

**CULI Instructors' Use of and Attitudes toward
the Self-Access Learning Center**

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Abstract

Learner autonomy should be promoted in order that students can learn more by themselves. Teachers play very significant roles in guiding students to this rather new concept. The Self-Access Learning Center at CULI can be a good start for English teachers to enhance the concept of learner autonomy to CU students. However, it seems that both the teachers and students here have not been motivated enough to use the center. The current study shows that most instructors at CULI believe that the SALC has an important role in promoting independent learning and students should be encouraged to come and work in the place regularly. Yet, most instructors have never conducted any activities at the center or fulfilled their new roles as facilitators. Rather, they have assigned students to work totally alone there. Thus, more training should be provided to the instructors to better understand the concept of the SALC and obtain practical knowledge about it.

Introduction

Most English teachers see the importance of helping their students to be able to learn and practice English on their own outside class in order to become effective language users. According to Nunan (1997), for learners to become able language users, it is essential to develop some degree of autonomy. However, how do our

students become autonomous and independent in their learning if we, their teachers, never give them a chance or guide them to learn and experience being autonomous? Sheerin (1997) seems right when pointing out, "It is the paradox of independent learning that almost all learners need to be prepared and supported on the path towards autonomy by teachers" (p. 63).

Learner autonomy and language learning

Little has described autonomy as a "buzz-word" of the 1990s (cited in Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 1). Yet there are some misconceptions about the term. One of the main misconceptions which has to be avoided in autonomous learning according to Esch (1997) is that autonomous learning does not mean learning in isolation. It does not mean that students are left working alone without any help from their teachers. Later, Thanasoulas (2000) also pointed out, "learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher becomes redundant, abdicating his/her control over what is transpiring in the language learning process" (p. 1). Therefore, it is not "*teacherless learning*" (p. 4). In fact, teachers do still have some control over the teaching and learning process but in a new way. They have an important new role in promoting their students to be more independent.

The issues of autonomy have been widely discussed (Sturtridge, 1997). Two key words relevant to the concept are responsibilities and interdependence. Students need to have the ability to manage their own learning in the context of the learning of languages (Holec, 1981). Managing one's own learning means that autonomous learners are able to make all decisions involving all aspects of learning, e.g. determining objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, and evaluating what has been acquired. They need to accept all these responsibilities for their own learning. Dickinson also relates autonomy with the idea of active responsibility for one's own learning (cited in Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 2).

Human beings are social creatures. We cannot learn only in isolation but from one another as well. Students can learn from both their peers and teachers. Interdependence cannot be avoided

in society. In fact, interdependence is a condition that can lead students to becoming more independent. According to Little & Dam, "in contexts of formal learning, we necessarily depend on others even as we exercise our independence" (p. 3). Therefore, learners can learn from one another and from the teacher.

Autonomous learners and teachers as facilitators

Learners can be autonomous if they are aware of the active responsibilities and are willing to learn in collaboration with others. The teacher at this point plays a significant role in helping learners become aware of their responsibilities, needs, and goals as learners by giving them the chance to practice, experiment, and learn how to learn in their own way in order to master the target language. Teachers will act as facilitators, counselors and a resource in order for students to best achieve learner autonomy (Thanasoulas, 2000).

Autonomous learners are not those who learn with rote memorization and are entirely dependent on teachers. Autonomous learners are expected to take an active role in the learning process. They are those who generate ideas and look for learning opportunities instead of reacting to the teacher's stimuli (Boud, Kohonen, & Knowles, cited in Thanasoulas, 2000). They need to become active agents who take responsibility for their learning and participate in making decisions regarding the learning. And they also need to realize that autonomy is not an end in itself, but the means to effective and successful learning (Sheerin, 1991).

University students in a new learning environment, especially, need to change their attitude in learning and realize this new role as active agents who are expected to take responsibility for their own learning in order to become independent and successful as learners. To achieve this new role, learners need preparation and support from the teacher.

Teachers need to first believe that autonomy is a capacity which can be developed in a number of ways and in different situations. Like learners, teachers should be aware of their responsibility to support students to learn how to learn and how to become autonomous. They also have to realize and assume this new role as facilitators, providing learners with opportunities to develop

their being independent learners, instead of feeding them knowledge. With this new role, teachers do not teach but are the ones who help students learn more independently.

Teachers also need to know how much they should intervene in helping learners. They need to be careful not to dominate or withhold support from learners. If they are too dominant, learners may learn nothing, and if they leave it all in the hands of learners, some may feel lost and will not know where to start and which direction to go in order to be a successful learner. According to Holec, a facilitator gives two kinds of support: psycho-social and technical. The psycho-social support includes the capacity to motivate learners and the ability to raise learners' awareness. Technical support means that he or she should help learners to plan and carry out their independent language learning and to evaluate themselves (cited in Voller, 1997, p. 102). Teachers, therefore, need to be trained to become a successful facilitator.

Self-access language learning

'Self-access' is defined by Sheerin (1991) as a way of describing learning materials, designed and organized in such a way that students can select and work on tasks themselves and get feedback on their performance, and as a means of promoting learner autonomy. This is also supported by Littlewood's (1997) opinion that self-access work is related particularly to the concept of autonomy which has been given more importance in the world of education.

Self-access is very flexible. It can be conducted in a classroom or anywhere such as a dedicated self-access learning center (Gardner & Miller, 1999; Barnett & Jordan, 1991).

According to Sturtridge (1997), self-access learning centers, places where students can practice their autonomous learning, have been in existence for about three decades and play a significant role in providing a learning environment for an individual learner. Teachers as facilitators can use it as a place to train students in areas like setting learning goals, finding suitable materials for their individual needs and weaknesses, keeping

records of their progress, and evaluating. It is a place where autonomy can take place and be promoted.

The Study

Thai students are usually seen as passive and dependent language learners. This comment seems to be unfair due to teacher-center classrooms. However, at the tertiary level of study, teachers are likely to expect their students to learn more on their own, while class participation is also required. Seeing the importance of promoting autonomous learning among Thai students who study English, Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) established the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) in 1990. The center accommodates CU students at different levels with different interests and in different courses by providing materials for specific courses along with other resources. Students can work on requirements for a specific course or use facilities to meet their individual goals and interests.

A number of studies have investigated how students have used and thought about SALC, while very few, if any, have investigated teachers' use of and attitudes toward SALC although they play an important role in motivating students to learn more by themselves. According to Cotterall (2005), in the case of Thai students, teachers can discuss with their students the ideas of autonomous learning in Thai to make sure that they understand the rationale for providing and encouraging out-of-class learning. Besides, CULI has a policy to promote independent learning and the SALC can be a place where teachers introduce this idea to students and have them undertake independent learning. Students' learning autonomy will be more enhanced with teachers' support and a better understanding of their new roles. Therefore, the researcher would like to investigate the use of and the attitudes of CULI teachers toward the CULI SALC.

Objectives

The objectives of this study were to answer the following questions.

1. What do English language teachers at CULI think about the institute's SALC?
2. To what extent do they make use of the SALC in the teaching and learning of English?
3. What problems have they experienced using the SALC in the teaching and learning of English?
4. What should be done in order that teachers and students can make more use of the SALC to enhance learner autonomy?

Subjects and Instrumentation

The research instrument was a questionnaire specifically designed to elicit data regarding CULI instructors' use of and attitudes toward the SALC and independent learning. During the semester break after the first semester of the academic year 2005, questionnaires were distributed to 73 instructors, both Thai and native speakers, at CULI except those who showed no interest in the topic, or were on leave. In the questionnaire, there were 15 items and the respondents were able to answer in English or Thai.

Results and discussion

About 60% of the questionnaires distributed were returned. Thirty-four questionnaires were completed by Thai and nine questionnaires by foreign staff. No interesting differences between Thai and foreign staff were found. More than half of the respondents were teachers with over ten years of experience in teaching at CULI. Most of the respondents knew about the SALC because they taught a course which required students to work there, while only a few said that they were involved in setting up the center, supervising it, or creating learning materials to be used in it. Regarding any training provided by CULI, only three respondents answered "yes." One said that specialists came to give material-design training for the SALC when the center first opened, while the other two said they attended a seminar or a talk held when new software was made available.

To answer the research questions, the results of the survey are discussed in the following four areas—attitudes, use, problems, and suggestions.

Attitudes

The study by Wasanasomsithi (2004) found that students' attitudes toward working in the SALC were positive with over 70% of the subjects saying that working in the SALC was either "rather" or "very" useful for their learning of English. According to the present study, teachers also had positive attitudes toward the SALC. Most of the respondents had very positive attitudes toward the SALC in the teaching and learning of English. Some of the more interesting results are summarized and discussed below.

1. All respondents thought that the SALC was necessary to the teaching and learning of English. However, one respondent did not check how necessary the SALC was, saying that self-study by students was necessary, but how or where they did it was not the issue. More than half of the respondents believed that it was very necessary. Their reasons can be classified as follows:

*** Autonomous learning and self study**

Learner autonomy is the reason given by most respondents. Studying English three or four hours a week in class is never enough for students to master the language. Therefore, students should be encouraged to become autonomous learners. They need more time to practice and should be more independent in their learning. The SALC is considered a vital component to help them achieve this goal. At the SALC, students have the opportunity to work at their own pace and to learn on their own whatever they want to. This can be a good start for them to practice independent learning which should be continued as a lifelong learning process as Candy points out, "the development of autonomous individual is the long-term goal of most educational endeavours" (cited in Littlewood, 1997, p. 80). CULI teachers can use the SALC as a place to introduce the concept of autonomy to their students as autonomy does not mean learning without a teacher. (Little, 1990) They can play the role of facilitators while students can practice to become more independent learners.

It is of great importance that teachers take a role in helping students become autonomous learners. But how? In her study, Anantasate (2001) found that learners who are able to undertake independent learning need to have the following six qualities: 1) willingness to take charge of their learning; 2) ability to analyze their own need in learning; 3) ability to set their learning goals and plan to reach their goals; 4) ability to assess themselves; 5) ability to solve problems, and 6) self-pride. Teachers may start by providing students with some learning activities which can enhance only one or two of the above qualities to students, or they can start by helping students develop good attitudes toward the subject or the English language. Anantasate also points out that students' good attitude toward a particular subject or learning as a whole is an important factor of their ability to learn autonomously.

*** Resources for students outside class**

Most respondents see the SALC as a place of knowledge with resources for both students and teachers. These resources have been selected and thought appropriate and useful for self-study. There are also various kinds of authentic English materials available. Students can select materials to improve particular points they want to or practice some skills useful for their specific courses. For example, Foundation English I and II students can come to the SALC to practice their listening skills for the listening test. However, quantity does not mean quality. One respondent pointed out that motivation should be the key point. The SALC should have activities and resources which stimulate students so that they are willing to spend time doing self-study there.

Another important point is that the SALC can be an aid for students without access to useful facilities. A large number of students are less privileged. They have difficulty gaining access to computers, the Internet, and expensive books and materials. Therefore, the SALC should be available as a place where this group of students can get exposure to the English language.

If CULI teachers believe that the SALC provides useful resource for students to undertake their independent learning, it will not be difficult for the administration to encourage teachers to use the center in their teaching of English. To support this point,

Sheerin (1991) emphasizes that self-access centers can be a valuable resource for project work initiated in class. Teachers can encourage students to use the SALC resource by assigning them a project work. They may give students a list of books or videos to read and study on their own for later class discussion. A team may be set up to create activities using the SALC materials and share them with all CULI faculty members.

*** More language exposure for students**

Due to limited contact hours per week and the fact that some faculties offer only six credits of English to their students, the SALC is another choice where students can be exposed to the English language outside class. Besides studying on their own at the SALC, they can come to maximize their language exposure by meeting their teachers for academic purposes or interacting with foreign teachers. At the same time, they should be motivated to do more than just complete course requirements. This does make sense because it is neither cheap nor easy for students to find an English-speaking environment. The SALC can provide them with the opportunity to use English. More than that, many Thai students are too shy to speak in English in class, with their peers or teachers. At the center they may feel more relaxed practising speaking English to a foreign or Thai teacher.

2. All the respondents thought that the SALC was useful. The information in this point related to the reasons above as to why they thought the SALC was very necessary. Almost all believed that the SALC is a good way to enhance independent learning. According to Cotterall (2005), the SALC could be one venue where students can experience and learn for the first time how to manage their own learning and take their own decisions. About 65% thought that the SALC was a necessary resource for students and a way to improve their English proficiency. Only 30% considered it a place where students can find a teacher to help them with their English problems. This may be because only a few teachers volunteer to be available for students to consult with for one or two hours a week. They are not at the center all the time.

3. As most teachers had a very positive attitude toward the SALC and thought that it was helpful to students, they thought that

students should come to work at the SALC every week. The frequencies suggested varied from once to four times a week for at least half an hour per visit. Once a week seems to be more possible than four as students also have to work on other courses. Some respondents said that it depends on their time and schedule but regularity is the key. This is interesting as students have different styles of learning and different timetables. Therefore, it may be a good idea if teachers motivate each student to set his/her own regularity. Sheerin (1991) suggested that learner contracts are useful to help learners set objectives. They are tools teachers can use with each learner whose contract can be “individualized” and adapted to his/her particular needs in learning. Students can also set how regularly they will work at the SALC.

Use

About half of the respondents visited the SALC occasionally while only one comes to the center every day. Nine respondents visited it only when they needed to. Most of the respondents visited the SALC for more than one reason. The number one reason is to check their students’ work. About half came to the center to find materials for a lesson or to read newspapers and magazines for their own pleasure. Teachers can teach students to follow their example by utilizing the SALC for their own benefits. For example, they can tell the students to read newspapers or magazines or to see a DVD movie at the center for their pleasure and exposure to English language.

Only 18% of respondents had experienced organizing classes or supervising students at the center, and the majority of these are teachers with more than ten years of experience.

Regarding the use of the SALC to incorporate self-access learning with classroom study, almost half of the respondents not only assigned their students to do exercises as required by the course syllabus, but also gave them the chance to choose things they would like to do by themselves. However, the respondents did not explain if they had supervised this freedom of the students or not. In fact, it is better if teachers talk to each student as his/her facilitator and guide him/her on how to start learning by

himself/herself; otherwise, students may get lost and waste time learning nothing at the center.

Teachers and their students mostly visited the center at different times. Teachers hardly used the center as a place to meet students and discuss their problems or progress. This is supported by the fact that about 70% of the respondents evaluated the students' work only by checking if they had completed all pieces of work required.

The concept of autonomy will never be realized or practiced by students if they are left alone. Thai students are not familiar with this so they need to have teachers as their facilitators at the beginning at the center. Sheerin (1991) gives us interesting advice to timetable classes into the self-access center on a regular basis with the teacher. Then students will become used to the center and this new way of learning as well.

Very few respondents said that they made appointments with students to give supervision or assign them to view a video or read a news story, and write a paragraph, discuss it, or do a test later in class.

While most teachers who responded see the necessity and usefulness of the SALC, they played little or no role as facilitators in the SALC to enhance autonomous learning, which is quite a new experience and mode of learning for Thai students. Gardner & Miller (1999) emphasize that teachers are very important because "it is they who are most likely to first introduce learners to self-access" (p. 2). Thus, to promote learner autonomy, students need to be introduced (especially by teachers), perhaps at the beginning of a semester, to self-access learning and the SALC. Also, they may sometimes be given activities to do at the center under the supervision of teachers.

The survey results showed that most respondents did not make optimum use of the SALC when it comes to learner autonomy. More than 70% did not think they had made the best use of the SALC when it came to the teaching and learning of English. Most of them reasoned that they did not have enough time due to other responsibilities and commitments. According to Wasanasomsithi (2004), lack of time is the main reason why students do not work at

the SALC more often. They have other responsibilities and assignments. However, this will not be their reason if they better realize the significance and usefulness of working independently in the SALC.

Problems

The respondents had experienced some problems using the SALC in the teaching and learning of English. They are summarized and discussed below.

1. Resources The respondents said that some resources, like reference materials, were old and out-of-date. Some video cassettes were not of good quality with bad sound and image. No answer sheets were available for certain tasks.

2. Access They stated that students may have had difficulty accessing the center due to its rules. For example, students are not allowed to take any materials into and out of the SALC, so it is not possible for teachers to assign work and have students bring it back to discuss in class. This problem has led to arguments between teachers and SALC staff. Students also made comments on this point (Wasanasomsithi, 2004). Therefore, although the prevention of material loss must come first, CULI needs to find a suitable solution for the sake of students. Distance also might prevent students from coming to work at the center. They do not like to travel from their faculties to the SALC, but this would not be a problem if teachers could make students aware that this is for their own benefit. Requiring students to possess a new photo ID may also discourage them from coming.

3. Students For most respondents, students are not motivated enough to use the center. They reasoned that students do not see the SALC as a way to improve their English proficiency. They simply come and do what they are required. They are there just to complete assignments and get marks. Furthermore, some are not fully responsible in doing the assigned work. They simply copy the answers from the key provided. This is because students do not understand the real purpose of SALC. At the beginning of the semester, teachers should give students enough information on the

concept of independent learning and its importance on their tertiary studies, and accompany them to the center the first time.

4. Teachers The respondents said that they were not motivated to use the SALC. They did not know where to start as there were so many things in the center. Moreover, they did not have time to study what resources they could use in their courses or to keep track of students' progress. This problem is very important. If even teachers are not motivated to use the SALC or do not know where to start, how can students undertake independent learning and understand what they are supposed to do with the SALC?

5. Environment Sometimes the SALC is too crowded, especially during the few weeks before exams. Space is limited. Teachers cannot really hold discussions with a group of students although they may be useful. There is no separate room in the center. However, quantity does not mean quality. More space may not mean more students or teachers. What is more important is the way the space is organized for different activities. For example, a closed area can be provided for small group discussion.

6. Services There is no photocopying service provided in the center area. Thus, students have to use almost all materials in the SALC and are not allowed to check any materials out except novels.

Suggestions

The respondents made some interesting suggestions as follows.

1. Materials and facilities

SALC materials should be revised periodically to ensure that they are up-to-date. Some old materials should be discarded while more new items, particularly multimedia, should be added. Multimedia materials will be very useful as CULI has a policy to encourage both teachers and students to use computers in class. Teachers can use the materials in class or assign their students to use the materials at the SALC. It is noteworthy that students like listening materials (including tapes and video movies) most (Wasanasomsithi, 2004). Thus, more materials of this kind should

be provided. More up-to-date exercises should be supplied and continuously improved. More reference books, newspapers, and magazines are also needed.

2. Services for teachers and students

More should be done to promote the use of the SALC among students and teachers alike. The most important point is communication. The center should regularly inform both teachers and students of the latest developments in the SALC as well as new materials and facilities provided. Introduction to the center and its current services should be scheduled for students and teachers at convenient times. As Cotterall (2005) states, students need to be introduced to the system of resources and activities available. After this introduction, students can spend time working in the SALC and “the time they spend there has the potential to provide a bridge to their classroom learning” (p. 4). Thus, teachers should train students how to learn independently in the SALC and may prepare and plan class activities which are related to what students have studied on their own at the center or in class where students can share what they have learned from the SALC.

There should be other services provided like some language sessions for students, perhaps three per semester. Consultants should also be available in the center. A “walk-in assistance area,” staffed by CULI teachers, should be set up. To support this point, Anantasate (2001) also suggested that there should be a teacher present at the center for student consultations. This should be counted as the teacher’s workload in order to encourage them to participate. There should be special oral classes regularly taught in the SALC by selected native speakers and the Writing Clinic (a service offered to give students assistance in writing) should be re-introduced. A small section in the center should be set up for a teacher to talk with one or two students at a time so that they do not have to meet in other less appropriate areas such as the corridors of the institute. Again, these services should be made known to the students. All these may help motivate both teachers and students to use the SALC more.

3. Training

SALC staff should be better trained. They need to be able to give better advice and be more knowledgeable about what is kept in the center. Most of the respondents thought that current training was not sufficient and suggested that training for teachers would be very useful and should therefore be implemented. It could include an orientation, a guided tour, and a training session. They would like to know more about what the SALC offers, where things are, and how they can use the facilities in their teaching. They also need more training on tasks incorporating SALC materials. New computer programs or IT lessons should be demonstrated to teachers and students more often. A study by Detaramani et al. (1999) concluded that suitable learner orientation and training needs to be given to help students become autonomous learners and use the centers.

Implications and recommendations

Teachers want to see that their students are able to learn more by themselves outside class. For English language teachers, independent learning is also very important. Students need to practice regularly in order to master the language. Contact hours per week will never be enough. Thus, self-study should be encouraged.

Learner autonomy is promoted at the policy level at CULI. Students should be motivated to learn more English on their own. The SALC is one way for teachers to introduce the idea of independent learning to students as the study has shown that most respondents believe that the center can play a significant role in encouraging independent learning among both teachers and students.

Thus, to promote its policy and make the SALC effective, CULI needs to find ways to increase teachers' motivation to use the SALC for their classes. How can the institute motivate them? They need to give an answer of why and how to their teaching staff.

The study shows that most teachers have very positive attitudes towards the SALC and also believe that it is one way to

help promote learner autonomy in students. Thus, it is possibly not difficult to motivate teachers to use the center in their teaching and learning of English in order for the institute to achieve its goal. Yet, their understanding of the concept of independent learning and the use of SALC needs to be broadened.

To enhance teachers' understanding, motivation, and knowledge on independent learning, the institute should promote training. Sturtridge (1997) points out that training and development programs can help staff understand their roles and the workings of the center. He said that teachers also need training in order to realize their new roles as facilitators working in the center. They need to be able to accept this change. Cotterall (2005) emphasizes that teachers may be a major obstacle which makes achieving learner autonomy in language learning difficult, as "Some language teachers reportedly feel threatened by the change in role implicit in a commitment to the promotion of learner autonomy, and believe that their new role undermines their authority" (p. 2). Thus, regular training sessions should be provided so that teachers understand their new roles as facilitators and see what they can do to help students become autonomous learners.

As Anantasate (2001) concluded in her study, teachers are required to adjust themselves to this changing role. They must always be ready to learn. She also emphasized that teachers should work to create an independent learning atmosphere.

Training on facilitating techniques, how to incorporate SALC materials into classroom learning, and how to manage classes at the center should be regularly offered. Moreover, there should be an idea-sharing session involving those with either less or more SALC experience. From a study by Yeung & Hyland (1999), there should be more idea and experience sharing among teachers and they need to have a sense of ownership of the center and be more involved in its development. A clear idea of how the center can help learners needs to be given to them. The institution should support all this training as sustained teacher development programs.

As for the center itself, the SALC should promote itself more to its customers rather than waiting for them to come. According to the current study, CULI teachers have very little knowledge when it

comes to new materials or interesting services and programs offered by the center, especially if they only occasionally come to check their students' work. Thus, it might be a good idea if the SALC is re-introduced to all teachers before the start of each semester. There could be an orientation so that the SALC staff or teachers in charge of the center can present what it has available and how teachers can use this. A small session during the orientation to demonstrate the use of new programs may also prove helpful.

Moreover, a needs analysis should be conducted to learn what both teachers and students want from the center before decisions on materials and services are made. This should be done regularly in order to suit the changing demands of both teachers and learners. For example, teachers may be asked what training they need in particular than will enable them to make more use of the center for the benefits of their students.

Regarding further research, it may be possible for those who have incorporated the SALC with their classroom teaching to carry out action research on how effective their use of SALC is to enhancing their students' learner autonomy. Another possible choice is collaborative action research. Some teachers may collaboratively carry out action research and present the results to all CULI faculty. If the results are positive and show successful use of the SALC in the teaching and learning of English, the institute may encourage further research and development of the center. An in-depth study may be conducted to see what factors can improve students' self-confidence and attitude toward English and learning as Anantasate (2001) found that these qualities can help increase a student's ability to learn independently.

Conclusion

According to this study, CULI teachers believed that the SALC could be used as a place to enhance students' learner autonomy. However, they accepted that they had not made the best use of the center. Moreover, very little training had been provided for their better understanding and knowledge of the SALC. Therefore, more training and support should be given to the teachers in order to achieve the institute's goal to enhance learner

autonomy. In Cotterall's view (2005), "a commitment to promoting learner autonomy highlights language teachers' language learning expertise as much as their pedagogic knowledge and expertise. This should be an affirming change for non-native speaker learners of English" (p. 2). The real goal is not just to complete our tasks but for our students to be able to depend less on us, their teachers, and to learn more on their own.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express her gratitude to Assistant Professor Krongkeo Kannasoot and Associate Professor Dr. Punchalee Wasanasomsithi for their valuable comments and suggestions as well as moral support. Her special thanks also go to Ajarn David Duesler for his help in editing an earlier draft of this paper and all her CULI colleagues who answered her questionnaires.

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