Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Canadian Public Libraries Are Aware of Their Role as Information Literacy Training Providers, but Face Several Challenges

A Review of:
Lai, H.-J. (2011). Information literacy training in public libraries: A case from Canada. *Educational Technology & Society, 14*(2), 81-88.

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Abstract

Objective – To explore the current state of information literacy (IL) training in Canadian public libraries, and to identify strategies used for improving IL training skills for staff and patrons.

Design – Mixed-methods approach, including document analysis, observations, and focus group interviews.

Setting – Two libraries of a large public library system in Canada: the central library and one branch library.

Subjects – Six staff members (manager, administrator, training coordinator, instructor, and computer technician) who have been involved in designing and teaching information literacy courses for library patrons and staff.

Methods – The researcher analyzed internal and external library documents related to information literacy, including, but not limited to, reports, posters, lesson plans, newsletters, and training scripts. He also observed interactions and behaviours of patrons during IL training sessions. Finally, he conducted a focus group with people involved in IL training, asking questions about facilities and resources, programs, patron reaction, librarian knowledge of IL theory, and impediments and benefits of IL training programs in public libraries.

Main Results – Staff were aware of the importance of IL training in the library.

Attracting more library patrons (including building partnerships with other organizations), improving staff IL and training skills, employing effective strategies for running training programs, and dealing with financial issues were all concerns about running IL training that were highlighted.

Conclusion – Canadian public libraries are well aware of their role as IL training providers, but they still face several challenges in order to improve their effectiveness.

Commentary

Lai presents an interesting study on an information literacy training program within a large public library system, providing background on the importance of lifelong and self-directed learning when discussing adult learners. He then centres on library staff attitudes toward IL training as the focus of this study.

This reviewer would consider the paper a case study of a particular library system. Although the research is of interest to others working with IL training in public libraries, the study may be difficult to generalize and to replicate because of the uniqueness of the subjects studied. The researcher conducted only one focus group of six people with different viewpoints of the library. Issues of administrators or management are very different from those of a training coordinator, instructor, or computer technician.

Because the make-up of the focus group is limiting, there is a disconnect between what is said and how generalizable these results are to all Canadian public libraries. One group member assumes that most staff members have library science degrees but tend to ignore the theories behind teaching, and that "some staff members are resistant to embrace their teaching role in providing IL instruction." (p. 86) Who is saying this? And what is the educational background not only of focus group participants, but of staff providing IL training? Including more people in several focus groups would make for a better informed study. We might see very different results if there were a focus group of just instructors and another of just management. For example, perhaps there are different reasons why it seems that staff do not value the training opportunities afforded to them, but staff may be unwilling to talk about these in front of their employer.

Observing only two training sessions is also very limiting. Perhaps it would have been more beneficial for the researcher to sit in on more than two sessions, but because a script was provided for sessions, maybe this wasn't necessary. But are people actually following a script? Readers do not know. Although document analysis was conducted, very little is known about what was actually found in the library documentation to support the researcher's findings.

Expansion of the research through interviews with more library staff and knowledge of educational backgrounds would be beneficial for further research. Although this paper is a good start in examining guidelines for effective IL training in public libraries, a more rigorous and systematic method would lead to more sound, valid, and replicable results.