

An Online Course for Research Library Assistants

Design, Implementation Issues,
and Outcomes

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Why is there a need for a course for library assistants?

- Assistants are given narrow, job-specific training
- Assistants seldom know much about the mission or operation of libraries
- There are few ways for them to learn how their jobs fit into the “big picture”
- As professional staff decreases, assistants are given more responsibility—need to know more

Why are there few courses for library assistants to meet this need?

- Most libraries have limited resources for staff development and tend to spend what they have on professionals
- Continuing education providers direct their efforts primarily to meeting the needs of professional librarians
- Assistants have low salaries and are not likely to pay for classes out of their own pockets

Why was an online course seen as a good solution?

- Learners can participate in the course at any time from their workplace – there is no need to travel to a central location.
- Once the course is developed and piloted, it can be offered repeatedly to new cohorts of research library assistants, regardless of where they are

Pilot course development

Collaboration

- Rutgers SCILS Professional Development Studies
- NY Public Library-the Research Libraries
- Rutgers-the State University of New Jersey

Funding

US Institute of Museum and Library Services grant,
2002-2004, \$233,861

Pilot course development

- Advisory group—subject experts
- Consensus on contents of modules
- Assignment of course developers
- Training on eCollege software
- Editing and revision

Participant recruitment

- Eligibility criteria:

On the job-1-3 years, time to study on work time, computer skills, support from supervisor

- Recruitment results:

14 from NYPL, 10 from Rutgers, 5 from Montclair; some more than 3 years on job

- Dropouts – 7 due to time constraints, lack of support





Course description

- 20 weeks in length, 10 modules, to be completed in about 5 hours per week:

Introduction, effectiveness on the job, library foundations, technology in libraries, collections, providing access, public services, digital libraries, future of the library, review

- Students expected to participate in threaded discussions, complete readings, collect their library's policies, etc.; take “self-check” quiz at end of each module; keep journal

Pilot course – proposed outcomes

- Assistants will demonstrate knowledge of the differences between their roles and responsibilities and those of degreed librarians
- Both assistants and their supervisors will report improved job performance and higher job satisfaction
- Supervisors will report satisfaction with the training program

Actual pilot course outcomes

- Pre-and post course self-assessments showed assistants gained in their understanding of the difference in roles only 30% of the time. Gains in other course contents were around 70%
- Both assistants and their supervisors did report improved job performance, but no change in job satisfaction
- Supervisors did report satisfaction with the training program; 60% said they would recommend the course to others,

Lessons learned

Course design:

- You need both content experts and instructional designers
- If you use more than one course developer, you will need an editor to ensure consistency

Course delivery:

- Make sure students have adequate equipment
- Require instructors to monitor discussions and to give prompt and ample feedback

Feedback from assistants

- Students reported that they liked having the course online, even though there were some technical problems
- More self-checks and more instructor feedback were desired
- Most felt that five hour per week was not enough
- They wanted more interaction and collaboration

Course revised and offered Spring '05

Changes made:

- Course was reduced to 15 weeks
- Instructor was one of the original project planners and course designers
- Instructor devoted more time to monitoring course and giving feedback

Results

Enrollment:

17 people from 13 institutions in 9 states

Comments from participants:

“Well rounded overview...found out much more about my own library..”

“It forced me to step out of my box and explore what is going on around me...got the ‘big picture’”

“Worth the time and money”

For more information:

A complete version of the original paper can be found at

<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~varlejs/varlejs.html>

For details about the course and an application form for
Fall 2005, go to:

<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/programs/pds/imls-olatp.jsp>

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