MEDIA WORKS COLUMN

Great Expectations: Competency-Based Training for Student Media Center Assistants

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According to recent Association of Research Libraries (ARL) statistics, the cost of employing a student assistant is approximately 25% of the hourly wage of a librarian (ARL 1997). From this cost perspective alone, there is a strong incentive for academic libraries to staff with student employees rather than librarians wherever possible. It appears student assistants will continue to be an integral part of many academic library departments. Nowhere else, however, is this more true than in academic media centers.

Depending upon the scope of the collection and services offered by the particular media center student assistants perform a variety of functions vital to the day-to-day operation of the unit. Student employees assist users in setting up and operating audiovisual and electronic equipment, circulate and reshelve items, and conduct collection searches to retrieve a variety of materials often arranged in a complex fashion. Because student assistants often staff centers alone and work in highly visible locations, their performance can have an inordinate impact upon the center's reputation. As a result, thorough training for student assistants is a pressing concern for many media centers.

Recently, the instructional materials/media center at Louisiana State University Libraries dedicated a large portion of their materials budget to building the CD-ROM and videotape collections. Concurrently, computer workstations offering complete access to the Libraries' electronic holdings, plus a selection of academic libraries' card catalogs, periodical indexes and databases, and the World Wide Web were installed. Up to that point, student assistants had been relegated to performing fairly basic library tasks such as reshelving and assisting in circulation functions. However, it was anticipated that the responsibilities of student employees would expand to include information assistance and increased automation mediation.

One recent survey indicates that instructional resource centers need to be much more systematic in providing training, in large part due to increasing automation (Buttlar 1992). Further, approximately 30% of student assistants employed by LSU Libraries have never held a job prior to coming to the library (Wilder 1990). This shift to electronic access and media, compounded by the lack of prior job experience, necessitated that the student assistant training program in place be completely restructured. Comparison of several training techniques revealed a competency-based approach had the flexibility to meet the training needs of the unit and the adaptability to evolve as position responsibilities changed. Thomas Corcoran, a long time proponent of competency-based training, states that a competency-based approach is viewed as

responsive to significant problems of service and accountability ([Corcoran 1976](#)) and as such can be a very powerful mechanism for bringing about improvements.

COMPETENCY-BASED TRAINING

Prior to a discussion on competency-based training, it is important to clarify what is meant by competence. The Fund for Improvement of Post-Secondary Education defines competence as: ....the state or quality of being capable of adequate performance. Individuals are described as competent if they can meet or surpass the prevailing standard of adequacy for a particular activity. While competence does not equate with excellence, it does imply a level of proficiency that has been judged to be sufficient for the purpose of the activity in question ([Trivett 1975](#)). Competency-based training as a technique structures learning around skills or behaviors defined as fundamental for successful performance. Components of any competency-based training program consist of identifying competencies, designing training, and assessment. Instruction evolves readily from these competencies and is designed to facilitate the development of the required skills ([Stoffle 1980](#)). Continuous feedback and reinforcement are also fundamental for enhancing retention of the information supplied in the training.

IDENTIFYING COMPETENCIES

Competencies are identified based on what a student assistant should know and be able to do to effectively to perform their duties. This knowledge consists of both library-wide and unit-specific policies and procedures. It includes calling in late or absent for a shift, opening and closing the unit, clocking in and out, and handling emergencies. Knowledge of locations and types of materials housed in the department, circulation functions of the electronic catalog, use of audiovisual equipment, and stacks maintenance are examples of other competencies.

Once competencies are identified, they are broken down into sub-competencies, and then the specific skills necessary to adequately perform them are detailed. An example of an analysis of one competency follows.

Competency - effective use of audiovisual equipment
Sub-competency - effective set-up of slide projector
Skills - be able to load slides in carousel correctly
be able to load carousel onto projector correctly
be able to replace light bulb correctly

TRAINING DESIGN

Training is designed to develop the skills recognized as necessary to meet the demands of the job. Trainers, consisting of a librarian, a library associate, a graduate student, and peer student supervisors, work individually with the student assistants. Student employees receive a variety of instructional tasks, each chosen as the most effective instructional method for the content. Individual trainers are responsible for instructional content based on their areas of expertise, experience, or job responsibility.

Specifically, student assistants review policies and procedures using a library handbook for student employees, the Emergency Response Plan, and a departmental manual which includes goals and objectives, evaluations and raises in hourly wages. The library associate, who is directly responsible for supervising student assistants, discusses expectations for covering scheduled shifts, telephone etiquette, greeting users, and individual shift responsibilities.

Library-wide locations, consisting of restroom locations, copier facilities, and call number ranges for each floor are introduced via a walking tour of the library. Several trainers teach information pertinent to the unit, such as holdings and locations, in a sequence of topical modules. Student assistants observe peer student trainers at the public service desk greeting patrons and proactively assisting them. Student employees practice setting up and maintaining audiovisual equipment.

The graduate student assistant instructs student employees on basic computer operation and hardware maintenance. Trainers also provide informational guides and an interactive Web- based library exercise to demonstrate basic searching on the electronic catalog, and on the World Wide Web. Student assistants practice loading and running CD-ROM products on a variety of operating systems.

ASSESSMENT

In competency-based training evaluation is criterion-referenced, where the degree of attainment is measured according to some defined standard, rather than norm-referenced, where the behavior of two or more individuals from some defined population is measured relative to each other (Grant 1979). Since assessment is criterion-referenced, student assistants only need training for those competencies which they cannot demonstrate. All new and returning student assistants are exposed to assessment procedures for all skills. Those proficiencies deemed to be the most needed for effective running of the department are targeted first.

Assessment measures used to evaluate skills are identical for both pre-instruction and post-instruction. Evaluation procedures are developed in a manner which measures performance approximating actual working conditions. For example, flash cards that have to be placed in proper sequence are used for training student assistants on the Library of Congress call number system. However, assessment for the same skill is designed so that student employees can be evaluated while actually carrying out their duties. To test for call number knowledge, stacks of materials randomly pulled and left for student assistants to reshelve are later checked for accuracy. Other assessment measures include supervisor observation and spot-checking work completed by student assistants, and the use of "mystery patrons" to ascertain public service attitude, adherence to unit policies, and skills often difficult to measure objectively.

Performance standards, or what a student must be able to do to demonstrate the abilities called for in the identified competency, are based on the trainer's judgement. Generally, this entails the student assistant's ability to demonstrate mastery of the skill in evaluation situations. Accuracy and thoroughness are specific criteria for many objectively measured tasks while punctuality and acceptable interpersonal skills are prerequisites for situations where student assistants are working with the public or other employees.

While competency-based training dictates only that mastery of the skill be demonstrated we have observed that student assistants perform at higher levels and more consistently when they receive ongoing feedback. On-the-spot feedback provides the student employee an immediate evaluation of their performance. It also instills in the student assistant the importance of the student in the organization (Kenney 1995).

Unfortunately, not all problems associated with supervising student workers can be alleviated by an effective training program. A small number of students simply can not make it to work at their scheduled times, do not perform their job duties at an acceptable level, or are unable to grasp all responsibilities associated with the position. Students who do not demonstrate competence are remediated by going through the training modules at a slower, more supervised pace. Students who demonstrate understanding of the position and mastery of the skills but who do not produce at adequate levels are placed on probation and then released if an acceptable level of performance is not forthcoming. The unit adheres to the philosophy stated in Kenney and Painter's article that any employee who is not making a positive contribution to the department's effectiveness should be reassigned or removed (Kenney 1995).

PROGRAM EVALUATION

What are the benefits and drawbacks of competency-based training? On the negative side it is very time intensive to identify competencies and develop training and assessment measures. Also, given the nature of materials and services offered by a media center, the list of skills will need to be continually reviewed and updated. There is also the argument that as even the best students are relatively short term there is little payback in investing in an intensive training program for them.

However, other studies reveal that effective training can be very empowering to student assistants (Kenney 1995). Student employees learn to use the library more effectively and demonstrate increased socialization to the library and the campus. A positive employment experience can also serve to reinforce good work habits by helping to develop a public service attitude, greater attention to detail, and increased responsibility for work shifts.

There is also a demonstrated benefit to the library. Prior to the beginning of the competency-based training initiative at the LSU Libraries' media center the student assistant return rate was comparable to the Libraries' overall student assistant return rate of around 50% (Wilder 1990). However, tracking return rates since inception of the training program (over the past four semesters) revealed an increase in retention from approximately 50% to over 80%. As a result less time is spent on hiring and training student assistants.

In addition to the decrease in student assistant turnover, we have experienced a decrease in problems due to improper circulation procedures as well as a decrease in user complaints. Student assistants appear to be more confident, focused, and productive, and the media center has noted a marked increase in output of their individual responsibilities.

The initial process of identifying competencies and designing instruction and assessment was time intensive. On the other hand, the number of student employees who have been hired and

trained was signifcantly reduced due to the lower turnover rate. Moreover, competentcy-based training can be easily modified to adapt to evolving position responsibilities and training needs. While only in its infancy at LSU Libraries, competency-based training promises to be a highly effective and efficient means for orienting student assistants to the policies and procedures, physical organization, and personnel of the media center.

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