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
References


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