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The Learner Development Journal Issue 7: Challenging the Conventions of Learner Development Research

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This article is part of a collection of practitioner research on the theme of “Challenging the Conventions in Learner Development Research” for Issue 7 of the Learner Development Journal (LDJ7), edited by Ellen Head, Aya Hayasaki, and Ryo Moriya. Published once a year, each issue of the Learner Development Journal follows a Community of Practices approach over a period of approximately 18 months in which contributors work together, under the guidance of the editors, to share, respond to, and develop their research and writing.

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Introduction to *The Learner Development Journal* Issue 7: Challenging the Conventions of Learner Development Research

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Why “Challenging the Conventions”?

Ellen: The shared global story of 2020-23 challenged many assumptions about teaching and learning, as the pandemic forced us to embrace online teaching under emergency remote conditions, study abroad was cancelled, Brexit, the Black Lives Matter protests, and the January 6 assault on the Capitol all acted together to undermine the pristine image of hegemonic English-speaking countries. Meanwhile, AI resources for translation and text creation were developing in ways that would change students’ perceived needs and profoundly impact the way we do teaching and learning. Back in 2020, it felt, for me at least, as if the era was challenging us. In ELT, there have been numerous attempts to identify trends such as “the multilingual turn” or “the narrative turn,” but it was very hard to say which way things would turn at the time in November 2020 when I first met Aya in a Learner Development SIG forum online. Recently I’ve been jokingly referring to this as the “Everything-Everywhere-All-At-Once Turn” (after the 2022 movie by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert) to express something of the confusion and complexity of that moment, when we could see “everything” online, but we could not actually go anywhere nor predict when that moment would be over. Now in December 2023, it might seem to be business as usual in many contexts, but it’s probably true to say that the experience of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) has affected teaching and learning in profound ways, even if we don’t fully realise it yet.

How we met each other and discovered the theme for LDJ7

Ellen: When I heard Aya’s presentation about dilemmas and trajectories in adolescents’ language learning, at the Learner Development Forum at JALT2020, I was fascinated by the new questions she was asking and her lightning-quick way of making connections between theory and practice. So in the summer of 2021, I approached her to ask if she would be interested in putting forward a proposal for Issue 7 of *The Learner Development Journal* (LDJ7). Aya asked Ryo Moriya to join us, as Ryo was also curious about emotions, life trajectories, and research methods which attempt to capture both the subtleties of individual experience and the connection to a larger picture. All of us

had written for LDJ at different times, and enjoyed the engagement with writing for a small audience, sharing multiple drafts, and continuing to work on the same piece over an extended time period. We started talking about themes and the idea of “challenging the conventions” emerged.

Previous conventions challenged and room for further exploration

Aya: In my view, one of the most important previous studies in our field that “challenged the conventions” is Firth & Wagner (1997). The authors overturned the hidden assumption that many people might have had as second language teachers/learners, namely the native speaker ideology. I myself, as an L2 English user, felt empowered by their argument that we should reconsider the conception that non-native speakers/second language learners are a “deficit” model. They also touched on the issue of what constitutes success, arguing that we should learn not only from failures but also from successes in language learning and use. What is considered deficit from one theoretical lens can be considered full of resources and potentials from another. Another important example that “challenged the conventions” would be how positive psychology was introduced to general psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and eventually to psychology of language learners (Mercer & MacIntyre, 2014). Positive psychology has challenged conventional psychology by shifting the focus from what is wrong to what is right in human life. While psychology has generally aimed to study and treat problems, positive psychology seeks ways to understand and enhance the positive aspects of human functioning such as wellbeing and strengths, as well as embrace and harness negativity.

While Firth & Wagner’s arguments and positive psychology developed from completely different histories of research, these perspectives have commonality in that they both brought fresh insights into learner development research. For instance, in my ongoing PhD research, I am exploring the potential role of English learning experience in the (trans)formation of career perspectives in women from rural Japan; I try to revisit this seemingly resource-limited context from both critical and hopeful perspectives by taking a transdisciplinary approach (Douglas Fir Group, 2016; see also Edsall et al., 2023, this issue). My suggestion here is not just to look at the *bright* side; we need to look at *both* sides, or *multiple* sides of learners—multiple and complex emotions, identities, and contexts within each individual (see also Ryo’s story below). Of course, this kind of holistic approach is not new in itself. However, what both fascinates and challenges me is the dilemmas, ambivalence, and contradictions in individuals’ lived experience, and these still seem to leave a lot of room for further exploration.

Looking back, I feel this room for exploration was what brought us LDJ7 editors and contributors together as well. We (Ellen, Aya, and Ryo) started by sharing what it meant to challenge conventions in our respective studies, which naturally made us curious about how practitioners and researchers in other contexts and from more diverse backgrounds might, could, and should be looking at learner development from new angles, and how we could learn from one another. Distanced from our normal lives because of the pandemic, we were somehow given more time and space than ever to rethink what we have done and what we have taken for granted in language education. One positive outcome of the pandemic, if any, was that it allowed us to explore such *room* for exploration and discussion together without being in the same *room* physically.

Historia: From person-in-context to context-in-person?

Ryo: Regarding “challenging the conventions,” I am working on sociocultural theory (hereafter SCT) based on Vygotsky’s ideas. Specifically, I am interested in praxis (the fusion of theory and practice), combining SCT and advising in language learning, to longitudinally investigate *perezhivanie* (a Russian term that represents the dialectical unity of both “cognition and emotion” and “individual agent and environment”) in advising settings that encourage learners to be autonomous/agentive and provide individualized and optimal support (e.g., Moriya, 2022, 2023). One of Vygotsky’s ideas that greatly impacted my thinking about my research L2 topics was that learning cannot be achieved only by individuals or certain targeted variables, but, in reality, involves a myriad of mediating interactants (including artifacts and interlocutors).

Vygotsky critically examined the dualism (e.g., subjective or behavioral psychology), common in psychology at the time, and theorized anew about the relationship between childhood development and education (see Vygotsky, 1997). Although he did not directly mention L2 learning, sociocultural theorists have incorporated his ideas into L2 learning/teaching as praxis (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014), and we can identify glimpses of them in many of the LDJ7 articles. For example, the analysis of peer interaction in Kawasaki’s paper (Kawasaki, 2023) owes much to Vygotsky’s ideas. In this issue, too, the idea of linguistic abilities growing through interaction with a whole group emerges in Takagi, Tanaka and Minami’s study of an autonomy-fostering teacher (Takagi et al., 2023). It might not be an exaggeration to say that none of the LDJ7 articles would be written in quite the same way without the influence of Vygotsky, albeit indirectly. Among the SCT-related terms (e.g., sociocultural interaction, mediation, and longitudinal development), one of the well-known concepts in the theory Vygotsky systematized is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD is a concept he created because of his dialectical view of relationships with others beyond the individual. It may sound paradoxical, but the ZPD reflects his idea that it is not enough to look only at the individual in order to face the individual. That is why the futuristic and collective aspect of *what we will be able to do* is crucial in the ZPD.

Vygotsky also incorporated dialectical materialism into his theory and emphasized *historia* (i.e., four different geneses; see Lantolf et al., 2018). In English, story and history are different words, but etymologically, *historia* is the Latin word for both. In fact, past events can be described as stories about something/someone. Like the ZPD, another paradox is at work: to understand the future, we need to face more about the past rather than only the future. Vygotskian sociocultural theorists have long stressed the importance of context since the 1980s, or rather, it has been a fundamental premise of their works (e.g., Frawley & Lantolf, 1985). There is no denying that looking at context-in-person is essential now in exploring learner development. Context-in-person truly represents a person’s *historia* (or history-in-person, according to Holland & Lave, 2001). Just as Vygotsky challenged the conventions of his time with dialectical ideas, we hope the works of LDJ7 contributors who have faced learner/teacher *historia* will become cornerstones for the reader’s future, which will be your *historia* afterward.

Developing LDJ7

Ellen: During the process of talking with writers and reading their early drafts, it became clear that as learners, teachers, and practitioner researchers, we need conventions as a place to start from, even if we do decide to challenge them. In this context, “conventions” mean both ways of writing, and awareness of what others have done in the past – practices they did and the theories that they had.

As each issue of the LDJ has a two-year gestation period, LDJ7 writers and editors had a unique opportunity to work with an audience with whom they had a social relationship, to track our own and each other’s changes, and notice when and how these show up in writing. During the meetings which we had online with contributors, there was an atmosphere of discovery and challenge as authors and editors asked questions and sometimes prodded each other to discover new aspects of the historia represented. As a result, LDJ7 authors took up a variety of inter/transdisciplinary approaches to gain fresh insights into the dynamic nature of learner development. In this issue, our authors focused particularly on the minutiae of relationships, emotions, and events related to learning at the most intimate level.

Such richness of interaction leads to tough decisions for the editors, as we have the task of setting boundaries which inevitably result in losses - of the evanescent insights in a marginal comment or a Zoom discussion, and of brilliant ideas that inadvertently spiralled away from the main theme. Along with setting boundaries, we also had the great pleasure of walking alongside the authors as they developed and explicated their research, as well as situated their stories in relation to their lived experiences of teaching and learning.

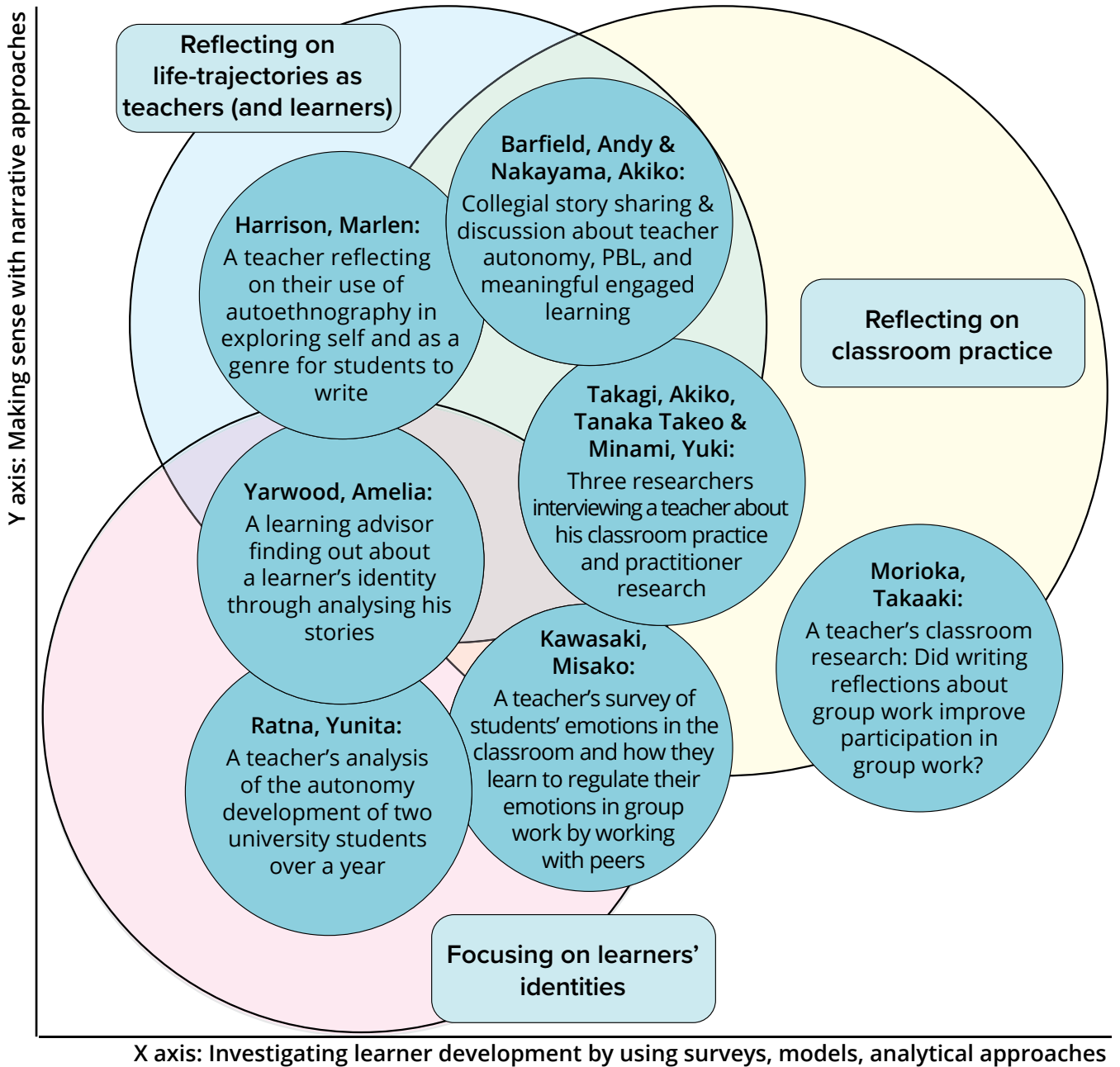
Challenging the Convention of Linear Reading

To provide an overview of this issue, the following map offers a visual representation of some of the themes which connect the articles in LDJ7. The three large circles correspond to the themes of the three groups which the LDJ7 contributors were divided into for the purpose of discussing their nascent research projects, sharing their developing drafts, and offering feedback on each others’ work. One group focused on learner’s emotions and identities, the second group on classroom practice for developing learner autonomy. The third group were drawn together by an interest in exploring the nature of writing as a practitioner-researcher, in terms of genre. In the map, we have labelled their focus as “reflecting on life-trajectories as teachers and learners” in order to bring out the themes they have in common with the other groups.

For those who prefer a linear outline, we have arranged the articles by starting with the focus on a single learner, broadening out to look at learner’s emotions in groups, classrooms and finally teachers’ life trajectories. However, we hope you will discover many resonances between the articles. Ideally, we would make this map into a three-dimensional, interactive game in which you, the reader, could move various articles around in accordance with the resonances that you notice.

LDJ7: Challenging the Conventions of Learner Development Research: Thematic Connections

Each colored circle represents one article, with author name(s) and a short summary. The map can be imagined as a three-dimensional, interactive game in which you, the reader, can jump from place to place and also move various articles around in accordance with the resonances that you notice.



More about this mind map: Articles which are closer to the bottom part of the page used more quantitative and analytic approaches. Articles closer to the left hand side of the page used qualitative approaches. The larger circles represent thematic connections between articles.

Figure 1. Thematic connections across LDJ7

***Amelia Yarwood*, “Tracing Emotion in the (Re)Construction of an EFL Identity During a Self-Directed Learning Module: A Short Story Approach”**

Amelia Yarwood's exploration of the emotions and learner identity of a single language learner reveals the dramatic shifts the learner experienced while he was studying on a self-directed learning course. The author analyses the stories which he told in interviews some time after the course had ended when he had had time to reflect. Amelia combines three different analytical methods – a short story analysis, using Barkhuizen (2016), together with emotional qualities analysis and identity analysis using narrative re-writing – resulting in a study which challenges the conventions of learner development research in terms of detail, priority given to emotions, and learner-centeredness.

***Ratna Yunita*, “Investigating Learner Autonomy Development Through a Complex Dynamic Systems Theory View: An Indonesian Context”**

Ratna Yunita looks at the development of learner autonomy in Indonesia in a longitudinal study focusing on two students. She contextualizes her research by looking at her own story of autonomy and Indonesian educational policy. Her in-depth study then focuses on the dynamic fluctuations of autonomy development experienced by her students during 2020-21. Carrying out retrospective interviews, Ratna identifies four factors which operate as part of a complex, dynamic system, including the learners' affect, behavioural change, restrictions, and external push and support. The compelling interplay between these factors over time provides valuable insights into how students may be supported in becoming more autonomous in different local contexts.

***Misako Kawasaki*, “The Influence of Peer Interaction on Emotion Regulation in the English Classroom”**

Misako Kawasaki describes a semester-long study of the emotion regulation which developed between peers in her class. Initially, she surveyed the students about the emotions which they experienced in class. Repeating the survey in the middle and at the end of the semester, Misako provided opportunities for the students to reflect and share reflection on the strategies they used to regulate emotions in negative situations. Peer interaction had a significant effect on their emotion regulation, generally promoting positive emotions. This innovative study suggests that classroom teachers can help students improve emotion regulation by specifically introducing discussion of emotions in the language learning classroom.

***Akiko Takagi, Takeo Tanaka, & Yuki Minami*, “The Role of Practitioner Research in Exploring Learner Autonomy for in-Service Teachers: A Retrospective Case Study”**

Akiko Takagi, Takeo Tanaka, and Yuki Minami collaborate with a junior high school teacher, Naoya Miyazaki, to find out more about the development of autonomous learning in the classroom. The three authors wanted to learn more about how Naoya did this through practitioner research over a two-year period. Interviewing him retrospectively about an article that he had written and that included teacher journal reflections on his practices, Akiko, Takeo, and Minami analysed themes from the multiple sources of data to build up a more sophisticated understanding of Naoya's learner autonomy-fostering perspectives in this multi-layered study.

***Takaaki Morioka*, “Exploring the Impact of Mandatory Reflection Activities on Students’ Perceptions of Group Work”**

Takaaki Morioka reports on the effect of mandatory reflection as a follow-up to group learning activities with first-year students aged 15 to 16 at a technical college in Japan. He carried out a comparative study in which one group participated in cooperative learning activities and wrote regular reflections, while the other group participated in cooperative learning without writing any reflections. All the students were somewhat positive about group learning, but the group which wrote reflections were not as positive about their learning experiences. The study thus leads Takaaki to challenge his assumption that reflection would result in enhanced learner engagement.

***Marlen Harrison*, “Why I Utilize Autoethnography to Promote Learner Development: A Reflexive Narrative of English Teacher Development”**

Marlen Harrison argues for the practice of autoethnography as a mode of self-development which can bring insight to both teachers and learners. He describes his own innovative use of autoethnography for self-exploration and his experiments with autoethnography as an assignment for students in university English writing classrooms in Japan, Finland, and the USA. Reflecting on his journey as an autoethnography instructor, Marlen makes original connections between identity, self-awareness, and autonomy, as well as provides practical suggestions for using autoethnography with learners.

***Andy Barfield & Akiko Nakayama*, “Collegially Exploring Engaged Meaningful Learning: Stories, Perspectives, Dialogue, and Issues”**

Andy Barfield and Akiko Nakayama’s piece challenges conventions in multiple ways, building up a patchwork of parallel stories and reflexive dialogue, ranging over themes which include teacher socialization, learner and teacher autonomy, project-based learning (PBL), and other non-conventional approaches to learning. Akiko and Andy’s article, co-written in a process which included regular collaborative meetings on Zoom, captures the flavour of collegial dialogue, and as such it stands to remind us of the special, dialogic nature of LDJ.

***Dominic Edsall, with Ellen Head & Aya Hayasaki*, “Towards Complexity in Challenging Learner Autonomy Research Conventions: A Wider View on Learner Development”**

We (Ellen, Aya, and Ryo) asked Dominic to write a piece for LDJ7 which would provide a theoretical underpinning and rationale for our intuitive feeling that both qualitative and quantitative research could have a place side by side in LDJ. In this paper, Dominic focuses on making connections between various different research perspectives, drawing on the work of Bhaskar, a critical realist philosopher, and the Douglas Fir group, to ask directly “What are the conventions of learner autonomy research, and why should they be challenged?” The writing was further enriched by continuous dialogue and questioning by Aya and Ellen with Dominic; however, the authorial voice, knowledge, and overall perspective remain Dominic’s.

Dominique Vola Ambinintsoa, “Concluding Commentary: Reflect, Write, and Share”

Dominique Vola Ambinintsoa offers a thoughtful critique of each article, together with a strong endorsement of reflective writing as practitioner research. In this concluding piece, Vola exhorts us to engage in reflective writing and collegial sharing, reminding us how close the process of writing is to reading. If you would like more orientation before jumping into LDJ7, then this commentary might be the best place to start. But you are warmly invited to find your own route.

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The editors express our heart-felt thanks to each and every contributor for creating and sharing these journeys of discovery together with us. We would also like to say a giant thank you to the reviewers and, above all, to the steering group for their tireless work and attention to detail without which LDJ7 could not be produced at all. Their hard work has resulted in the illusion that the issue came together effortlessly, when in fact much of the work was done behind the scenes by the STG. We also want to offer our sincere thanks to Ivan Lombardi for working on the layout of LDJ7 with amazing speed, insight, and good-humoured replies to our demanding requests. In the beginning stages, Gareth Barnes and Takaaki Morioka joined us and contributed their ideas to the Call for Proposals, helping to shape our thinking and collaboration. It is a great privilege to be part of LDJ and, although all three of us started out intending to “give back” to the LDJ community, it is probably true to say that we have received more than we have given, many times over.

— Ellen Head, Aya Hayasaki, & Ryo Moriya
December 2023

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