

The Day They Guttled the Language Lab, Or *J'accuse*

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This summer we will celebrate a dubious anniversary at Goucher College. It is most likely that I will be the only one to observe it. Not my Director, nor my colleagues who had scattered to the four corners of the globe as they do every summer, nor our students who were there at the time, will remember the occasion, unless they see this article. In the midst of last year's summer break, while the other students retreated to home, summer jobs, and beach, and our inbred mutant deer reclaimed the campus on Mother Nature's behalf, it finally came to pass. On a typically hot and humid day, several of us in the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology marshaled our student employees and marched across campus to the Digital Language Lab, tools in hand. It was like Pickett's Charge, which incidentally in 1863 took place less than an hour's drive from here, near one of our cohort peer group institutions. Our dastardly purpose was simply this: to gut the turnkey lab like a fish. Like was done so many years ago to a wounded Civil War soldier with a limb that had to go, no anesthesia was administered; and I am sure the mutant deer could hear the high-pitched shrieks of our instructor's console as it was disconnected from its computers, cables ripped from raceways, junction boxes dismantled and piled on the floor, and headsets decapitated and collected into a box. (As an aside, as a historian by training, I find the experience reminiscent of accounts I've read about violence perpetuated in other times and places, such as the Haitian Independence movement, La Violencia in Colombian history, or perhaps some of the massacres of indigenous people from many parts of the world. For indeed, this massacre of the turnkey lab was the equivalent of massacring the indigenous resident of that particular classroom on sacred ground.) As for me, I played the role of the acquiescent mid-level officer who had tried to pre-empt and postpone the inevitable, only to be left with the justification that I was merely following orders. But I have to admit that it was a cathartic experience deep down.

And as a historian, aside from analogies to hold my audience's attention, I am always looking for causation, underlying reasons, infrastructures, politics, cultural mores, and other factors that explain the advent of a particular event or movement. At Goucher, there was a confluence of these, which I could envision from far off and well in advance, making it all the more frustrating and bittersweet when the day finally came in the humidity of suburban Baltimore summertime.

Our dedicated, turnkey Digital Language Lab is no more, and in part it is my fault. However, I share that responsibility with others. I therefore submit to your judgment, and in the words of Emile Zola, *J'accuse*. Substitute "Tandberg," "Can-8," "ASC," or "Sony" for "Esterhazy" and you get the gist. To wit:

J'accuse that the Department of Modern Languages was lacking a specialist in language pedagogy, linguistics, SLA, or educational technology. We do have a specialist in Critical Pedagogy, and she does use technology quite effectively, but she and her students are not place-bound. *J'accepte* that my role was to promote said educational technology, based on on-the-job experience and my participation in professional organizations with that focus. If I failed to energize and motivate my colleagues to make greater use of the lab as it was designed, I should have made a concerted effort to find visionary applications and reward systems, as well as best practices; and to implement them with my colleagues' active participation and direction. In fact, my colleagues do know the pedagogies that work for them and many do use educational technology, critical pedagogy, active learning, communicative approach, and so forth; and for that matter, they get better teaching evaluations than I do in many cases. But few if any know the field as a whole, so mine had been the only voice defending the lab and its use for the past several years.

J'accuse that the designers of the turnkey lab, despite their best intentions, make it highly difficult for faculty with Ph.D.s to run it on their own; and they frequently withhold nuggets of information such as, for example, the fact that there are hidden files that must be written to certain directories and that those directories must have read/write/execute rights assigned to them or the recording features will be all for naught. In our case, my colleagues in Information Technology never quite figured this out; despite the fact that they had primary responsibility for supporting the lab's technology. Under former leadership, their focus was primarily on locking down the network and systems as tightly as they could at the time, not on our mission statement and ground of being which seek to empower stu-

dent learning. Happily, that has since changed. *J'accepte* that even though it took my personal investigation, hampered by little formal technical training and an intuitive-based empiricist methodology that led to the above discovery, they resolved the problem immediately once I brought it to their attention; and the lab worked perfectly for me and my own students the rest of the year. But by then my colleagues wouldn't hear of it and we had lost all credibility with them. *J'accepte* that credibility was my responsibility to maintain.

J'accuse that to date the Modern Languages Department and the Academic Center for Excellence have been unable to overcome the inertia and lack of funding in order to create a substantive tutoring and supplemental instruction program that would have made use of the various technologies available in the lab so as to hold individual and group sessions there. *J'accuse* that they lack the time and expertise in order to systematically assess the program or empower a professionalization of the student session leaders. *J'accuse* that for years the College chose not to prioritize or come up with funds to hire students to run the lab for faculty who were unable to make it work. *J'accepte* that despite the myriad of documentation that our lab company and I personally devised, including hands-on training, my colleagues did not in good conscience see anything in our demos that they couldn't do in a face to face setting, or more precisely, anything that they wanted to incorporate. Telephoning, pairing students, eavesdropping, and other more basic functions of the lab did not interest them and I failed to get them interested and comfortable enough with those in order to then progress to the higher level capabilities of our lab.

J'accuse that my colleagues never decided to pursue a systematic configuration of our 100 level course program to include dedicated work in the language lab, despite meeting 4 times a week for 15 weeks a semester, and in some languages, covering a single textbook in 3 semesters that other institutions cover in 2. *J'accepte* that I myself, in my own courses, never managed to get enough lab time and traditional instruction time to add up together to the same or fewer total hours as we had at our disposal, and instruction time won out over dedicated lab time every semester. In fact, soon we will offer one of those 4 hours as a virtual hour online. This will be an option in all 3 levels of our Spanish course sequence, though students will not be required to use the physical lab at a particularly scheduled time. They will be free to chose from among our facilities across the campus, or to use their own computers. Anytime/anywhere computing trumps the dedicated lab space in this instance.

J'accuse that our turnkey lab company, again with the most honorable of intentions, released expensive software upgrades that were not included in our purchase price and which, when brought to the attention of my superiors, caused eyebrows to raise and calculators to engage, resulting in a financial decision not to upgrade — and even worse, the start of the journey down the road that led to questioning of the *raison d'être* of the lab in the first place. *J'accepte* that I failed to make the case for needing the costly upgrade, insofar as I never succeeded in making the lab an indispensable and fully integrated part of our lower level language program, let alone the upper level courses. I could not argue with a straight face that our colleagues were making full use of the lab's capabilities and that the enhancements were pivotal to our teaching methodology. I certainly could not argue that we made extensive use of discipline-specific third party software installed in the Digital Lab because there was never the budget support on the one hand to purchase it, nor the interest in such software on the other to justify its acquisition, upgrade, or maintenance.

J'accuse that the textbook publishers routinely make “lab” exercises that consist almost exclusively of listening comprehension, with no offerings tailored specifically to the turnkey or virtual language lab's capabilities; and no interaction, recording, or production is incorporated consistently in the design of these exercises. *J'accepte* that they are acting in accordance with market forces and that those forces require that they devise their ancillaries to meet the least common denominator in the market, in terms of potential adopters who may lack a lab altogether or have limited access to it. *J'accepte* that nothing prevented me at any time from reconnecting with publications that contain lab-based exercises for language learners (I do have them on my bookshelf) or from creating my own and promulgating them amongst my colleagues. Perhaps I could have gotten a second summer grant to expand upon the ones I did create during a previous summer and shop them around to my colleagues, as templates and outlines, particularly to those in the other languages.

J'accuse that in our profession, there are several models of reporting structure and responsibilities, so that each lab or LRC director is an island unto himself/herself in each institution. In my case, the modality of our institution was structured in such a way that a tug of war could ensue over my position, with interests in maintaining civility and collaboration at odds with the primordial defense of turf and evolutionary career paths. *J'accuse* that our administration had to take its time and allow things run their course in a way that the situation did exacerbate and prolong itself. *J'accepte* that the desire for my colleagues to fight to the death over my position and for the fate of the lab was my own battle cry, that went beyond the scope of a reasonable

expectation. Also, *J'accepte* that at the end of the day, I remain a liaison to Modern Languages and Literatures; I'm able to continue to teach a variety of courses in that department and others; and I am fully integrated into the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, and on a career path that is fruitful, challenging, rewarding, and promising. Though perhaps inevitable, this came at the sacrifice of a dedicated, turnkey language lab as well as any control of my position by the Academic Division; but we now have a resolution and healing analogous to the aftermath of the Gettysburg Address, to finish out our previous historical allusion.

So, there you have it, my accusation and my confession all in one. Having pleaded "guilty" to crimes of this nature, I do reserve the right to present mitigating evidence before History pronounces sentence. In other words, here's the rest of the story.

Before we gutted the lab, to reprise a sanguinary yet appropriate term for it, my Director and I spoke to my colleagues in Modern Languages about the possibility of transforming the Digital Language Lab into a facility that would better serve the Department's purposes. We decided to dream big, then to begin to bring about what we could afford over that fateful summer. Our dream received broad support. It included removing the turnkey lab so as to be able to replace the desktop computers with laptops. Tables would be replaced with modular tables on lockable wheels that could be configured any number of ways for individual, small group, or large group collaboration. Software solutions (we decided to pilot Horizon/Wimba's Voice Tools) and competitively priced headsets with mini sized mic and speaker plugs would replace the complicated turnkey hardwired network of computers. The room orientation would be rotated 90 degrees and a new projector, mechanical screen, and teacher station would be installed. We would retain and perhaps enhance our ability to present CD, DVD, VHS, laserdisc, any digital sound file, and any website. Software solutions piloted previously in another teaching facility would allow for instructors to control or display any laptop in the room, all of which would be done wirelessly. The room would get comfortable seating furniture and new erasable boards. It would be used exclusively for Modern Languages and Literatures faculty and students, even being locked when not in use, and open to all of our programming including language floor social activities and a variety of academic, quasi-academic, and social endeavors such as as *tertulia* or international press reviews. This would, in fact, fulfill the original vision of the larger Center in which the Digital Language Lab is housed: that of integrating technology and language learning in a seamless way. Furthermore, the whole building is on the residential side of campus and has residence halls attached to it.

This vision remains intact, though I am sorry to say that we're not there yet. Unfortunately, miscommunication and some well-intentioned misunderstandings took place that fateful summer and we have not been able to secure the necessary funding to carry out the entire make-over, at least not yet. But we're getting there. We have the old tables and the old PCs, but the tables that support the PCs now only take up part of the room and the remaining tables do have wheels and can be moved around. The room was rotated and the new projector and teacher station are in place. The screen raises and lowers itself automatically depending on what device is selected, which the students find amusing. We can display anything we want. We're happy with Horizon/Wimba's Voice Tools and we found affordable headsets. The room is not entirely off-line in terms of being a Modern Languages and Literatures dedicated space, but in practicality it's ours to use when we need it. The administrators responsible for scheduling work with us to give our classes priority, almost to the point of exclusivity. Most of us do in fact teach in the lab once per week or more. Even more noteworthy, the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology has transformed the adjacent computer lab into a Digital Arts Classroom, which is used by students and faculty from throughout the College but which provides us all with the hardware and software resources to engage in the production and editing of digital audio, video, and graphic materials. Students and faculty can now produce their own educational digital artifacts and learning objects. The turnkey lab could never do this, with the exception of audio recording of course, and given the choice between upgrading the turnkey lab for a single academic department or providing a state of the art Digital Arts Classroom for the entire College, the choice was clear and was well-made.

As for me, my position as Coordinator of the facility in which the aforementioned labs plus other labs and rooms are housed, but in which I no longer even have an office, has been reconceptualized and rewritten to broaden my involvement in promoting sound pedagogy and the integration of educational technology for the faculty as a whole. Though I remain a part of Modern Languages and Literatures, I have assumed a 12-month Information Technology role and, pending approval, with it a new and impressive job title that includes words like "senior" and "technology" to reflect my stature and what I am doing in the larger institution. I continue to teach Spanish and History, and I'm currently preparing to teach an online course for our Graduate Programs on integrating technology into the language classroom, for K-16 teachers. My colleagues who teach languages full time have landed a Department of Education grant to allow them to bring in colleagues from other disciplines and to do some cross-fertilization and team teaching with them. These

involve abroad experiences for each pair of faculty as well as their students who will commit to a year-long experience worth multiple credits. Our institution as a whole has implemented a requirement in which all incoming students will participate, having at the very minimum a 3-week intensive international experience. For implementing this requirement we've been rewarded with national press attention and record numbers of applications. Our Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology is now 3 years old and has accomplished tremendous goals. Soon we will host our 3rd annual conference that brings together faculty, staff, students, and colleagues from Baltimore area colleges and universities to focus for a day on pedagogy. This year, it's "Group Dynamics and Collaborative Learning."

You know, our Digital Language Lab used to be one of few dedicated spaces on campus for collaboration and group work. Now it is one among others. *Plus ça change...*