Bibliographic instruction

A corporate trainer's take

by Kenneth D. Fink

W hen I was a corporate trainer for Great Western Bank, there were several key principles in delivering and designing training programs for employees, many of them college students working part-time for the company.

These guiding principles, borrowed from adult learning guru Malcolm Knowles and other training professionals, include several key ideas useful to librarians who conduct computer-based bibliographic instruction (BI).

They embrace the notion that adults learn by doing; that adults learn from each other's experience, as well as from the instructor; that adults want to know upfront why what we teach is worth learning[1]; and, finally, that learning often happens in direct relationship to the amount of intellectual excitement created by the materials—and the instructor.

It takes practice

The principle that adults learn by doing suggests that teaching research skills via the computer requires computer practice to transfer those skills. Indeed, one could see this principle at work in a typical training session for employees. When I demonstrated on the bank's computers a deposit with cash back, for example, new customer service representatives (CSR) could not develop this skill without repeated hands-on computer practice.

It was the trainer's responsibility to describe the transaction, demonstrate the transaction on the computer, and finally give students the opportunity to practice the transaction and receive constructive feedback from the instructor about their performance.

Providing constructive feedback is a subject that deserves a separate article, but briefly, it means describing for students *first* what they did well and *then* what might be improved upon. Also vital to student success was giving them the opportunity for practice as close as possible to the instruction. It did not bode well for the instructor or the students if the opportunity to practice a bank transaction came hours after the initial demonstration.

Time: BI's greatest enemy

So if one is demonstrating how to search the library's OPAC to a large class, provide a quiz, an exercise, or a game they can do in pairs *before* you go to on to a new database demonstration. Do not wait until the end of the BI session to give students an opportunity to practice. I say this because the greatest enemy of bibliographic instruction is time. There is simply not enough of it, and librarians (this one included) are sometimes guilty of rushing on

About the author

Kenneth D. Fink is librarian at Pepperdine University and California State University, Northridge, e-mail: kdfink@pacbell.net

to teach another database before the lessons of the previous ones have been reinforced.

The idea that adults learn from each other as much as from the instructor may seem like unconventional wisdom. Studies have shown that adults bring different levels of experience to the classroom. This is plain to see in the varying degrees of comfort students have in searching the Internet, not to mention the university's subscription databases. When the instructor honors, even solicits students' Internet experience, ideally at the beginning of a BI session, students are more likely to honor the librarian's recommendations. Also, let students know at the beginning of the session that you welcome their participation and that you will be calling on them. Then they know they are accountable and they'll be prepared. Librarians may also want to distinguish between searching the Web and searching the university's subscription databases on the Web, with which students tend to be less familiar.

Give students the big picture. The big picture is the larger context into which a specific BI session fits. It provides a reason for students to invest their time and energy in mastering what we have to teach. This belongs at the beginning of every BI session. What is the "big picture" librarians can share with students?

At the beginning of the BI session ask how many of them have ever felt clueless about where and how to begin an instructor's research assignment. Tell them that the skills and resources you hope to impart over the next two hours will change their entire college experience. Guarantee that by the end of the session they will understand at least two electronic and print resources they can use to begin research on their subject—taking the first steps to mastering the resources that will turn anxiety into confidence.

The training principle that learning happens in direct relationship to the amount of intellectual excitement seems almost an insulting notion. After all, learning should be rewarding in itself and not dependent on the instructor's ability to provide a good time for students. Yet few people would deny that BI includes engaging exercises, some friendly competition, lots of student praise, maybe even a prize or two at the end can

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turn a first-rate instructional session into a memorable one. There are many books devoted to designing relevant exercises, ice-breakers, and games for training sessions. *The Complete Games Trainers Play*, by Edward E. Scannell is an excellent resource librarians can use to energize bibliographic instruction.[2]

Finally, a heretical suggestion: abolish the term "bibliographic instruction" which causes the eyes of students to glaze over. It is a term that is fine as jargon used by and for librarians, but avoid mentioning it in front of those who receive it. At Great Western Bank, training classes for the traditional "bank teller" function were never called "teller training". It was more accurately called "Customer Service Training" for employees called Customer Service Representatives. Was there anything wrong with being called a teller? Not at all, except it was a limiting term in describing a position that included considerable people and problem-solving skills, as well as product sales goals.

"Bibliographic instruction" is a limiting term, as well. It does not adequately describe *for students* the variety of skills required to effectively search and record both print and online sources of information. What should we call bibliographic instruction? The possibilities are endless. A few that spring to mind include, "Research Methods for Student Success," "Internet and Print Resources for Students," "Internet and Library Search Strategies for College Success," "Investigative Skills for College Success." Perhaps at the weekly staff meeting, librarians could brainstorm other creative alternatives.

Lastly, creative bibliographic instruction is just good customer service. CSRs had customers to

• "Cooperation and Coordination of Information and Communication Services at German Universities" described current efforts of Germany universities to cooperate more with one another using technology for research and education.

• "The Six Webs or Why One Web Won't Do" was presented by Sun Microsystems.

• "Top Performance and Partnership," was presented by another vendor, Fujitsu Siemens Co.

• "Portals and E-business in Higher Education," was presented by EDUCAUSE from the United States.

Speakers from various European countries, the United States, and Canada also presented 124 different papers related to the conference themes:[1]

• **Cooperation between European Universities.** In the 21st century, European universities will benefit from cooperating across boundaries and various examples of cooperation were presented.

• **Information Technology and Network Computing Security.** Universities have to face many potential security problems in the use of information technology in teaching and research and the use of networks. Procedures need to be established to deal with security-related incidents, training and education in network computing security is needed, and new trends in information security will affect universities and knowledge management.

• **Changes in University Organization and Structures.** Use of technology is leading to major changes in university administration in most European universities. Technology has a major impact on the structure of management, security, funding, and staffing. Technology is enabling European universities to cooperate more and offer more learning advantages to their students.

• **New Technologies, New Capabilities and New Opportunities.** Supercomputing, cluster computing, computational grids and metacomputing, and virtual reality are examples of capabilities now becoming more and more important for scientific computing at universities.

• **Supporting Change in Teaching and Learning.** New media and international educational developments have helped develop new approaches to teaching in universities. Examples were provided for online learning, Web-based instruction, and distance learning. Discussions centered on effective cooperation across national boundaries using online learning and teaching. Also presented was information on collaborative learning in medicine using the Internet.

• **Libraries in the Digital Age.** Libraries and multimedia and computer centers have overlapping activities. Some convergence, partnerships, and new structures are being considered. A variety of collaborations can result in positive and negative effects. Discussions on the changing role of librarians prevailed throughout the track within the conference. Also covered were the use of the Internet for delivery and management of information, the UNESCO guide to electronic theses and dissertations and a variety of library consortia.

Note

1. Many of the papers have been published as the *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference of European University Information Systems* by Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany. ∎

please; I had the CSRs to please. They were my customers, just as the students are my customers/patrons now. And great customer, great patron service is what being a librarian is all about.

Notes

1. Malcolm Knowles, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species,* 3rd ed. (Houston: Gulf Publishing Company Book Division, 1986).

2. Edward E. Scannell and John W. Newstrom, *The Complete Games Trainers Play: Experiential Learning Exercises* (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1994). ∎

Correction

In the article "Print book bibliographies on the Web," *(C&RL News,* March 2001), the author refers to a *New York Times* article that was not cited. It is Doreen Carvajal's "The Book's in Print but its Bibliography Lives on in Cyberspace," *New York Times,* May 29, 2000, A1.