

Lost in Research: an attempt to create a learning community for research students at an Australian university

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Abstract

This self-reflective report introduces a learning community for research students whose research interests are related to Japanese applied linguistics, Japanese language pedagogy and Japanese cultural studies at an Australian university. Research students at Australian universities often feel that they do not have sufficient intellectual and social support. In order to improve the research environment for postgraduate and honours students in the Japanese program at an Australian university, a number of research students have organised a learning community called the Benkyokai (study group). The findings from observations and written documents indicate that the Benkyokai has provided its members (research students) with both emotional and academic support. Through sharing their research experiences and resources at the Benkyokai, the research students support each other in various aspects of their research career. In other words, the Benkyokai functions as a Community of Practice (Wenger et al. 2002; Wenger 2006).

Keywords

Research students; Australian universities; Community of Practice; Emotional and academic support; Benkyokai (study group)

研究者の孤独:オーストラリアの大学で大学院研究生のためのラーニング・コミュニティを構築する試み

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要旨

自らをふりかえる意味合いも込めたこの発表では、日本語の応用言語学、教授法やカルチュラル・スタディーズに関心を持つ、オーストラリアの大学の大学院研究生のために作られた学習コミュニティを紹介する。オーストラリアの大学では研究生の多くが、知的にも社会的にも十分な支援を受けていないと感じている。あるオーストラリアの大学の日本語学科では、大学院生や名誉学位を目指すオナーズの学生のための研究環境を改善すべく、研究生のグループが「勉強会」と称する学習コミュニティを立ち上げた。この学習コミュニティを観察し、所見をまとめた結果明らかになったのは、勉強会が、メンバーである研究生にとって精神面でも学術面でも支えになっていることである。研究生は、勉強会で自分たちの経験や知恵を共有することによって、研究生活の様々な側面において支え合っている。言い換えれば、勉強会は「実践共同体」(Wenger et al. 2002; Wenger 2006)として機能しているのである。

キーワード

研究生、オーストラリアの大学、実践共同体、精神面および学術面での支え、勉強会

Introduction

As Australia has the fourth-largest number of Japanese language learners in the world (The Japan Foundation 2013), it is not difficult to find academic articles discussing how we can improve the learning environment for Japanese language learners in Australia (e.g. Thomson 2009; Fukui 2014). However, articles discussing the learning/research environment for students who engage in Japanese language education research are scarce. Research students form an indispensable component of Australian Japanese language education, as they not only engage in research on Japanese applied linguistics and Japanese language pedagogy, but may also become the teachers and researchers who make contributions to further the development of Japanese language education in Australia.

This paper is a self-reflective report, which introduces a learning community for research students in Japanese linguistics, pedagogy and cultural studies at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Australia. The three authors are members of the learning community and will reflect upon their own and their peers' practices in this report. This learning community is called the Benkyokai, a Japanese term meaning "study group", and is analysed based on the concept of a "Community of Practice" (Wenger et al. 2002; Wenger 2006). The aims of this paper are to portray how the Benkyokai has been organised, and to report how the Benkyokai has supported the research students so far. It articulates problems faced by these students and describes the processes in which they overcome these problems through their participation in the Benkyokai.

Problems

Research students at Australian universities inevitably encounter many dissatisfactions and difficulties throughout their research degree. According to Conrad (2006, 34), the least satisfactory aspect of doctoral study is the intellectual and social climate. For students, the lack of intellectual and social support beyond their supervisors creates a sense of isolation, which can impact on planning and conducting their research and writing their theses. Joining a supportive research community which provides intellectual and social support is thought to be key to the successful and satisfactory completion of research degrees (Conrad 2006).

At UNSW, where this study takes place, faculties provide their research students with some support, such as seminars and workshops for research students, in an attempt to create an intellectual and social climate that is favourable for them. However, these seminars and workshops are held intermittently, and participants vary. Through these experiences, research students in the Japanese applied and educational linguistics found

it difficult to share their research interests and passion with other research students in political science, media, translation and the like. In other words, these occasional seminars and workshops, which include research students from various disciplines, are less likely to help with forming a strong, supportive and continuing community among those who share a common research interest.

At UNSW, the number of research students in Japanese applied linguistics and Japanese language pedagogy has constantly increased over the past few years to reach a critical mass. Thus it was timely to create a learning community—or Community of Practice—for research students in the Japanese program to provide them with support not offered by the faculty.

Community of Practice

A Community of Practice (CoP) is defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al. 2002, 4). In order to be classified as a CoP, the community contains three particular characteristics: domain, community, and practice as described in Table 1 (Wenger 2006).

Table 1: Domain, Community, and Practice

Domain	The area of particular interest shared and pursued by all members of the community.
Community	A particular group in which all members are expected to participate in order to pursue a shared interest, while building a mutually supportive relationship through engagement in various activities.
Practice	Activities developed by members in the community to develop and maintain their own knowledge and skills related to the domain, and to learn from other members through participation.

A CoP requires continuous interaction between members. Conversation with a stranger with different domain of interest does not lead to the establishment of a CoP. Members in a CoP will be able to recognise, given the proper structure, that they are in the best position to pursue their own objectives through interaction with other members (Wenger 2006, 4).

Benkyokai

A group of research students in the Japanese program at UNSW has been operating the Benkyokai since 2011. The Benkyokai aims to improve its members' research by sharing experiences and relevant information regarding their research amongst members, and by supporting each other in various aspects of their research career. This section will introduce how the Benkyokai is organised.

Domain

Benkyokai members belong to the Japanese Studies program at UNSW and share research areas—that is, Japanese applied linguistics, Japanese language pedagogy and Japanese cultural studies. Each member has a research topic related to these areas. All members are very keen to improve their own research to successfully complete their degrees, secure scholarships and gain future employment. Their shared interests and goals help create a common ground and a sense of common identity amongst the members, fostering a sense of belonging.

Community

Table 2 describes 16 past and present Benkyokai members, including an academic supervisor. Currently, 11 members are active (two have successfully completed their degrees and started or plan to start more advanced degrees [marked by *]), while four members have successfully completed their degrees but continue to contribute as peripheral members (marked by **). One member withdrew from the Benkyokai in 2012 because he decided to discontinue his research project (marked by ***). The members are diverse in terms of their research experience (Honours, Masters, PhD), language background (Japanese native speaker, English native speaker, Chinese native speaker), enrolment status (off-campus or on-campus, full-time or part-time), and other factors such as teaching/learning experience. The Benkyokai also allocates roles to members, such as leader and event coordinator. This diversity creates multidimensional interactions among the Benkyokai members.

Table 2: Benkyokai members

Name ¹	Degrees	First Languages	Periods in Benkyokai
Tsukasa	PhD	Japanese	2011 S2–current
Kumi	PhD	Japanese	2011 S2–current
Sara*	PhD/ Honours	English/ Cantonese	2011 S2–current
Yoshinobu	MA by research	Japanese	2011 S2–current
Takako*	MA by coursework ² /PhD	Japanese	2012 S1–current
Kanako	MA by coursework	Japanese	2012 S2–current
Toshiko	MA by coursework	Japanese	2013 S1–current
Yukie	MA by coursework	Japanese	2013 S1–current
Megumi	Practicum student	Japanese	2013 S1–current
Takeshi	Graduate Diploma	Japanese	2013 S2–current
Professor Robson	Supervisor	Japanese	2011 S2–current
Anne**	PhD	English	2011 S2–current
Momoko**	PhD	Japanese	2011 S2–current
Linda**	MA by coursework	Mandarin	2012 S1–current
Emily**	Honours	English/Cantonese	2012 S2–current
Robert***	MA by coursework	Mandarin	2012 S1

¹ All names are pseudonymous.

² Coursework students in the Benkyokai are enrolled in a special project course where they are required to conduct a research project for one year.

Practice

The Benkyokai operates via two main practices: weekly meetings and information exchanges on members' own Wikispaces³ and emails. Weekly meetings are organised as follows:

Table 3: Weekly Meetings

Time	Thursday 4-6pm
Place	A booked classroom/the main library's meeting room/the supervisor's office
Languages used in the meetings	Japanese (occasionally English)
Basic flow of each meeting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Members report their weekly research progress and receive feedback on their own work from other members. 2. Members discuss a specific topic relevant to their research (e.g. read academic papers on learner identity and have discussions; discuss how to structure a literature review; rehearse their presentations for conferences and receive feedback from each other). 3. Members decide the discussion topic for the following week. 4. Members set goals for the coming week.

Members who are unable to come to the university campus participate in the meetings via Skype. The chosen leader of the group usually leads discussions, however all members have the opportunity to contribute to discussion in a relaxed atmosphere (some members often bring snacks to share in the meetings). All members agree on the basic principle that they must contribute constructive arguments to create a supportive environment.

The Benkyokai has also had its own Wikispaces website since 2012, providing members with yet another way to participate and communicate with each other. Since the website contains some confidential research data, only registered members have access to the website. The members mainly use Japanese to communicate.

The Benkyokai website has two main functions. The first is to share information and resources for research and seminars/conferences. Members post a variety of information and resources on the site, such as details of upcoming seminars/conferences, references of useful readings, questions regarding theories and research methods. Members also

³ Wikispaces are social writing platforms for education (<http://www.wikispaces.com>). Users can create their own page, communicate with each other and work on writing projects alone or as a team.

use email to share important information and resources, as well as to offer personal support. Minutes are taken at each meeting and posted to the website so that all members can keep track of what has been discussed.

The second function is the recording of individual research progress. All members have their own page where they can write about their research, and post weekly goals, research plans and reports of their own research progress.

The Benkyokai regularly organises gatherings and events for both academic and social purposes. Members have also formed panels to participate in conferences, and have prepared and discussed presentations together. At the end of semester, the Benkyokai organises a dinner party to provide members with an opportunity to get to know each other better in an informal setting.

Emotional and academic support

This section outlines how the Benkyokai has supported research students by analysing three data sources: members' written comments,⁴ exchanges between members from 2011 to 2013, and participatory observation (the authors also participate in the Benkyokai). Data indicates that the Benkyokai provides two main types of support to its members—emotional support, and opportunities to develop academic knowledge and research skills. This section also describes one of the challenges involved in strengthening the Benkyokai as a CoP.

Emotional support

As indicated above, the primary motivation for establishing this study group was to solve one of the all-too-common issues that postgraduate research students face at universities: namely, isolation. The data indicates that the Benkyokai has been functioning well to achieve this goal. For example, Takako points out that the Benkyokai is not only for *benkyō* (study), but it is also a “home” for her. She explains that “we share our personal experiences” like a family, and this home provides the individual with a space to grow. Takako’s perception of “the Benkyokai as a home to belong” is reflected in her active participation. She often takes the initiative in welcoming new members to the community (by proposing/organising social events) so that they can begin to “feel at home” in the Benkyokai. Takako is often called *okāsan* (mum) in Japanese by other members of the group because of this caring role. This indicates that

4 In 2012, the members wrote how they felt about the Benkyokai to review its effectiveness. Each report was one page written in English.

other members also see the Benkyokai as a home that gives them a sense of belonging. The Benkyokai works as a “comfort zone” that protects members from becoming isolated in their new academic environments and from getting emotionally lost there.

Yoshinobu’s comment below also illustrates how the Benkyokai provides emotional support to its members. Yoshinobu, who cannot always physically be on-campus due to full-time work, points out that the Benkyokai is “an indispensable place” for him. He says:

As a full-time high school teacher, it is a little difficult for me to keep proceeding with my study constantly as sometimes I have to leave my study aside. But, at least once a week, I have this Benkyokai to attend physically or on Skype. By attending it, I can feel reassured that I am also a research student like others as well as proceed with my study by receiving advice from other members of the Benkyokai.

This comment reveals that, while Yoshinobu too regards the Benkyokai as “a home” to which he belongs, he also considers it a place where he is reassured of his identity as a research student in the Japanese program at UNSW, not just a full-time worker. Although it might be difficult for him to keep up the pace with his research due to his physical isolation over long periods, this comment shows that his regular participation in the Benkyokai helps him maintain his identity as a research student by constantly interacting with others in the group.

Opportunities to develop academic knowledge and research skills

It is important for research students to develop the knowledge and skills to conduct research and write academic papers. The Benkyokai functions as a unique space for helping members to develop research skills and academic knowledge. Members can decide what they want to do in weekly meetings, and can therefore address areas that they want to improve or develop. For example, when Toshiko was writing an abstract for her research project for the first time, she asked other members for comments and advice. Other members were more experienced in writing academic papers, so they shared their knowledge and experience with her. After receiving comments from other members and re-writing her abstract, she described her feelings as follows:

Thank you very much for giving me comments on my first abstract ... I have learnt a variety of things through your comments on structures of abstract, appropriate academic expressions, grammar mistakes, and things I should add to my abstract.⁵

As this example demonstrates, the Benkyokai provides members with academic support that is not otherwise available, helping them to develop academic knowledge and skills required to become a competent researcher.

Another member, Emily, who is not a native speaker of Japanese indicates that the Benkyokai has helped improve her Japanese language proficiency as well as develop her knowledge of Japanese language education and culture.

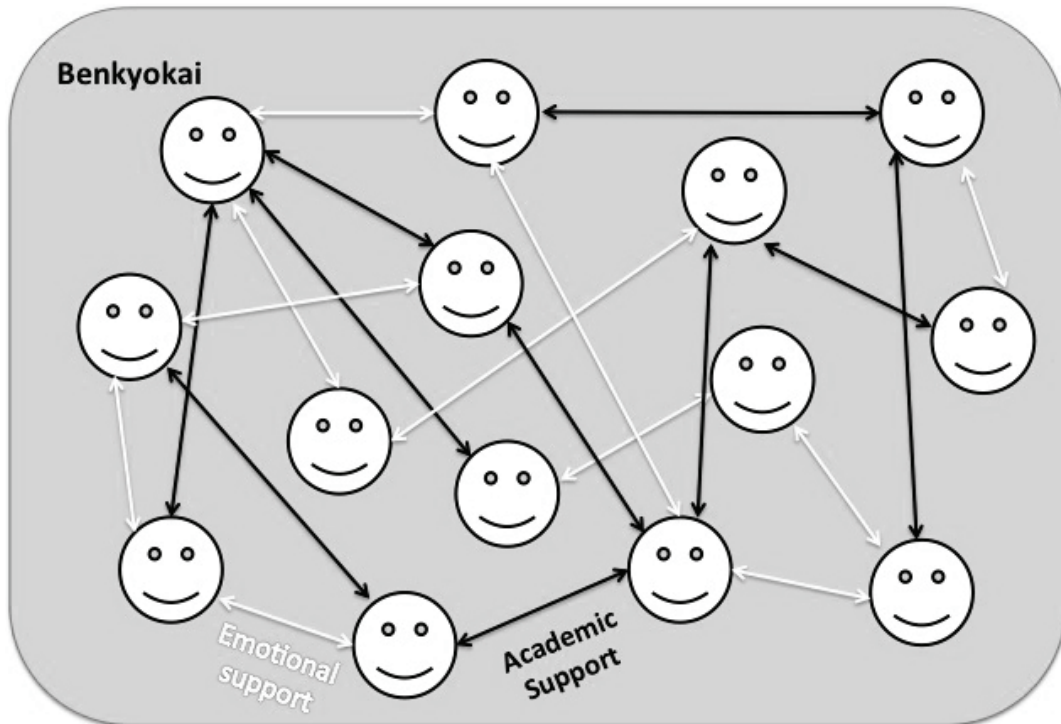
As a non-native Japanese speaker and a first-time research student at university, being a part of Benkyokai has been a great learning experience. The consistent weekly meetings in Japanese have helped me keep up with my Japanese [language] study. The support network within Benkyokai is very strong – regardless of research career, background, or stage of progress, everyone is willing to extend his or her support and advice. It is also interesting for the members of Benkyokai to be able to develop interest and offer insights into each other's research, across research areas that span from culture to language education.

Because discussions in weekly meetings, on the website and through emails are conducted mainly in Japanese, the Benkyokai provides non-native speakers of Japanese with valuable opportunities to improve their Japanese language proficiency (for more details, please refer to Thomson and Chan 2014).

Diagram 1 illustrates the support system in the Benkyokai. The Benkyokai contains complicated, multi-dimensional interactions which allow members to support each other academically and emotionally.

5 私の初めてのアブストラクトにコメントしてくださって、本当にありがとうございました。アブストラクトの構成の仕方、的確な表現、文法の訂正、もっと挿入すべきことなどのコメントをいただき、色々なことを勉強させていただきました。

Diagram 1: The Support System in the Benkyokai



All members have different backgrounds and experiences, and different skills they want to develop. The Benkyokai leverages these differences to help members develop the skills necessary to become competent researchers. By creating opportunities to share knowledge, experience and resources with each other, members not only develop a stronger sense of community but also successfully improve various aspects, helping them to better conduct research and write academic papers.

It is worth mentioning that the Benkyokai is not an alternative to formal academic supervision. It provides research students with an important additional dimension of support. As their supervisor also participates in the Benkyokai as a member, and continues to provide necessary supervisory support to members individually outside the Benkyokai, research students do not lose any input from their supervisor. By having this unique opportunity to share thoughts and opinions regarding their research and learning/teaching experience, members receive more diverse feedback, support and information as it comes not only from their supervisor but also from each other. The Benkyokai is a community where research students support each other over in the course of their study. This improves their research environment and productivity.

Challenges

Generally, the Benkyokai provides members with the emotional and academic support presented above. However, it is also true that the Benkyokai faces challenges as a CoP. The Benkyokai accepted four new members in Semester 2, 2012 and Semester 1, 2013. However, the new members took time to understand how to participate. One of the reasons was that new members had few chances to see how other members had been involved. For example, Takako (who joined the Benkyokai Semester 1, 2012 and took a caring, motherly role), was absent for several months in 2013 for personal reasons. She would have been a good mediator to bridge the gap between the founding members and the new members. Members have attempted to organise informal dinner parties in addition to information sessions to explain how the Benkyokai works. As membership changes, it is important that the Benkyokai develops structures to help new members settle in and form stronger bonds so that all members can make the most of the Benkyokai.

Conclusion

This paper describes the Benkyokai and how it supports research students in the Japanese program at UNSW, through the concept of community of practice. Despite the fact that universities try to support research students in a variety of ways, such as seminars and workshops, many research students still feel that they do not have enough intellectual and social support. Often, university-led support events are inclusive of diverse disciplines and lack continuity. The Benkyokai is organised by research students themselves who share similar interests. These members have developed the structures and practices to maintain the Benkyokai as a community of practice that provides members with important emotional and academic support.

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