

# Lab Management

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I'm sure that many of you have had a similar experience: I had been asked to conduct a training session for a group of teachers at a school that had just recently purchased a Sony language lab system. I didn't know too much about the group, and my contact person said that whatever I presented would be fine. I should have pressed for more details, but I didn't. Big mistake.

I prepared a series of exercises designed to highlight the system's versatility in the language classroom. Since I teach Spanish, most of my examples were from the *Dos Mundos* text that we use at U of Akron, but I also included some elementary exercises in French and German. I wasn't sure of the methodology that the teachers employed, so I included a wide range of activities, some mechanical and others quite communicative. The session was thoroughly planned and well organized—each participant would practice being both student and instructor so that they could learn how to work both the student recorders and the control panel. I was ready.

I was wrong. The group of fifteen not only included five language teachers (five!?), but also several music, history, and English (not ESL, just plain English) teachers. Disaster! I muddled along as well as I could. I explained how to use the hardware; I shortened the practice exercises; and at the end I answered as many questions as I could. The teachers had had a long day already, and my demonstration exercises were irrelevant, at least to the ten who were not language teachers. It was hard to keep all of the teachers focused; they started acting like the students they were complaining about before the session started—whispering, giggling, and acting silly. This was not my finest hour.

It is hard to get some teachers into the lab: they don't have time; they are resistant to learning new things; they don't think that the technology can do anything to help with teaching. And some people just have a phobia of technology. Needless to say, training sessions like the one I've just described don't do much to get them over these feelings. Any good training event should be thorough enough to cover -in a meaningful way- all the aspects of the technology to be employed and give the participants enough time to become confident in using the technology. But, most importantly, the session must also be short and focused enough so that the participants do not lose interest. An effective training program that follows these guidelines

will build enthusiasm for using the available technology in a pedagogically sound, successful way. This, I think, is almost the only generalization that can be made regarding training in the language lab.

One of the most difficult deficits to overcome in instructor training is the lack of general computer skills. Many colleges and universities offer seminars throughout the semester on basic word processing, spreadsheet use, and Web surfing. I encourage all faculty to attend these sessions and learn these fundamental skills. Commercial training software and books are also available: by working through a series of lessons which increase in level of difficulty, the user can obtain the basic skills required for a particular computing task or environment.

But much of the equipment found in a language center cannot be found elsewhere on campus, nor can the training to use it. A Sony or Tandberg lab is just one example. Moreover, equipment available elsewhere on campus may not be used in the same way as in the language computing environment, so specialized training is often needed to supplement the basic skills taught by campus-wide training services. Such specialized training may be done in several ways.

A one-on-one session with an instructor may be the most obvious way to teach the technology, but it is also the most labor-intensive type of training. The time commitment has a payoff, though: one-on-one training is probably the most effective means of preparing individual instructors to use the technology. In speaking with the instructor, the trainer can find out the ways in which s/he would like to use technology and make observations and suggestions based on experiences other instructors have had using the equipment in certain ways. The course instructor and the trainer can meet several times during the semester and work together to develop the instructor's comfort level with the technology and proficiency in using it. By the end of a two-semester period, the instructor may then be recruited to serve as a trainer, help develop materials for other instructors to use, and so on.

I worked with one instructor from the University of Akron's ESL program in this way. She wanted to use the LRC's Sony Symphony system once a week. We met before the semester began, and I demonstrated one of the simplest operations on the system: playing a tape for students. We met on a monthly basis, and by the end of the semester, she was using the system to tape modified oral proficiency interviews. This, in turn, freed up her class time for other, more important tasks. Her enthusiasm for the use of this technology spread to other instructors in the ESL section, and now several of them want to do the same thing.

Certainly, the biggest drawback to this method is that it is labor-intensive. To train a large number of instructors in this way could completely occupy a lab manager's time or would require a number of staff members devoted just to training. With limited time and budgets, neither option is feasible for a lab with a large constituency.

Consequently, this method is best suited for a small school or department, or as part of a program for training selected faculty as “power” users (who can then go back and help colleagues within their own departments).

Small group training is almost as affective as the one-on-one model. To avoid the catastrophe that happened to me at the high school, though, it’s important to keep the group as homogeneous as possible. This type of training works well with multisection courses—a second semester French course, for example, with ten sections. Or, if the basic level language program in a given language plans to use technology in the same way over a two or three semester program, all the instructors in these courses could benefit from a training session together.

The trainer or director can work closely with the course coordinator to develop a series of exercises or activities that require the specialized equipment in the lab. Then—at the beginning of the semester, and several times throughout—the group of instructors, the language coordinator and the director can meet for training sessions. The group can be led through the process of conducting a very simple exercise, then use that same model several times for the rest of the semester. At the second meeting, another more complex type of activity can be demonstrated and practiced, and so on. By the end of the semester, this group of instructors, plus the coordinator, will feel confident about using the equipment effectively in their classes and will have an arsenal of techniques to draw on in the future. These activities can be further incorporated into and across the entire language curriculum following this same pattern.

Through careful planning, a director can also train large, multi-language groups differently. In this case, of course, the common denominator is the type of activity that will be performed. In a networked classroom lab with a system like Robotel or ClassNet, the trainer can work with a group of instructors teaching composition courses. The trainer can review the various functions of the equipment, such as controlling a student mouse and keyboard, using a student machine as a model for other students, changing the dictionary and grammar correcting selection in the word processing software, and so on. This type of training can work with a group of instructors teaching a first semester class for several different languages: the trainer can demonstrate how to use the equipment to practice listening comprehension activities on a traditional language tape program, or to access the local server that has practice software on it.

Finally, one of the most flexible ways to train language instructors is through the Web. Individual lessons or modules can be created and made available for all the equipment in the lab, from the overhead and VCR to the sound system and computer network. In a survey that I recently conducted, only about 10% of the total

number of respondents indicated that they use any type of Web-based training at all! This is unfortunate, because training provided in this way may prove to be the most efficient of all. Instructors can go on-line to find out just exactly how to implement lessons that they have in mind, and they can get easy, step-by-step guides at any time, from any computer with an Internet connection. If the user has a problem during the lesson itself, on-line help is just a click away. As I've already stated, however, one of the obstacles that may have to be overcome is the resistance to the technology itself. An instructor with limited or non-existent computer skills is not one who is likely to turn to the web for instructional support for technology. But if this initial reticence can be overcome, the impact of a comprehensive, Web-based training system could be extensive.

Whatever method or combination of methods you choose be sure to warn the teachers of what sometimes happens: machines don't work. Having a back-up plan –no matter how schematic– to fall back on helps to cope with these unexpected glitches. Servers crash, machines don't boot up, and tapes get jammed in machines. An alternate plan means that the class hour is not wasted, and the teacher can try the original plan again another day (after trouble shooting and necessary repairs, of course). ♦