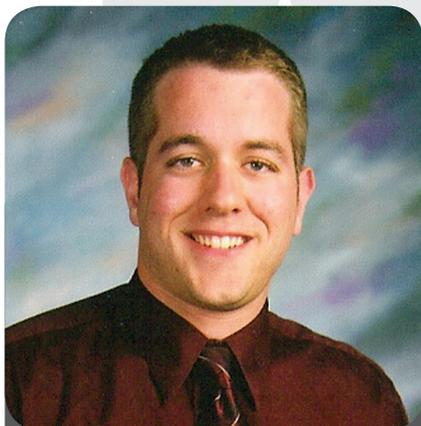# OR, HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE LAB

### BY JOSHUA GLEASON

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*New interfaces. Separate classrooms. New equipment. Even teachers who are excited by the potential of the language lab are easily intimidated by the tremendous adaptation it seems to demand. However, a language lab offers unique opportunities for all teachers to enhance what they already do without having to institute a major shift; expansive technical expertise is not required for immediate success.*

Sixteen years of experience, first as a student and then as a teacher in analog, digital, language-based, and music-based learning labs, have taught me that language labs are an indispensable tool for teachers (and students) at all levels of technical savvy. In my Sony Virtuoso™ Digital Language Lab I often conduct the same activities as I would in a traditional classroom, but the lab renders them neater, more interesting, and more effective. The lab allows me to reduce preparation time, execute lessons efficiently, manage my classroom effortlessly, assess my students' work accurately and quickly, and provide meaningful motivation for my students – all through fewer than a dozen basic functions. Quite literally, a handful of one-click buttons dramatically enhances the quality of my classes.

## Preparation

Teachers are often intimidated by the perceived need to master the entire range of a language lab's capabilities. Frequently, that perception is paired with a misconception of the lab as merely a bonus to – or change of pace within – the framework of a traditional curriculum. However, many of my most successful interpersonal exercises, adapted from more traditional classroom activities, require little preparation time and use only a few basic functions. I can create numerous activities by combining simple features of the Sony Virtuoso System with a bank of pictures – gathered from internet image searches or textbook databases – and simple word processing documents. With a few spare minutes, I can use the Sony Soloist® student software for basic voice recording to create my own readings and listening tests. If I spend a full prep period – still working only with a small subset of the lab's functions – I can create lessons that run themselves, allowing me to observe, assist, and assess in ways unimaginable in a traditional classroom. Because of my lab's compatibility with basic word processing programs, I can turn existing traditional activities into lab activities with only a few organizational adjustments. My preparation time for a lab class is often less than that for a traditional class, as the lab takes care of so much organization and structure for me already. While many computer labs provide teachers with a way to capitalize on the connection between students and technology, a true language lab does so while giving a teacher total control over each element of the lesson – without taxing a teacher's free time or comfort levels with technology.

## Materials

Creating and providing materials in the lab is simple via file-opening or program-launching features, both of which are no different than opening a document in, for example, Microsoft® Word®. I can create and distribute materials in a wide variety of media, all through the "clearinghouse" of the lab – which provides not only the ease of centralization but also a teacher-determined dissemination of digital materials unavailable with, for example, a laptop cart. Gone, then, is the necessity of many physical materials, creating a more efficient and eco-friendly classroom. Many of the traditional material staples of the language classroom have advantageous digital counterparts that are used easily in the language lab setting. The materials I can provide not only span a wider range of formats and media, but they also exist individually for each student on his or her own workstation. Independent organization and manipulation of those materials enhance the learning experience. Nobody has to "share" the image on the classroom projector anymore, and nobody has to turn his or her seat around to avoid seeing a prompt; the same feature that allows me to present materials to students allows me to choose who does – or does not – receive each element. Schools lucky enough to have laptop programs benefit from some of these advantages, but they still work within a traditional, compartmentalized environment. My lab goes beyond digitizing preparation and materials, fundamentally changing my approach to classroom management and assessment.

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## Classroom Management

My language lab is a crucial tool for conducting interpersonal activities efficiently and effectively. In language classrooms, interaction between students provides more valuable practice and instruction than almost any other activity. It also creates some of the highest risks in terms of classroom management, but I can minimize or eliminate many of them through the features in the lab. I rely heavily on the pairing function, though grouping and conferencing functions apply in the same way, just with larger numbers of participants. One click of a button connects my students to each other. I lose no time to their getting up, gathering materials, and moving around the room. There is no opportunity for small talk as they settle in; they are instantly partnered while still in their seats. Plus, headphones and individual workstations create a virtual personal space that overrides the physical proximity of students to one another; once seated and "plugged in," students take almost no notice of their actual neighbors. In that way, the lab encourages focused, topic-based discussions and leaves little room for side conversations. And while physically close pairing – just turning around in one's seat, for example – functions well in a traditional classroom to reduce transition time, the lab allows me to ensure a new partner from anywhere in the room for each participant as often as I please. The lab thus also renders major questions surrounding classroom arrangement and seating largely irrelevant. Quieter students may physically hide in the corner of the lab but, during an activity, every student is as virtually visible – or audible – as any other.

## Assessment

The amount of control that the language lab affords me does not just ease my mind; it assures me that I will be able to witness, guide, and assess every activity in novel ways. In a traditional computer lab, my students can use an instant messaging or video chat program on their own and print a transcript or send me a recording. In the lab, though, the same types of programs allow me to observe student interactions live and to interject whenever I please (and still to save a copy for myself if I so choose). Real-time feedback leads to quicker retention and self-correction, and in my lab I can be right there with whichever pair or group I choose. Moving around the room requires only a click of the mouse – certainly quicker than even just a few steps, and, more importantly, infinitely more effective because my presence is not always obvious. I can allow my students to know that I am listening, or I can elect to slip in unnoticed (at least until I offer correction or encouragement). Differential reinforcement provides better results than any other method; when my students do not know whether I am listening to their efforts, they more consistently give it their best shot. They know that the expectations, along with the stakes, are higher. Both my students and I save time and energy using the lab, but the design of the lab perpetuates a productive and efficient environment for meaningful language learning.

## Student Engagement

Tapping into the technological elements that have become indispensable to students' lives – and the social structures that have grown out of that technology – gives students additional ownership of, and vested interest in, their work. Activities in the lab naturally parallel much of the technology that students enjoy in their free time. When I pair my students, giving one a picture and the other a virtual blank drawing canvas, they can't help but feel distanced from the "classroom" and closer to their own computers at home, where they might conduct online image searches or draw with a sibling or a friend. Furthermore, many traditional classroom activities take on more meaning for students when conducted through the technology of the lab. Simple conversations, such as those mimicking phone calls, gain more credibility as the environment lends a more realistic feeling. (I can even have my students use a phone call feature to place "real" calls to each other and leave voice mail messages when lines are busy or someone is away for a moment!) The familiarity and authenticity of many easy-to-use language lab functions engage students and encourage them to use the target language by distancing them from what they perceive as a standard learning environment. And yet, the language lab is in some ways the ultimate learning environment, where I have complete authority over the activity at hand and can respond to and build off of student participation in ways unavailable in the traditional classroom.

## Final Thoughts

In my Sony Virtuoso lab, I can maximize the impact of my teaching by using the features of the lab to work more efficiently and more effectively. In my lab, I can maintain the activities and pedagogies that I have found successful in a standard classroom while making an affordable time investment in a new technique and a new technology. In my lab, my students have a private line of communication directly to me throughout the duration of each class. In fact, that safe, comfortable environment is the same one that allows them to make mistakes, to hear their mistakes, and to self-correct. Students can hear themselves while they talk in the classroom, but in the lab they can truly listen to themselves; when they really know what they sound like compared to a native sample, they can begin to narrow the gap between their perceptions of their work and their results. They gain confidence speaking the language, and that confidence spreads to all aspects of their performance in class. And, when they finally find themselves in a real-world situation that requires their use of the language, they will not hesitate because they are truly prepared.

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