pratt, 2020, p. 231](#)). CoP participants adopt a substantivist posture where, by giving “form” to personal experiences and interpretations of reality, processes of social knowledge production establish “points of focus around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organized” ([Wenger, 1998, p. 58](#)).

Nevertheless, learning communities must invoke a specific framework to realise their CoP. [Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner \(2015\)](#) describe the rudimentary act of establishing a community or social space as, in and of itself, insufficient. CoPs draw upon three structural characteristics, domain, community and practice, which function in parallel to circulate meaning through self-organised participation. The CoP domain is, as the term suggests, the area of knowledge driving the joint enterprise, creating a shared identity for members to rally

around as they engage in and contribute to collaborative practice. Thus, Eurby and Burns (2012) summarise the domain as “often characterized by purposes, missions, values, propositions, and goals” (p. 199). The community dimension, meanwhile, represents the “social fabric of learning” (Wenger *et al.*, 2002), where, through processes of mutual engagement, stakeholders participate in collaborative activities and discussions, assist fellow CoP members and share information – in essence, working to “build relationships that enable them to learn from each other” (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). Given this communal dimension, strong CoPs draw upon acceptance, curiosity, empathy, interpersonal commitment and resilience while negotiating meaning (Eurby and Burns, 2012). Finally, practice constitutes the repertoire of resources, including ontologies, methods, instruments, technologies, experiences and competencies, through which CoPs engage in their respective enterprises. Consequently, practice necessitates sustained interaction to accumulate the shared elements necessary for effective participation within a domain of interest.

Regarding the applicability of the CoP model to self-access, the joint social constructivist epistemologies of each practice (Jeon *et al.*, 2011; Stoszowski and Collins, 2014; Mynard, 2019) present a notable point of cohesion. On a more tangible level, Tassinari (2017) contends that SACs are CoPs insofar as the former involve “various actors within the educational context in its everyday work and in its development [...] all these actors bring their own perspective and experience into the project and thus contribute to the learning environment” (p. 161). Concerning the pedagogical inculcation of knowledge through self-access, Gardner and Miller (2014) describe the SAC and its relation to autonomous learning as a specific domain element. Here, the community is composed of SAC stakeholders, including professional organisations, managers, practitioners, tutors, student assistants and learners (Tassinari, 2017) who, drawing on communal practice elements (i.e. self-access facilities, experiences and materials), contribute to the everyday development and performance of the SAC. In the research of both Gardner and Miller (2014) and Shibata (2016), it is noted that junior self-access participants must undergo a gradual acclimatisation period – in essence, a phase of legitimate peripheral participation – before transitioning to “full” members of the community. Returning to GCED, Shibata (2016) highlights the potential advantage of self-access CoPs to international student mobility – and, consequently, the development of “global” jinzai. Specifically, the author describes how, in drawing on the experiences of language learning role models, an informal self-access community motivated learners to become more interested in studying abroad to improve their EFL proficiencies (Shibata, 2016, p. 318) and, upon return, seek out mentoring roles within the SAC.

Technology-mediated learning

Technology-mediated learning aids lifelong GCED and cross-cultural understanding from several perspectives. For example, by facilitating “dialogic online intercultural exchanges in a safe ‘third space’” (Orsini-Jones *et al.*, 2022, p. 306), technology liberates diverse groups from anglospheric norms, while tangible and universally applicable language skills may be fostered through familiarity and fluency with online communication (Nowlan and Wilson, 2022; Smith, 2021). In addition, Eryansyah *et al.* (2019) stress the importance of digital technology to EFL education and, more broadly, information sharing, underlining how internet-ready devices may be exploited to develop reading, writing, listening and speaking through social media platforms, audio resources and authentic “real-world” materials. In the classroom context, information gleaned from digital technology facilitates learner autonomy by divesting the teacher of their traditional role as the ultimate, didactic source and arbiter of knowledge (Hussain, 2018). Appropriate use of digital technology also removes barriers to education imposed by geographical location – removing the need for students and educators to be physically present when learning (Inamorato Dos Santos *et al.*, 2016). This benefit,

twinning with the relative affordability and ubiquity of digital technology, unleashes a wealth of access and educational opportunity, aiding students traditionally disadvantaged by financial or geographical constraints (Inamorato Dos Santos, *et al.*, 2016).

Conversely, diminished digital literacy negatively impacts not only communication but may more broadly occasion adverse effects on the ability to think critically and assess the credibility of information, among other metrics of cognitive ability (Eryansyah *et al.*, 2019). These findings imply that digital illiteracy is more likely to afflict economically disadvantaged areas of the globe, highlighting the risk that the adverse effects of digital illiteracy may, in some instances, disproportionately impact learners outside of the anglosphere (Reed and Thompson, 2021). Yet, as previously argued, digital literacy has numerous tangible and multifaceted benefits. The development of core language skills, the decentralisation and democratisation of knowledge and learning, combined with the global reach attainable through technology, digital literacy represents a crucial vehicle for reifying properly constituted and effective “glocalised” learning environments. Furthermore, using technology scaffolds autonomous study, facilitating and promoting the skills upholding lifelong learning (Chen *et al.*, 2023; Tsolaki and Stathopoulou, 2023).

Self-Access and lifelong learning in Japan

While early iterations of tertiary-level SACs in Japan, such as Kobe Shoin Women’s University’s *English Village*, may be traced to the mid-1980s, an expansion of self-access facilities ensued at the turn of the millennium (Mynard, 2016; Thornton, 2015). This growth trailed white paper recommendations by the Japanese Educational Council to reform into “a lifelong learning society in which each individual will be free to select his or her learning opportunities as and when they wish” (Kawachi, 2008, p. 510). Thus, as of late 2023, the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) reports 61 SACs nationally (JASAL, 2023), an increase of 25 over five years. The rationale for this growth is commonly associated with MEXT’s push for “global” *jinzai*, where, alongside the fostering of “international” worldviews and increased proficiency in English (Birdsell, 2015), students are impelled to develop the lifelong habit of autonomous learning which, in turn, is expected to enhance success within labour markets. The shift from the State to the individual established a “hands-off” environment that engages adult learners “in a powerful learning process that they themselves have helped to craft” (Pomeroy and Oliver, 2018, p. 731). Indeed, Kawachi (2008) notes that autonomous learning enhances intrinsic motivation on the personal, social, vocational and academic levels.

Particularly common in HE, SACs are often physical, non-obligatory learning spaces incorporating some degree of online or multimedia service (Mynard, 2016). As noted by Reinders (2013), SACs provide materials, activities and practitioner support “to help learners develop the skills necessary for taking control over the content, pace and method of their learning” (p. 5166). While the development of digital literacies, foreign language skills and interculturality remains fundamental, SACs hold the potential to support learners in, amongst other endeavours, homework tasks, remedial instruction, skill-based workshops and general educational guidance (Reinders, 2013; Tassinari, 2017). Put simply, the learning opportunities afforded by SACs are not restricted to drop-in language exchange but a diverse range of pedagogical outcomes. Regardless of original intent, learners attending the SAC are expected to demonstrate “a level of awareness and control of their learning processes, and therefore makes informed choices about their own learning” (Yarwood *et al.*, 2019, p. 356); in essence, to be autonomous. Yet, how does one go about fostering self-determination? Tassinari (2017) posits that the development of learner autonomy necessitates an environment in which all stakeholders, from the student to practitioner to administrator, collaborate towards a common

shared goal, for “autonomy needs a community – a learning community, a community of practice” (Tassinari, 2017, p. 157). With this understanding in mind, SACs may, through collaborative practice, provide momentum to learner actions, empowering them to manoeuvre towards their intended outcomes independently and relinquish, where possible, decontextualised visions of outcome-based education (Past and Smith, 2023).

Discussion

Towards a more pluralistic global citizenship?

As noted by Dill (2013) and Franch (2020), GCED extends beyond the bounds of content-based learning into character development through “moral pedagogy”. In this sense, MEXT’s commitment to fostering “highly capable people with a global perspective who can play active roles in many fields” is, by the Ministry’s very admission, conceived as a means of “strengthening Japan’s international competitiveness” (Shimomura, 2013, p. B1). Subsequently, the pursuit of “global” jinzai has been criticised for its narrow scope (i.e. Chapple, 2014; Samuell, 2023; Yonezawa, 2014) where, from a Foucauldian perspective, MEXT’s provincial interpretation of skill-based globalism positions graduates as “docile” subjects, conditioned for insertion within future labour markets (Ogawa, 2021). More practically, the quest to create lifelong internationalism contributing to Japanese economic development has led to an overemphasis on measurable competence in EFL (Samuell, 2023) but also supports a demonstrably paradoxical inward-nationalist and outward-globalist orientation, whereby “Japan attempts to protect itself from external influence while simultaneously accruing the physical and cultural resources necessary for international competitiveness” (Smith, 2022, p. 9). Indeed, Fujita-Round and Maher (2008) posit that “the logic of internationalization implies, tententiously, educating Japanese people to behave “more Japanese” as well as equipping them with the linguistic armour to compete in the world beyond Japan” (p. 495). This incongruity evidences itself in MEXT’s (2003) strategy to cultivate “Japanese with English abilities”, which, in addition to bolstering the nation’s economic position, was somewhat optimistically intended to “lead to a deeper understanding of Japanese language and culture” locally (Burgess, 2010) – as demonstrated in METI (2011) drive to foster “a sense of identity as a Japanese” (p. 7) amongst learners.

Consequently, the reformation of GCED as a tool for nurturing lifelong global mindsets has been subjected to criticism (Dill, 2013), with EFL’s seemingly unassailable position “as a point of ingress to essential societal domains, including education, trade, politics, and the economy” (Smith, 2022, p. 6) coming under particular scrutiny. In Japan, this relationship has led to a culture of regular testing as learners strive to improve their demonstrable linguistic capital. Yet, Ohara and Mizukura (2020) contend that the inherently decontextualised nature of standardised language assessment leads to “fractured knowledge”, for “aspects of language and culture are inseparable and thus cannot be individually measured through tests” (p. 7). SACs, however, hold the potential to reformat HE institutions into sites of authentic – and, thus, highly contextualized – cultural exchange. For instance, research by Murray *et al.* (2017) describes self-access as “supporting language learning and cross-cultural acclimatization for both international and Japanese students” (p. 235). Drawing initially on a CoP framework, the authors describe how social learning spaces transformed the university into an authentic “glocal” domain, where multinational SAC members’ deepened their knowledge and expertise as they interacted with more established members” (Murray *et al.*, 2017, p. 238). Of course, that is not to say that social learning communities should abandon form-focused test preparation as shared practice – for that would be to neglect the functional realities of the knowledge economy. Rather, these findings demonstrate how, through multinational community building, understandings of

linguistic and cultural practices may be enhanced to reflect the diverse nature of globalism. From this base, the CoP is better prepared to counter the discursive and ideological assumptions driving skill-based learning.

The “social fabric” (Wenger *et al.*, 2002) of multicultural communities – of which HE SACs are a notable example (Murray *et al.*, 2017) – remains decidedly at odds with MEXT’s inward-orientated push for citizens to behave “more Japanese” (Fujita-Round and Maher, 2008), a practice routinely criticised in terms of its depiction of “Japaneseness” as a fixed construct (Chapple, 2014; Thornton, 2015). Returning to the oft-decontextualised knowledge economy, Franch (2020) has criticised GCED for its “marginal” contribution to critical discourse and counter-practice. While GCED does seek to foster a “cosmopolitan identity in line with moral and cultural global citizenship and centred on a sense of belonging to a common humanity, respect for cultural diversity, moral obligations towards distant others and a commitment to human rights and sustainability” (Franch, 2020, p. 521), learner reflections on the symbolic and discursive assumptions rationalising the practice of globalism remain comparatively peripheral. With this understanding in view, multicultural CoPs hold the potential to counter Japan’s quasi-nationalistic assumptions through processes of cognitive decentralisation that move beyond the provincially ethnocentric intent of “globally-focused” moral pedagogy. Central to this reformation of GCED is a shift in the joint enterprise. Given CoP domains draw upon a shared identity (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015), the ideological separation between Japanese and non-Japanese should, in theory, diminish as members gradually integrate and collaborate through processes of legitimate peripheral participation. With the goal of critical counter-practice in view, the CoP may work to achieve “a curriculum that de-centres the bounded nation-state and complicates the notion of [national] citizenship” (Franch, 2020, p. 516).

Naturally, the SAC community has a coequal role in this enterprise. Regardless of one’s status within the CoP, reification, as it pertains to the process of social construction, recognises the criticality of communicative action to collective beliefs, activities and symbolic structures (Pratt, 2020), including globalism. Accordingly, multicultural SACs establish a broader epistemic space for the realisation of meaning where, through exposure to diverse and, thus, non-MEXT-derived expressions of internationalism, paradoxically ethnocentric representations of GCED may be challenged. Of course, that is not to say that all conceptualisations of globalism, *jinzai*, or, for that matter, “Japaneseness” should be reduced. The presence of cosmopolitanism, internationalisation and English as a lingua franca within the reification process necessitates acknowledging the values and norms that strengthen Western cognitive hegemony (Jooste and Heleta, 2017). As previously alluded to, efforts to reconcile constructivist learning processes with the stated goals of GCED manifest a seemingly inherent contradiction. This paradox lies in that constructivism – as broadly constituted in much of the current EFL pedagogy – embodies a hegemonic conception of Western cognition (Awayed-Bishara, 2018), potentially undermining *authentic* cultural diversity and inclusivity from the outset as interactions filter through the prism of West-centric norms (Pardo, 2020). The risk here, of course, is that nominally successful cross-cultural interactions are implicitly tainted (Guo and Beckett, 2008).

Consequently, “glocal” efforts have been made to address this issue by redefining our understanding of “the West” and the occidental presuppositions that may otherwise tarnish or impede multicultural interactions (Casini, 2015; Pardo, 2020). By drawing on diverse representations of the international, for instance, glocal pluralism constitutes a shared resource, or practice, through which stakeholders address the joint enterprise of their domain. Through sincere attempts at epistemic engagement and inclusion, reification may, for example, facilitate a gradual shift in SAC member subjectivity from Foucauldian “docile bodies” to autonomous

world citizens holding genuine, lifelong curiosities in diverse cultures and ways of being. While ambitious, the glocal “complex dynamic system” described by Murray *et al.* (2017, p. 243) tentatively supports this position, as do the findings of Shibata (2016), Wang (2020), who describe journeys towards autonomous internationalism where junior SAC community members rose to the position of valued leaders, drawing on their multicultural involvements and understandings “to work with other Japanese students who might also become autonomous learners who could pave their own paths” (Wang, 2020, p. 49).

In facilitating enduring globalism, SAC communities do work to achieve MEXT’s stated aims for GCED and, more broadly, self-reliant citizens maintaining a lifelong dedication to self-betterment: specifically, “developing students” autonomous personalities with a critical attitude towards themselves and the world’ (Křepelková *et al.*, 2019, p. 2). Dill (2013) observes that autonomy manifests according to specific national and sociocultural contexts; yet, the degree to which GCED in its current manifestation fosters critical “deconstruction of the dominant modern/colonial global imaginary” (Franch, 2020, p. 516) remains open to debate. Perhaps seeking to address this issue, UNESCO (2016) calls for the development of more robust support systems for GCED’s cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural domains, including “identifying needs for the development of new tools and including a broad range of countries and regions” (p. 14). Calling upon Wenger *et al.*’s (2002) vision for practice, the CoPs multidisciplinary, multi-stakeholder and multicultural status is an epistemic resource that may be called upon to engage the SAC’s joint enterprise: autonomous pluralism. Studies by Hobbs and Dofs (2017) and Tassinari (2017) support this position, describing the value of broad CoP networks in fostering learner autonomy. The latter, in particular, recommends the creation of a “community of actors”, or alliance between stakeholders, academia and practice, that serves “to strengthen the influence of international networks” (Tassinari, 2017, p. 167). Ohara and Mizukura (2020), meanwhile, note the importance of SAC-derived globalisation efforts in “offering students opportunities to explore their identities and express their agency” (p. 29). More importantly, the authors describe self-access spaces as key sites for fostering diversity and individual growth (Ohara and Mizukura, 2020). Through such exchange, CoPs offer learning opportunities decoupled from provincial, skill-based visions for GCED.

An inclusive, technology-mediated means of cultural exchange?

Following a prolonged decline in outward student mobility (Kuroda *et al.*, 2018), Japan faces mounting challenges in its attempts to engender global citizenship. In addition to the ingrained cultural and attitudinal indifference reported by Yonezawa (2010, 2014), Ota (2013) identifies several pragmatic constraints that also serve to dissuade study abroad. They include an oversupply of HE locally, a decrease in affordability and value, the incompatibility of the Japanese HE system with its international counterparts (in terms of curricula, credit transfer and preparatory programs), a conflict between the timing of study abroad and the traditional period for job hunting, and, in keeping with “global” *jinzai*, an increase in transnational competition amongst students and workers. This increased competition, in particular, has led to a “higher requirement in language ability that most Japanese students cannot meet under the current education system” (Yonezawa, 2014, p. 46). With these factors in view, Thornton (2015) suggests that, by creating a “glocal” environment locally, self-access not only represents a viable intermediary for pre-sojourn preparation and cultural exchange but, more crucially, offers an inclusive alternative to costly overseas study built upon authentic and autonomous community building that may into lifelong global citizenship. Ohara and Mizukura (2020), too, describe the SAC as “an important place for learners to explore their translingual identities and engage in diverse language activities” (p. 6).

Returning to Ota's (2013) reflections on the decreased affordability of study abroad, student mobility efforts in HE may strengthen socioeconomic inequity, with non-TGUP-affiliated universities less capable of overcoming institutional inertia and discarding educational norms that have been self-evident for a sustained period (Smith, 2022; Kikuchi, 2021), for instance, notes reductions in MEXT funding to be in the vicinity of one-to-three per cent annually, leaving many provincial or smaller colleges unable to form financially prohibitive study-abroad networks. More critically, in focusing its internationalisation efforts overwhelmingly on TGUP schools, MEXT rejects the OECD (2009) calls for "policies and instruments for stimulating a fitting internationalization strategy of all institutions" (p. 86). In the face of mounting economic pressures, SAC communities present a viable solution for non-TGUP universities – or those "that are not on the list" (Maruko, 2014) – to secure epistemic decentralisation from elite schools, thereby planting the seed of lifelong global citizenship on a broader scale. Rather than study abroad, Thornton (2015) describes the financial and pedagogical value of self-access community building to fostering self-reliant and assertive graduates possessing linguistic-communicative competence in EFL and increased awareness of foreign cultures alongside their Japanese identities. With regards to transferable skills, for example, the findings of Shibata (2016), Wang (2020) suggest that CoP learners may, through processes of legitimate peripheral participation, rise to the position of valued advisors, thereby embodying METT's pleas for "team-work and leadership skills (to bring together persons of various backgrounds)" and "public-mindedness" (p. 7) – traits aligning with the Council of Europe's (2018) vision for lifelong learning – while simultaneously gaining valuable experience in a "glocal" setting.

While initial start-up and staffing costs may prove unpalatable to university administration, Hadley and Brown (2007) and Reinders and Lázaro (2008) argue that self-access represents a long-term, cost-effective approach to fostering cultural immersion and enduring global citizenship. Additionally, Thornton (2015) contends that self-access spaces are often more cost-efficient than subsidised study-abroad networks while offering several ancillary benefits. Through shared practice, the SAC may serve as a bridge to complementary skills and areas of study, including learner autonomy and digital literacy. Reflecting on OECD data detailing the relative lack of computer-mediated education locally, Colpitts *et al.* (2021) note the detrimental impact of Japan's "teaching to the test" approach on digital proficiencies. Recognising this issue, MEXT incorporated the Kyoto, Nagaoka, Nara and Shibaura Institutes of Technology into the TGUP Type-B' global traction' group, which, more so than its Type-A research-focused counterparts, focuses on innovation and competency-based education. Thus, TGUP targets technology use alongside EFL, leadership, global citizenship and a sense of the Japanese as desired skills. The Kyoto Institute of Technology, for example, aims to train "Tech Leaders", who "perform as a leader of globalization, in addition to specialized knowledge and skills, Tech Leaders must further enhance the three abilities of leadership, the willingness, communication skills and aptitude to lead, a solid Japanese identity" (MEXT, 2021).

Given the recent COVID-19-enforced constraints placed on bilateral student mobility networks, self-access CoPs are a cost-effective site for nurturing lifelong intercultural mindsets and digital literacy skills locally (Thornton, 2015). Further, Hubbard and Levy (2016) highlight the importance of the CoP framework in building active learner participation in foreign language exchange and collaborative online activities. Darhower (2002), meanwhile, describes CoP as a "robust paradigm" by which to frame technology-mediated language learning and cultural exchange, noting "the unique ways in which learners took ownership of the chat room environment and constructed a dynamic, learner-centred discourse community characterized by discussion of topics of mutual interest, social

cohesiveness and group belonging” (p. 273). Returning to the contributions of reification to the negotiation of meaning, Darhower (2002) notes intersubjectivity, or cognitive development through the gradual creation of a shared context, as a fluid and fragile process, particularly in the context of cross-cultural exchange. With this understanding in view, interactions between the practice and domain elements of the SAC remain crucial to securing a “community-wide” orientation or “perspective on a communicative task” (Darhower, 2002, p. 256). Therefore, senior SAC community members, particularly university staff and student advisors, must reject the deterministic fallacy that digital tools *automatically* strengthen learner interactions and equity. To better enhance online participation, agency and egalitarian cultural exchange, for instance, Smith (2021) implores practitioners to pivot towards an open design that, where possible, accommodates the cultural and epistemological contexts of its learners.

As noted by Servaes (2013), the internet presents an increasingly powerful tool for enduring, self-organising groups, one that, if used correctly, may “re-balance power relationships [. . .] based on the co-existence of varied subcultures” (p. 327). Now more than ever, the internet represents a compelling practice element for SAC communities in the quest for authentic globalism. While the COVID-19 pandemic continues, albeit to a much lesser degree, to impact HE, digital GCED emerges as a connected and mobile alternative to strictly face-to-face community-building. Drawing on a CoP framework, Radclyffe-Thomas *et al.* (2018) detail a longitudinal case study that sought to enhance learner agency in collaborative internationalism via a “blended” project-based model. Here, learners in the UK, Hong Kong, Singapore and Vietnam liaised online, gradually building community knowledge within a quasi-vocational context. Through legitimate peripheral participation, learners experienced a gradual discursive shift “to one where their subjective view and agency becomes a legitimate part of knowledge enquiry through critical engagement in an interpretative community” (Radclyffe-Thomas *et al.*, 2018, p. 269). The authors report that their community-centred approach enhanced intercultural awareness, immersion, engagement, collaboration and communicative competencies – holistic skills at the centre of lifelong learning (Council of the European Union, 2018). Yet, returning to the deterministic reading of digital tools inevitably engendering cross-cultural empathy, Radclyffe-Thomas *et al.* (2018) stress the importance of active and democratic engagement within the CoP, mainly through processes of reflection and reification that provoke “extended and ‘deep’ encounters” (p. 271). Indeed, it is through such practice that interculturality embeds “a broad range of worldviews” as a lifelong trait (Sanchez Tyson and Watson Vega, 2019, p. 358).

Following Hobbs and Dofs (2017), the protracted digital globalisation of society necessitates contemporary approaches that account for in-and-ex-situ-based encounters within heterogeneous cultural perspectives. Through the conditions detailed here, the SAC CoP model presents a peer-supported, interest-powered, production-centred learning environment that contributes to a shared academic purpose (Smith, 2021), drawing on its community members’ social and historical backgrounds. In this sense, SACs embody the European Commission (2014) calls for digital instruction to adopt an integrated, content-based approach that recognises the importance of culture, communication, cognition and community. Indeed, learners are not decontextualised or “docile” bodies but valued group members contributing to the joint enterprise of their domain. With this understanding in mind, the vision for digital GCED described here is better placed to enhance learners’ long-term understanding[s] of global issues and cultural differences alongside humanistic agendas such as rights and responsibilities (Ogawa, 2021, p. 44). Following Kawachi (2008), lifelong learning is best realised not through a commitment to vocational, competency-based knowledge but processes of intrinsic social motivation. Whether online or face-to-face, cross-

cultural contact through a foreign language necessitates a robust foundational base whereby participants are equipped for long-term interaction and collaboration through contextualised community-building. In this sense, SACs provide the focus for social learning, facilitating glocalisation through day-to-day encounters (Murray *et al.*, 2017) that, in keeping with the stated goals of GCED, prompt “learners to explore their translingual identities and engage in diverse language activities” (Ohara and Mizukara, 2020, p. 6).

Conclusions and recommendations for future practice

Calling on a CoP approach, this study stresses the applicability of self-access to fostering lifelong global citizenship and, more broadly, sociocultural knowledge building. Through gradual processes of legitimate peripheral participation and reification, GCED emerges as an “openly networked, collaborative endeavour” (Smith, 2021), with the multicultural “social fabric” of SAC communities presenting as an epistemic resource that may be called upon to realise a pluralistic vision for globalism. In this sense, reflexivity through the (re)negotiation of meaning establishes a historical basis for collective knowledge that, counter to MEXT’s utilitarian, paradoxically ethnocentric push for “global” *jinzai*, is better placed to bring forth autonomous’ world citizens’ holding genuine, lifelong curiosities in diverse cultures and ways of being. With this goal in view, SAC CoPs may occasion epistemic decentralisation from a decontextualised GCED and the mass-market universities prioritised by MEXT in funding, infrastructure and status. Given current pushes for study abroad, it is clear that institutions have “no choice but to accept the idea of *globalization* [4] proposed by the government” (Ohara and Mizukara, 2020, p. 29). Yet, SACs present a cost-effective, easily accessible means of realising the vocational competencies – including learner autonomy, global mindsets, EFL and digital literacy – demanded by the Japanese State and industry in a highly contextualised, humanistic manner.

In closing, the pedagogical and academic pursuit of SAC-induced GCED remains primed for future growth. Practitioner-researchers in this area would be wise to consider the enduring impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on community-based learning and the potential of digitally-mediated, networked community-building in reducing (if not entirely mitigating) its after-effects. Nevertheless, the reliance on technological interventions gives rise to other challenges, notably cost, training and infrastructure. We must recognise that across-the-board benefits of technology and, more broadly, cross-cultural interaction are far from guaranteed. While this review calls for future research in this area, it does so in the knowledge that communities must identify and accommodate the sociocultural frameworks by which diverse groups navigate online spaces (Smith, 2021). Consistent with the social constructivist foundations of self-access, communities of practice and, to a certain extent, GCED (Blackmore, 2016), each SAC’s “social fabric” will vary significantly. In this regard, future research may prove beneficial in highlighting the motivational and affective factors driving social participation structures within diverse online/blended communities and how they impact attitudes towards lifelong learning. A complimentary longitudinal-qualitative methodology, for instance, may prove fruitful in gaining a deeper insight into lived phenomenological experiences of self-access GCED, particularly within the contexts of critical counter-practice and epistemic decentralisation. With this socially-situated reading of global citizenship in view, self-access emerges as a reflexive and adaptive approach that, contrary to current educational reforms locally, holds the potential to impact the lives of all learners positively in a manner befitting lifelong learning’s dedication to fostering a just and pluralistic tomorrow.

Notes

1. All upper-case instances of domain, community and practice refer to the structural elements of the CoP, while instances featuring the lower-case are used generally.
2. Approximate rates of currency exchange are accurate as of March 2024.
3. Emphasis added.
4. Original emphasis.

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