

LAB NOTES

SOME DINOSAURS DON'T DIE, THEY EVOLVE

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The renovation of the Language Lab at the University of Notre Dame and the creation of the Language Resource Center had enough thrills, chills and spills to keep me entertained for an entire summer. What a ride! Here's how it went:

It was apparent in 1984 when I started as lab director at Notre Dame that the lab, which had been "renovated" just two years before, was not going to meet the needs of the faculty and students it was meant to serve. A monument to bad design, the lab consisted of three classrooms, each about 30x24, each with five rows of seven booths each. You know the booths: institutional green painted metal with little tiny holes that students use to play connect-the-dots. Mounted in these booths were the last living members of the Wollensak recorder family. They were installed after Wollensak stopped manufacturing them, and moments before the company that installed them closed its doors for the last time. Service

contract? Ha! At the front of each of these three rooms was a console. The console had four rows of ten buttons each, on-off switches, whereby one could listen to students as they drilled. (Perhaps I should say as they were drilled —yes, the passive form of the verb seems more suitable.)

Now if you have been paying attention, you realize that four rows of ten buttons do not correspond well to five rows of seven students. Yes, there were five dummy buttons. Many instructors (at that time a fourth meeting was required in all beginning level language classes) generally put a tape in the console and graded papers while the students were put through their paces. One, who is no longer here, used to drink coffee and read the newspaper at the console. He didn't notice that his students weren't repeating. To be fair, teachers who tried to use these consoles in some sort of interactive way found that one switch would often disconnect five or more students, connect some random number of students to each other, or send a high-pitched whistling noise into the ears of 25 unsuspecting aspirants to the German subjunctive.

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Clearly something else was needed. From 1984 to 1988 I researched and wrote grant proposals. I wrote for the \$15,000 grant (for a couple of computers) and the \$10 million grant (for a new building). I discovered that \$15 paid by each language student each semester for years, something that had originated as a "lab fee" had for several years been absorbed into The General Fund, and that The General Fund was not the place to look for the money I needed. A momentary bright flash occurred at the announcement of a \$17 million project to be funded by a donation from the DeBartolo foundation. A new facility could go in that building! This was, I thought, a rare and wonderful opportunity to put a new language resource center that went way beyond the bounds of three classrooms with stanchions into a new building that would be designed for the student of the future. That idea was nixed for reasons I can't go into here without having to hire an attorney.

We were back at square one. In the meantime, the Department of Modern and Classical Languages split into three departments. Romance Languages, which had always had the most students anyway, adopted a strategy for placing students more accurately in college level language classes, and the French section adopted French In Action. These two decisions led to a large increase in the number of students taking language classes and needing opportunities to practice. Romance Languages squeezed enough money from its tight budget to buy three VCR's on carts with monitors for the video component of the French In Action course. At the same time, the Wollensaks were starting to fail. There was no money in the budget for repairs. The technicians on campus could not make repairs without parts, and there was no money for parts. Headsets had been "removed," more likely in an effort to disable the lab than for listening enjoyment, instructors had simply given up on the fourth meeting, and I was in charge of a dinosaur.

On a good day we got one halfway decent copy from our fivecopy cassette duplicator. It was looking grim. What we needed was a Knight in Shining Armor.

Well, he didn't come riding into O'Shaughnessy Hall on a great white steed. But the chairman of Romance Languages remembered that she thought she saw this guy in church on Sundays. "This guy" was Michael Kenahan, Notre Dame graduate, now Director of Foundation and Corporate Relations. That's the fellow who gets foundations and corporations to support Notre Dame's programs, and who truly became a bright light for us. We asked for an appointment, and we asked him to come to O'Shaughnessy Hall for the meeting. We showed him the lab.

It was one of those instances where you slap yourself on the forehead and say, "Why didn't I think of this sooner?!" Mike went to work and in no time raised a quarter of a million dollars, which represented my "best case scenario" budget. There's a "bandwagon effect" as Mike explains it, and when some corporate and foundation donors hear about an exciting project, they become interested in it too. Whatever the effect, we were ready to begin the transformation. We started the day after commencement. It took about two weeks to remove the Labosaurus defunctus and to demolish one wall between two of the classrooms. The third classroom is separated from the others by a stairwell and a storage room. My concept was to create an audio-video resource center in the new 60x20 space, and to redesign the remaining room into a whiz-bang, state-of-the-art, leading edge technological marvel of a classroom. I wasn't sure anybody would use it, though. We had, remember, a steady decline in participation in lab activities on the part of instructors.

Undaunted, I designed. I heard voices saying, "If you build it, they will come." We

built a 27- upholstered seat classroom and outfitted it with a SONY LLC 9000 console. Seven of the student decks are ER 9060's and they allow us to do high-speed stereo duplication. The rest are 9030's. There's a video projector overhead that also projects data. Four audio sources, three video sources and a video presentation stand complete the picture (oh, sorry). We put white boards on the walls, room darkening shades on the windows, and added air conditioning. (It's difficult to get air conditioning for people, but when you put new video equipment and computers in a room you have to get air conditioning. The people who work here and the students like that side effect.)

The resource center itself has 24 individual audio-video booths, four video clusters (up to four students at a time working with the same video) and three interactive video stations with Macintosh computers. The campus is heavily committed to the Macintosh platform, especially in the humanities, and that prompted our choice at the time. This year we will probably add a couple of DOS machines, to take advantage of the wealth of foreign language software. We purchased a video camera and an editing deck (Hi8) and a couple of 8mm VCR's. We will use the latter to record satellite broadcasts and edit the recordings into language groups for daily use in classes.

So what happened, one asks. Did they come? There was yet another development that one should know about. The University made a commitment to be a national Catholic research university. To many, that set off alarms, alarms that said, "There goes teaching!" But at the same time, because of the huge increases in numbers of students, especially in the Romance languages, but also in Japanese, Chinese, and Arabic, a class of faculty called the Special Professional Faculty has expanded. The Professional Specialists are non-tenured regular faculty (assistant, associate, and full) who

do not have research and publication requirements, but who instead have taken responsibility for 100 and many 200 level language classes. They teach four such sections each semester. In return, they receive a respectable salary and health and retirement benefits. As one might expect, there is a lot of interest in these positions. This affords the departments the luxury of hiring the most enthusiastic and capable of the applicants. "Enthusiastic and capable" usually means "interested," and what we managed (there was some luck here, too) was to get the right kids into the right candy shop at just the right moment.

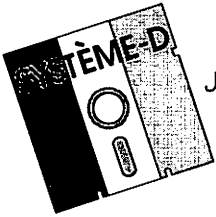
The results have been delightful. Oh, we still have a few cantankerous types who think that "butts in seats" (an hour a week, or else!) is what language lab is all about. And we still copy the same old tapes for a few sections. But the excitement is elsewhere, in specially prepared video tapes, in student produced video tapes, in truly engaging multi-media classroom presentations, in audio tape assignments with meaningful exercises, and in the development of computerized instruction by people who are novices at computing but know exactly where they are headed in the classroom. One aspect of the renovation has been most gratifying. We have managed to get the idea across that all this latest, greatest technology is not the solution to the problem of teaching an adequate amount of foreign language in three or four semesters. It's just a tool. A terrifically expensive tool at that. By itself it won't do anything, any more than buying the most expensive KitchenAid will have a Schwarzwälderkirchtorte on your dining room table when you get home. Sometimes when people look at these two roomsful of technology they are awed. Sometimes I am awed. After all, I've been in this business for twenty years, and a lot has happened in that time. Mostly I'm pleased. This first year with a workable language resource center couldn't have been better.

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We provide a quiet, comfortable atmosphere with all the technological bells and whistles students could hope for. Most instructors provide the kinds of assignments that students are enthusiastic about completing.

And sometimes I get misty-eyed when a student comes in and says, "Is it OK if I just sit here and study my vocabulary for a while?" Go figure.

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