TRAINING — MILES TO GO

Beth Fuseler Avery
Mary and John Gray Library
Lamar University
Beaumont, Texas 77710 U.S.A.

ABSTRACT: With increasing use of technology, the need for staff training is increasing. At the same time, budgets are decreasing and materials costs are increasing. In addition, in the small and/or remote library, it is difficult for staff to leave to attend training. An overview of types of distance education, selecting training, and ways to have a successful learning experience is given.

INTRODUCTION

Many of us do not feel well prepared for our new roles as guides through the morass of information technology. In this time of rapidly expanding knowledge and the electronic explosion most of us need to expand our skills continuously. We need more training before we can teach our patrons. While there appear to be more avenues for training available, there is also more confusion on what is the best way to obtain training.

Competency has become a buzz word for our profession. The Special Libraries Association at the 1996 Annual conference received a report on “Competencies for Special Librarians of the 21st Century.” It outlines eleven professional competencies and thirteen personnel competencies. Professional competencies are defined as “knowledge in the areas of information resources, information access, technology, management and research and the ability to use these areas of knowledge as a basis for providing library and information services.” Included in this category are 1) expert knowledge of the content of information resources, including the ability to critically evaluate and filter them, 2) provides excellent instruction and support for library and information service users, 3) uses appropriate information technology to acquire, organize and disseminate information, 4) subject knowledge gained by reading and taking courses. Personnel competency is defined as “a set of skills, attitudes and values that enable librarians to work efficiently; be good communicators; focus on learning throughout their careers’ demonstrate the value-added nature of their contributions’ and survive in the new world of work.” Included in this category are 1) seeks challenges and sees new opportunities both inside and outside the library including taking on the role of information leader in the organization, 2) is committed to lifelong learning and personal career planning, and 3) is flexible and positive in a time of continuing change.

How do one become this “super” librarian? We are already feeling the strains that rapidly changing technologies place on our time, and limited financial and human
resources. While commitment to learning new skills is becoming an integral part of our jobs, how do we do it? Many of us work in isolation, perhaps in a remote location, a one person library, or feel we are already so busy we cannot add another meeting or commitment to our schedule.

IDENTIFYING OUR DIRECTION

First, we need to identify our needs. What is it we want/need to learn? Do we need to get certification or a degree to progress in our career? Do we need a specific skill, such as creating Metadata tags? Do we need an introduction to a topic, such as an overview of the Internet?

Second, we need to check our motivation. Are we simply curious about a new technology or subject? Or is our back to the wall and we need to learn something to do our job effectively? We are more likely to apply what we learn when our need is immediate.

Third, we need to identify our options for fulfilling our needs. The traditional methods don’t seem to be the answer. The web seems to many of us to be being hailed as “the answer.” But anyone who has looked for information with your search engine of choice, soon finds that there is no simple answer. In an article in Computerworld in May 1997, it was noted that while most companies are connected to the Internet, only about 4% used it for training. This is at a time when Internet training programs increased by 87%. (King)

WHERE TO TURN, WHICH ROAD TO TAKE

The traditional methods of training include: 1) attending graduate or undergraduate library school; 2) continuing education courses offered at specific locations; 3) conferences and workshops; 4) correspondence courses; and 5) reading the professional literature. For many of us there are problems with these traditional methods. Attending library school full time works for someone who is able to take off from her current job for one to two years. However, as the cost of education increases, fewer people are able to do this. For the lucky few, there is a library school close by that they can attend part-time, while continuing to work. But as library schools are closing, those that remain may be a distance from your location. Commercial or academic continuing education courses are usually expensive and inconvenient if you are not near a major city. Conferences present the same problems -- expense and inconvenience. In addition, for both workshops and conferences, who will mind the store if you’re in a one-person or small library? Text- or video-base correspondence courses probably won’t give you the hands-on experience and interaction you need to learn many of the new technologies. Journals provide much information and are an excellent way of keeping up with the field, but they may not provide the skills or the exact information you are seeking.
New methods of distance education seem to the hope for those unable to attend traditional classes and workshops. The world of cyberspace offers many opportunities and challenges. To begin with, what is distance education in the electronic age? The definitions seem as numerous as the types of education being provided. I've heard distance education described as everything from a class meeting 5 miles from the main university to a correspondence course to a course delivered entirely on the Internet. The variety of opportunities seems endless, cyber study groups, chat rooms, videocassettes, interactive video, television, satellite programming, Internet classes, listservs. Articles in popular journals tell us the time of the electronic course is here and more than 3,000 colleges are offering courses electronically (Hamilton & Miller 1997). Forbes even lists the 20 top Cyber-U's (Gubernick & Ebeling 1997). While it is clear that distance learning is spreading because of improved communications and convenience in terms of time and place, it has yet to be determined if this will be known as the era of IBT -- Internet-Based Training or Incredibly Bad Training. How do we find out what is there and how do we evaluate what we find?

THE GUIDES

As librarians we know that the first thing that happens when more than a dozen sources become available, is that a guide is written. And so it is with Internet-based Training. There are many guides out there and more being added every day. There are ones from the traditional publishers, such as Peterson's Distance Learning Guide. Due out this Fall is Top-Notch Graduate Schools that Come to You.

One can also do an Internet search. As we have learned from various presentations on search engines, this can be a frustrating experience. A search on Lycos for library and training yielded 49,136 sites. A search for library and Distance Education yielded 7,543 hits. These included programs given by libraries to their students, training libraries and position descriptions for distance ed librarians. An Alta Vista search on library training yielded 4,498,740 sites. Using the refine feature by requiring library, education, skills, graduate, college, courses, workshops and excluding classrooms, grants, bibliographic, counseling, and community a result of 39 was obtained. Only one of these (or 2%) was useful. Eventually, through plowing through many search engines and sites and responses to questions posed on listservs I came up with two sites that I felt were useful starting points:

1) http://www.bfranklin.edu/de.html. The Benjamin Franklin Institute of Global Education list of 6,782 courses from 821 institutions around the world and an international video conference listing.

2) http://www.icdl.open.ac.uk The International Centre for Distance Learning of the Open University. Can be searched by country and subject. The course descriptions include offering institution, course level, course description, language of instruction,
media and methods employed, administrative information (including how long the course is and what credit given) and date the information was entered.

There were other sites that I found useful for specific courses on networks and the Web:

1) http://magellan.edu Magellan University calls itself "America's 1st On-line & Video University." It offers 21 courses and 400+ lessons. The fee-courses currently include math and Microsoft professional education courses. There is a $4.95 charge to enroll for the lessons in 19 subject areas.

2) http://dcn.davis.ca.us/~iacarol/webspin.html At the Webspinner's Workshop you'll find "Everything you need to spin your own web pages." The tutorials here provide basic level information and links to other useful sites.

3) http://www.ala.org/ICONN/onlineco.html ICONnect home page of the American Library Association offers free beginning and advances level online courses on using the Internet. It includes using search engines and building web pages.

4) http://www.stolaf.edu/services/acc/documentation. The Academic Computing Center at St. Olaf's University offers handout sets for Microsoft Word and UNIX, and general handouts on various e-mail packages, Excel, PowerPoint, Virus Protection, Windows95, Window 3.X, Netscape, etc.

5) http://www.helpernet.com/. Learning Online is a database of free and immediately available courses and tutorial. There is also a link to a list of low-cost courses (usually less than $200.00 U.S.).

WHAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU?

Choosing a distance learning experience is not like traditional college where you have a limited course of study or limited number of instructors from whom to choose. The distance learning experience can often be tailored to your specific learning needs. How does one identify and select the most appropriate training method, avoid the pitfalls, and have a successful learning experience?

A basic reference interview with yourself is a good starting place. Questions one needs to ask when selecting individual courses or courses of study leading to a degree or certification are:

1. What is my motivation? Do I have a specific application in mind, like learning Latin, or do I want to pursue a degree? What is it I want to know? If it doesn't have direct and acknowledged benefit you probably won't complete a course, or even a short tutorial.

2. What is the format of the course? Is it appropriate for the class? Distance learning methods and technologies need to be appropriate to the instructional task. What are the advantages of this format? A hands-on course, such as bookbinding, may not be easy to do in with a written correspondence course.
3. What are the costs? In addition to the tuition, this includes the time, the supplies and the equipment needed to participate in the class. You need to know if you can afford the tuition, the additional hardware or software, and the investment of time you need to make.

4. What are the technological requirements? Do I have or can I easily obtain what I need to complete the course? If the course is a video from a university in the United States, your VCR may not be able to play it on your VCR. If the course requires software that you are not familiar with you may have to learn the software first.

5. Is there adequate feedback and interaction in the class? As with traditional education, you need to be able to ask questions and to know as you go through the class how you are progressing.

6. What are others saying about it? Ask for references if appropriate or ask on listservs for opinions of specific courses.

7. Is the program accredited or does it matter for your needs? If all you want is a web page building introduction, a free, or low cost program will probably fit your needs. If you want to get a degree that will qualify you for another position, then you might need to look for accredited degrees.

Pam Dixon's Virtual College contains a more complete discussion of whether the virtual college is for you. For distance education, as with traditional education, is only effective with careful planning and evaluation. Remember nothing will work if you don't know where you are going, how to get there and move in that direction.

WHAT CAN IAMSLIC DO?

There are several ways IAMSLIC can help members to expand their learning horizon. At the University of Texas there is an Electronic Emissaries program which links younger students with older experts to answer questions about their profession. Helping one another has long been one of the strong points of this organization. Why not turn it into a formal Electronic Mentor program that would match up people in similar situations, one with several years experience in the field, one new to the field? While the listserv serves this purpose to a degree, many people are afraid to ask what they think are “simple” questions that any library staff member “should” know. This kind of program can give the one-to-one sharing of knowledge that has helped so many of us learn. With E-mail our mentors now can be thousands of miles away.

Pre-, during, and post-conference hands-on or application-based workshops could be extremely useful. It also might help some people in obtaining funding to attend the conference.

Links to training opportunities specific to marine and aquatic science libraries can be included on the IAMSLIC website.
As with an individual asking oneself what is it I need and how can I get it, now organizations need to be answering those same questions. What is it our members need and how can we best provide access to it?

REFERENCES


