Evolving Classrooms: Promoting Collaborative Language Learning in Computer Labs

Cassandra Rosado & John Kotnarowski
Illinois ESL Program, Linguistics Department
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
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Context & Motivation

- All of our ESL Academic Writing courses have been taught in computer labs since about 2010.
- While grateful for the luxury of the labs, most of our instructors feel that the traditional computer classroom layout is isolating and makes active learning strategies, such as group work, challenging.

A standard computer lab before renovation

General Classroom Design & Language Learning

- Classroom design can promote (or impede) engagement and interaction (crucial for language learning) (Gands & Ransemer-Topf, 2017)
- A wide variety of classroom design factors have been analyzed (e.g. how flexible seating can accommodate to different instructional contexts (lecture vs. group work) (Sanders, 2013).

Computer-facilitated Language Learning

- SIGNIFICANT amount of research on how computers facilitate language learning
- Research looks at how instructors and students use different tech to improve/replace “traditional” pedagogy
  - Virtual Reality (Schweinhorst, 2002)
  - Digital games (Reinders, 2012)
  - Telecollaboration (O’Dowd, 2012)

A Possible Gap in the Research

Classroom Design Research

CALL Research

Computer Lab Designed for Language Learning?

The Question

How can we design a **more flexible** space for a language composition course that **promotes active student collaboration** within the confines of a **static computer classroom**?

Reimagining the Language Computer Classroom

Establish a relationship with Facilities Management

Clarify the specific classroom issues

Understand possible options

Determine instructor preferences

Wait and cross your fingers!

Establish a relationship with Facilities Management

- Work with them regularly for training and support for instructors
- Express challenges and concerns

Clarify specific issues

- Confirm issues with classroom survey for instructors and students (easier way to promote small group work, clear line of sight at all times).
- Follow-up with a report of survey results and implications to facilities management)

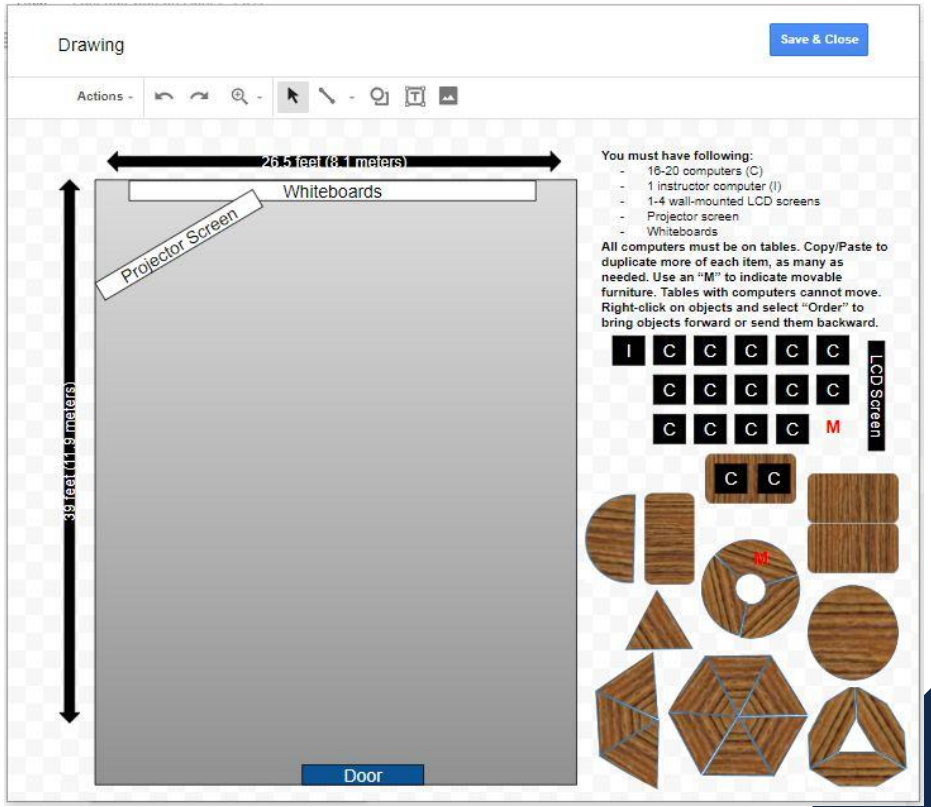
Understand your reality...

- Work with facilities management to discuss **possible, realistic options** regarding changes and additions: **Budgetary limits**? **Innovation threshold**?

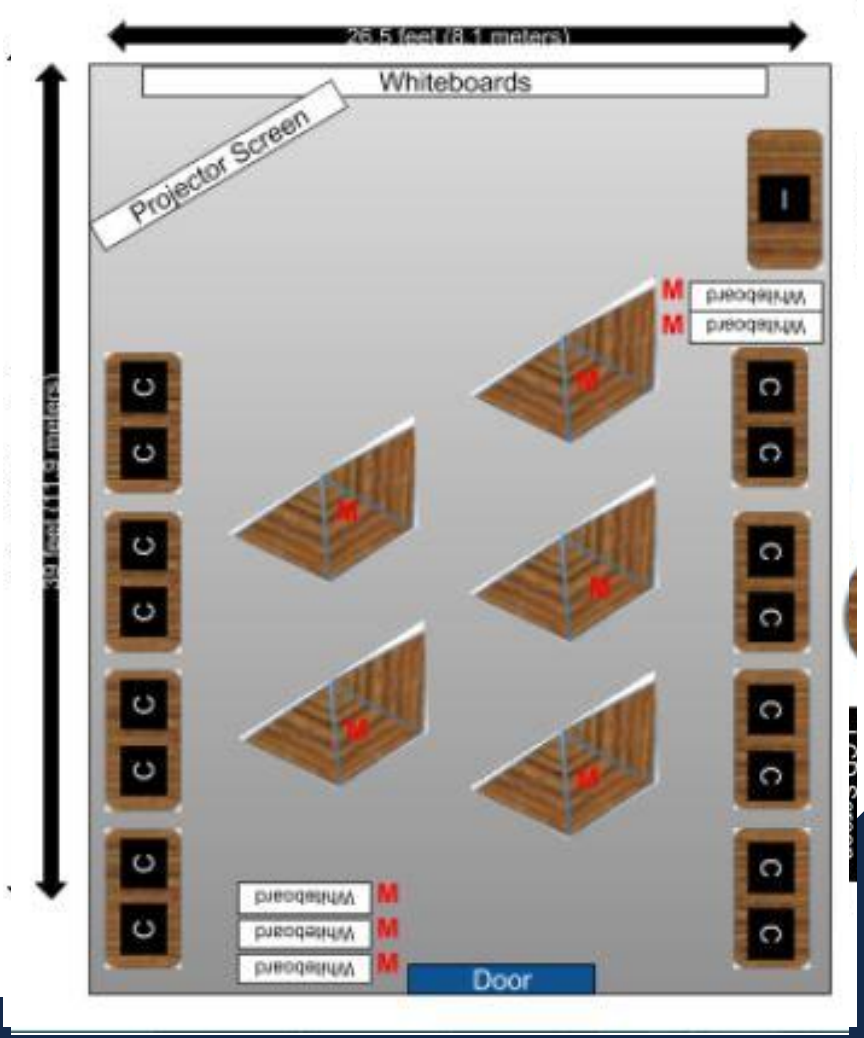
Determine instructor preferences

- Hold a **focus group** of instructors: they design their **“ideal” classroom layout** and then discuss layout and furniture options within our **“real” context**.
- Invite Facilities Management to observe!
- Summarize results with an **informal proposal**.

Use Google Drawings for Imagination Time!



Instructors came up with 3 general layouts



Keep instructors focused on *effectiveness* over the excitement of *innovation*

Substitution ➜ Augmentation ➜ Modification ➜ Redefinition

SAMR model (Puentedura, 2009), used to evaluate the use of technology vs. traditional methods for activity design➜ **modified**

~~Substitution~~ ➜ Enhancement ➜ Transformation

***Don't "innovate" for the sake of innovating**; Would the addition of LCD screens merely act as a Substitution of our current uses of classroom technology? Or would it **enhance or transform** our teaching strategies?

Then, the waiting game...

- Proposal submitted… wait...
- **Success**! Summer 2017 renovations
- Fall 2017 pilot (2 classrooms, 17 sections)
- Fall 2017 post-pilot survey

Results indicated that instructor satisfaction **greatly increased**!

New Computer Lab Layout #1

New Computer Lab Layout #2

Advantages of New Layouts

The newly redesigned classrooms…

- Allow instructors to take advantage of the various technological affordances of a computer lab
- Also offer the flexibility and space to arrange the classroom in ways more conducive to pair and small group work depending on the task at hand.
- Adapt to the environment to the students

Redesign Challenges and Lessons

1. The only recurring complaint is the **table shape**… and I knew that it would be. **Trust your teacher instincts**!
2. **Training and classroom management** should be an annual event/discussion **among new and experienced instructors**.
3. **Start establishing relationships** with Facilities Management now. This takes time, and **you never know when** it's time to buy new furniture!

It’s time to reimagine the language computer classroom!

Cassandra Rosado
Teaching Coordinator
crosado2@illinois.edu

John Kotnarowski
Lecturer
kotnaro2@illinois.edu

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Illinois ESL Program, Linguistics Department

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