LANGUAGE LEARNING Profiles

SANS SOFTWARE AND NETWORK SOLUTIONS

Exclusive Licensor of Sony Language Learning Software

RETAINING OLD WORLD ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE, RELEVANCE AND BALANCE IN THE NEW WORLD OF 21ST CENTURY TECHNOLOGY.

The Westminster Schools' language lab is equipped with the Sony Virtuoso™ and Soloist® digital language learning software.

"This is not just a listen and respond tool; it's much greater than that," said Ted Sadtler, Spanish 1 and 2 Teacher and Director of the Goizueta Language Learning Center for The Westminster Schools.

The Westminster Schools in Atlanta, Georgia was established in 1951 with the union of North Avenue Presbyterian School and Washington Seminary. As the test site for an advanced studies program that evolved into the College Board's Advanced Placement program, The Westminster Schools has managed to preserve its academic vision, while keeping its eye on the future. Driven by traditional values and Christian teachings, this pre-first through high school institution remains progressive by embracing innovative technology and putting 21st century skills to work in all their programs, and especially in their digital language lab.

With a belief that communication skills in a second language broaden individual perspective and international understanding, Westminster's language program offers Spanish, French, Latin and Chinese (AP® Spanish, French, and Latin) to junior high and high school students with a minimum of three years high school level foreign language completion. Their digital language lab is equipped with the Sony Virtuoso™ and Soloist® digital language learning software acquired through ACSI, their local SANS authorized reseller.

Excellence, Relevance and Balance: how the core principals extend to the language lab.

At its core, Westminster's academic vision relies on three principles: Excellence, Relevance and Balance. According to Ted Sadtler, Spanish 1 and 2 Teacher and Director of the Goizueta Language Learning Center, the application of all three principles is "readily available on a regular basis" in the digital language lab.

Excellence. "The digital language lab has dramatically improved language abilities – primarily in students' oral production, giving them greater opportunity to speak individually," said Sadtler. "In a classroom, students are limited by time and the importance of the individual voice; in a lab, kids can speak simultaneously and more interactively."

Relevance. "Having the internet at their fingertips lets students interact immediately with the outside world," said Sadtler. "In high school, where students already have a language foundation, teachers can use the lab as a resource to connect students to life outside school. Using the internet to create blogs or contribute to other people's blogs builds relevance," he added. Instead of reading about a political event in a Spanish history book, for example, students can go online and witness a coup unfolding in Honduras in real time. "This makes the experience real, relevant and incredibly immediate," explained Sadtler.

Balance. According to Sadtler, balance depends on the individual student or teacher. "Some do very well with balance, making play as much a part of a learning exercise as work," said Sadtler. "There are so many opportunities in a learning lab setting to play and let play be the learning experience," he added.

Sadtler was closely involved with choosing SANS and the Sony Virtuoso and Soloist software for the school's digital language lab. "The company did a good job of combining advanced technology with approachable design," said Sadtler. "They kept the interface simple – made it look like a tape player, which, for a teacher who hasn't got used to a digital lab environment, makes it more approachable, more useable. That blend – that combination of advanced technology and basic interface was very attractive," he added.

Another reason Westminster went with the SANS and Sony technology – and also with a software based lab in general, is because it can remain a cutting edge product for a relatively low cost. "As opposed to rip out old hardware and put in new – just update the program, and the infrastructure is the same," said Sadtler. "All you need are PCs."

Sadtler reports that students have responded well to the digital language lab. They are flexible to bouncing from one setup to another and fluidly move from a pairing activity to working in conference groups, for example.

"Being outside the classroom predisposes them to different ways of doing things," said Sadtler. "Students can be much more expressive writing on a computer as opposed to writing by hand. With non-traditional instruction – as in a digital language lab – you get non-traditional results, primarily with written production such as texting or blogging," he added.

Technology based instruction as creative teaching tools.

Frequency of student lab work depends on the teacher – some come in as often as three days a week, depending on lab availability; some use it for testing purposes and final oral exams. "Part of my job is to make the lab as approachable as possible for them. I provide tutorials or frontload projects, so they can immediately begin to play," explained Sadtler. He finds this has an immediate benefit for the teacher, and may make them more likely to use the lab again later. He also gives group tutorials at the beginning and midway through semesters.

Sadtler also helps teachers develop technology-based instructional activities, which often grow organically in the lab. "Teachers usually create something specific for a particular lesson in a particular language," said Sadtler. "Rather than create an activity from scratch, I take their activity and broaden it so that any language at any level can use it."

As an example, one teacher developed an activity called "The Talking Heads." Common for all levels and generalized so anyone can use it, this exercise takes a snippet of video from a film, commercial or sitcom in any language or from any culture, plays the scene repeatedly, removes the audio track and then challenges students to recreate the conversation based on body language.

Digital lab technology scores high with AP® tests.

Westminster also uses the Sony Virtuoso and Soloist digital lab technology to prep students for AP testing. "In a lab setting, I don't have to explain as much detail to students, because they are already familiar with the software, and there is a natural transition from practicing AP to taking the AP exam," said Sadtler. "This benefits the proctor, the students and the AP teachers," he added.

Sadtler trumpets communicative capabilities and the opportunities for open learning as the key reasons for choosing the Virtuoso and Soloist software. "This is not just a listen and respond tool; it's much greater than that," said Sadtler. "Collaborative capabilities on the Sony system are fantastic – providing a number of different activities and methodologies using pairing, conference, model and screen functions, which can be used effectively in language learning. You can do it in a traditional classroom but not as effectively. In a classroom it's not authentic," he explained.

Sadtler also recommends the Sony software for economic reasons. After the initial investment is made, all that's required is a yearly software upgrade. Said Sadtler, "It's quite cost effective, and all the while, you are dealing with cutting edge technology."

When asked about the SANS customer service and product support, Sadtler responded, "The SANS staff is incredibly knowledgeable. They helped get the lab directors proficient with the software, and they were wonderful with training, installation and troubleshooting after the software purchase."

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Coming full circle with 21st century technology.

The digital language environment epitomizes the idea of 21st century, skill based, digital literacy – with the focus on outward learning vs. inward learning. In education circles, the "Three R's": "reading, writing and arithmetic" are being replaced with the "Four C's": "create, collaborate, communicate and collective action", all of which are part of daily life for students today.

Sadtler then commented on the pressure of school administrators to address the importance of 21st century skills – the current buzz word in education. "It is a legitimate notion – in that we are no longer just consumers but also creators of content," said Sadtler. "A digital language lab is perfectly suited to that concept. The blogs or WIKIs that students are creating offer several advantages over traditional textbooks, in that they offer greater flexibility and relevance, and they create opportunity for a dialogue about content, rather than a soliloquy by the author.

Nearly 60 years of proven academic success, combined with a progressive approach and open mind to new technologies, make The Westminster Schools an innovative institution of learning in which the new world of 21st century skills, the "Four C's" and the digital language technology come full circle.

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