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L'apprendimento autonomo delle lingue straniere

Filosofia e attuazione nell'università italiana

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Affect, ergonomics and culture in creating and managing a self-access centre¹

The CILA's² self-access centre (SAC) was set up experimentally some six years ago. I would like to describe some aspects of our experiences and how we have developed, and tried to apply, a 'philosophy' which combines affect

¹ A connected report by Mikaela Cordisco (this volume) brings some quantitative and qualitative data from an informal survey carried out by questionnaire and observation among users of our SAC.

² *Centro Interdipartimentale di servizi Linguistici e Audiovisivi, dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*. It is not strictly a Centro Linguistico di Ateneo. It was set up some 30 years ago, by Fernando Ferrara as the 'laboratori linguistici' to provide teaching laboratories in the hope that this could cope with mass teaching of students of English, especially. In the late seventies some experimentation was made with closed circuit televised language lessons. It later became the audio-visual and multimedia services unit for the IUO. Its regular staff are all non-graduate technicians. Teachers of language or other subjects who choose to teach or otherwise operate in the CILA are either simply assigned some of their regular lessons there (if they wish to use technologies) or operate voluntarily. Since 1995/6 the author has been delegated by the CILA's CTS as voluntary 'coordinatrice didattica'. In 1998, CILA's self-access centre was awarded the EU-ISFOL's LABEL for 'iniziative che promuovono l'apprendimento linguistico'. Since 1999 it has been possible, thanks to a project coordinated by the author and funded until 2001 by the European Social Fund "RICERCA, SVILUPPO TECNOLOGICO ED ALTA FORMAZIONE" MISURA I.1 - "LABORATORI LINGUISTICI", to pay temporary collaborators to staff the self-access centre (and other activities connected with the CILA's TV-studio and multi-media production activities).

Thanks must go to Iain Chambers, 'presidente' of CILA at the time of the self-access centre's birth, Marina Vitale, the present *presidente*, and Nicola De Carlo the *direttore tecnico*, although experts in fields other than linguistics, for allowing the project to start and to

tive and ergonomic principles in a relatively high-tech SAC, with a practical, making do approach, in a state university setting in Southern Italy (Naples), and which also attempts to take into account the local cultural 'style'.

My comments, although informal, do have some methodological, and also some wider 'political' implications in that they also concern dealing with (all too common) attitudes within our public sector host institutions. Many methodological premises and goals relating to SALL, and/or TELL may well not be shared, consciously or unconsciously, by various components in our institutions, ranging from central university decisional bodies, administrative staff, technical staff, other colleagues and faculty, and even the students themselves (see, e.g. Gardner & Miller 1999, Gates 2000).

These remarks are offered in the hope that they may be a small contribution to our joint exploration of strategies towards acceptable results in our various contexts. It is also, at the same time, believed that at least some of these comments may have some relevance to SAC service environments in general, regardless of local cultural and institutional context.

If there be anything new here, it may be in the fact that while some or all of my premises are implicit in the literature in SLA and SALL, as well as in that on organizational, teacher and workplace management, it is my intention here to suggest they be made explicit goals in our contexts.

Some characteristics of our 'philosophy' and action

These are quite simply put: pay explicit attention to the psychological and affective dimension for students and for staff. Invest in human capital or resources rather than merely in technology³. Strive for efficiency and huma-

continue thus far. I must also thank SAC front-liners, ex-students of mine, who shared the vision, and over the years, at first voluntarily and later with temporary funding, have helped nurse our self-access centre along with their immense enthusiasm, hard work, and acquired expertise: Antonella Elia, Mikaela Cordisco, Paolo Donadio, and Marilena de Santo.

³ The technology must, nonetheless, be perceived as, mainly, up-to-date to appeal to users (especially in a purported technological support service), but should not be present simply for its 'dazzle' rather than methodological value; furthermore, high-end technology is useless without consistent, competent human backing (see also Gardner & Miller 1999:150). SAC equipment can also usefully include older machines if these are scattered among the more 'cutting-edge' ones. They can be the 'aperitifs' while people wait their turn to have their main meal at the more popular workstations. They can also function as a less-threatening entrée to newcomers. It is the question of human resources which is more acutely a problem in the public sector in Italy; as mentioned, at the CILA, there is no per-

nity, together. Try to create a pleasant 'social' space, where people enjoy coming to study and work, not only with machines, or alone, but also with other people. Make people feel at home, or more generally, make them feel good, and they will do well, or at least better than they would have otherwise.

Another important component (part of how to go about making the environment a place where people feel good) is that of making the local cultural⁴ and material characteristics work for you, rather than trying to work against them, or simply importing or grafting on models developed elsewhere, without adaptation (see also e.g. Gardner & Miller 1999:42). This principle of adaptation to/taking account of, the local cultural characteristics⁵ means that some specific aspects of what we have implemented may not apply to all contexts or situations. Yet, one nonetheless would expect, or hope, that the basic psychological principle (make people feel good, and they will do well) does have some general relevance.

To continue: for learners, one's service users, take care to create a relaxing, informal, non-clinical environment, one which is non-threatening;

manent salaried 'teaching' staff or self-access 'manager', and only temporary self-access staff (Gardner & Miller's comments (op. cit: 32) suggest that securing funding for pedagogical support is a common problem).

⁴ To briefly outline straightaway some of the cultural characteristics which seem to be relevant to us (using some well-known dimensions from the intercultural communication literature): the relative high contextualization (see Hall 1976, Hofstede 1994, Vincent 1989) expectations of many of our users in public service settings; relatively low trust in institutions and out-groupers (see e.g. Fukuyama: 1995); consequently ingrained 'receiver' responsibility expectations (Hinds 1987); a strongish Power-distance Index, PDI (see Hofstede 1994); in-group communitarianism or interdependence (Schwartz 1990), a consequent 'appreciation' of nurturance, and, connected to all the above, a heightened awareness of social reality, rather than mere physical reality, a preference for people as sources of information and 'truth', rather than 'objects' (see e.g. Tannen 1990); indeed, a preference for the oral rather than the written channel (see e.g. Tannen 1985); and, lastly, polychronism (see Hall 1985, and also Kendon 2000: cv-cvi).

⁵ Some importation can be useful, however, if it is perceived, by users and staff, to contribute successfully towards efficiency, and 'humanity'. Novelty may be refreshing, thus pleasurable, and thus successful. For example, depending on labelling and signs for orientation is very 'low-context'; asking people (friends, well-disposed people) is a more typical way of getting information in high context cultures. Users, used to very high-context modes of orientation and information-seeking, become accustomed to looking for signs and labels, rather than depending solely on people, only gradually. One needs to nurture in users the feeling that both modes are systematically trustworthy in a particular environment. A compromise in a service setting such as ours is needed. A dependence on people is not very efficient, when the institution provides no people, only machines! A combination which allows users also to be weaned gradually (from either extreme) and thus to widen their repertoire of strategies for information-seeking, is anyway, desirable.

this type of environment comes, not only through having user-friendly materials, and user-friendly work-stations, but also, user-friendly assistants, layout and decor.

User-friendly assistants will have, among other things (specialised methodological training is necessary but certainly not sufficient), a sense of service to the public, non-dismissive and non-patronising attitudes to users, and, not least, a positive affective attitude to their work-place. This involves a feeling, to some degree, of possessiveness, coming from a sharing in the creation of the environment. It means feeling proud to give hospitality in their environment, as if they were having guests in. Although it is true that eventually a SAC must belong to the users, at first, it is vital, or it was vital, that those setting up the centre should have this feeling of pride, and satisfaction in their creation. Wanting your 'guests' to feel at home, and making them feel at home (and looking forward to keep wanting to come back for more), then follow naturally. There is then no need to remind assistants to smile or be nice to people, nor to put things away or keep an eye out for new and interesting materials, nor protect materials from damage or loss, update catalogues and signs, etc.⁶ There is no need to suggest bright posters or plants, these will be brought in or suggested automatically. All this follows naturally from participating actively in creating the environment, or at least from feeling one belongs in it. These affective aspects of staff-management are also a consequence of certain actions on the part of the 'manager' or 'leader' (cf. also e.g. Gardner & Miller 1999: 67-69; Townsend 1999; Sergiovanni 1994; Connel 185; Elliot 1991; Ginsburg 1997; Goodson & Hardgreaves 1996), who must not only have a 'vision', but also set the example, and give a practical start to organising the environment, with, hopefully, both contagious enthusiasm and 'devotion', and by attending to 'small' practical details personally. A manager cannot expect from others, in difficult circumstances, what s/he is not prepared, and seen to do. This would include personally getting 'one's hands dirty', even to moving around furniture and trying out different layouts and materials, etc.⁷

⁶ Practical details, both methodologically and commonsensedly driven, which also contribute to the user-friendliness and efficiency of the service environment, for example, making sure that copies of worksheets are kept available, that signs are up-to-date, that resources are clearly labelled and described and that materials are replaced where they should be, though it may seem obvious, need to be explicitly introduced in a high-context setting.

⁷ In a high PDI society, this can have galvanising effects on the technical and caretaker staff, who are pleasantly surprised and re-motivated by seeing 'professors' actively and physically involved.

A pair of words which can sum up to some degree our general 'philosophical' aim are *humanity* and *efficiency*. We believe that humanity is allied to efficiency – indeed, they need each other. An efficient service is humane, because it is non-frustrating; a humane environment is efficient because it is more conducive to the correct atmosphere for learning: one that is relaxed, stress-free, non-threatening, comfortable, pleasurable, etc. Needless to say, this is especially important in self-directed learning, as fragile as it can be. Affective or emotional aspects (the importance, not only of comfort but also of pleasure), recently being addressed by so-called 'hedonic ergonomics', are finally being recognised and called for by the academic community⁸, though the application of humane principles should surely not need to be academically or authoritatively sanctioned.

Methodological reasoning behind our choices, taken on board from various SLA hypotheses⁹, obviously includes, among other things, the importance of providing a 'stress-free environment' for efficient learning/acquisition, and that of catering for the 'right to be silent until one is ready' and of guaranteeing a student's privacy and right to gradually reach full confidence, in production in this case, at his/her own pace. This is guaranteed in a true self-access environment, one where assistants provide discreet guidance, on demand, without coercion or breathing-over-the-shoulder or rushing students through demonstrations or exercises¹⁰. 'Comprehensible input', another invocation of Krashen's (1994) too is potentially guaranteed in self-access centres, since students will simply work with what they feel comfortable with, as long as they are given the chance to choose, the ease to experiment and the time to reach their own goals without feeling rushed. Stretching themselves, under requested guidance, is one thing, being forced

⁸ For confirmation one need only take a look at the programme of the next *Affective Human Factors in Design Conference*. (CAHD-2001- Singapore 27-29th June 2001), endorsed by the International Ergonomics Association (see at <http://www.unimas.my/Cahd2001/>)

⁹ From Krashen's natural approach and input hypothesis to the more recent and more inter-articulated hypotheses such as those theorising the importance of 'interaction' (e.g. Long 1996, Pica 1992), 'noticing' (Schmidt 1990, 1995) 'pushed output' and metalinguistic awareness (see e.g. Swain 1995). Without entering the methodological debate on their relative merits, we believe that it is important that any ILE should provide an environment with as wide a range of conditions as possible which might promote successful language acquisition and/or learning (surely also in consideration of the variety of individual learning strategies and personalities to be found, see e.g. Oxford 1990).

¹⁰ This can happen with enthusiastic assistants before they are fully trained or appropriately 'indoctrinated'.

to use materials, is another. Pleasure, not pain, must be the goal, or at any rate, the means. We have especially invested much time and energies to promote comprehensibility of authentic materials for less-than-advanced students by not only buying (motivating and pleasurable) materials (in particular close-captioned feature-films) but also by producing our own video companions containing transcriptions and guided comprehension questions, and notes¹¹ which enable these less-confident students to approach materials, which though less pleasurable than feature-films, are pleasant enough adjuncts to their language and linguistics studies, and enable them to feel pride in their capacities to approach and deal with confidence with authentic materials.

Other practical ways we try to ensure the user-friendliness of our materials, or access to them, is through the development of our catalogue¹², but mainly through the provision of counselling services and of suggested pathways or *percorsi* through the materials (which we are now also trying to develop along the lines developed for English by Jan Gates, for French, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Arabic, etc.). These are provided on paper *schede*, on wall-panels and on our stand-alone computers.

The counselling and suggested pathways, incidentally, also provide a way of catering for SLA hypotheses stressing the importance of forcing output, noticing and metalinguistic awareness. Tandem (which we also implemented early on with our Erasmus students and with the local immigrant community) also provides this, naturally, within interaction.

Our web-site was also conceived with user-friendliness (for learner orientation) in mind. It was, as far as we know, the first in Italy to provide on-line guidance to language sources on the web, and moreover, to do so for a very wide range of languages, from Albanian to Zulu, including all the 'LingUE', as we like to say¹³.

A further aspect of our philosophy (which to echo the Neapolitan theatre classic¹⁴ might be called one of '*miseria e nobiltà*'), that of trying to

¹¹ E.g. Vincent (1996-2000) video companions, to *The Story of English*, BBC-video series, and other Language and Linguistics documentaries (e.g. *Talking Proper*, *Before Babel*, *A Child's Guide to Languages*; also Marilena De Santo '*Teaching Languages*' video companion).

¹² Thanks especially to Jan Gates and Manuela Ragozzino; see also Gates 2000.

¹³ The site was developed mainly by Antonella Elia. (It is now embedded in the CLA's general site; see at <http://www.iuo.it/cilaweb/sitocila/homepage.htm>).

¹⁴ By the early 20th c. writer of society farces Eduardo Scarpetta.

attain some 'noble' effects even with 'limited means' (as we had at first), by attending to the affective side, and to small practical, or less noble, details, also has the advantage of costing relatively little to apply, at least on the technical side. It does, of course, require important investments in human resources, in time dedicated to motivating, and training assistants.

Whatever the future holds (and we hope that there will eventually be some official recognition of the usefulness of the SAC service shown by the 'powers that be', through the provision of funds for permanent 'didactic' staff - an official investment in human resources¹⁵), however, we do feel that we have proven that it is possible, by applying the principles I am attempting to outline, to accomplish good, even noble, results, out of relative 'miseria'. Even better results could be accomplished, of course, in more favourable circumstances.

Some problems we are up against

Without wishing to dwell on this aspect too much, mention must at least be made of some of the other things which we are up against, and cause entropy, waste of energy, and much frustration, yet also provide the motivation for continuing. I am not sure whether it is a comfort to know that, far from being unique to our context, they are widespread problems university language centres face, to some degree, everywhere (as discussions at CERCLES and AICLU conferences repeatedly throw up, and are hinted at in various publications on SAC and SALL, e.g. in Gardner & Miller mentioned above). Among these problems, are the incipient technophobia of some colleagues, and the technophilia of technical staff.

Furthermore, too few teaching colleagues are as yet aware of, or comfortable with, learner-centredness; many are fossilised in their 'magisterial' roles, and convinced that students do not really know what's best for them¹⁶.

Further problems, already (more than) hinted at, concern not only institutional, but also bureaucratic 'undertow' (causing frustrating blockages

¹⁵ See also Gardner & Miller 1999: 31-33.

¹⁶ Gates (2000:55) echoing Riley (1997) cautions that students' opinions on what is good for them need to be taken into account in a SAC/SALL environment too. We need to get at learners' truth (rather than objective truth), their perspective on what they believe will influence their learning, rather than what we believe.

and delays); furthermore, the often low motivation or low public-service attitude of public sector technical or administrative staff is also an aspect to be contended with¹⁷.

Cross-talk between pedagogic staff and technicians is also sometimes a potential problem, as seen in the different priorities suggested when decisions have to be taken, over, for example, how to allocate which software, functions or languages to which computers, or when looking for solutions to 'crashing' or slow functioning of overloaded systems. It is particularly important to develop successful 'intercultural communication' strategies so as to reach both technically and methodologically, or indeed, ergonomically and affectively, satisfactory solutions for all involved.

Some aspects of the local context working in our favour, on the question of user satisfaction with our efforts

Our local students are used to 'making do', to working on their own as best they can, or to having to work with little or no methodological guidance (except for that of their peers as we shall see), though usually less than efficiently and with much frustration. They come from a school situation where they had no autonomy at all, to a university one where they are expected to fend for themselves. Although at first many are unable to self-direct and assume/accept that their role is passive (and may even prefer it that way), many can immediately see the value of 'learner training', and are grateful for it.

Furthermore, some of the cultural characteristics of the Southern Italian world (mentioned earlier) provide a natural basis for aspects which in the Anglophone or Northern European world seem to need to be introduced as a methodological discovery and an exhortation. I am referring here, to collaborative or peer-assisted learning. Students here are already geared towards this. They naturally work together, and try to help each other, 'distribute their cognition' throughout a group (and not only with close friends). Being a *compagno di corso* or *di studio* can itself form the basis for

¹⁷ We did try to re-motivate tired and resigned technicians, and did to some extent succeed for a while (even conquering the union vetoes on their doing work not part of their contracts -see also Vincent 2000). This was done, as mentioned earlier, by 'contagion' and example, but also by promising monetary fall-out from external services. When these fell through, due to central administration blockage, their motivation, naturally, cooled, though not quite back to earlier levels.

future lasting friendships. There is, as far as I can see, no competition among them, or jealously guarded information¹⁸; they enjoy and actively seek out others to study together, whether already close friends or even through student sign-board advertisements. One sees, throughout the university, and the SAC is no exception, pairs and small groups studying, aloud, together, discussing and testing each other's understanding. This pattern is apparent throughout their schooldays, with students regularly spending afternoons and evenings together in each other's homes, to do their homework (and everything else) '*in compagnia*'.

Our Tandem corner, and service, is also immensely popular, and builds on another already firmly existing tradition of give and take with foreign guests. It enables students to give hospitality and advice to foreigners (part of local socialisation practices – see e.g. Vincent 1994) and to get from them much valued practice. Again this has to be built on and channelled methodologically, but the basic structure is already there.

Our students are used to frustration, inefficiency, and sometimes faceless and, therefore, even inhumane public services¹⁹.

For the negative reasons mentioned, they respond positively to any obvious effort to improve their study environment. Indeed, to unashamedly use a little rhetoric, they flourish in the better soil.

If we also build on the positive aspects already present that we have also mentioned (it is possible, though not necessarily automatic, to channel

¹⁸ The competition that does exist is between teachers and students. It's 'them (the institution) against 'us' (the students)'. The entire student body seems to see itself as an in-group. This is never more apparent, in the extreme case, as at exam times. Incidentally, in the SAC, however, this division, thanks presumably to their perception of our caring, seems to have been successfully to a very large extent eliminated. Our users, judging also by the virtual absence of any wilful or negligent damage to equipment, or theft of materials, seem to care about the SAC as much as we do, and see us as *compagni*. Lest one seems too romantic, another (intentionally planned) detail must be mentioned which may hardly be irrelevant to this point: our assistants are indeed, peer-like in age, aspect and attitude. They do have obvious methodological and technical expertise, but they are undoubtedly 'like' the student users. Some students themselves do actually also come to work in the SAC, either voluntarily, or thanks to temporary part-time contracts made available for low-income students. For all these reasons, we believe, the SAC is perceived as 'close' to its users and their interests.

¹⁹ Although there are signs of change, this process towards more humane and efficient public services in Naples is not yet fully consolidated. It is also true that hitherto faceless and demotivated public servants become noticeably more human and serviceable/*servizievoli* when their environment is rendered more efficient and satisfying, and trustworthy.

natural inclinations into more systematic practice), the combined effect is bound to be an improvement.

Some aspects of how we adapted ergonomically to local cultural patterns

We have not so far imposed any methodological structure on their collaborative or peer learning (except for tandem exchanges, where the intercultural situation calls for vigilance and needs some low-context regulation to avoid potential problems); what we have done, is instead to encourage and cater 'ergonomically' in our layout, for collaborative learning, even before being totally conscious of the methodological 'zeitgeist'. We observed that students often moved their chairs around to sit together, in small groups at the various workstations²⁰, the social, and pleasure, aspects presumably as important as the work of learning; probably, too, the psychological or affective 'support' aspect provided by a peer. Catering for this, is one of the characteristics of our attention to 'ergonomic' details. We simply provide moveable chairs and armchairs and enough room for two (even three) people to work together if they wish at the video stations and most of the computer stations. We also, naturally, make sure that all the monitors have the possibility of two headphone attachments.

Another, connected, ergonomic aspect which we worked towards deliberately was for organised flexibility and informality, rather than 'tidiness', formality, or rigidity of layout. We deliberately mixed up stations, did not line up together apparatus by type in rows or rooms (e.g. all PCs in one room or line, all video-players in another, etc.²¹); except for one large multimedia, poly-

²⁰ As Mikaela Cordisco in her section discussing her survey results shows, this collaboration is most apparent at the beginning (when joint problem solving strategies are adopted to face novel situations) while individual work comes later with increasing acquired confidence. Only at the video stations, rather than at the computer and internet stations, used typically for watching films, do we continue to often find pairs of friends or colleagues preferring to watch together, in groups.

²¹ There is one unfortunate exception to this: the satellite TV monitors. For technical reasons linked to cabling we had to accept that they be lined up and this had immediate consequences on the feel of the room. There was often an 'empty' area when no-one was watching satellite TV (as often happens since it is most suitable for those rare advanced students, and again for technical and administrative reasons the particular satellite this row of monitors is linked to, is not particularly rich in interesting channels). However, we have overcome the emptiness of that side of the room, by putting in video-recorders so that the TVs can act as monitors for watching video-tapes.

functional, teaching room, where students can also go to work with audio-tapes, which has a traditional front-facing line-up of rows facing a monitors' bench (and large projection screen). This is tellingly, less popular, and hardly used for self-access, except in those cases where students are sent by their more 'traditional' professors to work on audio-tapes accompanying their classes or for languages where they need to 'drill' certain oral aspects. Often we find that students in there, when approached, may not be fully aware of what the self-access rooms have to offer for their languages. There are, also, students who feel comfortable in this type of set-up (presumably because of its familiarity from earlier school days). Most, do, however, eventually abandon it to come to the other more 'social' parts of the self-access centre proper.

To return to this question of untidiness or, rather, 'non-neatness' of boundaries between areas. This is another aspect concerning the fit between local cultural context and our SAC's ergonomics: the polychronic or non-linear use of time as well as of space. In polychronic cultures (such as Naples undoubtedly is to a high degree, even in institutional settings), there is tolerance for, indeed, comfort in the overlapping of activities, of functions (e.g. social and work), and of other people's voices and territories (see also Kendon 2000). Certainly, other people's noise (or even street-noise) is not necessarily felt as distracting. Rather than edit this out, we feel that it must be, to some degree, built in or at least catered for. One must not exaggerate this aspect (some (relative) quiet is necessary for many activities and for many students²²), yet it is noticeably less necessary to provide a silent, hushed library atmosphere in this local context, than, say in Northern Europe (including Northern Italy). A hushed quiet, which we did, naively, try to implement at first, is not only regularly 'infringed', but also actively argued against by many when asked. How could one have collaborative work, advising, etc. without chatting, and social interaction without talk and laughing? For those who do need to concentrate in silence, good headphones are available. Very few users have ever asked others to keep their voices down. It is also true that many would not tell their peers to be quiet, out of solidarity, but they have never even asked us to intervene, nor mentioned the problem in our suggestion box²³ or surveys nor, more tellingly, when asked directly.

²² See indeed Jan Gates' older (middle-aged) students' comments; this was also because they were having difficulty with the technology which was new to them and were under stress and thus needed to concentrate.

²³ The suggestion box, incidentally, is practically always empty. Suggestions are, ty-

Some further practical characteristics of our action

Since at the beginning we had very limited financial resources, and started out experimentally, needing to convince CILA's directors that self-access was a viable or opportune direction to go, we were perhaps forced to use our common-sense and methodological acumen, rather than have the soft option of simply ordering all the latest equipment and materials.

We thus dismantled and 'recycled' the old language laboratory booths²⁴, had them recovered in a pleasant relaxing blue matte 'formica', had them made by the university carpenters into double-berth booths, with low sides (they had been single booths with high sides) and, most importantly, orientated them around the room, facing the walls, or as room separators to create corners and peninsulas (our rooms not being large enough to create 'islands', even if we had wished to). Wall-facing booths facilitate concentration (through 'raccoglimento') and more focussed, group work and/or privacy, in a large open-plan room. The front facing line-up is hardly conducive to these psychological/affective aspects so important in self-access. Furthermore, it also, importantly, frees the centre of the room to become a social, aggregational space, and one which allows easy moving and mixing between workstations for assistants and students²⁵.

We also recovered old tables, in both senses, (scattered around the CILA or abandoned unused in deposits or neighbouring offices), using the same coloured formica as the booths and placed them in the centre of the floor-space surrounded by chairs. Our old chairs were also recovered, in a matching 'leatherette'. Our only separate expenses were to splash out on a

pically, offered orally to us, or only if solicited, again confirming the preference for direct interpersonal exchange rather than the deferred, more distant, and anonymous, written medium.

²⁴ This was relatively easy since the two rooms we took over were practically unused, full of 'ancient' high-walled dark-wooden booths with obsolete spool-tape recorders. The first year we took over one room; the next year, thanks to the obvious results and contagious enthusiasm generated by this among all the staff, we were able to 'do over' and expand into the (adjoining) second room too.

²⁵ Convincing the technical and other directors to go for this new layout was a major victory, and possible, not only because we demonstrated on paper that almost as many people could work together if they wished in the room as with a linear arrangement line-up, but also because of the providential arrival of a CERCLES newsletter on the technicians' desks, with an article on SACs and a schema of alternative layouts. This provided impartial scientific authority to the idea of non-linear arrangement, at just the right moment.

few inexpensive bright red easychairs, some coloured blue and yellow blinds and some inexpensive blue-felt carpeting, for the central walks and corners (these being suggested by the technical staff who had got well into the spirit by then). Even our 'shelving', was recycled. Most especially, that for holding our A4-format study-packs (housed in open upright plastic boxes) was put together, literally and physically, by some of the enthusiastic technicians. For this, some left-over black piping (lacquered 'tubi innocenti') which had originally been ordered for mounting apparatus in the TV studio, was 'creatively' assembled, with big bright yellow bolts, to form a long low 'bench' (like a gymnast's double bar) in/on which the black open boxes were propped tilting upwards for easy access. That this is still being used, is proof of its functionality as a good solution. It is also surprisingly stylish.

As for hardware, we decided to use everything we had, from the oldest computers, to the few new ones we could buy at the beginning. Throwing nothing out. If it had proven useful once, it was still useful now. One needed only to think about what to use them for. As funds have come in we have naturally updated (funds, in the public sector, are more easily allocated for hardware than for people-ware), and now we have not only the latest Pentiums and Macs but also NT networking facilities, Internet from most stations. However, we also keep a PC-286 and a 486, not only for old-time's sake, but also because of the absolute usefulness of the original non-fussy WIDA (Storyboard, Choicemaster, Gapmaster, etc.) programs, which we authored over the years, organised into 'levels', for different languages, and which provide convenient, unthreatening quick introductions to CALL for newcomers²⁶.

On the materials side, we also recycled, but mainly re-organised in a more efficient and user-friendly way the enormous amount of materials that had accumulated over the years (especially audio and videotapes). This was also necessary because of bureaucratic delays in acquiring new software, and the fact that funds when allocated are, again, biased towards hardware. Everything was sifted through, chasing up teachers in the faculties to try to get them to help do this, and then re-organise, annotate and catalogue them, according to level, skills, activities, themes, etc., so that they can be accessed from a keyword-searchable database. We also provided quick re-

²⁶ It is again symptomatic of the two cultures' different perspectives, that we have to continually convince the technical staff not to automatically replace them with the latest multimedia models. As long as students continue to choose to work on them, and consider them useful, we, the non-technicians, believe they (at least one) should stay.

ference flash card Mini Guides for the various software packages we have available (at least in the early days). One further cultural characteristic of our users is revealed/confirmed by observing the use made of orientation materials, however. Overwhelmingly, at first, users prefer to consult people, be they assistants or peers for orientation, rather than written instructions, be they on panels, quick reference flash cards, or computer data-bases²⁷. These become useful, they are indeed used, in joint consultation, as it were, as visual aids during orientation by people. With increased familiarity, when our environment becomes theirs too, then these become trusted guides; they lose their impersonality perhaps, some of the personal rubbing off onto them.

Some team-building aspects implicit in our action

Attention to these seemingly 'unworthy' practical aspects is part of the philosophy I have tried to outline. Furthermore, the joint creation and involvement in trying to make the most of what little one has, helps create both bonding between different sections (or 'cultures') of the staff, and also shapes the sense of possessiveness towards one's environment²⁸.

Furthermore, another aspect, that of getting one's hands dirty, managers and staff together, is also bonding and 'educational'. This does not go with the local Southern Italian culture (it is indeed consonant with a more pragmatic or 'doing' culture, and is also to some degree 'shocking' because of the surviving (high PDI) 'feudal'/class distinctions between technicians and professors/managers, not to mention the job-description constraints), but, precisely because it is 'marked', it does, at least at first, serve to galvanise emotions and enthusiasm. (Furthermore, 'if the professor is not ashamed to do it, then why should we be?'). Lest one seem hopelessly utopian

²⁷ There is a preference for the oral, face to face type of personal interaction for acquiring and negotiating information, and for personal problem solving, rather than the individual, and impersonal use of written information sources, which may be even mistrusted, as perhaps not personally relevant to one's particular problem, or simply out-of-date (see also Vincent 1994, and Cordisco this vol.).

²⁸ We have also begun to involve students themselves in the creation of materials (see e.g. Aston 1993), and to some extent in the creation of their environment (see also Cordisco, this volume). To be honest, this last aspect was not necessarily planned. It is simply that we receive, and try to accommodate, the frequent spontaneous offers of help from the many students who wish to be 'part of it all', who ask to be voluntary assistants and/or who offer many practical suggestions.

here, it is vital, however, that other types of staff incentives (monetary ones) then take over, or at least some sort of recognition by the institution. Unfortunately, despite best intentions, this cannot be guaranteed by 'middle managers' (or even 'leaders') in large state-run institutions.

To end on an optimistic note in this section, despite the institutional 'undertow', and despite the presence of different cultures and concerns between technicians and 'pedagogues', a great deal of bridging and successful bonding can be accomplished, and has been in our setting, thanks to these 'strategies' (which, one might stress again, essentially all come down to caring for the affective and psychological aspects of the work-place and team).

Summary and conclusions

Some of my main points might be summarised as follows:

- In general: adapt to, go with, or at least take into account, the local cultural context; look after affective aspects of the environment;
- On student strategies: individual autonomy and confidence grows, and can become a resource to choose among others, rather than one imposed from the start; collaboration with peers (and among the various types, tandem learning) is an important alternative resource, both because of its social, affective aspects, but also because of its natural accommodation of various factors, which are becoming increasingly recognised as important, in SLA;
- On institutional and managerial aspects: explicitly address the question of cross-talk between cultures (technical and humanistic), successful 'talk' can be achieved; promote a 'team' sense in one's staff through joint, practical involvement, and a sense of pride and satisfaction in one's work; hope that the principle of investment in human, alongside material resources, percolates up the institution.

The importance of affective aspects, i.e. caring for service users, and providers, and for learners' social and psychological or emotional welfare, is surely not pertinent only to a Southern Italian cultural context. The growth of this concern indeed, testified to, theoretically, in various literatures ranging from that on SLA to that on management and in ergonomics, points to the birth of a new humane ethos in service environments. It is time to put this into practice.

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