

AN ONLINE COURSE FOR RESEARCH LIBRARY ASSISTANTS: DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES, AND OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

While an increasing number of degree and professional development courses for librarians has become available online, training and continuing education for library support staff has remained largely a local, on-the-job effort. Typically, library assistants are taught the specific job for which they are hired, and do not receive the kind of broad-based orientation to their library's mission, policies, and procedures that would help them to place their work in a broader context. In order to address this situation, a pilot project was conducted in three libraries to develop and test an online course for academic and research library assistants that could be offered regularly for open enrollment. The paper is in two parts: (1) from the point of view of the project directors, how the pilot was designed, implemented, and evaluated; and (2) from the point of view of a staff development officer of one of the participating libraries, how the project affected the assistants who were selected to take the course. Lessons learned that will influence the course revision conclude the paper.

INTRODUCTION

In order to develop and test an on-the-job, online training program for academic and research library paraprofessionals, a grant was obtained from the United States Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in 2002. The project participants were:

Rutgers University, School of Communication, Information and Library Studies
New York Public Library—The Research Libraries
Rutgers University Libraries
Montclair State University Library
The Association of Research Libraries

This paper describes the pilot program, with particular emphasis on the evaluation. The overview of the project is followed by a case study that reports the experience of one of the three participating libraries.

BACKGROUND

Discussion about continuing education and professional development in the library/information science (LIS) literature or in professional association meetings usually refers to professional librarians. Staff who do not hold a degree in LIS are rarely included, at least not explicitly. Yet, most of the people who work in libraries are not degreed librarians. In the United States, they outnumber the professionals almost two to one.¹

In 2003, support staff educational needs received a rare moment in the spotlight, when the third Congress on Professional Education (COPE III) was held under the auspices of the American Library Association. For some time, there had been a general recognition that as library and information technology became increasingly complex and as professional staff numbers were decreasing, greater responsibilities were being assumed by support staff.² The COPE III discussions confirmed what was generally known, that is, how little continuing education is available for support staff, at least in the United States. The prevailing training takes place on the job, and tends to be narrowly focused on specific tasks.³

Even before COPE III took place, the need to develop a continuing education program for library assistants brought together the training coordinators for the New York Public Library-The Research Libraries (NYPL) and Rutgers University Libraries (RUL) with the director of the Professional Development Studies program of the Rutgers School of Communication, Information and Library Studies (SCILS). With Rutgers SCILS and NYPL in the lead, funding was sought from IMLS in order to design and deliver an online course for research library assistants. This paper describes the project and its results in two parts: (1) from the point of view of the project evaluator, how well the pilot was designed and implemented; and (2) from the point of view of the staff development officer of one of the participating libraries, how the project affected the assistants who were selected to take the course.

The rationale for the project is quoted from the grant proposal at length below, in order to provide the context for the ensuing discussion. A summary of the educational opportunities for support staff in the United States is included.

Most ... assistants are hired because they are local residents who meet the basic education requirements – usually either some college credits or associate or bachelor's degree – and they come to their jobs with little or no educational background or experience in libraries. Most library systems do not have the resources to conduct training for these employees beyond general orientations and instruction on the specific tasks of the job at hand. Yet assistants can perform excellently and contribute to the improvement of library services with general training in library values and practice and in a broad range of technology, technical, and service skills. Given the realities of salary structures for most academic and research library assistants, it is difficult to hire assistants who bring these skills to the workplace. Therefore, the training needs to be done on the job. The two possibilities for on-the-job training are either for the library to conduct training on its own or to send assistants to classes provided by others.

There are few educational opportunities for libraries who want to send their

assistants for more comprehensive training. Throughout the country there are five types of education and training opportunities for library assistants:

1. Community college programs aimed at pre-qualifying people for jobs. There are about 50 associate degree programs for library assistants nationwide, however they can only be found in about twenty states. These programs, which prepare people for work in all types of libraries, are not currently coming close to producing the number of trained people who are needed by the 122,000 public, school, college and university, and special libraries in this country.

2. Professional development programs associated with colleges and universities. While 43 schools with graduate library programs do offer some continuing education, only a handful conduct classes aimed at library assistants, and none cover the full range of topics needed.

3. Library and library assistant associations. These groups mostly offer ad hoc, short-term training programs for library assistants, such as one day programs or conferences with a few hours of classes spread over several days.

4. Library consortia and agencies, such as those that are part of state-supported networks or OCLC-affiliated regional networks. Many of these groups offer sporadic library assistant training, but few have comprehensive programming. Maryland has a statewide library assistant training program, but this 60 hour program is designed and only required for public library assistants.

5. Individual library systems. Libraries of all types routinely do on-the-job training focused only on the skills and knowledge that library assistants need to perform the tasks of their specific jobs. Some larger library systems do orientation sessions, but these focus more on issues of local workplace conditions such as how to schedule vacations.

None of the training above offers a comprehensive overview for library assistants. None of it provides cross-training to enable personnel movement across departments on a temporary or permanent basis. None of it helps assistants understand how each worker's function fits into the mission and processes of the entire library. None of it provides a strong support for the development of service skills which are so critical in all library positions. And none of it offers assistants a base of knowledge about general library issues, goals, and practices in a way that allows them to consider their own performance and their library's operation within the broader context of best library practices.

It must be remembered that the grant proposal was written in 2002, and that the picture has continued to evolve since then. Nevertheless, the need for a widely available and regularly offered basic introduction to library work for support staff has not disappeared.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

The project proceeded in several overlapping phases: design and scripting; recruitment of students; delivery of the course; evaluation. The time frame for the project

was two years, with about a year devoted to course development and student recruitment, five months to running the pilot class, and six months to assessment and reporting.

Recruiting students

Originally, the plan called for recruiting fifteen students each from NYPL and Rutgers. In order to overcome objections to releasing the assistants from their duties for the five hours per week that they were expected to spend on the course, the grant included money to pay for temporary replacements. The eligibility criteria that assistants had to meet in order to apply were: (1) more than six months and less than three years of employment in the library, (2) a letter of support from the supervisor, (3) approval by the library's training manager. Since the course was to be delivered online, the students had to possess basic computer skills (4).

Supervisors were asked to nominate eligible assistants. In the end 14 from NYPL and 10 from Rutgers were selected. To bring the cohort up to the desired number, the director of the Montclair State University library, an advisor to the project, arranged for the recruitment of another 5 participants. Of the 29 original recruits, 5 dropped out before the course began, and another 2 while the course was in progress. Time pressures and lack of support from the employing library were the reasons given for dropping out. The data on the assistants and their supervisors are summarized in tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Characteristics of participating library assistants

Library	Female	Male	Total	DB*	DD*	Average age	Average education	Years in position	Years in library
NYPL	9	5	14	2	1	32	2 yrs college	2.5	5
Rutgers	6	4	10	-	1	35	2 yrs college	1	2
Montclair	3	2	5	3	-	49	2 yrs college	4	4.5
Total	18	11	29	5	2				

*DB: dropped before program began; DD: dropped during the program

Table 2. Characteristics of their supervisors

Library	F	M	Total	Average Age	Have an MLS?		Years in Position	Had any supervisory training?		Years in library
					Yes	No		Yes	No	
NYPL	6	5	11	46	7	4	7	10	1	22
Rutgers	6	3	9	39	3	6	4	7	2	13
Montclair	2	-	2	55	2	-	5	1	1	7
Total	14	8	22		12	10		18	4	

The data show that the longevity-in-job criteria for eligibility were not met, except in the case of Rutgers assistants. NYPL had suffered a job freeze for a number of years, which was the reason for not having more candidates with fewer years of service. In part II of this paper, Marilyn Wilt describes the process of recruiting participants from the perspective of one of the three libraries.

Course development

The project directors began by developing a list of topics that they wanted to include in the course and invited a group of subject experts to refine the list. Most members of this advisory group became course designers of modules covering their areas of expertise. In order to establish a standard style and tone, the project directors and a consultant edited the results. The entire development process took from the beginning of the grant period in August 2002 until the course went online in September 2003. The software used was eCollege, which was adopted by Rutgers for its online courses. The delivery was asynchronous, but was instructor led. Beginning and ending dates were scheduled for each module, so that the cohort of students navigated the course together. The final course content can be seen in the introduction excerpted from the online course, below:

Table 3. Course syllabus

Course Syllabus

Reading this Syllabus	This syllabus is a quick overview of the Online Library Assistant Training Program, which we will abbreviate as OLATP.
Course Description	The Online Library Assistant Training Program is designed for paraprofessionals who work in academic and research libraries. The goal of this twenty-week class is to offer you a broad perspective of the mission and functions of libraries, to help you consider the different roles of people who work in libraries, and to support your personal growth so you can have a productive and satisfying experience as a library employee.
Schedule and Topics	The twenty weeks of the OLATP will be broken into ten modules: <u>Introduction</u> <i>September 29 through October 12</i> Welcome to the course and to each other; library support staff history, issues, and roles. <u>Effectiveness on the Job</u> <i>October 13 through November 2</i> Time management; communication skills; teamwork and managing conflict; problem solving; managing change; meetings. <u>Library Foundations</u> <i>November 3 through November 16</i> Brief history of libraries; library principles and values; library missions

and visions; networks and consortia.

Technology in Libraries

November 17 through December 2

Basic computing, like operating systems, hardware, software, databases, backing up; troubleshooting problems; LANs; WANs; the Internet.

Collections

December 3 through December 21

Collection development; interlibrary loan and document delivery; circulation; stack maintenance; copyright; special collections; preservation.

December 22 through January 4 - there will be no class.

Providing Access

January 5 through January 18

Storing information; describing information; subject access, controlled vocabularies, classification; MARC records; metadata.

Public Services

January 19 through February 2

Levels of information interactions; behavior at a service desk; reference and research; library instruction; exhibits and public events.

Digital Libraries

February 3 through February 15

Definitions; organizing the acquisition, description, access, and preservation of digital libraries; creating collections; accessing digital resources; the impact of digital libraries.

The Future of the Library

February 16 through February 22

Current trends, such as interconnectedness and collaboration; service in a high tech world; legal issues; technology.

Finale

February 23 through February 27

A review of what we have accomplished in this class.

Assignments

Each of the ten modules listed above is broken into units that have specific topics. There are threaded discussions throughout the course, and you are expected to participate in these discussions weekly. In some of the units there are brief assignments; these include activities like finding out about your local library's practices and policies, writing a few sentences in answer to a question, and some outside readings. At the end of each module you will find a review unit with two parts: a multiple choice self-check so you can confirm that you understood the material. and a requirement to write yourself a few notes about what you

learned in the module that was interesting to you and/or applicable to your work. The work for this class, including reading all the units, participating in discussions, and doing all of the assignments, should take you about five hours per week.

At the end of the last module, the designers express very clearly what they wanted the course to accomplish in terms of student learning:

We hope all of this material has given you new insights into the business of libraries and the organization and operation of your library in particular. *We hope we've given you some new ways to think about your role and the role of some of your colleagues in meeting the mission of your library. We hope you've picked up one or two tips that will help you do your job better.* We hope we've shown you clearly that focusing on the people who use our services is the key to all of our activities.

In addition, there was the overarching goal of the project: To develop and test an online course that could become a regular, nationally available offering in which academic and research libraries could enroll their recently employed support staff. Therefore, the evaluation of the project was concerned with outcomes for the library assistants (LAs) and their employers on the one hand, and with the viability of the course as it was designed and delivered, on the other. The primary stakeholders in the first case were the three libraries, and in the second the Rutgers School of Communication, Information and Library Studies Professional Development Studies program. The Association of Research Libraries was also interested in the pilot as a means of meeting its member libraries' need for this type of program. IMLS, as the agency that provided the funding, was of course interested in both aspects.

EXPECTED RESULTS FOR STUDENTS AND LIBRARIES

IMLS requested that the project directors and evaluation coordinator attend a workshop on outcomes evaluation at the start of the grant period. Consequently, an "Outcomes Logic Model"⁴ worksheet was prepared that included detailed methodology and specific numerical targets for determining whether the desired results were achieved, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Outcomes Logic Model (excerpts)

Intended Outcomes <i>(Changes in skill, knowledge, attitude, behavior, life condition or status)</i>	Indicators (Measures) <i>(Concrete evidence, occurrence, or characteristic that will show the desired change occurred)</i>
Immediate: LAs will demonstrate knowledge of concepts of the library	No./% of LAs who score 85 or better on course assessment, and who articulate the

business, and of the different roles and responsibilities of librarians and other staff	differences in the roles and responsibilities of librarians and other staff in online discussion
Intermediate: LAs will report greater job satisfaction and better performance; supervisors will report better performance	No./% of LAs who score at least one level higher on job satisfaction and performance self-assessment scales 3 months after completing the course than they did on the same scales before the course; no./% of supervisors who score at least one level higher on their assessment of the LAs performance.
Long-term: LAs in other libraries will enroll in the course, with similar benefits	The course will have 20 or more registrants twice a year on a continuing basis

[For each outcome, the model calls for specifications such as the following:]

Outcome #1 LAs will demonstrate knowledge of core concepts of the library business

Indicator(s)	Data Source (Where data will be found)	To Whom (Segment of population to which this indicator is applied)	Data Intervals (Points at which information is collected)	Target (the number , percent, variation or other measure of change)
No./% of LAs who will score 85% or better on all online assessments	Quizzes, written assignments, online discussion threads	All LAs who complete course	At the end of course modules	75%

There were four additional immediate and intermediate outcomes proposed:

- • LAs will demonstrate knowledge of the differences between the roles and responsibilities of degreed librarians and LAs
- • LAs and their supervisors will report higher job performance
- • LAs will report higher job satisfaction
- • Supervisors will report satisfaction with the training program

In order to collect the data that would constitute the “indicators” of whether the desired outcomes were achieved, a set of instruments were developed. Prior to the beginning of the course, the assistants filled out a self-assessment that dealt with their feelings about their jobs and their ability to do them, and the degree to which they possessed concepts and skills integral to library work. Their supervisors filled out matching surveys, so that it was possible to compare the assessments. Three months after the course ended, the same surveys were administered again in order to determine whether or not the expected outcomes were achieved. Mid-course and end-of-course feedback and online journal entries were also collected. As they finished the last module, LAs were asked to write down three things they had learned that they expected to use on

the job. These “action plans” were collected and saved by the course evaluators for three months, at which time follow-up meetings were held. The LAs were asked to look at their plans and to write down whether or not they had implemented them. At this same time, informal discussions with small groups of LAs allowed evaluators to round out their impression of the of the effectiveness of the course. In addition, the advisory group that helped to design the course were asked to comment on their experience of the process, and the two instructors were interviewed in order to gain their impressions of how the course was going about six weeks after its start and at the end. Course management data was examined for amount of time spent online and quiz scores.

RESULTS IN TERMS OF THE OUTCOMES LOGIC MODEL

Table 5 shows a comparison of LAs pre- and post-course self-assessments, aggregated by broad categories. The assessments were made using statements such as “Participate effectively in meetings,“ and “Difference between acquisition and collection development,“ where the LAs were asked to rate the degree to which they possessed the skill or understood the concept on a scale of 1 to 7.

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Table 5. Library assistants’ self-assessments pre- and post-course (n=22)

Category	Change down by 1 whole number or more	Change down by small amount	No change	Change up by small amount	Change up by 1 whole number or more	No. of missing cases	Percent of cases in plus category
Functions, Values of libraries	1	3	3	7	8	0	68%
Roles and functions of library staff	2	7	5	2	4	2	30%
Technology in libraries	0	3	5	4	10	0	64%
Technical processes in libraries	3	2	2	3	12	0	68%
Collections	3	3	0	3	13	0	73%
Communication/personal work practices	4	2	0	12	4	0	73%

All categories	13	20	15	31	51	2	62%
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Referring to the first outcome posited in the Outcomes Logic Model, 75% of the LAs who finished the course were expected to demonstrate knowledge of core concepts of the library business, as indicated by quizzes, assignments, and online discussion threads. Because a decision was made not to assign grades, it was not possible to measure this outcome systematically. Students' self-rating, however, showed that 62% of them felt that they had made gains in knowledge and skills. The supervisors tended to see a greater gain in skills and knowledge than did the LAs.

The second outcome, knowledge of the differences between the roles and responsibilities of degreed librarians and library assistants, was to be measured by having 75% of LAs able to articulate at least three differences. As above, a numeric result could not be ascertained.

The third outcome, better job performance, was determined by comparing pre- and post-course self-assessments and supervisor assessments. Overall, the ratings increased, but the supervisors' did so more than the assistants'. Agreement of assessments by pairs of LAs and their supervisors was higher than it was initially. The fourth outcome, higher job satisfaction, was also measured by comparing pre- and post-course self-assessments. In the aggregate, no change occurred.

The fifth outcome, supervisors' satisfaction with the training program, was the only one that achieved the anticipated result, with 60% saying that they would recommend the course to others, and reporting at least three benefits gained from having their assistants participate.

OTHER RESULTS

In addition to data collected for the purpose of determining these five outcomes, a number of other evaluation and feedback mechanisms were built into the project. Half-way through the course, the assistants were asked four open-ended questions. The majority of comments were positive, but when asked what they liked least and what they would change, some LAs said they needed more time, more involvement by and feedback from the instructors, more review and more self-checks (that is, quizzes). A few weeks before the LA mid-point survey, the two instructors were interviewed. They noted that there was not as much discussion and interaction among the students as desirable and attributed that to time pressures. They acknowledged, however, that they might have pushed harder to encourage more exchanges.

As indicated above, three months after finishing the class, the LAs filled out post-course surveys that were essentially identical to the ones they were given at the start. At the same time, small group discussions were held in order to allow the LAs to reflect on the experience in retrospect. It was also an opportunity for them to see the action plans that they submitted at the end of the course and to comment on the extent to which they followed their plan and what barriers they encountered. Overall, the LAs followed through on their action plans, and did not encounter many barriers. There was a very

wide range of learning reported, although a considerable number could be categorized as general work skills. LAs mentioned that they were better at time management, participating in meetings, and communicating both with colleagues and the public. Greater understanding of copyright restrictions and ability to troubleshoot technology were among the more technical skills mentioned. In general, they were focused on applying what they had learned to specific aspects of their own jobs, although there also were statements that showed that some had gained a broader appreciation of the functions and operations of research libraries.

In addition to what was learned, the evaluators were also interested in how well the LAs were able to cope with taking a course that was entirely delivered online. In the end-of-course feedback form, the LAs were asked to what extent they had adequate workspace and a consistently functioning computer that they could use for learning at work. The mean score for this question was 5.4 out of 7. Overall, they liked having the course online (a score of 6.2), had some trouble with the technology (5.7), but when asked about adequate time at work to take the course, a 4.3 rating indicated that this was the greatest problem.

ONE LIBRARY'S PERSPECTIVE

Background

Before describing the Rutgers University Libraries (RUL) experience with the online training project, some background information is helpful. Staff development programs at RUL have traditionally been scattered and haphazardly administered. The primary focus has been on teaching technical skills to enable the staff to work well with the existing libraries' technologies. There are no defined core competencies, linked to developmental learning plans that might guide both employee and supervisor in designing necessary training programs, or on-the-job experiences.

The primary delivery mode for the training programs has been instructor-led, classroom training. RUL is beginning to offer some tutorials online to enable employees to work at their own pace learning Microsoft Office products. In addition, since Rutgers University has three widely dispersed campuses, the Libraries have started to offer training programs using videoconferencing to expand "reach" and potential audiences. Videoconferencing works well for formal presentations, question and answer sessions, and group discussions. RUL has had success delivering Microsoft Office training to all three campuses, using videoconferencing, along with handouts and demonstration disks.

Recruitment process

Moving into total online delivery of course content was a new direction for LAs, supervisors, and administrators. The Libraries' senior management team, the Cabinet, reviewed the program's objectives and felt that participation would be an important learning opportunity for LAs, and also a chance for RUL to assess the effectiveness of online training delivery. The team agreed to coordinate the identification and selection of participants in line with the eligibility criteria (more than six months and less than three years of employment in the library; support from the supervisor; approval by the library's

training manager; basic computer skills), while also working with the participants' supervisors to ensure their willingness to support their staff in this twenty-week program.

The Cabinet invited nominations from all three campuses, sharing the descriptive information on the emergent program and the student selection criteria with the supervisors to help them make informed choices of candidates. The nominations were reviewed by Cabinet in advance. As both the supervisors and participants moved through the application process, there were thoughtful discussions and interviews to give both the program organizers and the participants opportunities to gain a better understanding of what they were about to embark upon. Despite these efforts, RUL's contingent failed to reach the desired twenty.

Rutgers participants' reflections

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As a member of the project evaluation team, the RUL Training and Learning Coordinator was involved throughout the project and had opportunities to review feedback from the LAs and the course instructors at the midpoint and the end of the program. The evaluation three months after the course was over gave further insight into the transfer of training from the perspectives of both the LAs and their supervisors.

In addition, the RUL Coordinator met with some of the RUL participants about six months later to gather further reflections and insights since their return to their normal everyday routines and practices. In particular, the Coordinator was interested in hearing reactions to the online delivery of the course. Recall that the traditional practice at RUL in terms of training support staff had been to offer primarily classroom training in technical skills, presented in the traditional face-to-face mode.

When questioned, the RUL LAs had predictably wide-ranging comments about their experiences of this totally online program. Some very much enjoyed taking the class entirely online: they could work at their own pace, they engaged with the readings and activities, and found them to be fruitful and supportive of their work. Others would have enjoyed a more "blended" course delivery, to give participants an opportunity to put faces to names, to make connections. Individual learning styles and ways of processing information impacted the individual experiences of the program. Some were comfortable working at the computer; others preferred to download readings and work with the hard copies. Some felt most comfortable working at home rather than in their cubicles, because they were less likely to be distracted or interrupted.

Feelings about tests and about keeping journals colored individual approaches to the program. Participating in a threaded discussion was for some a new experience, and therefore a potentially challenging one. If English was not the first language, or if one felt somewhat uncomfortable about one's writing skills, the program held some unique stresses.

The RUL participants agreed that the program afforded a good overview of libraries and working in libraries. They felt much better acquainted even with other units in their own library whose functions they did not formerly understand. They enjoyed having the opportunity to probe the Libraries' organization: learning about its vision, mission, overall organizational structure. In this exploration, they developed a clearer understanding of how the Libraries function, and how their individual jobs fit into that

functioning. For some, this expanded understanding created opportunities to take a fresh look at their responsibilities, and how best to apply some of what they had learned.

Suggestions for future online courses

The RUL LAs identified some key qualities that future participants in online programs should be required to have. They will need to be

- (1) (1) flexible
- (2) (2) active learners
- (3) (3) self-disciplined to persevere in the program
- (4) (4) comfortable with change.

The LAs suggested the possibility of designing some group work into the program to encourage and facilitate dialogue and “cross-pollination”. They felt that it would have been good to meet face-to-face at the beginning of the program, and to share tips on successfully navigating the program. The RUL Coordinator believes that such a kick-off should include supervisors as well, so that they fully understand what the program involves, and how they can best support the participants that they supervise.

The LAs also suggested creating custom “tracks” for specific positions in the libraries, other than those generally grouped under the “library assistant” or “support staff” label, e.g., administrators; communications officers; development officers; human resources officers. The program’s content could serve to better inform the work of each of these staff members. Perhaps in screening potential participants there might be different paths for high school graduates, and those with some college, bachelor’s or master’s degrees. This last suggestion spoke to some concerns that were raised about individuals’ facility in communicating, along with the course modules’ reading level and vocabulary.

The Rutgers participants had uneven experiences in their relationships with their supervisors. Some supervisors were supportive, and allowed the LAs adequate time and space, and talked with them about what they were learning. Others seemed to not appreciate or understand the impact of this investment of time and energy on their LA’s regular workload. They were not willing or able to facilitate effective transfer of learning. Hence the above suggestion of an opening “kick-off” event that would include supervisors in order to address some of these concerns.

As the participants talked about their experiences in the program, they each found portions that were strong and meaningful, and others that had little value. The tests were experienced as weak, even pointless, since there were no repercussions and no grades. The test questions also often seemed too granular, not necessarily encouraging the learner to grasp the critical parts of the module’s content. On the plus side, when an individual who was motivated found areas that were unclear or that needed expansion/clarification, there were remedies built into the course that they could pursue.

Paradoxically, some of the participants felt that they now knew the Rutgers Libraries’ culture better for having participated in the program, while others felt that cultural issues were missing. For example, there seemed to be little recognition of the diverse population that makes up the Libraries’ workforce.

The threaded discussions seemed to be more appreciated as the participants moved through the program, and they became more comfortable participating in them. The RUL LAs found that the discussions did a good job of amplifying each subject area, prompting a thorough review. They began to recognize that participating in online discussion is a unique communication skill. One needs to learn how best to join in and share, while recognizing that one can also “hide” online.

Because professional development at Rutgers Libraries has for so long been unplanned and unsystematic, the participants in the program have had little experience of acquiring a new skill or idea and then taking it back to their workplace and applying it in the “real world.” While several of the RUL LAs felt that they had gained much in terms of knowledge and understanding, no one could point either to concrete transfer of learning or improved job satisfaction as a result of their new insights.

Impact on RUL planning

Using this online program as part of a new employee orientation could be a valuable addition to a library’s training and development activities. If a library had a well-articulated process to support the learning and development of every member of the library’s staff, this program would be a strong foundation on which to build. From this program, one could move into more specialized educational activities to support both individual and organizational goals. Rutgers University Libraries are currently embarked on drafting a strategic plan for the next five years. An important element of this plan will be ongoing professional development for both faculty librarians, and administrative/professional and support staff. This professional development process is called “Creating Our Future,” to symbolize the collaborative nature of this work.

RUL expects to offer programs using a variety of media to engage participants on multiple levels. The Online Library Assistant Training Program experience has provided us with wide-ranging experiences, and a cadre of staff and supervisors who have experienced first-hand the value of online delivery of learning. RUL looks forward to building on this experience.

DISCUSSION

Evaluation was enriched by collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. Applying the Outcomes Logic Model yielded mixed results. The targets set for desired changes were too high, with one exception. The objective of having 60% of the supervisors willing to recommend the course to others was achieved. The data needed to measure learning was inadequate. In part, this was due to an effort to allay the fear of testing that many of the LAs had, and in part due to the way the “self-check” questions were designed. The course developers wanted the students to use the questions as prompts to think more deeply about each module’s content, rather than as a means of testing comprehension and recall.

Another problem was that participation in threaded discussion and journal keeping was not enforced. An important outcome that was sought was the ability to articulate three differences between the roles and responsibilities of degreed librarians and LAs, yet the question was not posed to the students in a straightforward way that allowed the evaluators to review answers.

There was concern about confidentiality, especially about assuring the LAs that their supervisors were not going to know how they were doing in the course. Judging from comments that LAs made after the course was over, the program directors should have been clearer about expectations and procedures at the outset. LAs would have welcomed more support from their supervisors, and supervisors should have received advice on how to foster transfer of training.

Taking into consideration both the overall evaluation and the informal RUL follow-up, a number of successes and failures can be identified.

On the plus side:

- Of the 22 who completed the course, 19 logged on for every module
- The 20 who returned the end-of-course feedback gave an average rating of 5.8 out of 7.0 to the overall quality of the program, and a 6.2 to its online delivery
- Supervisors reported that the LAs performed their jobs better after the course, and had improved their skills and knowledge; LAs also scored generally higher on the post-course survey, although not as much
- Several LAs voiced their intention of pursuing the MLS degree
- Discussions at the three-months post-course meetings and the reviews of action plans indicated that most of LAs were applying at least some things that they had learned
- Ample, useful feedback was obtained from students, supervisors, course developers, and instructors to inform course revision

On the minus side:

- On average, there was no change in how well LAs thought they did their jobs or how satisfied they were with their work
- Five hours a week was not enough time for most LA's to complete the course
- There was insufficient feedback from instructors, lack of encouragement from supervisors, dislike of the quizzes
- Interaction among students in discussion threads was disappointing
- Some students complained that the course was too basic

CONCLUSIONS

This pilot project was designed to test the feasibility of an online course for training library assistants in academic and research libraries. It fulfilled this purpose quite well, giving the project directors information about what worked and what needed improvement. Overall, the experience confirmed what is known about factors that influence the quality of online learning.⁵

The experience with integrating the Outcomes Logic Model into the project evaluation has been instructive. The most important lesson was that the evaluators must be more closely involved in the course design in order to ensure that the necessary data can be collected.

Once the course is revised and is offered in the marketplace, it will receive its ultimate, "real-world" evaluation--libraries either will, or will not be willing to pay for their LAs to take the course and to give them release time to complete it. Of course, the

hope is that the commitment to staff development will be there, and that in addition to paying the tuition, that library administrators will give more attention to the selection, preparation, and ongoing support of their online LA students.

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