So You Want to Build a CALL Lab?

There has been a lot of traffic lately on the Ohio TESOL listerv regarding creation of a CALL Lab. As a CALL lab manager and CALL consultant, I have been involved in creation and management of labs in a variety of programs as well as the Electronic Village lab at TESOL during the annual convention. No two have been the same. Each of these settings has presented a unique set of needs and each lab has been designed to cater to those particular needs.

While it is obvious that the constant advances of technology may impact your selection of hardware and software, it is equally important to consider issues such as the layout of the room, space restrictions, faculty training and support, your ongoing budget, staffing, schedule for upgrades and procedures for troubleshooting. While a CALL lab can be a great benefit to a program, the implementation of a dedicated CALL lab is not always a viable or appropriate solution. Some alternatives may include sharing a lab with another unit, creating a portable wireless lab, utilizing an existing lab elsewhere on campus or simply creating a set of materials for use by students off campus. If you do decide to build a CALL lab, here are some of the preliminary steps necessary to evaluate your needs and implement the most effective CALL solution.

Conduct a Needs Analysis.

You may consider surveying your students and faculty to get a better idea of their familiarity and willingness to expand their use of technology. Begin by identifying areas of your curriculum that may be enhanced by CALL and make a group attempt to develop a thorough overview of your current technology use. Consider your current technology status, short-term desires and long-term goals. Identify faculty abilities and potential and set aside regular meetings for their continued development as users of CALL. The collective and conscious investigation of these issues will certainly enhance your implementation. A sample needs analysis can be found at http://edvista.com/claire/needs.html

Develop a Better Understanding of CALL

However you decide to address your CALL needs, involving as many members of your faculty as possible will improve your chances of success. To reach this goal, encourage faculty to attend CALL conference sessions to learn more of what is being done in other technology driven programs, familiarize themselves with sources of information on the internet, or join one of the many listserv communities of enthusiastic and helpful CALL practitioners (See Below). Maintaining a link to such communities will be important in your long-term use as technologies and approaches advance. You may even choose to create a full or part-time position on your faculty for a CALL representative who can guide, motivate and train the faculty. More information on the management of a CALL lab can be found at: http://www.ict4lt.org/en/en_mod3-1.htm

Consider Space, Budget and Staffing

Space

As they say, the devil is in the details. Even the most advanced, impressive and appropriately designed lab can fail due to simple oversights. Before you establish a lab, consider what space is available, where it is located in regard to your classrooms and what it would take to network. If your lab is far away, inaccessible, or cramped its days may be numbered. A building that is under construction, or slated for remodeling is ideal as you can build networking into the plans. An older, vacant room may benefit from using wireless technologies rather than trying to retrofit with advanced networking. Visit a few labs and try to get a feel for the layout and its effectiveness. Some questions to consider: Can all students see the teacher or presentation screen? Can students easily work in groups? Can the teacher see all the students? More information on space issues can be found at: http://www.ohiou.edu/esl/teacher/labspace.htm

Budget

While a one-time grant may be a great acquisition, it can be the worst way to establish a lab. In order for a facility to be reliable and attractive to teachers and students, an ongoing system of support must be implemented. An ESL lab can be inexpensive overall, but it will still require (at the least) maintenance (including virus protection, consistency of user interface and hardware repair), regular upgrades, replenishment of materials, and ultimately, next generation equipment. Planning for the future is essential upon the initial planning of a lab. This planning will include hardware, software and knowledgeable lab manager(s)

Staffing

If you are planning a self-access lab where students check in and use the lab on their own, outside of class, you will need to have trained and reliable individuals available to assist students with computer and/or language problems, monitor equipment, and distribute materials (such as software, text, etc.) If you are planning a classroom lab that will only be used while students are in the room with a teacher during class time, your staffing needs will be minimal, but should not be considered to be non-existent. You will still need to have someone who monitors the equipment, performs updates and maintains general reliability and consistency for users. For a sample student worker handbook, see http://www.forlang.utoledo.edu/LAB/HandbookFall99.html

Select Appropriate Hardware

Hardware is constantly advancing so it is important to consider both what you need today and what you may need in two or three years. You should consult your school's technology support center (if available) or one of the previously mentioned communities. Your school may already have a relationship with a company that provides a special discount, or may even require you to purchase from them. In order to get proper guidance

from your sources, you should be able to provide them with answers to the following questions: What kind of programs will students be using? What are the hardware minimum requirements for these programs? How long will you intend to keep these computers before replacing them? (the standard is now three years) What platform will you be using? (while most people are familiar with Windows computers, much traditional language software was created for MacIntosh) Will students save their work on a floppy disk, a server, a website, or some other manner? How many printers will the room need? Will students have access to the printers themselves? For a sample list of hardware questions, see: http://www.ohiou.edu/esl/teacher/labhard

Select Appropriate software

The decisions regarding software may be most important, and may be the first step you take. With so many products on the market, it is important that you exercise caution and research a product prior to purchase. Every piece of software has the potential to be problematic, non-intuitive or inefficient if it is not appropriate for the level and abilities of your students. It is also important that teachers are able to present the software in a clear and methodological manner. If you can't navigate a piece of software, you should not assume it is due to your own inability. Try to get other opinions about software and perform a hands-on evaluation of each potential title. Such hands-on opportunities exist at TESOL's annual Electronic Village and Ohio TESOL's fall conference technology room. You can also consult the TESOL CALL IS software database and software evaluation procedures at http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~call/

Consult online sources of information

Once you get started, remember that you are not alone. Many who have blazed these trails have gone to great lengths to share their feedback and advice. Whether provided by professional organizations or individuals, each of the following sources of additional information provides valuable insight from real practitioners of CALL. Make the most of their information and share your experiences with others in the future.

> The Ohio Program of Intensive English's teacher resources page on CALL lab planning: http://www.ohio.edu/esl/teacher/labs.html (Thanks to John McVicker)
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> The TESOL CALL Interest Section's Listserv: http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~call/list.html
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> The Computer Assisted Language Instructor's Consortium (CALICO) website: http://calico.org/
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> The International Association for Language Learning Technology (IALL) website: http://iall.net/

Deborah Healey's Technology Tip of the Month:
http://www.orst.edu/dept/eli/techtip.html

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