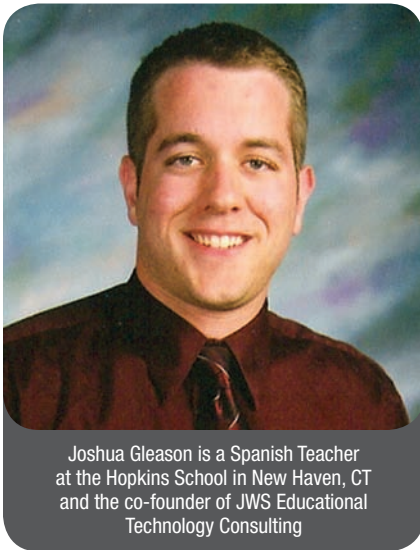


...Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Lab

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

"The lab perpetuates a productive and efficient environment for meaningful language learning."



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.

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

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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

RESOURCE CORNER

World Cinema Resources

Kino International

(world cinema, classic foreign titles, independent US, documentary)

Zeitgeist Films

(world cinema, documentary, independent)

First Run Films

(documentary, social issues, politics)

Icarus Films

(documentary, social issues, politics)

Film Movement

(world cinema, independent U.S. documentary)

Rialto Pictures

(classic and contemporary world cinema)

language, they will not hesitate because they are truly prepared.

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SANS Inc./NECTFL Mead Scholarship Awarded to Alba Osorio, Vernon, CT Spanish Teacher.

The SANS Inc./NECTFL Mead Leadership Program, named in memory of Robert G. Mead, Jr., a distinguished member of the foreign language education community, recognizes foreign language teachers who demonstrate leadership and vision in world language education. Mead Fellows are selected in part for the quality of projects they propose, and the plan of action for that project is developed by the Fellow and their assigned mentor, with input from state FL association leaders.

Alba Osorio, a Spanish Teacher since 1997 and currently teaching at Rockville High School in Vernon, CT, was recently chosen as a Fellow. Alba was nominated by Deborah Murasso, Assistant Superintendent, Vernon Public Schools. Ms. Murasso states, "Alba consistently delivers well planned, quality instruction and creates a positive learning

environment through her interactions with students. Additionally, she participates as a member of the data team putting research into action and monitors the effect of adult actions on student learning. Most recently she participated in the development and implementation of a new course, Spanish IVB. Designed for students who are interested in careers in social services and business, the curriculum is based on real world applications of the language both inside and outside the classroom environment."

Alba's Leadership project is based on this new course. It focuses on collaboration with bilingual professionals, local businesses and state regional and national agencies that can provide her students with insight into the advantages of having the knowledge of a second language and of a different culture. As part of the curriculum, students will job shadow with some local businesses and agencies and



NECTFL Awards Ceremony: (L-R) Jaya Vijayasekar (NECTFL), Stella Derum (SANS Inc.), Alba Osorio (2010 Mead Fellow)

do community service. She hopes that this project will serve as an example for other colleagues in her department for other languages that they teach. Alba will share her project in a session to be presented at the Northeast Conference in April 2011 in Baltimore, MD.

To learn more about the program and/or to apply: www.nectfl.org.

FALL 2010

\$400 Million Bill Introduced To Fund Foreign Language Learning.

Rep. Rush Holt (D-NJ) and co-sponsor Rep. Paul Tonko (D-NY) recently introduced the Excellence and Innovation in Language Learning Act, a bill that would authorize \$400 million in funding for fiscal 2011 for the teaching of foreign languages to K-12 students. They hope the bill will become part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

During a briefing on language learning, Rep. Tonko stated “Our future workers are going to be working in a global marketplace. They need to know English isn’t the only language in the world.”

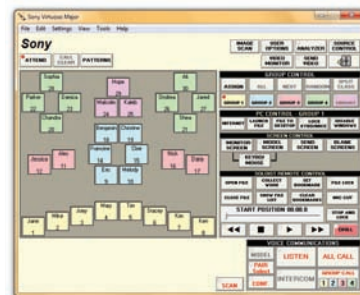
For more details on the proposed funding at the federal, state, and local levels, and to learn how you can show your support for this legislation please go to the ACTFL site at: www.actfl.org.



New Version of Sony Virtuoso™ Digital Language Lab Software Is Released.

Version 10 of the Sony Virtuoso Language Learning Instructional Software suite has recently been released. This latest update to this widely used language learning technology provides language instructors and students with enhanced functionality for uninterrupted audio communication and the ability to seamlessly incorporate a wide variety of audio and video content into their language lab activities.

According to Ron Remschel, president of SANS Inc., “We continue to improve an already robust and feature-rich software suite keeping in mind the capability for language educators to provide their students with a multitude of relevant content from the vast resources that are readily available.”



This version includes technical enhancements to more efficiently process audio and video files used in the language lab by means of a new SANS developed utility – SANSMedia™; increased support for a variety of file formats including Adobe® Flash® video, Apple® .aiff files, and Unicode based text files; and new built-in visual prompts for a precise, real-time, view of student audio recordings.

To learn more about this update or any of the Sony Virtuoso software products, please contact sales@sansinc.com.