The Computer Lab...Management

As the computer lab becomes a more integral part of elementary education, the computer lab becomes the hub of activity. Teachers needing instructional and technical assistance need to know they can find it in the computer lab. However, you do not have to be a computer expert to provide this help, you only need to have the desire. As a professional maintaining a computer lab, many things may fall under your jurisdiction from software installation or minor technical problems to joint planning of technology lessons and staff development.

Here are some great management ideas to help keep a computer lab running smoothly throughout the year. (If you do not have a computer lab at your elementary school, you may wish to use some of these ideas in your media center or teacher resource room).

Classroom Set-Up

If you wish to make your computer lab truly a "technology lab," don't think of it as just a place to use the computer. It should be a center of student productivity. Include stations for video capture and editing, telecommunications, publishing, and more.

If possible, for behavior management purposes, arrange the computers around the perimeter of the room. This allows the professional facilitating the activity to do a quick scan of who is on task.

Student Stations

Provide your students with computer clipboards (the clips that hold your notes comfortably on the side of your computer). Student projects now require notes, research, planning sheets -- all kinds of information for the student to reference while working. This helps students keep their personal area organized while helping them get their work done. (For right-handed students these should be mounted on the left side of the computer monitor, for left-handed student they should be mounted on the right. Most manufacturers offer a velcro attachment so they can be switched if necessary.)
Don't forget about left-handed students!! Show them how to switch the mouse to the left side of the keyboard (if possible on your hardware). Another option is to set up a couple of stations for left-handed students. Quite often, left-handed students won't complain about the difficulty of using a mouse with their right hand -- try to make it easy on them by making a few minor adjustments...
Information Station

Throughout the day, teachers may need assistance -- from questions about software to computer problems. Set up a help area near the entrance door to the lab to minimize lab interruption. Here they can sign up for lab time, get lesson plan ideas, request assistance, and answer their own software questions.

If you do not have an electronic mail system for your staff, it can be very difficult to keep teachers up-to-date with new information and announcements related to technology. Hang a white board or a bulletin board at the information station to keep teachers up with happenings in the computer lab. Here you can inform teachers of upcoming staff development opportunities in your school or outside of your school, technology conferences, deadlines for student projects, upcoming computer club or technology committee meetings, student software orders, and other important announcements.

Clipboards

Keep your Computer Lab Schedule Clipboard for each six weeks available for teachers at your information station. Teachers can double-check their times and projects and also see if there are open slots when their students are running behind on a project.

Set up a Computer Maintenance Request clipboard. Here teachers can inform the technology specialist or other person responsible of any type of problem on their computer. Maybe they need software installed or their printer is malfunctioning. In that case, you may be able to fix the problem before or after school. If it is a more serious problem, you can contact the necessary county technicians to help solve the problem.

Keep track of licensed software with a Software Inventory Clipboard. It is nice to have this available to everyone so they can be sure they have the proper, licensed software loaded on their computer. It is also a good idea if more than one person is responsible for software. For example, if the third grade uses some of their instructional budget to purchase software, they need access to the inventory sheets as well.

Binders

Technology Lesson Plan Binder

A Technology Lesson Plan Binder is a great way to organize teaching ideas for a technology lab. Whether one person is responsible for the ideas or the whole school contributes
activities, it is a fantastic way to offer integration ideas to teachers looking for ways to enrich their classroom learning. It is recommended that you organize these by subject area (like this book- Language Arts, Math, Social Studies...). That allows teachers from different grade levels to find good lessons from different grade levels and modify them to fit their own curriculum and skill level needs.

Encourage your teachers to add to the Technology Lesson Plan Binder each time they have a great idea. Your school resources will continue to grow and change as technology education changes!

**Software Help Binder**

Teachers always need quick and easy software tips. Because the day is so full, no one has time to weed through a software manual to have one simple question answered. However, when the lab manager has other responsibilities (especially teaching responsibilities) he or she may not always be available to answer questions. Have a Software Help Binder available. Make up "cheat sheets" or FAQ sheets (frequently asked questions) for teachers' quick reference. It is a great idea if you are in charge of staff development for your teachers. Each time you do an activity with your teachers or teach them a new skill, put the handouts you create in the binder. Now, teachers will always have access to that information!

**Software Licensing Binder**

A Software Licensing Binder helps you keep track of your software licensing. Use your Software Inventory Clipboard to keep track of what is currently loaded. You also need to keep up with the actual licenses -- for single user packages, network licenses, lab packs, and site licenses.

**Lab Information Binder**

What an important resource for a lab! This is a crucial component of an organized lab. However, you may want to keep it out of the reach of students. Based on your situation, these categories may or may not apply. There may be others that need to be included for your technology lab. This is just a suggested outline.

*Suggested Categories*

1. Scheduling Information (how scheduling is done in the lab, time slots available, down/maintenance time, etc.)
2. Lab Software (what titles are available on which computers, stations information, etc.)

3. Lab Hardware (information about computers, printers, scanners, etc.) This is a very important category. It can help you keep track of what systems need upgrades and how they were purchased (local money, county money, PTA donation, etc.).

4. County Software (if your county or district makes county-purchased software available to you for review for possible purchase, keep track of what's new.)

5. System Information (important network information -- how computers on the network are named, backup information, passwords, etc.)

Note: Many people are hesitant to record passwords or to make them available to others. In some situations, as a school-wide technology infrastructure grows, there are so many different passwords; it can be difficult to keep track of all of them. Another point to keep in mind...what if the person responsible for the system is unreachable and there is a minor problem? The system information and necessary passwords need to be available.

6. School Technology Plan

7. County/District Technology Plan

Examples File

Appoint a special area -- maybe a filing cabinet or a book case -- to contain exemplary student projects. Sharing successful student projects is a great way to promote student interest and set expectations. Arrange a filing system (maybe arranged in the same way the Lesson Plan Binder is organized) so that the teacher directing the activity can quickly access good student examples. Within this file, put a disk box. Purchase some extra disks to put examples of student slide shows and HyperStudio stacks, or any type of project that is not printed. Each time you see a great project, save it onto one of these disks. Then, when introducing a new activity, you have a variety of student work from which to choose. It makes is much easier for student to visualize the outcome, and quite often, will raise student expectations.
Behavior

Quite often teachers find that students are on their very best behavior in the computer lab. Even those students who are often bouncing off the walls are so enthralled by technology that they actually stay planted for a 40-minute sitting.

However, without firm expectations, anything can become chaotic. And with expensive equipment around, you don't want things to get out of control.

Hints

Allow whispering. Students can (and will) quite often answer one another's questions if they are allowed to. While a "no tolerance" rule for talking seems to some like a way to keep students productive, it can also have the opposite effect.

Control Noise Level

Allowing students to whisper sounds great in theory, but 30 students can create a lot of noise -- even when working diligently on a project. If controlling noise is a priority, keep an egg timer handy. If the noise level climbs above normal, the whisper privilege is revoked for a short period. Set the egg timer for 3-4 minutes (any more results in lots of student questions without enough teacher to go around). Students are not allowed to talk until the buzzer sounds. This will bring the noise level back down, and also remind students of the importance of being able to communicate with one another.

"Look – No hands!"

In the classroom, students are sometimes required to raise their hands to ask a question. But in the computer lab, that takes away valuable time on the keyboard when they could be answering their own questions. Many student questions in the computer lab involve how to do something on the computer (how to delete a word, how to make a picture larger). If a student's hand is in the air, not only are his own problem solving capabilities taken away, but whatever the student next to him is doing becomes interesting and a chain reaction of off-task behavior is likely to follow.

Bypass that problem by using CUPS to request attention. Place disposable cups (I recommend SOLO cups or a similar plastic cup because they are more durable than paper, yet still inexpensive to replace if necessary) next to each computer. If a student has a
question, he places the cup on top of the computer monitor to signal the teacher that help is needed. If the student is able to answer his own question before the teacher makes her way over there, the cup is returned to the side of the computer.

If you are in a team teaching situation with a professional in the computer lab and the classroom teacher attending with his or her class, develop a signal. If the student has a technical or computer question about how to use a particular tool, place the cup upside down on the computer. If is a content-related question about what was covered in the classroom, the student can signal the classroom teacher with the cup facing up.

**Mini-Lessons**

If you have ever sat through a computer course where the instructor talked non-stop for what seemed like forever before allowing you to practice all of the neat things he was demonstrating, you will support the mini lesson. There is so much for students to learn about technology, that we as teachers want to share it with them. However, as we share tool after tool after neat trick, students begin to tune out. Somewhere there is a happy medium, and it seems to be around 5 minutes. Start each and every activity with a mini-lesson. When students are learning a new piece of software, we inundate them with all of the things it can do, when they can usually learn it pretty quickly on their own.

When student are already know a piece of software, teachers tend to say -- "Go on and get started" without talking to them at all about the software. Even if you are only showing them a neat trick about how to change a font or make a picture more spectacular, you are giving them one more tool to make their work the best it can be. Take about 3-5 minutes each day to share - or better yet - let one of them share - a valuable idea on the computer.

**Example:**

Mrs. Loeber’s class is typing a Civil War newsletter on the computer. It will take about 4 visits of 40 minutes each to the computer lab to type in the information, add graphics, edit, do the necessary formatting and print. Instead of taking 20 minutes at the beginning of the first session to overwhelm students with how to type, change font and style, add pictures, edit, etc., spend about 4 minutes at the beginning of each to show them the tools that will help get that day’s objective met.

**Day 1 Mini-lesson (3 minutes)**

Remind students how to create a document and set its margins. Students spend the day typing in their information.
Day 2 Mini-lesson (3-4 minutes)
Show (or remind) students how to change the font and size of the letters for headlines. Show how to change the text justification to center where necessary and justified on the articles. Go over anything that students struggled with on day 1.

Day 3 Mini-lesson (4-5 minutes)
Show student show to import a picture into their document, resize it, and text wrap. Go over anything that students struggled with on day 2

Day 4 Mini-lesson (3-5 minutes)
Remind students how to do final editing (use the Student Editing Checklist if desired). Show them spell check functions and catching common mistakes.

Students will retain more because they will have the opportunity to apply what they learn each day.

*Keep it short and sweet!*

It is tough to stop yourself after 3-5 minutes. The first time I tried to do this I thought I did a great job and that my lesson was quick -- it lasted 15 minutes (and of course students only retained half of what they heard). Practice keeping it short! Keep an egg timer handy to stop you from getting too long-winded. There is always tomorrow.