Learning Electronic Reference Resources: A Team-Learning Project for Reference Staff

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This article describes how a large academic library addressed the problem of supporting the extensive learning of electronic information resources required by reference and library instruction staff. Library staff participants were organized into teams called Electronic Reference Resource Groups (ERRGs). Individuals within each team shared responsibility for the topics to be covered and for ensuring that everyone participated in both the teaching and learning processes. The ultimate measure of success was whether individuals, who took part voluntarily, found the teams sufficiently beneficial to warrant further participation in the team-learning process. A further stage, an ERRG Learn-in, was later implemented to extend learning opportunities to all library staff.

Reference and instruction librarians face a rapidly changing world of electronic information resources, change that has been ongoing for many years. Not only do new resources become available at a breathtaking pace, but it is not unusual for resources, which were previously available, to disappear and then sometimes reappear a few days later. In addition, the content changes not only by the availability of new databases, but also within existing databases that may swallow up new subject areas or types of documents. In addition to this content change, the search engines change relentlessly. Databases are often available in different versions through various systems. Versions may vary in terms of both coverage and up-to-dateness, as well as in their search protocols and commands. Just as mastery of a new tool or set of databases or search techniques for a particular database or system is acquired, many more tools and search techniques become available. Remaining au courant with what is available and sustaining learning without feeling totally overwhelmed is the challenge that many librarians face today. To maintain professional expertise, there is a continual need to keep building depth and breadth of knowledge, and to avoid the pitfall of using a limited and superficial knowledge of the resources.

Reference and instruction library staff need to be knowledgeable about the Internet with its huge range of resources, which are variable in the quality and quantity of content. In addition, they need to keep current with research strategy possibilities, both the search engines and the subject catalogs. Reference staff need

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to keep building knowledge of an extensive range of databases to enable intelligent and informed selection of the most appropriate for a particular requirement. Librarians, who previously needed to be generalists, now have to broaden their subject knowledge yet further, as access to electronic information breaks down the physical barriers that kept resources confined to specific libraries. For example, medical information once confined to science and/or medicine libraries is now available in humanities and social sciences libraries as well. At the same time, the need to retain specialist knowledge within the previously defined broad categories remains. In addition to breadth, there is still a need for in-depth knowledge of the complexity and richness of individual databases, in terms of both subject coverage and searchable fields. Reference librarians also need an in-depth knowledge of a range of central search engines for highly used databases or circumstances where there is a multiplicity of databases.

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The University of Toronto Library, with its five central libraries and many campus and college libraries, offers a range of electronic information resources. As of March 1999, these resources include 386 indexes and abstracts, 150 reference sources, 198 newspapers and news services, and 10,983 electronic journals offered by a range of publishers or vendors, each with its own search interface and capabilities. [1]

The Literature

From a staff development perspective, the question was how best to support and encourage a continuous learning process to sustain the knowledge required to provide effective library service.[2] This is because "the quality of information service is based in large part on the competence of personnel" and, more fundamentally, on their knowledge base. [3–4] In addition, it was important to convey the message to reference staff that being knowledgeable is crucial. What was needed was a design that would allow maintenance of the high level of energy needed to continually build that knowledge. It is clear that staff development and training has as its objective the provision of skills and knowledge, but there is "another vital objective: that of raising staff morale and motivation, something which underpins the whole service."[5]

The literature of adult education provides the underlying concepts used in this staff development project to support the learning required of expert and knowledgeable reference librarians. As Carol A. Hert states: "There is no better way to convey the sense that staff are respected … than to create a training development process founded on [the] principles of adult learning theory."[6]

Central to the philosophy of adult education is the creation of an appropriate learning environment or climate in which each individual's knowledge and experience are recognized and built on, people are mutually respected and valued, participative decision making is used, and participation is voluntary.[7–8] As spelled out in *The Study Circle*, this model is one in which everyone plays an active part and feels that "he or she is the equal of … the other members of the [group]"—learning together, sharing, helping each other, collaborating rather than competing, a learning environment in which everyone participates and the opportunity to talk is evenly distributed.[9] Learning happens in a relaxed social climate, with a feeling of togetherness.[10]

"People learn best when they are actively involved in the learning process."[11] The outcome of active participation is "to foster the empowerment of individuals,"[12] so that the learners "remain enthusiastic and interested in the learning process after the program is over." [13] This is a model in which individuals take responsibility for their own learning of electronic

reference resources because when they do this, "then they learn more, retain what they learn longer, and learn more efficiently."[14] Out of this grows self-directed, highly motivated action.

The Process

Although a great deal of learning takes place in the process of providing reference service, there is seldom sufficient time for librarians at busy desks in large academic libraries to explore the multiplicity of electronic information resources becoming available. Both in terms of motivation and because there are so many calls on a reference librarian's time, it is often difficult to set time aside to research the resources that are used on a regular basis, unless specifically searching out the answer to a particular question or preparing a subject-specific library instruction session. Often the best learning is goal directed and happens when a particular subject has to be explored to depth and/or breadth to answer a particular need. Knowing the need to keep building electronic reference resources knowledge to provide expert reference service, what is required is the motivation to dedicate time to this.

From this experience, a background in adult education, and also as a member of an active Staff Development (Working) Committee, an idea was born. The next steps were, first, to find out whether other reference librarians had similar needs and experiences, because "to be effective, developmental programs must be consistent with … needs and interests,"[15] and, second, to explore ways of implementing the idea. One way to do this was to meet with colleagues on a regular basis to form a team committed to teaching and learning together. This was certainly not a new idea: At some time or another, everyone involved had experienced teaching their colleagues about a topic, such as a new CD-ROM. What was different was trying to create a team that would sustain this kind of shared learning/teaching on an ongoing basis.

The idea was discussed and explored with a number of individuals, reference librarians and others, and then taken to the Reference Services Committee, where it received strong support and an offer of help for implementation. From there, it was taken to the Staff Development Committee, under whose auspices the learning project would be launched, and then to the Senior Staff Group. These discussions were helpful in determining whether there was support for the concept, in finding out whether there was interest in participating in the learning groups, and in garnering further support and gathering ideas for implementation.

Throughout the process, the Staff Development Committee provided invaluable support. This support included providing brainstorming opportunities, helping determine participation in the groups (whether to confine this opportunity to reference and instruction staff only), giving feedback on information to be put out in the Staff Update and to the all-staff mailing list, and on questionnaires sent out to participants. One concern was to find a way to share information across groups and with those who would be unable to participate in the groups. However, this was dealt with after the groups were functional. Two members of the Staff Development Committee, the chair and the designate for Human Resources Manager, were particularly helpful in being available for consultation and providing feedback and advice throughout the process.

In April 1997, an invitation was extended to all central and campus library staff members who "provide reference service, and instruction" as well as "others," in consultation with supervisors. The problem of finding time to learn about the many new electronic reference resources that are available and the concept of making a commitment to share responsibility for both learning and teaching were described. Some example topics were given: using Alta Vista effectively, exploring useful capabilities of electronic *Ulrichs* (serials directory), organizing

bookmarks, and identifying and exploring favorite Web sites. It was made clear that after they were established, groups would create their own agendas. A questionnaire was appended that would identify interested individuals and elicit the information that would allow the creation of small learning groups, based on area of general subject interest (humanities and/or social sciences, sciences or mixed), availability, and preferred location.

Based on information elicited by the questionnaires, fifty-one participants were organized into six Electronic Reference Resource Groups (ERRGs)—two humanities and social sciences groups, three mixed groups, and one science group. Almost all the participants were reference librarians, many with library instruction responsibility, but there also were some library technicians and reference student assistants. Participation reflected the reality of reference and instruction service providers at the university. The numbers of participants varied a little as individuals joined or withdrew from the groups. Every effort was made to match timetable constraints and participant requests and at the same time ensure the best speed times for use of electronic resources (early morning or late afternoon).

During May and June, introductory meetings were set up for each of the groups facilitated by a small team of two Staff Development Committee members and one reference librarian. Participants were asked to bring a list of two to three electronic resources they would most like to learn about and diaries for setting dates of future meetings. The meeting agenda included introducing the concept, eliciting expectations, determining guidelines as to how the groups would function, setting topics and dates, and selecting a coordinator. Due to time constraints, it was decided that guidelines would be presented for discussion, rather than elicited from the group.

Introducing the concept included making a general statement explaining how the groups had been formed, describing the enthusiastic response to this initiative, and pointing out how participants could benefit from sharing the skills and knowledge brought by individuals from a range of areas. Moreover, it was acknowledged that participating in the groups was a clear indicator of commitment to ongoing learning.

In the expectations section, participants were asked to introduce themselves and to describe why they were there, what they hoped to accomplish, what they expected of others, and what they were willing to do to ensure that the learning would be effective. In light of these expectations, participants were asked to look at a list of suggested guidelines and to make changes accordingly. The guidelines, which were accepted with a few adjustments, included:

- All participants should engage in both the teaching and learning processes.
- Consensus is desired on what and how the group's learning will be focused.
- Each topic presentation should include three elements:

—an explanation of tool and content;

—a hands-on practice period;

—a "cheat-sheet" handout for individual practice and information.

- Personal learning issues that may arise during the group sessions should remain confidential.
- Respect for all levels of learning and expertise should be maintained.
- A positive outlook when encountering learning challenges should be encouraged.

Other guidelines addressed more practical issues of determining and changing dates, times, and topics of meetings and of notifying the coordinator about attendance.

The next section focused on identifying topics or resources to be learned, determining priorities, and identifying presenters and dates. A range of topics of interest was put forward by participants and then grouped by commonality. Participants then identified those topics they felt willing to present, and dates were assigned for presentations. The list of top-

ics and presenters was distributed, together with a list of the names and e-mails of the participants of the group. In addition, electronic labs were booked. Topics included search engines, Internet subject guides or directories, licensed databases such as Current Contents, ERL databases, CBCA (a Canadian database), and full-text electronic journals, as well as a range of subjects on the Internet such as patents, electronic texts, political science, and environmental sites. Each participant was given a handout, used in Internet library instruction sessions, that identifies major subject directories, search engine information, and sites providing help on Internet search tools and techniques.

Moreover, participants were encouraged to identify topics requiring guest expert presentation or presentations that would take longer than the one to two hours available for the ERRGS. These were taken back to the Staff Development Committee for consideration.

For each group, a participant volunteered to take on the coordinator role. The coordinator was described as the person who would ensure that there were always presenters and topics ready for the next meeting and who would set up dates for future meetings and reserve electronic labs. In addition, he or she would send out reminder notices one week prior to each session with date, place, topics, and names of presenters. The coordinator also would communicate with designated members of the Staff Development Committee should any difficulties arise or if help were needed. Each coordinator was given a handout listing the responsibilities of the position. In turn, group members were asked to notify coordinators if they were unable to attend a session.

Although not everyone attended the initial group meetings (thirty-five participants came), several sent messages of apology. The words of appreciation, interest, and enthusiasm of several of the participants were encouraging. Those who attended the initial group meetings agreed to share information across groups and with those unable to participate on a regular basis.

The groups had all agreed to meet for two hours each month. In most cases, initial ERRG meetings were held in July and monthly meetings potentially took place until November when formal assessment began. In the interim, some Staff Development Committee members kept in touch with ERRG participants to find out how things were progressing. It became clear that some of the groups were working very well, but others were running into scheduling and other difficulties. In October, coordinators were phoned and asked how things were going with their ERRGs—whether the ERRGs were still functioning, whether they were working well, what could be done to improve them, what topics had been discussed. Coordinators were told that a questionnaire was in preparation to send out to all individuals. This initial assessment helped determine the content of the questionnaire.

Measuring Success and Assessing What Needed to Be Changed

Three months after the ERRGs started functioning, it was time to assess how they were doing: Were people continuing to attend meetings, did they want to continue coming, and what was working for them? In addition, it would be helpful to understand why things were working they way they were. Would this be found to be in accordance with principles of adult education? It was critical at this stage to assess what was not working well, what needed improvement, and how to implement change.

A questionnaire was distributed to all ERRG participants asking them to indicate:

- how well their ERRG was functioning;
- how often their ERRG had met to date;
- how many ERRG meetings they had attended (most, half, few, none, etc.);
- whether they had yet made a presentation to the group, their topic, how long it took them to prepare, and whether

they had learned more from preparing their own topic, from other peoples' presentations, or the combination;

- whether they were learning enough to want to continue attending;
- what would make their ERRG work better;
- what their preferences would be in a reorganization of ERRGs, including whether they would like to withdraw;
- whether they would be interested in attending presentations from other ERRGs (a list of topics presented in the various groups was appended);
- what recommendations for presentations they had from their own ERRG that others might like to attend;
- what suggestions they had for topics by outside presenters;
- what other comments or suggestions they had.

Results

Forty-four (of fifty-one) questionnaires were returned. Over a period of three months, twenty-four presentations had been made in the six groups. It became evident that four of the six groups were doing well and that two of the groups never really got off the ground. This general assessment is based on mean ratings provided by participants on a scale of 1 (poorly) to 5 (very well), questionnaire return rate, and number of presentations given, as well as general comments made by participants. In one of the groups, poor attendance was a problem from the outset. Some individuals never attended any of the ERRG sessions at all. Table 1 shows results from the six groups.

Group functionality could not be assessed by whether participants wanted to continue because even in the groups that were not doing well, several participants chose to continue in reorganized groups, as described below:

- "I have tried to give the same presentation twice—to an audience of one on each occasion. But I am still very interested."
- "I became discouraged by our ERRG because the two people who knocked themselves out to make excellent presentations got almost no audience. I knew I couldn't make that kind of effort, and it would have been an inappropriate use of library staff time, in any case, to make such an effort for so little effect. However, I would like to try again, preferably as a member of [a different] group."

Emerging Themes

Comments from the questionnaires provided very useful information and elicited indicators of success, reasons for success or failure, and suggested changes.

Indicators of Success

1. ERRGs Are a Good Idea

Comments made by participants indicate that they found this a useful and productive way to learn. Several expressed appreciation for organizing the groups.

- "I ... think that this concept of having small groups is an excellent one."

TABLE 1
Assessments of Six Groups

Group #	1	2	3	4	5	6
No. of group members	9	8	7	8	8	9
Questionnaire returns (%)	88.9	87.5	71.4	75	50	44.4
No. of presentations given	7	4	4	4	2	2
Mean ratings (scale 1–5)	4.6	3.8	3.3	3.2	1.9	n/a*

*In group 6, only one person provided a rating (of 5), which she described as being based on her assessment of benefits accrued by a librarian who had attended a different ERRG, rather than on her own experience. She herself never attended any of the sessions.

- "My experience has been very positive. It seems to me to be a sensible approach to librarians' needs to familiarize themselves with resources now increasingly available electronically."
- "I believe this type of group is essential these days."
- "I think the ERRG is a good idea that works well."
- "Overall, very helpful."
- "It guarantees that I set aside at least two hours every month to explore the Internet."
- "Congratulations on managing this very important initiative. It's wonderful to have a resource available, even though we all feel swamped. If the topics are pertinent, it is a great help."
- "Thanks, Jenny, for organizing these groups. I greatly appreciate it."
- "Thanks for doing this."
- "Please keep up the good work. This [the ERRGs] is a great idea, and I hope it continues."
- "The first thing I wish to say is a big thank-you for allowing me to participate in this very interesting group."

2. Learning Is Accomplished

Participants commented that they not only learned during the ERRG sessions, but also that they often were able to apply that learning almost immediately. An increased confidence level was implied by some of the comments but was referred to concretely in one instance only.

- "The proof that the ERRG is working well for me is that I learned about UTL [University of Toronto Library] databases on the Web that I didn't know existed. I actually spoke at a brief training session of … librarians about this particular database. So it has improved my own knowledge and productivity."
- In reply to the question "Are you learning enough in your ERRG to want to continue attending," the response was "Absolutely."
- "I learn many shortcuts, cool sites, and new approaches to using the Internet *as an academic tool*."
- "I certainly learned a lot from both the group members and the presentations. I can also apply what I learned from the meetings to my reference work."
- "I am giving my presentation again to the Electronic Resource Interest Group of the Health Science Information Consortium of Toronto, and it is fully booked, and even overbooked, with people sharing computers in the lab, so I suppose this topic seems to be of interest to many."
- "I am learning quite a bit from the presentations of others."
- "As supervisor of a librarian who attended, I noted that interest and confidence was enhanced after interaction in such a group, which corresponds with her own assessment."

3. Quality of Presentations

Several individuals commented on the quality of the presentations, mainly positive but also one (verbal) negative comment about one of the presentations.

- "We had some excellent presentations."
- "The session itself was useful and interesting."
- "Presentations have been good, well prepared."

4. Preparation Time

A powerful need and commitment to learning was made evident by the fact that participants were willing to spend considerable time preparing topics they felt they needed to learn in order to do a better reference job and would be of benefit to other members in their group. Four of the participants made presentations they had prepared or taught previously, and commented that they therefore required less preparation time. Of the remaining presenters, more than 40 percent spent more than twenty hours in preparation time and 47 percent spent eleven to twenty hours in preparation. Not unexpectedly, more than half the participants commented that they learned most from their own preparations, although they also learned from others.

However, concern was expressed that they would not be able to spend this amount of preparation time too often.

- "I would like to continue attending. One concern is the time needed to prepare for a presentation, especially during the winter busy time."
- "I found that my own presentation took a long time to prepare; I was very fortunate to be able to do it during the summer."

Reasons for Success and Failure

1. Poor Attendance

In some of the groups, attendance was poor from the very outset. After this had happened, it was difficult for the groups to survive, although one group did manage to reverse this trend.

- "The group became very small for the last two meetings [which] caused the discussion to be not as active as the previous sessions."
- "Every session seems to have less and less people. Other commitments have made it difficult for people to participate."
- "Better attendance would help."
- "[The ERRG is not working particularly well] because our group is quite small and we have poor attendance."
- "X's presentation was very good, but our group has dried up. Other members did not attend even those two sessions for the most part. Participation would make our ERRG work better."
- "Yes, the group is working well. We did have scheduling problems over the summer, but we now seem to be back on track. Attendance is improving, and people seem to feel the group is valuable and worthwhile."

2. Finding Time for Participation

Several of the participants commented on how difficult it is to get away from day-to-day activities to give time to learning, even when it is perceived as important. A few participants were especially concerned about the time required for preparing sessions. Scheduling problems also created difficulties.

- "I would love to keep up with what you are doing, but it would be extremely difficult to know when, if at all, I'll be able to attend and/or to contribute."
- "My ERRG would work better if there were an adjustment of the normal workload."
- "I think the idea of ERRGs is great. I only wish I was able to attend more."
- "It is hard to find the time to participate, especially when there are numerous demands on time, but I think it is worth the effort."
- "Sessions would work better if we all had the time to attend."
- "I really wish to continue participating in ERRGs, but I think it would be irresponsible of me to try to do so since I have yet to lead a session myself and cannot foresee doing so in the near future. While I have definitely benefited from others' work, I cannot in good conscience continue as a "lurker."
- "Unfortunately, the timing of meetings has made it impossible for me to attend more than one meeting."
- "Scheduling is a problem."
- "Even though the coordinator tries to arrange mutually convenient times, I have not yet been able to attend a single session."
- "It is promising, but there are some problems with scheduling and coordination."

3. A Successful First Session Was Often Critical

It would appear that the first session was often critical in determining ongoing attendance. If it was not immediately successful or valuable, participants tended to give up at that point.

- "At the first meeting, I felt that I wasn't in the kind of group that I wanted to be in."
- In answer to the question whether the ERRG is working well: "Not really. I have only been to one session, which was very small."
- "I only attended one meeting. I would like to know more about many of the topics that have been presented at other

ERRGs; the list below sounds quite interesting to me."

4. Common Needs

Success or failure of an ERRG often depended on whether participants shared a commonality of purpose and need, and had a similar knowledge base and reference experience.

- "[The ERRG works well because] we all seem to have the same needs and problems."
- "I think it has been quite educational, especially because we're all close in searching knowledge."
- "A community of similar interests is the key to the continuing of these groups."
- "At the first meeting, I felt that I wasn't in the kind of group I wanted to be in. My hope is to learn more of the technical issues behind the Web and on the Web that are relevant to my work; about CGI, Java, upcoming hot trends. I would like to be in a group where people are interested in the same things."
- "Our group has not been as successful as it might have been because we dealt solely with Internet sites, which most of us use so rarely in reference work. Topics pertinent to our reference desk might be better."
- "I find that I am not really terribly interested in knowing the infinite details pertaining to particular www sites but am much more interested in search techniques and tools. I would find the hows and whys of search techniques more practical than extensive viewing of a handful of sites I may not ever need to visit again."
- "The mix of librarians and nonlibrarians was not good and may also have been a divisive factor. Perhaps reference librarians need to be together because the demands on them are unique."

5. Groups and Learning Environments

Participants referred to those aspects of learning environments that enhance learning, including taking responsibility for learning. The questionnaire did not ask why the ERRGs had succeeded or failed, which may have elicited more information about learning climates.

- "I find it to be a relaxed and stimulating learning environment with all participants eager to share their knowledge and experience."
- "For me, our group has worked fairly well. It's small and congenial and presentations have been interesting."
- "[The] ERRG is not really working very well. I went to one session … which itself was useful and interesting, but I don't even know who is in my group or their interests. I feel no connection."
- "[The] ERRG is not working very well … perhaps we haven't bonded."
- "The group did not seem to hang together. Many seemed unwilling to take on presentations on a regular basis."
- "I really don't think we need any presenters from outside UTL. I think part of the idea of these groups is to help us to help ourselves and learn from one another."
- "[The ERRG is a] model [in which there is] mutual responsibility for contents."
- "I know this is about sharing, and I would like to attend and add to the discussion."

6. Leadership

The role of coordinator was important in ensuring that meetings were ongoing.

- "[The coordinator did not seem to be] willing to force the meetings to happen."
- "[The ERRG would work better if we had] leadership from the chair and commitment from the members."
- ERRG working well? "Not at all. We had two [presentations] …and that was that."
- "I am still waiting to hear from my group as to our next meeting."
- "[The group is not working] at all [well]. We had two meetings and that was that."

Suggested Changes

1. Allow More Time for Informal Discussion

One repeated suggestion for change, in those groups where this had not happened in the natural course of things, was for informal discussion as well as formal presentation.

- "Use ERRG time to discuss frequent problems/questions that we encounter."
- "I learn a lot from the informal exchange that takes place in class before, during, and after the sessions."
- "Although major presentations have been very good, I think the ERRG would work better if we spent less time on major presentations, [and] more time on just sharing knowledge you have acquired with others."
- "I do think we would benefit from more communication among group members prior to the meetings."
- "I think that it would be valuable to have general discussion about any problems people may have encountered in using electronic resources in a university context and resources that people have found particularly helpful."

2. Enlarge the Groups

Most participants identified the need to enlarge the groups and provided the reasons for this. However, some participants requested that the groups not be made too large, so that they "remain nonintimidating."

- "With more people, the work would be spread around a little more and there would be more ideas for topics and more areas of expertise."
- "We could probably use more people for participation, to get more breadth of experience and expertise."
- "We cannot continue to meet every month and present two topics because it is too much work for the presenters."
- "If we joined with another group, our topics could be more diverse and the burden of preparation for one's own topic would be less frequent."
- "[The ERRG would work better with] more members. After only three meetings, those who presented first will be due to present again. It's a lot of work to prepare a presentation. Also, larger groups equals more ideas!"

Reorganization

Some of the groups had done really well, with a driving energy to keep going. Starting with small groups probably had been helpful in the creation of successful learning climates, in which individuals were able to build a trust and comfort level with each other, allowing them to talk to each other and admit what they did not know and felt the need to learn. It also was less overwhelming and terrifying to present to a small group. However, it was evident that a reorganization would allow for the creation of larger groups, which would provide a broader expertise base, decrease the number of presentations required of each individual, and allow for fluctuations in attendance. The science group would still be separate from the humanities and social sciences.

The question was how to reorganize in such a way as to maintain the impetus of the groups that were already doing well. As Julie Parry states: "Finding time for staff development activities is notoriously difficult,"[16] and the problem of ensuring that reference staff are encouraged to regard their learning time as being as critical as the time they are scheduled for desk duty is an ongoing challenge. Because participation is voluntary, it is only if the ERRGs are perceived as providing the learning that is needed that they will continue to function. Ultimately, two new groups were formed from the original six: a Humanities and Social Sciences ERRG, and a Science ERRG. Two years later, these groups are continuing to meet on a monthly basis.

Extending the Frame: The ERRG Learn-ins

In January–February 1998, an ERRG Learn-in was organized for all library staff. This initiative was especially important to allow for the inclusiveness that is

important in staff development activities. From the outset, it was decided that every effort would be made to extend the learning opportunity to all staff, including those reference and library instruction staff who felt they could not participate because they did not have the time to contribute actively to the ERRGs. Eleven ERRG presentations recommended by other ERRG participants were selected, and presenters were asked if they would be willing to participate.

Topics offered for the ERRG Learn-in 1998 included:

1. history of communism on the Internet;
2. Alta Vista search engine;
3. CBCA (Canadian journals and news papers – index + full-text journals);
4. patents on the Internet;
5. Catholicism on the Internet;
6. netzines, newspapers, and other periodicals on the Internet;
7. search strategies on the Internet;
8. chemical abstracts;
9. introduction to Java;
10. Canadiana (nongovernment sites);
11. metasearch engines.

The success of the ERRG Learn-in was evident from both the participation rates and the evaluations. More than 260 participation spaces were booked by ninety-four staff members in sixteen sessions (some repeated to meet demand). Ninety-five percent of the evaluations were at 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). Comments, many of which frequently used the term *excellent* to describe the presentations, matched the high evaluations.

One year later, at the request of the chief librarian and in response to popular demand, a second ERRG Learn-in was organized. Again, there was an overwhelming response and some of the sessions had to be repeated. Three hundred and twenty-three participant sessions were booked in twenty-three sessions, some of which were repeated two or three times to meet the demand.

Topics offered for the ERRG Learn-in 1999 included:

1. Britannica Encyclopaedia online;
2. Bookmarks;
3. database searching—basic building blocks;
4. explore the environmental databases;
5. government publications for the sciences;
6. finding it on the Web at U of T;
7. search strategies on the Internet;
8. Balisoft LiveContact—providing live user support on the Internet;
9. searching and using full-text journals;
10. metasearch engines;
11. expanded academic index;
12. Silverplatter databases;
13. Web of science;
14. Medline (for infrequent users of this database).

Conclusion

With the ongoing and relentless change in electronic information resources, librarians face an enormous challenge in building and maintaining expertise that is to both depth and breadth. The ongoing learning needed to provide expert library service requires enthusiasm and commitment that is difficult to sustain alone, especially when so little time is available.

The ERRG project was initiated to support the extensive learning of electronic information resources required by reference and library instruction staff, within an environment that encourages individual responsibility for that learning and provides the clear message that staff development is valued and supported by the library. This is in keeping with Kostas Messas, who argues that a learning culture "foster[s] individual responsibility and creativity, and keep[s] employees on the leading edge of information, … knowledge and technology."[17] The enthusiastic response to the ERRG questionnaire, the ongoing participation in the ERRG groups, and the keen response to the ERRG Learn-ins indicates that, despite the difficulties described, they have provided a successful learning opportunity for reference staff. One

individual's comments reflected the enthusiastic response to the ERRG sessions:

> I'll tell you what excites me about the ERRG sessions … I want so badly to take time out to explore the Internet. And not to have it as a quiet solo exercise alone, but to learn from other people. I really feel that's where it happens. And just taking that time out really excites me. Just being there and finally doing it. And having company to do it. Ultimately, we all have the same goals. We want to feel comfortable, not only for ourselves but also to help the public. I'm just so excited about it. I think it's terrific.

Lothar Spang argues that "the competence of academic librarians promises to be the foremost issue for academic librarianship in the twenty-first century, [and that] … continuing education is, therefore, even more vital in maintaining a staff of professionals who are capable of providing continually relevant service to library users."[18] Finding effective ways to provide continuing professional education that is critical to the provision of high-quality service remains a challenge to anyone involved in staff development activities.

Notes

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