Enhanced Staff Development Programs: Strengthening the Personal through Collegial Reflection

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Valparaiso University is a private, 4-year liberal arts university located in northwest Indiana, about 45 miles east of Chicago. Our campus is home to about 3600 FTE. Moellering Library is the current main library, and in Fall 2004, we are scheduled to move our new facility, The Christopher Center for Library and Information Resources. Eight librarians have varied primary duties with seven of us participating in instruction and reference services. We average 5-10 students working in reference services and 1-3 students working in instruction.

While our jobs often overlap, this particular collaboration grew from work on a common publishing project that opened our eyes to our similar needs and opportunities: we both had issues with training and supporting our respective staff members. The collegiality we’ve modeled through working with and supporting one another in these endeavors has seemingly pervaded our staff as well, assuring us that in the areas of staff development, we are doing the right things at the right times.

Instruction Services Staff Development Program
Trisha Mileham

Our Environment

Moellering Library has formally supported a library instruction program since the mid 1980s. Currently, there are eight members of the instruction team, seven librarians and our interlibrary loan manager. Of those eight, five of us serve as primary instructors. In the classroom, we are team-based, with four possible roles: lead instructor, co-instructor, facilitator, and assistant/observer. This model allows participation at a level comfortable for those not in the classroom as often as others. We teach course-integrated, assignment-specific sessions, creating
hands-on assignments for class use when appropriate. Our program structure is a subject-liaison based model, arising from our collection development subject areas.

Our library supports two hands-on classrooms, providing 21 workstations for attendee use. We reach between 1500-1800 attendees per academic year through up to 168 sessions. In the new library, three classrooms offer seating for 90, 39, and 24 attendees at individual workstations. Campus enrollment is projected to increase in the upcoming years as well.

While our program has been active for years, very few of us have had any formal education in instruction and there is currently little chance to attend education instruction opportunities outside our immediate area. With a growing program, a small staff, and an increasing enrollment, staff support and burnout prevention have become primary concerns. As Ruth and I began our work last summer, it seemed like the perfect time to also investigate the possibility of creating an instruction staff development program.

**Development of the Program**

Preparation for this program involved the usual suspects: a literature review, gathering of conference ideas, and interaction with colleagues, on- and off-campus. These steps may seem obvious but their worth should not be taken lightly. While no one instruction program situation directly matches another, the variety of resources available allows for appropriate comparison and consideration.

As this experience progressed and four categories began to take shape, I decided they were to act as the cornerstones for the program’s development. While they are listed here in an order, the process is much more circular, with revisions and revelations calling attention to previous steps.

**First Cornerstone: Identify and Meet Immediate Needs**

We needed some immediate help in certain areas but I didn’t want that to drive the program. I found three needs that became primary focuses for this cornerstone. We needed
materials of all types on instruction: the how-to, the why, the practical, the theoretical, the reflective. We needed personal interaction about instruction issues, with one another and with other teachers on campus. And, we needed ongoing, programmatic support, from our University Librarian, our campus Teaching Resource Center, and appropriate campus faculty committees.

**Second Cornerstone: Determine Goals and Objectives**

Why here? Why not first? Based on my experience, I strongly believe that it’s only after the immediate needs are met that things can clear enough to consider the long-term situation. For example, one of my goals is to increase staff confidence in their teaching. To do this, I identified resources and materials to share (ILI-L items, LOEX News, LOEX Currents, LIRT News, IS Newsletter, authors of note, etc.). I also needed to heighten the availability of these items while cognizant of the time needed to thoughtfully consider them (i.e., email small bits of information rather than the entire day’s digest posting of ILI-L). My third step was to identify, and now create, interaction opportunities for my staff with other campus teachers, such as those who have won our VU “Caterpillar Award for Excellence in Teaching.” Had I not taken care of immediate needs first, I doubt that my goals would feel as cohesive and attainable as they do.

**Third Cornerstone: Create a Program Plan**

I learned the need to keep a reasonable implementation schedule for my program, for even though I didn’t want things to drag on and on, I also needed to remember how slowly things can change on an academic campus. From the start last Fall, my staff knew the layout of my program plan, helping them to feel more involved and perhaps increased their buy-in to the program from the start. Resource management is another key area to plan. Some crucial factors to consider here are: what are the selection criteria, how to gather materials, where to collect the materials, and how to provide access to them.

**Fourth Cornerstone: Keep Staff Involved**
Staff involvement is essential; not only is this program for them but it can be BY them as well. During the academic year, we have monthly User Services meetings, addressing current issues in that service area but also liaison-based “show and tell” of new, intriguing, or hard-to-use resources. The instruction staff development program purposely appeared at two of these meetings each semester, each focusing on a theme supported by an article read by everyone. Last year’s themes were: who are we teaching, the paradigm shift from teaching to learning, instructor burnout issues, and “we the teachers.” This summer, we’re keeping the monthly meetings and adding four topic-focused two-hour sessions (from suggestions by the staff): teaching portfolios, learning styles, classroom activities, and a get-outside-your-comfort-zone.

Results

Overall, the instruction staff is pleased with the development program and are anticipating the topic-specific summer sessions. Our disciplinary faculty have remarked positively on the changes in the classroom activities, as we feel more freedom to reflect and consider class content rather than just react to the assignments. The article-reading activity was useful but follow-up was hampered when our discussion timelines changed. This fall, I’ll provide a few reflective questions along with each article and will keep the discussion timelines in place. Ruth and I will bring in the reference quizzes as refresher tools (more about these quizzes in the second half of this article).

Future Considerations

We need to further personalize the program to encourage the instruction staff to identify their individual needs and how they can be met. The library’s intranet site, StaffWeb, will be the online repository for any resources, citations, tips, and guides that we discover or create as well as summer’s topic-focused sessions’ content. Our University Librarian is working with me in consideration of a full-blown retreat and/or workshop for our staff and possibly other area
instruction librarians. On a smaller scale, we plan to model this program for all of our public services support staff, especially those who are on the spot when we are in the classroom.

Reference Services Student Assistant Development Program
Ruth Connell

Background

When I began my position as Reference Services Librarian at Valparaiso University’s Moellering Library in fall of 2000, the reference student-training program was almost non-existent. I arrived on campus one week before classes began, and was still learning the ropes when the students arrived a few days later. The way the department was set up, students were actually answering questions at the reference desk, and so developing a strong training program was of paramount importance. That first semester, there were 8 students working in reference. Except for late evenings and Saturday shifts, they worked under the supervision of a librarian, who could step in if a question was beyond their abilities. However, sixteen hours a week student assistants answered actual reference questions on their own; not just ready-reference questions. They needed a strong knowledge of reference sources and research techniques. They had to be confident in this knowledge so that they could teach patrons how to research, use databases, and find materials. Therefore, the training program had to be comprehensive, and provide students the knowledge they needed to perform their jobs well.

Our Needs

Unfortunately, that first year, there was almost no training program for reference student assistants. At that time, the greatest needs for the reference department were documenting and developing reference procedures and policies; and secondly creating a training program to impart this information to student employees. The first year, I talked with returning students about how things had operated in reference before my arrival, and using this information, documented
procedures that had been practiced but not written down. In addition, policies were written, as well as directions for frequently performed procedures (processing new reference books, using the scanner, etc.) The second year, the training program consisted of sharing these policies, procedures and tasks with students; followed by a several hour research training session. Upon completing this multi-day training, students were given a post-training quiz to test their retention of information. This was the extent of formal training that second year. When changes to policies and databases occurred, as well as when timely issues arose, student assistants were emailed to keep them up to date. In early January 2002, an email went out to the students to remind them that tax season was fast approaching and let them know where to locate tax forms. A couple weeks later, one of my assistants came to me, said a patron wanted tax forms, and asked whether we had them. After helping the patron, I asked her if she had read the email. Appearing confused, she said she did not remember what it had said. It was clear that an ongoing training program with checks and balances was needed.

Development of Reference Intranet

As part of the training program, it was important to place the documented procedures and policies online. Many students took the paper copies they received during their initial training home, and did not have access to this information when they needed it. Thus, a reference intranet site was created. Directions for processing new books, instructions on how to process pamphlet file materials, tasks for students to perform when they come on duty, printing and guest login policies, student assistant schedule and subbing information, and shelf-reading instructions were all included on the intranet site.

Development of Quizzes

Once the intranet site was developed, the next step was to develop the training quizzes. The quizzes would test the students’ knowledge of material they should know, as well as expose them to
new information. In other words, they would encounter questions and sources they had no background or experience with, and the quizzes would cause them to explore new information; thus serving as a teaching tool. In developing the quizzes, many sources were culled for question ideas. A review of the literature proved very useful. For example, an article by Chris Neuhaus entitled “Flexibility and feedback: a new approach to ongoing training for reference student assistants” provided many examples of quiz questions and themes. In the late 1990s, the University of Northern Iowa began a training program that included biweekly worksheets for reference student assistants. Their program was larger than ours was, but many ideas from the article could be adapted and used immediately in our program. For example, students who missed questions received one-on-one assistance from more advanced students or reference librarians.¹ This feedback provided the personal attention to help make their program a success; therefore, this aspect was incorporated into our reference-training program.

Another great source of question ideas was course material from Terry Weech’s reference class at the University of Illinois. He gave challenging reference assignments that I wanted to emulate with my reference quizzes. I did not use his questions as they were, but rather used the concepts behind his questions. For example, Professor Weech had a question where he gave the last line of a poem, with one word altered, and asked students to find the author and the title of the poem. The first time I gave my students a last line question, I did not alter a word in the last line, and many of them just did a web search for the answer. The second time I gave them such a question, I altered a word which prevented doing a web search for the answer, and the students were tested on their knowledge of the reference source in question, Kline’s Last Lines.

Other ideas for questions came from timely issues (e.g. the location of tax forms) and questions asked at the reference desk. If a patron asked an interesting reference question that would challenge the reference students, I noted the question and used it later.
Originally, the intention was to give quizzes every other week. However, due to time constraints, only nine quizzes were given during the 2002-2003 academic year, i.e. once a month. It took about half a day to develop a quiz, and then after each student completed a quiz I would go over the answers with him or her individually. This time of mentoring after the quizzes created quite a few teachable moments. We talked about things they had done well; other sources they could have used to better answer questions; and when they were completely wrong, covered sources or methods they should have used.

Surprisingly, most of the student assistants really enjoyed the challenge of the quizzes. In fact, at the end of the first semester of the quiz program, a student approached me and asked if the students could make up their own questions and have a “student challenge” quiz. Although taking the quiz was not optional, submitting questions for the quiz was, and six out of seven students chose to participate. Most students really enjoyed this exercise, and worked hard to come up with questions that would challenge their fellow assistants.

**Training Program: Student Opinion**

At the end of the fall 2002 semester, the students were surveyed to find out how they felt about the training program. Six out of seven students agreed or strongly agreed that the quizzes had improved their researching skills. All students felt their skills had improved as a result of their initial training. In addition, six out of seven students felt their skills had improved from the time of their initial training to the time they took the survey. Many students had comments: good, bad and bizarre. One student said, “I can’t even begin to fully explain how much more use I have received from the library after my training. I find researching to be much easier and I am always eager to help friends out as well. My training has made being a History major less daunting as far as the amount of research required.” At the other end of the spectrum, one student responded, “not really”, to a question about whether his training has impacted his library use as a student. Another
question on the survey asked students to reflect on areas that were not adequately covered during training. One student’s bizarre and humorous response was, “tax law, I really don’t recall covering this subject at all.”

**Training Program: Student Performance**

After the quiz program began, there was a noticeable difference in students’ performance on the reference desk. For example, for the past few years a professor from the College of Business has given his students an assignment where they were required to research a brand name and its company. After the reference student assistants took the business quiz, they felt much more comfortable helping these business students. They referred fewer questions, and said they felt more comfortable with business sources (Standard and Poors, Hoovers, Directory of Corporate Affiliations, etc.)

**Training Program: Student Retention**

In order to get more quantifiable results; students were given a cumulative end-of-the-year quiz. The quiz was designed using questions that most students had missed the first time around. At the time the cumulative quiz was given, only five students were working in reference. One had been hired mid-year, and had only taken three of the nine quizzes given during the 2002-2003 academic year. The new student had worked in the library for several years, but was new to reference, although she proved to be a quick learner. Despite this, she scored several points lower (5 correct out of 11 questions) than any of the students that had taken all nine quizzes. Most of the questions she missed were harvested from quizzes she had not taken. Everyone else did fairly well, most getting 8 or 9 correct questions out of 11. The cumulative quiz demonstrated that students did learn from the quizzes, and managed to retain most of the information they learned.

**Future Considerations**
For the future, several goals have been set for the reference-training program. The first will be to implement some student suggestions. One student suggested that new hires shadow more experienced students their first few shifts. This suggestion will be implemented this fall. Secondly, more feedback from the other librarians would be helpful, especially from those who work in the reference department. This could provide ideas for topics to cover and questions to include. Finally, several user-services departments (circulation, reference and interlibrary loan) would like to cross-train our students. This would enable us to maximize student power, by shifting students around to where they could be most useful.

Our Collaboration

The collegiality formed by recognizing common goals of similar projects has been but one of the rewards of our project. Keeping our staffs involved added to their respective buy-ins of the programs, heightening each person’s engagement without threatening anyone working at a different level. The student assistants enjoy the sense of ownership and legacy they are instilling in their work. We feel our Reference Desk staffing quality is higher than ever and more evenly distributed. This success feeds itself, for as the classroom instruction improves, it supports improved reference work and student contact, which leads to more comfort in the classroom, and so on. This model also instills continuous reflection, renewal, and professional support, even with limited staff and no funding, in areas of library work that are often known for burnout and high stress.

For more information, a complete bibliography, and audience comments, please visit our website at http://www.valpo.edu/library/pd/loex03.

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