

LAB NOTES

[Editor's Note: This section will be devoted to less lengthy, less formal notes on subjects of interest to directors of language learning facilities. We encourage colleagues to send articles describing facilities, procedures, and/or activities that might be of use to others. Original notes as well as reprints (with permission) will be considered. As a sample, we are including an article on electronic mail, adapted from the regional newsletter MWALL News.]

Electronic Communications by Read Gilgen, University of Wisconsin

One of the reasons that language courses continue to attract students, even where language requirements have been dropped, is that a language class is one of the few places where students (at least at large universities) can actually communicate thoughts and ideas to others.

Our business, if anything, is to use technology to assist these students in communicating better. As a result, we have to be aware of the technologies which make good communication possible. Nothing quite substitutes for face-to-face interactions. But another form of interchange has developed in the last few years that can speed communications, can remove many of the barriers people find when trying to talk to someone else, and can even save money!

I am talking, of course, about electronic (i.e. computer) communications, and in particular what we call electronic mail, or simply, Email.

Email is nothing more than messages that are sent from one computer to another. The distance can be from one room to the next,

across the country, or even around the world. Some of the advantages are that you can send the message any time of day, it will get "mailed" and received at the destination computer almost instantaneously, it eliminates frustrating "phone tag", and, depending on the networks used, it can be free to both parties.

What do you need to use electronic mail? You first need access to a computer, either a PC (including Macs!) or some sort of a terminal to a larger computer. You also need some kind of software to allow you to communicate. Some of the popular programs for the PC are Procomm, Qmodem, Smartcom, etc. On the Mac, Red Ryder is perhaps the most popular. Then you have to connect to the outside world, usually by modem (the little box that translates your computer signals into tones that phone lines can carry, and vice versa), although some campus computers are connected directly into their campus networks. And finally, you need to have some sort of local "account" with your campus electronic mail system. Many campuses provide this service free of charge. The various combinations of hardware and software are too numerous to give detailed help here. Contact your local computing center for help in getting set up.

Finally, you need to know the "addresses" of people to whom you want to send mail. Every computer system uses different protocols, so you will need to ask your computer support people just how to address and send your electronic mail. For campus mail, this is usually quite easy, quick, and cheap (if not free).

News and Notes by and for IALL members .

Now I get to where I was really headed. You've probably had colleagues at other campuses ask that you send them Email, or send other information to them electronically. Once you've learned how to send Email locally, you can then determine if your campus is connected to one of the large inter-university networks. BitNet and Arpanet (or Internet) are probably the two most popular, but there are others as well. If so, you find out the address of the person you want to contact, send the messages pretty much the same way you do locally, and the internet automatically finds that address and mails your message.

Let me give you a typical scenario. Kelly Nelson, our journal's managing editor, needs to contact John Huy, our advertising manager, concerning some final ad copy for the next issue of the journal. The deadline is fast approaching, not leaving enough time to send a letter through the postal service. She calls John, but he is teaching a class. He calls back, but she has just gone to an Iowa basketball game. So, he sits down at his computer, composes the message, and sends it (using his own particular campus protocols) to BLALMCPC@UIAMVS (logical name, right?). Later that night Kelly returns from the game (they lost, by the way), and fires up her computer to check her Email. Finding the information she needs, she quickly puts together the last of the ads, and discovers the journal will be about one paragraph too long. She

fires off a note to GILGEN@WISCMACC along with some suggested editing changes. She also sends a thank you note to HUY@UKANVAX. The next morning, Gilgen reads the messages, decides what can be deleted, and sends the changes back to Kelly. She picks up the changes from her Email just before lunch, makes the last minute changes in the journal, and takes the final copy to the printer when she goes to lunch. In the space of less than 24 hours, the information has traveled from Lawrence, to Iowa City, to Madison, back to Iowa City, and to the printer!

How could this technology work for language students? Although relatively few campuses provide Email for students, those that do find they can get students "talking" electronically about their course work. Why not do this in a foreign language? Further, students could establish contacts with "computer pals" at foreign universities that are connected to the networks (and many are).

Those of you who do work with Email know that all the pieces are not in place yet for unlimited communications. But the time is quickly coming that we will depend on Email just as much as we do the phone. Perhaps even more. Now's the time for those of us in the business of educational technology to learn to use and take advantage of this exciting new means of communication. Contact your local computer center today!