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## **The Media Center: Computer Labs and Media Centers: A Natural Fit**

by

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**Help!** A friend has recently learned that the computer lab is being moved into her elementary school media center. She is at a loss of what to do. . . has anyone experienced this problem? Another person wrote: I need suggestions on how to effectively manage a media center and a computer lab. I am overwhelmed. I am responsible training teachers and staff in technology usage and integration strategies. . . . I'm also responsible for troubleshooting, loading software, and administration and teachers look to me for all technology related issues. I feel like I can't do it all and be effective. (LM\_Net, June 2000)

**Problem? Of course not ?** A media center lab is a natural fit. It's an opportunity to create a seamless information environment, improve access, interact with teachers, and integrate technology and information literacy throughout the curriculum. Can a lab and media center co-exist? How do you effectively manage both? Critical to success are a vision of what the lab will be, management skills, collaboration, staff development, and a positive "can do" attitude.

**First hand experience:** A computer lab became part of our media center in 1986; it was a catalyst for change and a first step towards building a strong school-wide media/technology program. Our first lab was only 12 computers; we now have two media center labs of 30 computers each as well as 25 other computers throughout the rest of the media center. Even though there are other labs and considerable classroom technology, the media center labs are in high demand and support the widest range of student learning. Non-computer media center activities have not suffered; use of print resources is stronger than in the past. The program has grown and thrived.

**Planning our school's first lab** was the first thing I was asked to do when I began my job. I envisioned an active learning environment and couldn't wait to get started. Often labs are not planned; they just end up in the media center because there is no place else for them to be or because the media specialist is the only person qualified or available to run the lab. The right reasons for labs to be in the media center are student learning and the capacity to create a dynamic information environment where information technology and information literacy are transparently integrated in the curriculum. Activities are curriculum driven; the lab is not used to teach about computers. Technology is used to access, work with, and communicate information in a wide range of learning activities. Boundaries between research and production or between print and non-print become blurred. The media specialist works with teachers to align resources in all formats with curriculum and facilitate the instruction of critical information literacy skills. If labs are separate it is more difficult to align resources and instruction. As one media specialist lamented, "How can I be a [media specialist] , if I do not have access to the students while they are researching?" (LM NET POSTING)

**Managing a lab is a multifaced job encompassing policies, scheduling, instruction, supervision, and technical support.** Policies may be formal or informal. A mix of both has work well for us. One example of a formal policy is our district's Acceptable Use Policy which is visibly posted. We also post abbreviated "Common Sense Technology Use Guidelines" and "kid- friendly" dos and don't s on all workstations. There is no guarantee that signs will be read; by posting them you cover your tracks and can point them out to students if they do not follow the guidelines.

**Printing :** A concern shared by many media specialists is too much printing. There are times when a request to print multiple pages from the encyclopedia or the web are legitimate, but we typically ask students to only print school related work; in many situations no printing is allowed without specific permission from media center staff or their teacher. Students generally understand the need to conserve paper and ink; the best reason for not printing is to encourage careful

reading and note taking skills. We make it easier by providing note taking forms and many teachers devise their own. Do whatever works to eliminate the "I don't have to read, it's on a computer" attitude. Other options for controlling printing are punch cards limiting students to a certain number of free printed pages, only putting paper in the paper trays when printing is essential, or keeping the printers at the circulation desk so students must claim their work from a staff member

**Scheduling is a joy and nightmare** . It's exciting when teachers call in June to schedule lab time for the fall; it's a nightmare when everyone wants to use the labs at the same time or when unanticipated situations cause scheduling conflicts. Colleen Mills Williams, a media specialist from Florida pointed out that when you schedule you are scheduling many things:

- 1) the facilities
- 2) the resources
- 3) the equipment or workstations
- 4) and your professional attention

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**Policies addressing priorities for lab use keep conflicts to a minimum** . Decisions should be curriculum based. Depending on need it may be necessary to limit use to a given number of times. We've managed well with informal scheduling policies and remaining flexible. When we first established one of the labs lab we gave priority to the curriculum areas most expected to integrate technology in the curriculum. With technology integration now wide-spread, the labs are open to everyone. All teachers are welcome to use them providing they don't over schedule to the point of making access difficult for others. Scheduled classes always have priority over small groups or drop-ins. Teachers are allowed to sign up as needed and as far in advance as they wish with the understanding that changes may be necessary. The first and last days of a grading period mean less use. Mid-term is the busiest.

☐When teachers schedule lab, also take time to schedule other resources, collaborative planning time, and instructional time. As teachers schedule lab time we also schedule peripheral equipment and related print resources, our instructional classroom, and a follow-up collaborative planning time. Keep the scheduling book at your desk to encourage media specialist/teacher collaboration. We keep directions, bibliographies, technology tips, and student assignments on file so they can be quickly retrieved and updated while planning. Typically our teachers schedule the labs weeks in advance but we welcome last minute scheduling if there is space. We also ask to be notified of any changes in plans and publicize any openings in the daily bulletin.

#### **Instruction and integration. Who does what?**

*I feel torn between the [media center] and the computer lab; both need so much attention... .how do teach I teach all the skills in both areas. I know ... integration but it's still a lot.*

Integration and instruction should always be a planned experience that teachers and students participate in together. Teachers will never be able to fully incorporate technology into their day-to-day teaching if they do not immerse themselves in that same technology along with their students. They will also be unable to assess student work and the processes involved with using technology if they do not participate in the learning process. Who does what?

☐When our labs were new I spent a lot of time co-teaching with teachers in the lab. We were all learning together. Now the overall responsibility of working with the students in the lab is that of classroom teachers. I continue to provide "how to" and information literacy instruction at the beginning of many projects and help out as needed during project work. In many cases I only co-plan the instruction and teachers provide the instruction. Another model that works well is to teach the first of multiple sections; the teachers continue with the rest of the instruction. If we are tackling a new piece of software or if the teacher is new to the project I continue to co-teach. Increasingly both the teachers and I feel useless because students handle many projects with little need for technical assistance. This provides time to work on other activities that keep moving the media/technology program forward.

☐Our ongoing staff development endeavor s have been a major contributing factor in achieving staff independence. It's impossible to teach 1000 students, but it is possible to help 80 staff members become comfortable with the lab and technology integration. Our help sheet racks filled with "how to sheets" also help staff become self sufficient.

**Supervision.** Labs are not places to "send students; it's important to have a policy stating that teachers must always be with their classes and assume responsibility for student behavior. But, everyone who works in the media center also supervises; we all pitch in as needed. A media center lab makes it possible to provide access to individual students or small groups on their own, different than what happens with separate labs which may sit empty during non-scheduled time. Our labs are physically open (no wall) to the rest media center making it possible to supervise without physically being in the lab. (Other options are glass walls, half walls, or wide doorways.) Noise is not a problem; obvious shouting, screaming and other unnecessary behavior are unacceptable, but we do accept and expect a certain level of productive noise. The media center also has designated quiet areas for reading and instruction.

**Technical issues.** The level of technical support media specialists provide will depend on the amount of other building support, your own interest in providing support, and the demand. Expect to provide some level of technical support; it may be as minimal as installing software or as much as managing a network, much of it is on the spot. With a lab full of students and teachers on a tight schedule a lab cannot be down; unless you have the luxury of many extra computers you cannot afford to have any computers not working. Minimize problems by standardizing what's on each computer and take care of problems as they come up. A portable phone is useful if you need to call for assistance while working on a computer. Ask people to report problems not immediately solved in writing so they can be forwarded to technicians. Everyone or almost everyone who works in the media center should be able to help with technical support.

**Juggling multiple demands. So how do you do it all?**

1. Think seamless and blended.
2. Plan. It saves time and ensures a successful experience for teachers and students; when everything goes well there is far less to deal with.
3. Take time each day to see what's happening tomorrow; be ready ahead of time in the event an emergency makes "last minute" preparation difficult
4. Periodically check the computers to make sure the necessary software is installed and working deleted unneeded files
5. Empower all media center staff to help; everyone learn, shares the work and is better able to help the students
6. Empower teachers to be self sufficient
7. Have directions, manuals and help sheets easily accessible and always ready to use.
8. Keep procedures and tips handy so everyone knows where to turn when they need information
9. Keep a log of problems and solutions
10. Prioritize. What will impact the most students or have the greatest impact when you decide what to do and what to give up.
11. Enjoy the challenge and opportunity.

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At a time when it is becoming necessary to use a computer as part of almost all information processes it is essential that labs be part of all media centers; they should be encouraged and welcomed. You can eat an entire elephant if you cut it into small enough pieces.

Mary Alice Anderson is a frequent contributor to professional journals, a conference presenter, and an adjunct instructor in the College of Education at Winona State University. The Winona Middle School Media/Technology Program has received both state and national recognition and awards. She is also the lead media specialist for the Winona School District.