Carol Doyle

Rethinking preprofessional training to improve work quality

Engaging library interns

Managing preprofessional interns is a rewarding task, as I get to see first hand the impact that quality training and mentoring have on these student workers. Curious and eager to make a contribution, these students make me aware of what is currently being taught in their MLS programs and allow me to offer ideas for improving their work. However, I often wondered if we were providing the right training and mentoring frameworks for achieving engaged workers. By integrating teaching and learning into the job, and focusing on intern roles as a part of the larger library work environment, I find that the quality of their work improves and they express higher satisfaction with the internship experience. Interns are also better able to understand "quality work" because it is defined as a result of seeing others perform and because of the support that is given.

The internship program at Schaffner Library was designed 21 years ago for MLS candidates to assist librarians with reference service and technical support and this continues to be the focus today. A branch of Northwestern University's main library, Schaffner Library is located on the Chicago campus and serves nontraditional students who earn degrees in the evening from the School of Continuing Studies and the Kellogg Graduate School of Management. Currently, our library employs four interns in the year-long program who are working towards MLS degrees at area schools. New interns receive two weeks of intensive review of information sources, both print and electronic, and job shadow reference librarians. Informal training

and support are ongoing. Since we're a small library, interns also perform some circulation duties and assist with special projects that have included collection development and Web site maintenance.

Traditionally interns were given lots of information of how they should perform their tasks. We would describe information sources in detail and give examples of how to negotiate patron questions. Despite this, the quality of their work was mixed, and I felt it was more the result of our training and mentoring initiatives than aptitude. I also had a nagging feeling that while we were giving the interns lots of information on how to do tasks, I was not getting real feedback about their perceptions of the job and the work environment, despite the fact that I always encouraged them to ask questions and to seek help whenever they needed it.

Around the time I began thinking about making the internship program more robust, I took a look at Peter Drucker's *Management Challenges for the 21st Century* to see if I could gain more insight into managing people. I chose this preeminent management philosopher because I was familiar with his writings as a result of many years spent working in business, so I knew the impact his writings had on management practices. Having coined the terms "knowledge worker" and "management by objectives," Drucker is

Carol Doyle is reference and instruction librarian at Northwestern University, e-mail: c-doyle4@northwestern.edu

well known for arguing that management is the tool that makes all institutions, whether they are corporate or nonprofit, able to produce results, not technology, information or productivity. Drucker believes that it is key to ask What is the task? rather than Here is how to do the task.

For instance, in the case of the manual worker, What is the task? is always obvious: the factory worker who works on an assembly line knows precisely what the task is and needs to be trained on how to do the task. In the case of the knowledge worker, Drucker believes these questions need to be asked in order to be productive: What is your task? What should it be? What should you be expected to contribute? What hampers you in doing your task and should be eliminated? He goes on to say that knowledge workers must be responsible for their productivity, and there must be a culture of continuous learning and teaching. Quality, for knowledge work, is not set at a minimum standard as it is in manual work, rather it is the essence of output. In other words, quality is defined for the worker when they know what task they are to perform, there is continuous learning and teaching, and they understand how their job fits into the larger work system.

In reading this I immediately realized that our training was adhering more to Here is how you do the task rather than What is the task? Thinking about work in these terms, I realized that training should focus more on the goal of reference service, which is to create self-reliant library users. While I discussed this concept during training, it wasn't always embedded in our examples. I revamped the training so there is less emphasis on learning lists of information sources and instead focused on actual user questions, the sources used, and, most importantly, the steps we took in helping the library user understand how to access information on his or her own. In doing all of this, I came to see Drucker's point: by focusing on the overreaching mission of reference service, interns not only see the task, but come to understand that it is a shared goal in the work we perform.

While we offered ongoing training and mentoring it was more haphazard certainly not true continuous teaching and learning built into the job. I tackled this in a couple of different ways. We now have a blog that is designed for all of us to share our reference experiences librarians and interns alike. I also spend time every week with each intern to find out how everything is going and to hear about any ideas and thoughts they might have regarding their jobs or the library. I make sure that whenever possible interns shadow me on reference interviews. I try to involve them in the entire process, from refining the question, to locating materials, and communicating with the user.

I believe that the blog postings, and my more frequent interaction with them achieves a couple of different things. First, they see what I do on a regular basis, which means the opportunity to watch me get stymied with tough questions. Interestingly, a few of them have seemed surprised to learn that I don't know where all the information is, and this presents an opportunity to talk about how it is more important to know how to effectively find information even if it means pulling in a subject specialist. They see that it can be difficult to understand library user questions, so it is alright to keep probing until the question context is understood. With constant exposure to the realities of reference service in an academic research library, I believe these student workers see the level of quality we expect from ourselves and, by extension, from them.

Another point I added to the training was an overview of everyone's role at the library. This came about as a result of exit interviews I conduct with interns, and it happens to fit in with Drucker's idea that workers need to see their roles as a part of the larger work system. During these interviews, some interns told me that they were confused about the roles of the support staff and felt that some were encroaching on their turf. They wanted roles to be clarified.

Now I spell out roles and responsibilities during training so that interns understand both the boundaries and the interconnectedness of all our work. I also use the exit interview as a way to learn about what the task should be and what, if anything, hampered them from performing their work.

So what is different now that these changes have been implemented? For one thing, I notice that the interns are much more forthcoming if they are facing challenges on the job, more likely to share information and offer ideas for improvement. And, I feel the quality of their work, overall, has improved. Why is this? I believe it is because, nally,

quality has been de ned for them through the concepts Drucker states: they know their roles in the system, understand what work is to be performed, are held accountable, experience constant teaching and learning, and are encouraged to offer ideas for improving their work.

Making sure that these initiatives stay in place and thrive takes time and patience. It requires more time on my part, as I need to be mindful to spend more time with them on an individual basis, but I believe the end result is worth it because they are more engaged and express higher satisfaction with the internship experience. *⁊⁊*