

Reflections on the Origins of the World Language Center at Soka University

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Time certainly flies—nearly twenty years have passed since the World Language Center was established!

I had the great honor to be involved in the planning and design of the World Language Center during the 1990s. WLC Director Professor Ozaki has invited me to share memories of those historic and exciting times, and I am thrilled to have the opportunity to do so.

I would first like to share some impressions going back to 1987, when I arrived at Soka University from the USA. I was amazed by how eager and determined Soka University students were to learn foreign languages in order to play a greater role on the world stage. Many of my students wanted to practice English outside of class, so we would meet in my office or at restaurants on campus to chat. I loved doing that, but I had so many students that making time to converse with all of them was not always possible. In class one day, students had the task of sharing one of their dreams for the future. After everyone had shared his or her dream, a student surprised me by asking, “Mr. Miller, what’s your dream for the future?” What immediately came to mind was this: “My dream is that there will be a place at Soka University where

students can go to practice English and other languages.” The fact that the leadership of Soka University had the vision to create just such a place is a testament to their wisdom and their sincere commitment to providing quality foreign language instruction and to fostering a steady stream of global citizens.

I must also share my impression that, as eager as Soka University students were to learn English and other foreign languages back then, conditions were not so favorable. English conversation classes could be quite large, and they met for 90 minutes just once per week. There were students and faculty from other countries on campus, but few organized opportunities for them to meet and converse with Japanese students.

The idea for the World Language Center was certainly a response to the students’ yearning for improved conditions for foreign language practice. I recall senior university administrators asking me frankly, “What changes would make English classes more effective?” After consulting with colleagues, I offered these suggestions: create an articulated English curriculum delivered over the students’ first two years, hold language classes multiple times per week, keep classes small,

hire more instructors trained in communicative language teaching methods, and use English as the medium of instruction.

When all of those suggestions were implemented over a relatively short time, I realized that Soka University is truly a model of humanistic education—it exists to serve the needs of students. The two-year curriculum that a team of instructors created has evolved into English 1, 2, 3, and 4. For more advanced English learners preparing to study abroad, more intensive courses were needed. A group of instructors, including Donna McInnis and Bruce Carrick, developed an English for Academic Purposes curriculum. That was the foundation for the courses now appropriately titled English for Study Abroad (ESA). Through the WLC web site, I've learned that several other specialized courses have been created, such as Test Preparation TOEFL, English Communication Advanced Intensive (ECAI), Test Preparation TOEIC, and Professional English for Career Development (ECD). Soka University students who graduated before the WLC's opening must be so pleased and impressed by these developments.

But the WLC is far more than just language courses. Those of us who were given the task of designing the center talked with students to learn what kind of services, programs, and facilities would be attractive and beneficial. At that time, I was doing doctoral research on what seemed to be a tension between communicative language teaching practices being "imported" from Western countries and Japanese educational traditions. I am deeply indebted to Izumi Kanzaka, who was then a student and is now a WLC faculty member, for helping me with that research. I could not have completed my dissertation without her

insightful assistance.

Here are some things we learned: communicative language teaching methods can indeed feel strange and uncomfortable because learners must be actively engaged and willing to express themselves and make mistakes; instructors should become familiar with the cultures of their students and adapt their teaching styles accordingly; and Japanese instructors with training in communicative language teaching methods can be valuable guides and role models for students and can also serve as cultural advisors to foreign instructors.

Students told us they would be inclined to visit the WLC if it was a clean, modern, and comfortable setting. They hoped it would be a place for both informal gatherings and formal study, where they could access reading materials and foreign films, TV programming, and music. They wanted the WLC to be equipped with the latest technology for language study and for connecting with people in other countries.

The WLC design steering team was shown a drawing of the seventh floor of the Central Tower that was under construction, so we knew the size and shape of the space the WLC would occupy, but our daunting task was to design the layout of rooms and determine the functions of those rooms. Based on input from students, we thought a part of the center could be made to feel a bit like a spacious hotel lobby, with various arrangements of furniture for people to meet and talk, or maybe to watch a foreign film, newscast, or TV program. Another area would have tables, like a coffee shop. There would be seminar rooms, a library, computer areas, and a reception area for greeting visitors to the center.

Barbara Wells, who at the time was an instructor at Soka Women's College, came up with the name "Chit Chat Club" and was its first coordinator. The Chit Chat Club has always been an "English only" space. I imagine thousands of students over the years have taken a courageous first step into the Chit Chat Club. That is so admirable! I hope that first step has led to improved confidence and language skills, and to other English language encounters, at Soka University and beyond.

Professor Olivier Urbain, who taught French and English classes at Soka University (and now directs the Min-on Music Research Institute), was the first coordinator of the Global Village. He put his heart and soul into providing opportunities for students to converse with speakers of foreign languages other than English. I mentioned earlier that Soka University students rarely had chances to meet with students and instructors from other countries who were on our campus. Now, however, thanks to the Global Village, these kinds of encounters have become commonplace.

Professor Ozaki invited me to share expectations I might have for the WLC going forward. What I would say is that the World Language Center is uniquely positioned to play a central role in helping Soka University live up to its lofty guiding principles:

Be the highest seat of learning for humanistic education.

Be the cradle of a new culture.

Be a fortress for the peace of humankind.

The WLC is a place where students can develop their capacity to promote humanistic education, cultural transformation, and peace. The world is in great need of such people.

Secondly, Soka University Founder Dr. Ikeda listed these components of global citizenship in the speech he delivered at Columbia University, Teacher's College in 1996:

The wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and living.

The courage not to fear or deny difference; but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures, and to grow from encounters with them.

The compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one's immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in distant places.

We hoped the WLC would become a place where students could develop these forms of wisdom, courage, and compassion, so we included Dr. Ikeda's guidelines in the WLC Mission Statement. We wrote, "To nurture such attributes, the World Language Center shall be a place for connecting with the world, celebrating the richness of its diverse cultures, and transcending borders through understanding and friendship."

I have visited Soka University every few years since moving back to America in 2001, and I love to stop by the WLC. My impression is that the WLC has consistently expanded and improved its offering of services, and it also becomes more warm and welcoming each time I visit. Two years ago, I had the pleasure of seeing the WLC in its new location on the 2nd floor of Global Square within the SPACE learning commons. My goodness! It was bustling with activity, and all around me were students excitedly engaged in a wide range of language practice activities. You should all be very proud of what you have built through

your creativity, hard work, and dedication to students.

To the many people who have contributed to the mission of the WLC over the years and to all the students who have made use of WLC programs, activities, and courses to deepen friendships, engage in cultural sharing and learning, and improve language skills, I want to congratulate you on what you have accomplished, and to offer warm wishes for the continued development of the World Language Center.