

# Hints on Preventing Computer Lab Catastrophes

By Keith E. Polonoli

**E**nvision a line of well-mannered children marching down the hallway to the microcomputer lab. As the troop comes to a halt, their teacher gingerly opens the door. Raising an index finger to her lips, she gives her cadre a last *shhhhh*. Immediately, eighteen fifth-graders race to their favorite computer to begin the ritual of button pushing and mouse clicking.

If the scene above makes you a little anxious, maybe a few suggestions will help. The hints I offer for a successful sojourn to your school's computer lab are based on commonsense and over five years of experience spending a somewhat embarrassing amount of time in elementary school, high school, and university computer labs instructing students and faculty. If you are savvy in the ways of navigating the computer lab *mélée*, you are probably already using some of these strategies. If you are a pure novice or fall somewhere between, maybe these 12 suggestions can help give you an edge and increase your comfort level as you start the journey of teaching with technology.

## 1. Explain the need for patience to your students.

Patience is a virtue, especially in the computer lab. I am very frank with students that I take to the computer lab for instruction; events outside my control occur. It is necessary to tell them that things do not always go as planned when using technology. Stringently convey to them that everyone must exercise patience.

This is sound advice; no matter what grade level you are instructing. However, for elementary-age children, it may be the most prudent. Engage your students in a simple call and response. Ask them the following question: What must we have when we work with computers? Be sure to elicit a resounding cry of PATIENCE from your group. It may seem a little silly, but when a problem arises, asking your group this simple question can defuse a tense situation until help arrives.

## 2. Do not enter the computer lab without having a specific instructional purpose for being there.

This is the number one cause of computer lab chaos. An educational

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objective must be the catalyst to propel you and your class to the computer lab. The computer must be part of your instructional strategy or be ready to field the question that many students seem to chant as their mantra - "Why do we have to do this?" Instructional time is precious; the computer lab is not a place to burn this commodity.

### 3. Always have a back-up plan.

Computers do not always work. To some, this may seem like a great understatement. Therefore, it may be wise to have a contingency plan. If you choose to teach a new lesson with technology, a set of just-in-case overhead transparencies, worksheets, or other activities may be in order. This endeavor, however, is much simpler if you choose to teach a lesson taught earlier in a traditional manner. The benefits being, you already have your "backup" material if the technology fails and you are familiar with the lesson and the classroom dynamics it fosters.

### 4. Stick to a "hands off" policy.

This is not only a good strategy for the computer lab, but it is a good policy to adhere to in general. I would encourage you to have a student model the keystrokes or display the mouse path on their machine, but avoid physically completing these tasks on another pupil's machine. When a student begins to operate another classmate's machine, a learning opportunity is lost and one student may be left feeling victimized. It is also wise for teachers to heed this advice. I am aware that it is difficult to witness a student struggle with a particular task, but it is through his/her own resolve that learning occurs.

### 5. Use assigned seats.

Most computer labs have the machines numbered in a logical manner; simply assign each child a number that corresponds to a machine. Assigning seats in the computer lab prevents mad rushes and wasted instructional time as each student maneuvers to take a seat near their best friend or sweetheart of the week. In addition, assigning computers allows you to diagnose any recurring technical problems your students may be experiencing. For example, if a particular machine is constantly being shut down improperly after your second period class has used the lab, it is simple to identify the child and correct the situation.

### 6. Find an extra set of hands if possible.

A trip to the computer lab is a time to call in favors. If you can find an aid, a teacher willing to sacrifice a planning period, or train a parent volunteer, do it. It seems that things go much smoother when another person is in the lab to field questions. Other students are great-untapped resources. It has been my experience that older students enjoy teaching their younger counterparts. We sometimes forget that teaching is a wonderful learning strategy.

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### 7. Be certain you are proficient with the software application that you will be using.

Nothing can be more frustrating, or dangerous, than teaching something you know nothing about. If you plan to use a particular piece of software for instructional purposes, please read the manual and work with it in your spare time. See if you can borrow a copy to use at home. You will gain confidence by mastering the software you intend to use for instruction, and your students will recognize this confidence. Teachers are not the only ones who can tell when someone has not done his/her homework.

### 8. Make sure the software application(s), computers, and the network that you will be using are in proper working order.

This seems like commonsense, but it is surprising how easily we forget the obvious. Checking the software, computers, and the network the day before you are to perform the lesson will not work. Strange things seem to happen overnight. It is wise to check these items one period before use. It is much easier to initiate your contingency plan before you begin a technology-rich lesson than when you are in its midst's. Remember Murphy's Law.

### 9. Show tolerance to emotional responses.

Most children see the computer lab as a fun place. To many, it is a chance to engage in something out of the ordinary. As children build word skills with such classic programs as *Spellivator* and *Word Muncher*, emotional displays in the forms of "Ooo's", "Aha's", and "Darn's" should be expected. Maintain classroom discipline, but show a little extra tolerance for verbal outbursts. Emotional responses are a good sign. Engaging educational software will stimulate this behavior. A red flag should go up when your students are staring stoically at their computer screen. This is a harbinger of pedagogical doom.

### 10. Bookmark web sites that you intend to use as a resource in the computer lab.

Taking a few minutes before your class to bookmark web sights is a major timesaving strategy. This is especially helpful with younger students whose keyboarding skills may not be up to speed. Or if you like, use a floppy disk to type the web addresses, saved as text, which you will be using in class at your leisure. When you are finished, share them over your building's network shared drive so your students can access them.

### 11. Have a Chalkboard or Whiteboard handy.

These are handy devices to use in order to post notes or to jot down instructions. You would be amazed at how many computer labs I have taught in

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over the years that were void of this simple tool. If you find your lab is missing this device, it may be wise to purchase one. Portable whiteboards can be found at any office supply store for under \$20.00, and they have a myriad of classroom uses.

### 12. Have Fun!

This one is self-explanatory.

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