

LAB NOTES

PROFESSIONAL ROLES FOR THE LANGUAGE LAB DIRECTOR: PR MANAGER, POLITICIAN, PREACHER AND PARAMOUR

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The following article is based on an article written at the request of the Executive Director of the National Association of Self-Instructional Language Programs (NASILP). Dr. John B. Means asked for a brief article to acquaint his members with the "Roles of the Language Lab Director." The original article was published in the *NASILP Bulletin* in October 1991.

At a lively session at our IALL '91 Conference at UCLA this past summer, Steve Smolnik likened his role as a Lab Director to that of a Minister of Foreign Affairs. Steve, Lab Director at Connecticut College, divided his job into three distinct professional roles.

First, he saw himself as a "minister," energetically working to convert the media illiterate heathen. Second, he declared himself an investigator who must learn the "alien" or "foreign" interests of his professor colleagues to serve their media needs better. And finally, Steve cast himself in

the role of a seducer who must entice the wary media user into the Lab for a meaningful "affair."

The allure of alliteration caught me, and I immediately recast Steve's roles adding one new profession. What emerged was the lab director: part public relations manager, part politician, part preacher and part paramour. I also decided to push these metaphors just a little further. Besides being a competent teacher and media specialist, lab directors must play many other professional roles in their daily routines. The first involves good public relations: from providing basic professional information and services to selling faculty on using technology and resources.

THE LAB DIRECTOR AS PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGER

Operating a successful lab demands good communication skills and ongoing public relations. The active language learning lab director must inform faculty not only about the latest language technology, but also about services available both in the Lab and beyond.

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Faculty must be told about available resource options in providing learning experiences for their students. Labs and technologies can range from simple audio listening capabilities to complex multi-media on the "cutting edge." These electronic options allow learners to listen, record, view images and make choices to influence the direction they take.

Good public relations also requires the director to be master of the existing lab. The lab director must be responsible for maintaining a collection of resources for use in existing language programs. Useful resources include more than the audiotapes that come with textbooks. Videotapes and computer programs are also useful in teaching everything from basic skills to the culture and history of the language and peoples. The director must keep the faculty informed on what resources are available at the lab for use in current programs and at various levels.

Different programs have different media needs: regular languages are usually classroom-based; the less commonly taught languages are often more self-instructional. Both programs have media and lab needs. Thus, the director's administrative role includes setting up various procedures to suit different program needs for student and faculty resource use. Other routines involve obtaining copyright clearances on materials used, ordering and maintaining office and media supplies, and organizing support staff to distribute and service both resources and equipment.

Another major PR role of the director involves the planning of equipment and resources, whether in the lab, lecture theater or classroom. This task requires tact and negotiation as the director works with faculty to assess teaching needs, prescribe solutions and implement them within their teaching programs.

Equipment planning duties range from assisting faculty with basic audio recorder operation to the complex design of language or computer labs. Today's technologies require the lab director be familiar not only with the many media and computer options, but also with how they can be integrated into academic programs.

On the one hand, the planning for technology in language learning has become a more complex task for the director. On the other hand, the use of technology has become more "friendly" for the end users, faculty and students. At one time users were confronted with an array of different media formats such as audio, film, slides, video, computers. Each format had its own unique properties and uses. Now we are entering the age of "multi-media" where all these formats, as well as text, are moving towards a seamless integration into a single media system. Through the development of interactive videodisc and computer technologies teachers and learners can now access text, graphics, still photos, and video images on a single computer system.

While the technology has made complex jobs possible, the PR Manager-director has an important role in seeing that this technology is successfully applied and integrated into ongoing academic programs.

The lab director must do more than inform potential clients about new technology, resources and methods. Faculty may or may not use those resources lining the shelves of the well-designed media center lab. The shrewd director must play other professional roles to win the race or bring in the flock.

THE LAB DIRECTOR AS POLITICIAN

The lab director must also be an effective politician. Good interpersonal and political skills are important in keeping faculty

informed within the context of their own campus academic and administrative structures. It requires a sometimes intuitive political sense to maneuver the tricky shoals of campus politics. Keeping abreast of changes in administrative responsibilities, budgetary considerations and academic priorities is a must for the aggressive and successful director.

Faculty may often be embroiled in their own individual teaching or administrative duties. Sometimes they neglect to communicate changes in curriculum or teaching assignments to the lab. Such information is essential in the staffing of the lab and in making sure students and faculty have the resources they need at the proper time. Keeping one step ahead through active and continued communication with faculty, department chairs, and academic administrators is yet another part of the director's duties.

By knowing what is developing within programs, the director is in a better position to make recommendations on learning resource needs that teachers or administrators may not have considered. The skill of anticipating needs and making oneself indispensable is a necessary political skill for survival of any species, and especially for the *laboratoriae director*.

Most importantly, to plan for complex technologies, the politician-director needs to be able to question faculty about their learning objectives to determine what resources would best suit their needs. Here the director must display the diplomacy and sensitivity. He or she must use both tact as well as a non-threatening yet affirmative manner when assisting faculty, either with operation of sophisticated equipment or with development of creative uses for resources or technology.

Like a politician, the director must serve the faculty and their academic needs without sacrificing his or her own professional commitment. The director must be

able to provide the best professional advice to the client-teacher to do the best job for the students they both serve. Yet, sometimes altruistic goals are not enough to effect change and improvement in language learning programs. Sometimes the director must resort to higher means to move clients into experimenting with change that could transform their lives.

THE LAB DIRECTOR AS PREACHER

The lab director must not just talk about the field of language learning technology, but must convince faculty of its ultimate purpose and superior efficacy. This means "preaching" to uncommitted teachers that media resources can assist them in achieving both their students' learning goals and their own teaching goals. To do so, the lab director must first be a true believer.

In the beginning was the word. The director must know where to find the latest word on research and development of new technologies and their applications. Not an easy task when looking for studies that show significant differences in learning for students using technology. Yet there are many studies and reports that indicate use of media can provide the multiple stimuli required to have the learner experience the language in its cultural context. Many others indicate increased motivation and attention to task for students using more than traditional lecture and listening learning techniques.

The lab director must also be ready to witness personally for enlightened teaching through foreign language technology. Faculty, like so many other unbelievers, must often see for themselves before accepting the word. The preacher-director must, therefore, bring in converts who have successfully used new techniques. Faculty need to hear "testimonials" from committed teachers who write about their missions in the language learning literature or who may practice behind closed doors.

Unfortunately, outside experts are often more effective, since many unbelievers are often skeptical or resentful of their own prophets from within.

Yet sometimes altruistic goals are not enough to bring change and improvement in language learning programs. When all else fails, the director may have to resort to more basic instincts to tempt his or her clients into experimenting with new techniques.

THE LAB DIRECTOR AS PARAMOUR

The worlds of business, politics and religion, and even education, all have their darker sides that sometimes place professionals at the level of an even older profession. When efforts at politicking or proselytizing fail, sometimes directors need to seduce clients into using lab services. Many a wary professor can be brought in with promises of immediate gratification, then with the right appeal, can be won over and develop a lasting commitment.

The shrewd director has to be able to offer something alluring to the faculty he or she serves. Incentives for those willing to experiment in the new forbidden worlds of technology are often a necessary evil. The competition from other seductive appeals is unrelenting. Faculty usually receive favors and rewards from their departments and colleges only for publication of significant research or literary scholarship. Yet time and creative energy spent in the development of media or computer resources for teaching usually goes unrewarded. To entice faculty to spend time on affairs that lead to the development of resources, the director must develop his or her own seduction techniques.

Rewards that are more within the director's control can be used to lure shy faculty to experiment and use technology in teaching. For example, faculty may be tempted with promises of staff help in

planning or development of curricula and resources. Financial incentives such as the promise of new resource purchases may attract others. Or staff could be provided to help faculty in organizing existing resources to make their teaching task easier.

To entice those more concerned with research and publication, a director could work to design a development project with a research component that examines the efficacy of the new teaching approach and materials. The study, however, must meet the needs of the faculty person and the criteria of faculty promotion committees.

In summary, the language lab director has many positive professional roles to play. First, communication skills are essential in disseminating information on technology and resources. Political savvy is then useful in organizing and operating essential services and in making sure they serve the client's real needs. Next, commitment must be displayed to convince faculty about use of resources that can provide them with successful and meaningful teaching and learning experiences.

Finally, the Director needs to provide the incentives to get faculty clients to use the Lab.

The most successful role for the Director, whether it be public relations manager, politico, preacher or paramour ultimately is that which leads to a lasting commitment. Both the director and the instructor run the risk of feeling "used" unless the affair has significant meaning. To sustain a lasting relationship, the successful interaction must lead to greater learning for their mutual interest: their students. Secondly, it should bring greater personal satisfaction and commitment to the professional lives of both the teacher and the director.

- Did all the work on those video "vignettes" of French culture really allow the students to learn aspects of the Gaelic

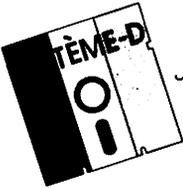
mind set that they could not "see" in any other way?

- Did those computer exercises pinpoint both verbal and non verbal Spanish cultural characteristics?
- Did students' test scores improve and

their motivation increase on these and subsequent tasks?

- And in the clear light of a new morning, does the faculty member and the director want to see each other's smiling face over the breakfast table?

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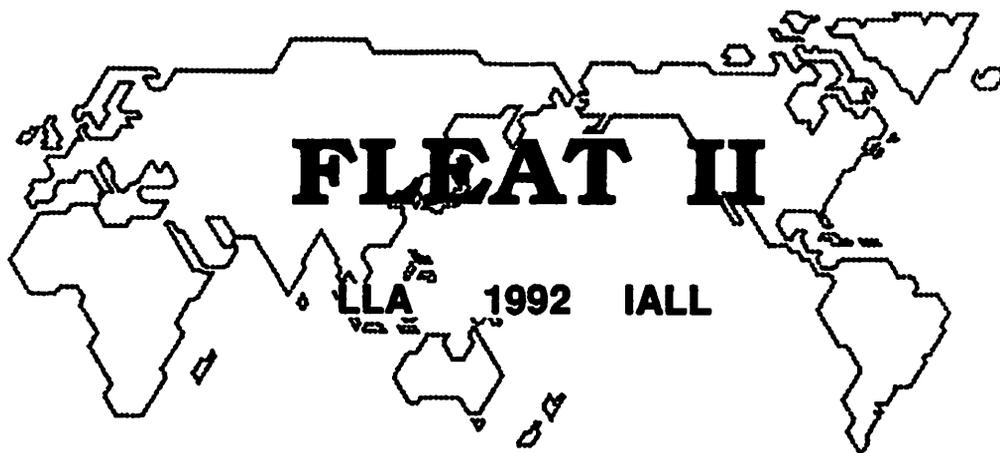
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