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The IALLT Language Center Evaluation Toolkit: Context, Development, and Usage

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Abstract

In the summer of 2014, a committee composed of members of the International Association for Language Learning Technology (IALLT) began discussions toward accomplishing the following charge:

Design a tool that internal evaluation committees can use to evaluate and make recommendations for the improvement of their institution's language center. We emphasize the fact that it is the university appointed evaluation committee that will use this evaluation toolkit, not the language center directors themselves (although the LC Director should have input on how the toolkit should be deployed). Such evaluation committees might be composed of language department Chairs, TA/Language coordinators, Dean or Assistant Deans. We need to keep in mind that those put in charge of evaluation language centers might not know much about language centers in general. (*excerpt*)

Keywords

International Association for Language Learning Technology, evaluation, language, toolkit

Disciplines

English Language and Literature | Language and Literacy Education | Reading and Language

Chapter 9: The IALLT Language Center Evaluation Toolkit: Context, Development, and Usage

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Assessment is probably one of many people's least favorite words, in dealing with issues in administration. It conjures up visions of impenetrable jargon, mind numbing statistics, and masses of paperwork.

(Lahaie & Ledgerwood, 2013, p. 169)

In the summer of 2014, a committee composed of members of the International Association for Language Learning Technology (IALLT) began discussions toward accomplishing the following charge:

Design a tool that internal evaluation committees can use to evaluate and make recommendations for the improvement of their institution's language center. We emphasize the fact that it is the university appointed evaluation committee that will use this evaluation toolkit, not the language center directors themselves (although the LC Director should have input on how the toolkit should be deployed). Such evaluation committees might be composed of language department Chairs, TA/Language coordinators, Dean or Assistant Deans. We need to keep in mind that those put in charge of evaluating language centers might not know much about language centers in general.

(IALLT Assessment Committee minutes, June 17, 2014)

When this charge, the committee, composed of Chair Edwige Simon, Angelika Kraemer, Felix Kronenberg, Elizabeth Lavolette, and Audrey Sartiaux, began work on what would become the IALLT Language Center Evaluation Toolkit. The Toolkit (Kraemer, Kronenberg, Lavolette, & Sartiaux, 2015) itself details some of the reasons that language centers are evaluated, including justifying the center's existence (Lahaie & Ledgerwood, 2013), identifying areas in need of improvement, and assessing the center's budget needs.

In the current chapter, we first explain why the Toolkit is needed and provide some definitions that clarify its intended scope of usage. Next, we situate the Toolkit within the related literature on language center and language program evaluation, explain how it is intended to be used, and briefly describe the Toolkit. Finally, we detail our plans for distributing and continuing to develop the Toolkit.

Why Create the IALLT Language Center Evaluation Toolkit?

The Toolkit is the first standardized collection of documents intended to be used for evaluating a language center. Such evaluations have traditionally been performed using idiosyncratic methods with little public documentation or sharing of information. The 2015 IALLT Survey (Kronenberg & Lavolette, 2015) indicated that most centers formally or informally assess their success using faculty/student surveys, usage statistics, or internally developed reports. Certainly these are all valid ways of assessing a language center; however, particularly for formal evaluations conducted by committees that may not include the center director, a standardized tool endorsed by IALLT is needed. Below, we detail the three main reasons.

As the charge above shows, the initial impetus for developing the Toolkit was to provide guidance to evaluation committees that might know very little about language centers and how to evaluate them. From that perspective, the Toolkit provides much needed guidance, with minimal background knowledge necessary. In fact, the Toolkit provides guidance beginning at a very early stage in an evaluation: forming the evaluation committee. The Toolkit makes recommendations about the selection of committee members, which should include, at minimum, an administrator in the humanities, a language student, a language faculty member, and an instructional technologist. Further recommendations are made for additional committee members, and some of the concepts and organizations that the committee members should be familiar with are outlined.

Another reason that the Toolkit is needed is to provide language centers with a tool for determining their strengths and weaknesses. A standardized form of evaluation also allows a given language center to plan for and gauge its improvement over time (Gopalakrishnan, 2015). In addition, while no direct comparison of the great diversity of language centers across institutions is recommended or even feasible, having a standard set of tools for evaluation allows indirect comparison through a master list of possible evaluation points. The results of an evaluation can, in the best cases, prove to administrators the usefulness of a language center and be used to justify its continued existence and spaces. It may also be useful in seeking increased funding (Gopalakrishnan, 2015) and function

is a tool for realigning the center with the needs of its stakeholders.

Finally, the Toolkit is useful for increasing the professionalism of language center directors and staff by providing a set of recommended standards to which we aspire to raise our language centers. An important role of IALLT as the professional organization for language center directors and staff is to provide direction and resources for our membership, which includes support for conducting evaluations. We believe that the Toolkit will help to further unify our profession.

Although we are of the opinion that, in many cases, the positive outcomes of an evaluation will outweigh the negative, we also acknowledge the potential drawbacks of conducting an evaluation. Negative outcomes are particularly likely if the impetus for evaluating a language center comes from external forces that are biased against the center. Whatever the initial impetus for evaluating a center, it is impossible to control how administrators will interpret and use the results. Some of the potential negative outcomes may be the reduction of language center space and staff.

What Is a Language Center? What Does It Mean to Evaluate One?

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define the language centers that we are targeting for evaluation and to establish what it means to evaluate them. Many authors have offered definitions of language centers (e.g., Askildson, 2011; Garrett, 2001; Lage-Otero, 2013; Liddell & Garrett, 2004), often in great detail. However, to indicate the target of the Toolkit, the following broad definition suffices:

A language center is a physical and/or virtual space that supports foreign and/or second language learning and/or teaching within a larger educational institution.

This definition is intended to include the sort of language center that Garrett (2001) describes as “established by postsecondary institutions to coordinate and strengthen the language instruction on their own campuses” (p. 17), while excluding federally funded national foreign language resource centers, whose missions reach beyond their hosting institutions. Although pinning down specific spaces and services that all language centers provide is difficult, we mention here a few common examples for the sake of clarity. A language center often includes a (computer-based) language lab, and the focus for the teaching and learning support provided by the center is often on language technology. However, this focus is shifting at many centers to providing social spaces and opportunities to use language. Some centers focus exclusively on faculty support and professional

development, while others focus exclusively on support for student learning. Some centers focus exclusively on language education, while others include culture and literature education within their missions.

Given the wide variety of language center spaces and services, what does it mean to evaluate a language center? Drawing on Walvoord and Banta's (2010) definition of assessment, we define the evaluation of a language center as the systematic collection of information about how and how well the center is fulfilling its mission in order to inform decisions about how to continuously improve the fulfillment of that mission.

Language Center and (Language) Program Evaluation

Little has been written about language center evaluation. While Lahaie and Ledgerwood (2013) addressed the topic of assessment, they approached it from the perspective of goal setting and achievement, rather than assessment of the language center as a whole. In our view of evaluation, goal setting and achievement should occur as part of an evaluation, but evaluation is a larger concept. Gopalakrishnan, Yaden, and Franz (2013) also briefly addressed language center assessment, including director self-assessment and the assessment of programs, technology resources, and services. Gopalakrishnan (2015) elaborated on this topic in a presentation in which she provided examples of how she has quantified her performance and the services of the language center she directs using faculty and student surveys and usage data.

In the related field of language program evaluation, on the other hand, the literature has greatly increased in the past decade, perhaps in response to the growing emphasis on assessment in higher education (e.g., Birckbichler, 2006; Norris, 2009). Watanabe, Norris, and González-Lloret (2009) provided a brief history of language program evaluation, starting from behaviorist perspectives and large-scale quasi-experiments intended to develop an understanding of "good" language curricula in the late 1940s through the 1980s. Beginning in the 1980s, evaluations shifted to the domain of external experts, many of whom began to look beyond the outcomes of language programs and undertake long-term evaluations that focused on helping program faculty and staff improve their work. Current language program evaluation is focused on how the evaluation will be used, which determines the kinds of questions that are asked and the data that are collected.

The work of several authors exemplifies this practical approach to program evaluation. First, we briefly step outside the world of language learning to

Consider a more generic assessment of a department. Walvoord and Banta (2010) recommended a “basic no-frills departmental assessment system” (p. 59), which includes learning goals for each program and two measures of how well students are achieving those goals. One measure should be direct, such as an analysis of student work, and one measure should be indirect, such as a student survey. They recommended holding a departmental meeting once a year to discuss the data collected, deciding on a single action item for the following year, and assigning responsibility for following up.

Moving back to language program evaluation, Lindholm-Leary and Hargett (2006) developed a toolkit for evaluating dual-language programs. Their toolkit is much more extensive than ours, as appropriate to the generally larger scale of the evaluation needed for a dual-immersion program versus a language center. The two toolkits do have some similarities; for example, both provide suggested assessment instruments, including surveys for various stakeholders. However, Lindholm-Leary and Hargett’s toolkit includes sections on data management and analysis, which we deemed unnecessary for our audience. Their toolkit also focuses on collecting language proficiency data, which is not likely to be a priority of a language center assessment.

Finally, Norris (2009) provided a list of four characteristics of a language program evaluation, which are useful for understanding and improving a program. First, language teachers and other stakeholders should be involved in the evaluation as either evaluators or sources of evaluation data. This is both because teachers’ knowledge is valuable to understanding the program and because they are best able to cause change in the program. Second, data should be collected using multiple methodologies to avoid capturing only quantitative data, which may paint a limited picture of the program as a whole. Third, to avoid biased interpretations of results, data should be triangulated and contextualized. Fourth, the findings of an evaluation need to be communicated strategically. To encourage stakeholders to use the results toward improving the program, merely reporting results in writing is unlikely to be effective.

For the most part, Norris’s (2009) recommended characteristics of a language program evaluation can be adopted without modification to language center evaluation. However, the first characteristic requires minor adjustments as follows: language center staff (including student workers) and students and faculty who use the center should be involved in the evaluation. We make recommendations in the Toolkit for how exactly they should be involved, with a key role for the director, including a self-assessment.

Given the very limited literature on language center evaluation and the somewhat indirect applicability of most of the language program evaluation literature, we developed the IALLT Language Center Evaluation Toolkit with minimal guidance from previous authors. That said, Norris's (2009) four characteristics in particular are applicable, with the modifications detailed above.

Development

The Toolkit was created during the 2014–2015 academic year by the IALLT Assessment Committee. The committee members represented centers with varying missions at institutions of higher education with varying profiles across the U.S.:

- Dr. Edwige Simon, Chair of the IALLT Assessment Committee, Language Technology Coordinator at the Anderson Language Technology Center at the University of Colorado Boulder.
- Dr. Angelika Kraemer, Executive Associate Director of the Center for Language Teaching Advancement at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan.
- Dr. Felix Kronenberg, Director of the Language Learning Center at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee.
- Dr. Elizabeth (Betsy) Lavolette, Director of the Language Resource Center at Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.
- Dr. Audrey Sartiaux, Director of the Language Center at Union College in Schenectady, New York.

Over the course of the academic year, the committee members held regular videoconferences to discuss first steps, formulate the components of the Toolkit, and fine-tune its content. Individual committee members took on individual Toolkit areas, and the final product was discussed at length in full committee meetings.

The goal was to provide an easy-to-use, flexible resource for anyone charged with evaluating a language center. We noted in the "About this Project" section of the Toolkit:

Routine evaluations (including self-evaluations) help language centers remain relevant and efficient. Specifically, regular evaluations allow centers to:

- Ensure that proper alignment exists between what the center does and its mission statement,
- Ensure that proper alignment exists between the stakeholders' expectations and the center's services,

- Justify the center's existence and demonstrate how the center contributes to the mission of the institution and of the stakeholder units,
- Identify areas for improvement,
- Assess the center's needs and justify budget requests, and
- Ensure that the center makes optimal use of its resources. (Simon et al., 2015)

Throughout our discussions, we agreed with Lahaie and Ledgerwood (2013) that it is important to consider the mission statement of a language center in evaluating the center. A center can only be evaluated based on its purpose, meaning that there is no standard or ideal language center against which it can be judged. This is further supported by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education to conduct accreditation and pre-accreditation activities for institutions of higher education in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, which "applies its standards within the context of each institution's mission, so its standards are not prescriptive" (Middle State Commission on Higher Education, 2013, p. 3). We recognize that not all language centers have formulated mission statements; however, all language centers should have a specific charge against which the evaluation can take place. If not, creating one may be the first step toward evaluation (see several chapters in the 2013 IALLT Language Center Management Manual for guidance: Cobb-Zygadlo, 2013; Gopalakrishnan et al., 2013; Kronenberg, 2013; Lahaie & Ledgerwood, 2013).

Description

Although we began this chapter with a quote from Lahaie and Ledgerwood (2013) indicating that assessment is often viewed as difficult to understand and tedious, we believe that the IALLT Language Center Evaluation Toolkit is clear, concise, and easy to use. The Toolkit contains four major components: 1) recommendations for assembling an evaluation committee, 2) a center director self-evaluation form, 3) a survey for language center patrons and stakeholders, and 4) a list of descriptors organized by categories (Simon et al., 2015).

After brief biographies of the committee members, the introduction of the Toolkit provides reasons that language center evaluations are necessary along with a description of the Toolkit's intended use, including example headings for synthesizing and communicating findings. The first major component offers recommendations for evaluation committee member selection as well as a list of important concepts and organizations that will help evaluators contextualize their evaluation efforts. This is necessary because some evaluators may not be

intimately familiar with current pedagogical practices pertaining to the learning and teaching of foreign/second languages.

The second component provides a list of open-ended statements intended for center directors to use in a self-evaluation. This list can certainly also be used by individuals external to the center. The areas covered in this form include general items about the center as well as items pertaining to staffing, budgeting, and location and space.

The third component is a survey intended for language center patrons and stakeholders. Depending on the center that is being evaluated, the patron and stakeholder groups could include students and faculty as well as center staff. After a set of general questions, the remaining survey questions pertain to location/hours and contacts, communication, space, services and resources, usage, and miscellaneous topics.

The final component forms the core of the Toolkit. The language center descriptor list consists of 11 specific descriptors that help evaluators get a true sense of the center's state, accomplishments, and goals. As indicated above, it is important to note that not all aspects of all descriptors will be met by each center and that the list should be discussed with the center director prior to being used. The descriptors list includes the following areas:

1. Center
2. Communication
3. Collaboration
4. Staff professional development
5. Involvement with the field of language technology
6. Professional development
7. Spaces
8. Budget
9. Resources
10. Student support services
11. Development, research, experimentation, and innovation.

The first five descriptors are considered core components that are relevant to any center evaluation.

Intended Use

The IALLT Assessment Committee's charge indicated that we would develop a tool for internal evaluation committees. However, as the committee's discussions evolved, we decided that the Toolkit should be useful to external evaluation committees as well. In addition, we realized that the Toolkit could be used for self-evaluations. One of the current authors used the Center Director Self-Evaluation portion of the Toolkit as part of an annual performance review. Although this usage was not part of our original intention in developing the Toolkit, it was a valuable addition to the performance review because it stimulated the director's thinking about what had already been accomplished and what needed to be improved and accomplished in the coming year.

The Toolkit contains some recommendations for use with internal or external evaluations. First, we strongly agree with Lang (2006), who stated that the process of evaluating a language program should be open. Similarly, we stress that stakeholders should be kept informed during a language center evaluation about why and how the center is being evaluated, when and where evaluation activities will take place, and how generated reports can be accessed. This communication should not be one-way from the evaluators to the stakeholders, but should also allow stakeholders to ask questions and provide feedback.

To make the Toolkit useful to as many language centers as possible, the Toolkit contains many items, some of which will not apply to a given center. For this reason, one of the recommendations for how to use the Toolkit mentions marking such items as irrelevant, rather than simply removing them. The reasoning behind this recommendation is to increase transparency in the process. Such transparency prevents, for example, the case in which a reviewer with an agenda to cast a language center in the best possible light is tempted to remove items that may reflect poorly on the center, rather than removing only irrelevant items.

Distribution

Now that the first version of the Toolkit is finished, an important consideration is how to make it available to potential users. The editable Google Doc version may be made available to IALLT members only. The current PDF version of the Toolkit is free and published under a Creative Commons license that does not allow it to be sold but allows adaptations (i.e., CC BY NC SA).

Another consideration in distributing the Toolkit is how to let potential users know that it is available. A link from the IALLT website is a clear starting point.

In addition to providing a workshop at the Foreign Language Education and Technology (FLEAT) VI conference (Kronenberg, Lavolette, & Simon, 2015) and a session at the Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium conference (Kraemer & Sartiaux, 2016), future presentations may be proposed for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and IALLT conferences, in addition to state and regional world language groups. Thanks to the suggestion of one of the workshop participants, we also intend to reach out to consortiums such as the Big Ten Academic Alliance and Associated Colleges of the Midwest.

Future Development and Conclusion

The IALLT Language Center Evaluation Toolkit (Simon et al., 2015) is an evolving document, and we intend to produce updated versions based on feedback from users and other stakeholders. We have already received valuable feedback from participants in the workshop held at the Foreign Language Education and Technology conference (Kronenberg et al., 2015).

Much of the feedback received will be implemented in the next version of the Toolkit. For example, several suggestions were made about forming the evaluation committee. One participant suggested that because applied linguists often consider themselves social scientists, rather than humanists, we should expand the qualification for committee members to include social scientists. Another suggestion was that if the language center has an advisory board or steering committee, those members should be considered for the committee as well. Finally, another participant mentioned that finding committee members who are knowledgeable about language teaching, rather than foreign language literature, may be difficult at a small school and that outside experts should be considered as well, even for an internal evaluation.

Other suggestions affect various sections of the Toolkit. First, we will be expanding the list of useful prior knowledge for evaluation committee members to include the MLA's *Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature* (The Modern Language Association, 2009). While this document is primarily focused on literature, with a secondary role for language learning as a support skill for accessing literature, it provides a point of view that is common in the academy, and it may be valuable to consider that perspective. Second, we may add suggestions for increasing student survey response rates, such as having computer stations already logged in with the survey available to students, asking instructors to use a few minutes of class time, and offering incentives such as food (e.g., Gopalakrishnan, 2015). Finally, an important suggestion that may be more

difficult to implement was that we include a K–12 perspective. While few K–12 institutions have language centers, we recognize the need to address this often neglected perspective.

In addition to the feedback provided by users and potential users of the Toolkit, we acknowledge additional weaknesses that we intend to address in future versions. First, we have not included a general definition of a language center and its functions. A definition such as the one in the current chapter will be particularly valuable to committees that are not familiar with language centers.

Next, we have not included a recommendation of conducting a needs assessment (e.g., Watanabe et al., 2009) under the assumption that the evaluation is taking place due to external pressures. However, if a language center is being evaluated due to an internal desire to improve, a needs assessment is a recommended starting point. Guidance for this part of the process will be added in future iterations of the Toolkit.

Another feature that is missing from the Toolkit is a suggested timeline for collecting evaluation data. As Lindholm-Leary and Hargett (2006) suggest, data collection should be avoided at times such as the last weeks of school, immediately before and after vacations, and during peak work times for faculty and staff. A suggested timeline would be useful for planning the time needed to conduct an evaluation, including data analysis and goal setting.

Finally, although the Toolkit provides a basis for evaluating a language center, it does not provide an approach to using the evaluation results for improvement (cf. Watanabe, Davis, & Norris, 2012). The Toolkit includes suggested headings for a report, but it does not include information about effectively presenting results and persuading stakeholders to support goals (e.g., Lindholm-Leary & Hargett, 2006; Norris, 2009). As pointed out by an attendee at the FLEAT VI workshop (Kronenberg et al., 2015), an important consideration is what the results will be used for, particularly if the evaluation is initiated by forces outside the language center.

In spite of its weaknesses, we believe that the IALLT Language Center Evaluation Toolkit (Simon et al., 2015) is a useful starting point for language center staff and anyone else who has been tasked with evaluating a language center. We anticipate that future iterations of the document will become even more useful as feedback from users is incorporated. Further improvements will be facilitated when the Toolkit is used in case studies and the results are published for a wider readership.

We conclude by mentioning the wide range of stakeholders who benefit when a

language center evaluation is conducted. According to the workshop attendees (Kronenberg et al., 2015), everyone benefits, beginning with the students who use the center. Clearly, an evaluation should benefit direct stakeholders, such as the center itself, students, and language faculty. In addition, workshop attendees pointed out more distant stakeholders who also benefit. For example, language department chairs can use language center evaluations in their reports. The larger institution will benefit if, as a result of an evaluation, the language center mission is better aligned with the institutional mission. Other language centers will benefit when evaluation results and strategies for improvement are shared. And finally, language centers as a whole benefit when professionalism is highlighted through systematic evaluation and transparent sharing of results and strategic plans for improvement.

Acknowledgments

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