



Language Labs Living On Borrowed Time?

A Professional Opinion

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I am not concerned that language labs will disappear in 5 years or so, or 10 years or so----- or even 50 years. (I couldn't resist throwing in the "50" since language centers have now been around for half a century --- starting in the 50s --- so why not another half a century?). Language centers, like other discipline-specific learning environments are firmly interwoven into the daily fabric of a curriculum and certainly in the case of languages, work hand in hand with the pedagogical issues. Language labs are no more likely to disappear from the Language Field than science labs for the Sciences.

As for the concern that publishers placing materials on-line may take away some of our business---this is true, but to my mind a welcome development and not a moment too soon. Unlike audio-cassette decks, computers are multi-purpose. Students and faculty use the computers for a variety of activities and it would be practically impossible to have sufficient computers to handle all the traditional textbook/lab manual related activities in addition to everything else the students need the language center computers to accomplish. Even with the availability of the textbook materials on-line and the option of doing the work at any time in the comfort of one's own room, the students still seem to often prefer the Language Center environment. They feel they can focus better, like seeing their fellow classmates, etc.

In my opinion, if any lab is at risk of extinction or down-sizing, it is the general computing lab. With more students owning their own computers, printers, etc., there is far less need for this type of lab. In addition, departments who have reserved these labs in the past for classroom purposes are increasingly requesting their own computing spaces having realized that "one size doesn't fit all" and that it is the Language Center model which makes more sense pedagogically as well as in terms of productivity and effectiveness.

I think Language Centers will be around for a long time and will continue to be invaluable as technical pioneers on campuses, models of technology support within a pedagogical context, and examples for fostering a community of learners.

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