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Collaboration and Support: Two Key Ingredients to E-Learning Implementation

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The use of e-learning to meet the training needs of library staff continues to grow. In recent research conducted by WebJunction published in *Trends in E-Learning for Library Staff: A Summary of Research Findings* (1), 70% of survey respondents plan to pursue e-learning in the next three years. The growth of online training gives libraries the opportunity to collaborate, increasing the benefits of e-learning for everyone who chooses to pursue it for their training requirements.

The benefits of e-learning include consistency of training, reaching remote library staff unable to attend face-to-face workshops, and reducing staff time away from work. As more libraries discover the value of e-learning, it is important to address the associated challenges, as well. These challenges highlight the need for collaboration on course creation and on the acquisition of learning technology. In addition, supporting learners new to online training helps increase the likelihood of e-learning adoption. WebJunction and others are providing cooperative services to support libraries as they improve the quality and reduce the costs of e-learning. By working together, the library community can realize the benefits and overcome the barriers to the effective use of e-learning.

Collaboration

One of the challenges of e-learning can be the cost of course creation. A typical, well-designed, self-paced course can take up to 160 hours of development time per hour of instruction. The average cost per hour can be as high as \$160.00 (2). This brings the price of creating one self-paced course to almost \$26,000.00. While facilitated training can cost significantly less to produce (approximately \$5,000 - \$10,000.00), the price and time commitment can still deter many libraries from attempting to create their own training. Or, a potentially worse consequence, libraries may create inferior quality courses in order to reduce the cost of production. As WebJunction's research has indicated, learners who have a bad experience with an online training course are not likely to pursue e-learning in the future.

Since it is important for the field to reduce the cost of course production and to also insure high quality training, library trainers might consider opportunities to collaborate on course creation. Mary Ross, former Staff Training and Development Manager, Seattle Public Library, has seen courses created for library staff that do not consider how another library may differ in policy and procedure. She suggests that through the creation process, a course developer considers whether the content is generic enough for other states to adopt.

One of Ross's own courses, *Intellectual Freedom*, was developed for Washington State but was generic enough to enable other states to customize the content. The state of Illinois successfully adopted the course content and customized much of the material including segments on confidentiality and CIPA compliance to match their own state requirements. By doing so, Illinois saved time, money and staff resources they might have otherwise spent creating a similar course.

Another opportunity for collaboration that can increase the quality of the training occurs during the initial process of creating a course. Through 2006, WebJunction took a group of seven libraries through a project cohort to inform the purchase of learning related technology. During this project, each organization was required to develop its own facilitated course. The participants met online to review what they were creating, ask questions, and receive feedback. Through the months, participants developed a strong connection to each other and found that cohorts and collaboration really work. The feedback and support they received from others in the field helped them create superior training, important for increasing staff adoption. In fact, one organization's experience with the project and the resulting expertise they demonstrated in e-learning was recognized by a local foundation. Through this foundation, the organization received funding to develop additional training for small libraries.

A final example of sharing course content is a program developed by Helene Blowers, Public Services Technology Director for the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County titled "23 Things" (<http://plcmlearning.blogspot.com/>). It is described as "an online self-discovery program that encourages the exploration of web 2.0 tools and new technologies". Participants are guided through "23 Things" that include

short exercises to help them explore Web 2.0, such as creating blogs, setting up RSS feeds, and adding pictures to Flickr. Blowers originally created the program to train 550 staff members on the latest web technologies. It is now available for free on the web for any library or organization to use. As Blowers writes on her blog “If you have questions about duplicating this program, please feel free to contact me. This is a learning program that is freely available to anyone and I’d be happy to help anyway I can.” This open attitude has encouraged several organizations from Melbourne Australia to San Jose, CA to adopt the program and customize it to meet the needs of their staff.

In order for libraries to have easy access to course content, there remains a need for a centralized repository of library specific training. This would give libraries the opportunity to share content across the field. Additionally, libraries could readily view what topics already have been addressed by other course developers and they can concentrate their efforts on subjects not represented in current training catalogs. Again, this focus of energy can reduce cost and increase quality by limiting the number of courses any individual library must create. WebJunction expects to work with course developers to aggregate course content and provide a central access point for library specific online training.

Another opportunity for collaboration is in purchasing tools required for developing and delivering online training. A cooperative buying model can greatly reduce the cost to any individual library. For example, an important tool to deliver facilitated (live-online) courses is a web-conferencing service. An average cost for this service can range from \$40,000 – \$100,000 depending on the service and number of users. Knowing the importance of web-conferencing, WebJunction recently invested in this service. Through the power of collective purchasing, it is offered to libraries at a significantly reduced rate that they can afford.

Online Programming for All Libraries (OPAL) is another example of a successful web-conferencing program (<http://www.opal-online.org/>). OPAL is an international effort by libraries and other organizations to provide web-based programs and training for library users. The cost for the use of the system is less than \$1000. In addition, those who sign up for the service are required to conduct at least two “fully-public” live-online events to share training with the library field, pushing the sharing spirit even further.

Learning Management Systems (LMS) are important for tracking and managing training programs, however, they can be very expensive and often require a significant amount of support. Over the past three years, WebJunction has offered an LMS (Isoph Blue) to its premier partners at a greatly reduced rate. By having their own LMS, partners access and customize their course catalog and analyze and report measures of success. In addition to the LMS, these members also receive hundreds of courses they can distribute among staff in their state. In monthly calls, this strong community of partners regularly share practical advice and content as well as support each other as they implement their various programs. The benefit of this communication is essential to the success of the program and reinforces the collaborative experience. Over the next year WebJunction expects to enhance the functionality of the LMS it makes available to libraries. Among other things

the new LMS will enable library partners to track courses taken by library staff and will enable staff members to develop a portfolio of courses they have taken.

There are also opportunities for libraries to use open source Learning Management Systems. One example, Sakai, (<http://www.sakaiproject.org/>) is described on their site as a “collaboration and learning environment for education. Free to use, free to develop, freedom for education”. This product is built and maintained by the “Sakai Community”. In general, universities around the world pool resources to develop a system that is better than any one of them could develop for themselves. This happens both with individual universities developing and sharing specific modules they create for their own purposes, and also with universities ‘loaning out’ developers to projects being worked on by others. While, in general, mostly academic libraries have benefited from this project, public libraries have an opportunity to learn from their successes using this open source model.

Support

There are many examples of e-learning training programs that have never taken root in a library system. Sometimes even the best designed online programs are not adopted by learners. This lack of adoption can be frustrating for library directors and managers who have purchased training and/or designed training in-house. The “if you build it, they will come” mentality creates an expectation that just offering an online course to learners will have the immediate effect of pulling them into the training and learning effectively. However, WebJunction’s experience with offering online training suggests that much more can be done to motivate learners to be successful online.

In response to the need for library staff to effectively use e-learning in their day to day training programs, WebJunction established the E-Learning Institute. This program grew out of WebJunction’s direct experience working with library organizations as they created and implemented e-learning, seeing their struggles, and recognizing that more implementation support was necessary to allow everyone to succeed. The E-Learning Institute is for learners, trainers, and library directors interested in pursuing online training. It provides information on topics ranging from how to be an online trainer, how to learn on-line effectively, and methods to implement e-learning in an organization. In addition to WebJunction, many other organizations that have been creating and delivering online training over the years have developed expertise in supporting e-learning programs. As libraries introduce more e-learning courses into their training programs, they can learn from the successes of those who were early adopters of online training.

As those who have implemented online training have discovered, one barrier for learners to easily and quickly adopt e-learning is an unfamiliarity with the online learning environment. To be successful online, learners need to have a comfort with technology. In the case of facilitated courses, it is especially important for learners to understand their learning environment since there are often high expectations for their participation in the course. InSync Training (<http://www.insynctraining.com/>), has been helping organizations with online training since 1999. They offer a variety of consulting, development and delivery services to support synchronous training initiatives. As experts in this field, one of their first recommendations is for learners to take a “Learn How to

Learn Online” course. This course is described as “demystifying the technology for the participants so they have a positive learning experience”. Through the course, learners are exposed to a variety of online tools used in a synchronous classroom including whiteboards, chat, and VOIP. Recently, with the help of InSynch, WebJunction adopted this course content to create a “How to Learn Online” specifically for library staff as a part of the E-Learning Institute program.

Once a learner is comfortable with the online learning environment, there still remains the need for the organization to provide the support and recognition of online learning achievements. A successful training implementation by an organization is exemplified by Kate Laughlin, Training Program Coordinator at Seattle Public Library. Laughlin recently had to implement a self-paced Disaster Preparedness online training course to 25 Seattle Public Libraries and over 620 staff members. Several factors allowed Laughlin to successfully train almost 90% of the staff in the necessary time frame. In emails and memos that Laughlin sent to staff, she made it clear that the training was mandated by the city and completing the course was “required” for their job. Tying a training course to job requirements is extremely powerful because it gives staff permission to spend time on the material and they understand the importance of the training.

Management support is also an important part of e-learning adoption. Because the Disaster Preparedness course was mandated by the city, the time commitment for the training was supported by all directors and managers across the libraries. This made it possible for staff to take the time for the course. Using the administrative function of the system hosting the course, Laughlin could view who was successfully completing the material and managers could be kept in the loop on the progress of their staff.

Ease of use is important when staff are experiencing online training for the first time. Laughlin made it as easy as possible for staff to get to the course. In every email or memo referencing the training, she included a link to the course with log-in information. Additionally, she gave her direct contact information as support for the course to help staff register and log-in as well as provide technical troubleshooting in all points of navigating through the course.

The implementation of the Disaster Preparedness course was the largest online training initiative that Seattle Public Libraries has done to date. The success of the program has encouraged Laughlin to explore other opportunities for online training. She felt this course “definitely got students familiar with online training [it showed them] it is very easy to do and took away the fear of online”. Taking a small step into e-learning can lead to much larger programs as staff become familiar with the online training environment.

Using incentives is another option for motivating learners to participate in online training. When Blowers first offered her “23 Things” course, she distributed prizes to participants who completed the entire curriculum. She tracked the participants by requiring them to keep a blog of their progress in addition to asking them to submit their completed items to a central database. Everyone who completed the program received a USB MP3 player. In addition, all participants who completed were eligible for a final lap-top drawing. Incentives, however, do not need to be costly. It is important to be creative and think

about what most excites staff including a day off from work or a staff lunch. The goal is to recognize the achievement of those who successfully complete a course or program.

Implementing e-learning training initiatives can sometimes best be done through blended learning. One of the many benefits is the opportunity it gives learners to begin exploring an online environment when they have only attended traditional face-to-face training. In WebJunction's recently published *Blended Learning Guide* (3), blended learning is defined as "a combination – or blend – of different online learning modes, or of online and in-person learning". A blended learning course could include requiring learners to take a self-paced course, post feedback to a discussion board, collaborate on a wiki, listen to podcasts, and participate in live-online discussions. The various learning methods appeal to a variety of learning styles. If learners attend the course with a cohort, real bonds may develop among the participants creating stimulating and engaging online discussions. Kendra Morgan, WebJunction Outreach Specialist for TechAtlas, has ten years of training experience and believes, "the collaboration between students that occurs in a blended course can be even more powerful than what happens in a traditional classroom environment".

One of the case studies presented in the *Blended Learning Guide*, describes a successful blended learning program at Maryland's Division of Library Development and Services. When implementing management training, they grouped together 10 – 15 aspiring managers in a learning cohort. To kick-off the training, the teams met in person. Nini Beegan, Maryland's Online Learning Consultant, has said, "In-person kick-off sessions were essential to the program's success". In following months, they met online to attend facilitated sessions in combination with taking self-paced courses creating the right mix of independent and team learning. The teams helped learners stay motivated and created accountability among team members, becoming essential to maintaining high completion rates in the program.

Over the past three years, WebJunction has managed a blended learning approach for its' Spanish Language Outreach Program. The program is a train-the-trainer model, teaching staff to reach out to Spanish speakers in their community. The curriculum begins with an online Webinar, followed by a three day in-person intensive training. After this session, participants use discussion boards to post homework in addition to sharing their experiences and resources. A self-paced course is also available for trainers to review and share with others who do not attend the in-person workshop. The success of this program and the blending of training methods will make it possible for WebJunction to reach 150 trainers and conduct over 400 workshops by the end of 2008. Laura Staley, WebJunction's Spanish Language Outreach Program Coordinator, states "using a blended approach has been essential to expanding the program quickly and meeting the needs of the trainers and participants".

Worldwide Implications

Although this paper has drawn from research within the United States, indications are that library staff throughout the world can benefit from e-learning. Collaboration and support are equally important to improving quality and lowering the cost of training.

However, there are additional barriers to overcome before these benefits can be fully realized on the international stage. The three most obvious barriers are language, culture, and technical readiness.

The first and most obvious barrier is language. One can imagine that an efficient, effective translation program would enable library staff to use courses that have already been developed rather than starting from scratch. At the same time cultural difference would likely require some adaptation of content to make course material relevant to international users. Generic courses described earlier in this paper could be created with the expectation that some adaptation would be necessary to customize them for the intended audience. But even with those caveats, course sharing across borders would likely enhance and expand the course offerings available to libraries worldwide at a reasonable cost.

The issue of technical readiness is especially important for developing countries. Low bandwidth and slow transmission rates, even lack of readily available telephone service in some areas impede the ability of many around the world to take full advantage of e-learning opportunities. These challenges are seen in many other parts of the world, including some rural areas in highly developed countries. As countries work to establish an infrastructure to overcome the challenges of technical readiness, e-learning modules that rely on less sophisticated technology, like CD versions, may fill the gap in the short term.

Conclusion

E-learning is quickly becoming an important component to library staff training. As libraries implement more e-learning programs, they can consider opportunities for collaboration as well as evaluate the support necessary to make the programs successful. The benefits of e-learning can outweigh the challenges if libraries work together to reduce cost and learn from each others' successes.

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