

Media Centers as Agents for Community Outreach: The University of Miami Model

Rachida Primov
University of Miami

Ken Clark
Herbert A. Ammons Middle School

A few years ago, our¹ children started attending elementary school. Taking advantage of the Magnet School Program offered by the Miami-Dade Public Schools system, we enrolled then in a magnet school that stressed International Education. This meant that they would be exposed to more extended periods of foreign language learning and to a curriculum that stressed international events and cultures.

It soon became apparent to me that the foreign language teachers in these programs had little specialized institutional support and that there was only limited interaction between the staffs at different magnet schools. One thing that became very evident was that the teachers had very limited exposure to the new technologies that were revolutionizing foreign language teaching at the university level. It occurred to me (incorrectly!) that with very little effort, I could help to expose some of the K-12 foreign language teachers to some of the more promising technologies that were routinely employed in our language lab at the University of Miami.

I decided to pursue this notion by requesting authorization from my department to conduct a needs assessment survey of foreign language teachers at some of the magnet schools. So, on my own, I visited a few of these schools and asked to talk with some of the teachers and administrators in the International Magnet programs. While I was not met with uniformly high enthusiasm by everyone, most of the interviewees were intrigued and enthusiastic about the possibility of receiving some sort of technological support from the University. Most clearly felt that they could use some training in the use of newer language-acquisition technologies.

From this initial survey, I concluded that there was wide consensus on the desirability of support activities, principally:

1. Practical training in foreign language instructional methodologies
2. Computer-based materials appropriate to foreign language instruction for K-12 students
3. Communication between teachers in different schools.

These findings formed the center-piece for developing a more formal proposal for the implementation of an outreach program. I decided to prepare the proposal and to present it to my department for approval.

Designing an outreach program is not an easy task. It involves making dozens of procedural and organizational decisions, which affect its operational effectiveness. Luckily, my husband is a sociologist who has designed and implemented several international agricultural extension (a fancy word for outreach) projects. We used many of the insights gained in these projects to design my outreach program. This helped me to avoid many, but not all, of the pitfalls that befall similar initiatives.

Among the most important considerations that had to be considered were questions like:

- Who are the target participants?
- About how many of them should the program try to assist?
- How should they be recruited?
- How can they be rewarded for participating?
- What types of institutional support are necessary for the program to function?
- How is the program to be financed?
- How is the program to be managed?

And so on.

After putting together a cohesive first draft, I presented it to my department and asked for authorization to proceed as well as for some minimal initial funding. At this stage, much seems to depend on the idiosyncratic characteristics of each individual department and/or its chair. In my case, the Chair was extremely receptive to the idea and encouraged me to proceed as long as it did not interfere with my other departmental duties. And so, I proceeded.

Under the operational plan that I had conceived, the first activity of the program was to organize an initial workshop in order to jointly develop with the program participants a more detailed plan of activities for the program. To this end, I sent a blanket invitation to all teachers and administrators in the International Magnet programs. The initial response was a bit tepid.

I then made a strategic mistake. I decided to hold the workshop at the same time that the University of Miami hosted the annual meeting of SEALLT and encouraged the teachers to attend the SEALLT sessions. My thinking was that it would prove interesting for them to meet with their university counterparts and to be exposed to the professional issues facing the latter. For some reason, this did not work out as planned and the program almost died before its official debut.

This made me realize that I needed to be more in touch with the potential participants in order to identify and address the many small issues which often have large consequences. Issues such as during what part of the semester or week is it better for the teachers to attend program activities? Why is an all-day activity much more preferable to them than a half-day activity? Why were some teachers reluctant to attend technology workshops?

This insight led to one of my more fortunate decisions. I decided to form an Advisory Committee made up of program participants who would do exactly that, provide advice.

This turned out to be extremely helpful. With typical beginner's luck, I happened to choose some very able and enthusiastic committee members, one of whom is the co-author of this paper. This Committee has been instrumental in the eventual success of the program by helping me plan activities more realistically and by helping me to avoid potential problems.

The Committee has also been extremely helpful in another unexpected way. As employees of the Miami-Dade Public Schools system, the committee members have knowledge of and contacts within the system administration. This insider knowledge has been very useful in many different ways but especially in making the system administrators aware and supportive of the program.

This support has consisted not only in helping to finance program activities but also in awarding participants Master Plan Points² and thus not only motivating them to participate

but also rewarding their participation in a practical manner. Committee members have also performed many of the time-consuming, menial but necessary tasks that are necessary for the implementation of each program activity.

While much of the committee work is done through e-mails, at the beginning of each academic year, I try to host a lunch on campus where we can all meet face to face and plan the activities for the coming year.

We have settled on a format wherein the program organizes two activities each academic year, one towards the end of the University of Miami's Fall semester and one towards the end of its Spring semester. This scheduling is preferred by most of the participants and is intended to coincide with times when they have more available time.

Each activity is planned as a full day event. The number of participants is usually limited by the number of computers that can be made available to them; sometimes, teachers from the same school will share a computer. We make a concerted effort to draw participants from as great a number of magnet schools as possible. However, we have developed a critical number of regulars who show up for all workshops and so we are now forced to try to simultaneously cater to some new participants who have to be exposed to materials discussed in previous workshops and to returning participants who expect to be exposed to new topics.

One of the key incentives for participating in the workshops is that the participants are awarded the all-important TEC points by the school system. Having been alerted to this fact, we now plan our workshops in ways that enhance the number of points that are awarded the participants; this makes for happy campers.

We regard the willingness of the school system to award an increasing number of TEC points to workshop participants and to partially fund certain events, as critical signs of success for the program. Clearly, we are seen as effectively meeting institutional needs. Our success in correctly identifying these needs is directly attributable to strategy of initially surveying our potential clientele and letting it tell us what might be useful outreach program activities.

As the program has matured, we feel more comfortable with tackling new issues and expanding its scope. We have also

discovered very useful sources of institutional support from other institutions, most notably CLEAR at Michigan State University. We have used CLEAR staff at our workshops and have had very good results. I am sure that there are other good sources of institutional support that we have not yet discovered.

The challenge is to continue diversifying while remaining focused on our initial objectives. We are a small program and we intend on remaining small. One of the general lessons to be learned about outreach programs (so my husband tells me) is that quantitative increases in program scope rapidly lead to qualitative decreases in program effectiveness. We would rather remain small and effective. ♦

Notes

- ¹ The first person narrative corresponds to the first author.
- ² Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) requires teacher to earn 6 college credits or 60 Master Plan Points every five years to renew their teaching certificates. Teachers can earn Master Plan Points through the Teacher Education Center (TEC) by participating in approved activities that address their subject area, general teaching skills or the use of technology in instruction.

Dr. Rachida Primov was born in Morocco. She received her Doctorat de Troisième Cycle from the Université de Provence (Aix-Marseille I) in 1981. Her dissertation was on "Le Cinéma Américain de 1968 à Nos Jours: Du Rêve au Cauchemar". She is the director of the Eleonore Graves Tripp Foreign Languages Laboratory and the Tutorial Writing Center. She manages both Labs and is responsible for regularly upgrading their capabilities as new technologies emerge. She also teaches French in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures. Since 2002 she has been in charge of a community outreach program, which helps teachers of foreign languages in the Miami-Dade County International Magnet Schools to improve their curricula and incorporate new technologies in their classrooms.

Born and raised in New York, Mr. Clark attended Brown University before moving to Miami in 1970. A career educator with the Miami-Dade County Public School system, Mr. Clark has taught Math and French at the high school level, has been the Lead Teacher for two secondary magnet programs for International Education, and participated in a Fulbright-Hays Teacher Exchange in England. He is currently the Lead Teacher at Herbert A. Ammons Middle School, which is pursuing authorization as an International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program.

