LSC Webinar Snapshot—Adapting Classrooms for Student-centered, Individualized, and Technologically-supported Pedagogies *(March 2015)*

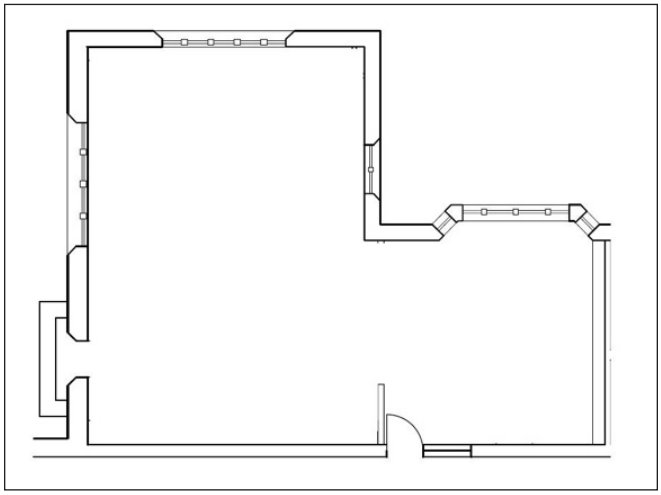
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The Context

By 2009, the original Language Center at Rhodes College, built in the early 1990's, was a space that had lost its usefulness. Poorly maintained, with a completely inflexible layout and aged technologies, it was rarely used. As a first step in remedying this situation, the college upgraded the position of language center director to a tenure-track faculty line and I became a member of the Rhodes community—bringing experience in this niche field of academic planning.

The Planning Process

My charge and my goal was to start from zero: find a new location and rethink everything about spaces that accommodate 21st century approaches to teaching and learning foreign languages and culture. The first step was easy. Rather than building a Center across campus, I favored a site that would be highly visible to all users. So it was planned to be in a central, highly visible location on the first floor of Palmer Hall, which had become the new home of the Modern Languages and Literatures department, thus close to faculty offices and foreign language classrooms.



My first step was to meet with all constituents individually and to ask them about their needs and experiences. Preparing for these meetings, I created blank blueprints that only featured load-bearing walls and permanent boundaries of the future space. It quickly became clear that notions of what a language center had to be in the past - a specialized technology center for languages - was not what the faculty really needed. By meeting with individuals, it became clear that space for more computers was not important to anyone.

Instead, faculty wanted a highly customizable teaching space that allowed for individualization of the learning experience. By not focusing on technology (although not disregarding it either) would allow the center to provide a space for a diverse approaches to teaching and learning—formal and informal—thus being more of a hub for all activities relating to language learning.



We decided on a two-room configuration (+storage room), to be partitioned by large sliding doors. The front room would always be open to all patrons, whereas the larger, second room would serve as a classroom and/or multipurpose room When not reserved or used for these purposes, that space also would be a drop-in social and work space.

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Another critical planning step was to establish a language center design task force, which consisted of three faulty members, two students, and me as the Center Director. Beyond our on-campus commitments, we even attended and presented our work collaboratively at a language center conference. The task force continues to exist, and with rotating members, there is a constant influx of new ideas and perspectives.



The center continues to evolve and it is intentionally designed to do so. Our goal is that it is able to become something very different in the future, as dreams of our faculty evolve. We have not planning a space that, once built, never changes—a lesson learning from Rhodes experience with the previous center which, once built, never changed.



Where are we now

The center has truly become the center of our community. What started out as a designed multi-purpose space for teaching, social functions, department meetings, check-out of media and technology resources, is now also a tutoring space for second languages and ESL. It is a space for student clubs, for study abroad advising, and now even for meetings of a new interdisciplinary group of innovation fellows.



Why does it work so well? One answer: the writeable walls and mobile furniture make the space ultimately flexible; another, as we continue to remove more and more computers, even more flexibility is added to the space and we can experiment with ever different configurations.

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The center is moving towards a BYOD (bring your own device) space, but I expect that we will continue providing equipment at least in the coming few years. In hindsight, it was a good decision to not pay too much attention on cable management but rather on "repurposability": the computer tables have become regular mobile tables. This decision had been criticized during the planning phase, but we are fortunate we had insisted on this.



One over-arching decision made was to have everything mobile, a decision even affected the design of the front desk. It continues to be relocated, as we observe the movement and flow of users of the center.

This brings me to a key lesson learned about how to understand how people use a space. This is not possible until users are actually using spaces—this is when careful observations must be made. This leads to another lesson learned, that building with flexibility and adaptability in mind means that those responsible have to be brave and leave enough gaps in the design to accommodate the future uses that will most certainly arise! It is okay and inevitable that we will not design and build a perfect space in the beginning. We must never be too happy with the space and become complacent.





Within the language center task force, we continue to ask uncomfortable questions:

- What is not working well?
- Which new technologies are making aspects of our space less important?
- How are we distinct from other units on campus?
- How are our users and patrons changing? Especially the students?
- How can we make sure that our processes do not allow complacency?

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Given responses to questions such as these, here is what we are now changing or working on:

- continuing to remove computers
- continuing to provide more charging solutions for patrons' devices (BYOD)
- moving more resources out of storage and make them more visible
- focusing on advantages that physical spaces have over virtual ones: sensory and haptic experiences. We provide items to touch, look at, for browsing.

  We allow for possibilities to run into people, to have food, to hear sounds, etc. The space continues to mature as a social space, which is especially important for a residential institution
- Continuing to focus on becoming more and more interdisciplinary.

Advice about first steps

- Do not design a finished space.
- Plan for gaps and unfinished areas, spaces, and aspects. It is impossible to foresee future needs, usage, and developments.
- Do not think about the finished space once it is built or renovated. Instead, think about what the space can become over the next 20 years. ■

Resources

Language Technology Bootcamp
http://www.languagetechnologybootcamp.org/felix-kronenberg/

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