

From the President

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Whenever you reflect on the evolution of language labs, how far we've come and where we're headed, as I had the opportunity to do recently at the annual TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) conference in Baltimore, technology is certainly one of the principle things you discuss. The enormous spread and popularity of video and the advent of powerful desktop computers—particularly computers capable of multimedia applications—have radically changed what labs look like and what activities take place in them. Just as dramatic is the fact that the broad, beyond-language-teaching appeal of these technologies has often resulted in a welcome new visibility for language labs. Both faculty in other disciplines and instructional technology support staff at our home institutions increasingly seek us out for assistance and leadership.

Changes and challenges brought on by technology attract well-deserved attention. At the same time, other aspects of our evolution, while taking place more quietly, represent opportunities of extraordinary power and potential that are worth our attention.

Even before language labs began moving into the electronic age, many had begun departing from two of the well-established models of student activity—that is, away from the individual booth design, intended to allow students to work in relative isolation each from the other; and away from the group drill model in which students are arrayed in mathematically precise rows with equipment designed to allow all of them to do the same thing all at the same time. It is not often recognized that during the last decade, as language labs have redesigned and reconfigured themselves, our attention has focused on more than how to fit lots more equipment into about the same amount of floorspace, on more than issues of ergonomics and security. The goal for many of us has been to create a space that would not only be comfortable for students, but that would attract them, would invite them in and

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encourage them to stay a while—in short, homey as well as high-tech.

In part, this focus on atmosphere has certainly been a reaction to the old, punitive aura that used to be associated with labs—"You don't have those endings yet, better get over to (usually 'down to') the lab and practice some more!"—but it has also been stimulated by important changes in language pedagogy, which in turn have spurred the language lab's gradual evolution into multi-resource, learning-activity centers. Language teachers have increasingly recognized the power of collaborative learning, creating activities and materials that require their students to work in groups, both inside and outside of class. Such activities might involve a variety of media-based, computer-based and text-based resources, all of which are conveniently available at the language lab. Result: flexible workstation areas that accommodate two- and three-student teams, comfortable work areas that are noise and motion friendly, attractive study areas that are stocked with foreign language materials of various kinds. In other words, the descriptors most frequently used to describe today's language teaching—communicative, interactive, personal—relate not simply to the materials and the methods, but rather to the entire learning environment. That's where we come in. For we are not only a source of interactive technology, but also the space that language students can identify as their own and in which they can feel connected to language, culture, issues, and one another.

On the one hand, the notion of the language lab being considered a community for language learners may seem too familiar to be remarkable. After all, one of the features that has long made language labs a special place in academic settings is that we tend to be one of the few places—often the only place—where individuals from different languages and at different instructional levels gather naturally. This simple—some might say accidental—feature of language labs has enormous potential significance. In 1990 a group of faculty and students led by Richard J. Light, a professor in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, began a series of explorations of teaching, learning and student life at that institution. Their findings were later published in two slim volumes entitled *The Harvard Assessment Seminars*. The second of these, published in 1992, contains a number of facts of particular interest to us,¹ the most important being that students' academic performance and satisfaction at college are tied closely to their involvement with faculty and other students

in substantive work *outside the classroom* [emphasis added]. Light expands this further:

There is a common wisdom at many colleges that the best advice for students, in addition to just attending classes and doing homework, is: get involved. Get involved in campus activities of all sorts. Writing. Singing. Drama. Music. Politics. Athletics. Public service. This is excellent advice.... But there is a different kind of involvement, a more subtle kind, and the undergraduates who are both happiest and academically most successful stress its importance.

Nearly without exception, these students have at least one, and often more than one, intense relationship *built around academic work with other people*. Some have it with a professor. Others have it with an advisor. Some build it with a group of fellow students outside of the classroom. The critical point is that this relationship is not merely social. It is organized to accomplish some work—a substantive exploration that students describe as “stretching” them. And nearly without exception, students who feel that they have not yet found themselves, or fully hit their stride report that they have not developed such relationships. (*Harvard Assessment Seminars, Second Report, 1992, p. 8*)

Creating a space that enables students to work together is not the same as building among them a sense of shared community. But it is an important step in the right direction, and one that I believe deserves some thought and attention if we are to figure out how to encourage faculty and students to collaborate with us on the next steps. ■

- Notes** ¹ One finding admittedly surprised the research team: that students found the study of foreign languages and literatures an especially satisfying and rewarding experience. For more on the particulars of what explains this and other reactions to language study, readers are encouraged to consult Richard J. Light, *The Harvard Assessment Seminars, Second Report*, Harvard University Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA 02138. 1992.



IALL '95 at Notre Dame

International Association for Learning Laboratories

May 23-28

Language Labs on the Leading Edge

Theme of the conference:

Advancements in electronic technologies have placed many language labs at the forefront of the technological revolution in education. Computers, digital media, and satellite communications are now commonplace in many labs around the world. New labs and renovated labs often include many or all of these technologies, and at many institutions it is the lab directors who are the most knowledgeable about them. Often it is lab directors who are the keepers of technological memories: who, while constantly informing themselves of advancements, at the same time maintain an experience file of the good and the not-so-good of years past. The goal of IALL '95 at Notre Dame is to share that experience, provide information about the latest technologies along with an opportunity to develop familiarity with them, to provide opportunities for professional growth, and to continue to assess and evaluate the role of technology in the language learning process.

Founded in 1842, the University of Notre Dame has a rich traditional heritage. The campus, located on a scenic 1250 acres on the north side of South Bend, Indiana, is home to about 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students from all over the United States and some 72 foreign countries.

Right next to Knute Rockne football stadium is perhaps the most technologically advanced classroom building in the United States, DeBartolo Hall. Its 84 classrooms are all connected to Media-On-Call, a centralized media distribution network for images, sound and data. Over the Internet and via satellite, the world can be

brought into meeting rooms that vary in size from 20-seat seminar rooms to a 450-seat auditorium. Uplink capability makes worldwide broadcast of some IALL '95 proceedings a possibility to consider. Make plans now to attend for sure, perhaps to present, at IALL '95 at Notre Dame.

Put it on your calendar. Pre-conference workshops in video editing, computer applications, instructional design, lab design and management begin May 23 and 24; conference sessions begin May 25 and finish May 27 in the afternoon. Board and council meetings are scheduled on May 28. The call for proposals will appear in September 1994.

IALL '95 at Notre Dame is for you if you are:

- ◆ managing a language lab, learning lab, or media lab...
- ◆ interested in the role of the language lab...
- ◆ planning a new lab or renovating an old one...
- ◆ new to the profession...
- ◆ a teacher or researcher in language learning methodologies
- ◆ interested in the role of technology in teaching and learning...

Exhibits PLUS! IALL '95 at Notre Dame will feature:

- ◆ Language Lab Equipment, Hardware, Software
- ◆ Integrated courseware (textbooks and media)

Perennial conference favorites:

- ◆ Teaching Languages with Technology: What's new?
- ◆ Language Labs Around the World
- ◆ Designing new labs and renovating older labs
- ◆ Managing people, resources and money
- ◆ Getting money: •budgets •grants
- ◆ Pre-conference workshops: •computer applications •video editing •multi-media •networks •and more
- ◆ Keeping it legal: copyright issues

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