

Training 2.0—Library Assistants in the Age of Information

JUNE L. POWER

Mary Livermore Library, The University of North Carolina at Pembroke, Pembroke, NC

With less staff time and more things to do, providing consistent and thorough training is sometimes a challenge. In order to streamline training and provide for more effective communication among staff and student assistants, a Blackboard course was created to provide a graded, self-paced, and interactive training tutorial. The tutorials were compiled using Powerpoint, Camtasia, and Snag-It, as well as Blackboard's internal test system.

KEYWORDS *Student assistants, library assistants, training, communication, technology*

THE EVOLUTION OF COMMUNICATION

Training is all about communication, and as communication evolves, training needs to adapt in order to ensure successful communication between library staff and library assistants. After joining the library staff at University of North Carolina at Pembroke (UNCP) in 2004, I quickly realized that assistant training was an issue that needed to be addressed. We went through several different methods before finding one that worked successfully in our particular environment. Our assistants are mainly student assistants, though we also have some nonstudent temporary assistants that work in the library. The Access Services/Reference department is responsible for conducting all hiring and evaluations of library assistants, and about 85%–90% of all assistants work in Access Services, with the remaining working in other public services areas and technical services. There are five full-time staff members in Access Services, which includes circulation, reserves, document delivery, and stacks management. We operate two shifts during the week, and two

Address correspondence to June L. Power, MLIS, Access Services/Reference Librarian, Mary Livermore Library, The University of North Carolina at Pembroke, P.O. Box 1510, Pembroke, NC 28372. E-mail: june.power@uncp.edu

staff members rotate weekends. Therefore, our assistants work at all different times of the day and with a number of different staff persons, underscoring the need for a coherent and effective training program, with the ability to track who has been trained in what tasks being a key component of the program. The evolution of training will continue to be ongoing, as new technologies develop and as stagnant programs outgrow training needs.

EVOLUTION OF TRAINING AT MARY LIVERMORE LIBRARY

2004 Oral History

In my first 2 years at UNCP, I worked to document procedures and policies specific to the UNCP's library. I also got a feel for general work flows and staff preferences and strengths. During this time, I basically maintained the training system in place at the time I took the position. This was a very informal system that essentially consisted of the staff person on duty at the circulation desk training students that were assigned to work during that time, while simultaneously performing circulation desk duties and assisting patrons.

2006 The Written Word

Once I had sufficiently adjusted to the work environment at UNCP's library, and documented the policies and procedures of the access services department, I felt the time had come to address the assistant training arena. At this time an outline system was implemented, listing all tasks in which assistants needed to be trained. This outline was supplemented with worksheets and paper quizzes to guide staff in conducting training. As each item was completed, staff were to initial the outline to note its completion. LC Easy and Dewey Easy were included in the outline system as a training tool.

2009 Training 2.0

In time the limitations of the outline system were felt, and I began to look for alternative training methods. It became apparent over time that centralized communications and a monitoring and evaluation system needed to be incorporated into the training program to ensure effectiveness. UNCP uses the Blackboard course management system. I was familiar with Blackboard both from a student and faculty perspective and saw how it could be advantageously applied to library assistant training. Using Blackboard, training, documentation, and communications could be centralized using a technology that students (the majority of our assistants) were already familiar with and frequently utilizing. Using the outline system as a guide, but updating the information for a digital format and currency, I created assignments in

Blackboard for training, which can be tracked for completion and accuracy using the Blackboard internal grade book. The assignments include a scavenger hunt, videos, discussions, quizzes, and other training tools. The discussion forums and built-in e-mail lists are used to facilitate communications, and access services policies and procedures are also included in Blackboard. The announcements and calendar features help to facilitate communication and also assist in the payroll process by reminding assistants when to submit their online timesheets and when they will receive their pay. Nonstudents are assigned a university identification number and e-mail address during the hiring process, due to new university procedures adopted during this time frame, and are also able to be added to the Blackboard training course. LC Easy and Dewey Easy are still used, as I have found them to be excellent training for shelving and are the only training pieces not included in the Blackboard course itself.

PROBLEMS WITH ORAL AND WRITTEN TRAINING METHODS

During the evolution described above, certain problems with previously used methods informed my decisions in developing a Blackboard training course.

Inconsistency

At first assistants set their own schedules, and this resulted in sometimes having many assistants working and sometimes none working, making the training work load uneven. The staff person also had to perform desk duties, so often the assistant was left to learn in a trial-by-fire method. Assistants didn't necessarily work with all staff members, and each staff member had his or her own method of verbal training. This resulted in assistants sometimes receiving conflicting information or receiving partial training. The institution of written outlines lessened the inconsistency of training by providing a standard set of information from which all staff could work.

Time Consuming

Since training was done by word of mouth, it was all staff driven. A staff person had to sit down with students individually and train them on library tasks, while continuing to help patrons. This would take months sometimes, as the assistant-to-staff ratio was often high, and had to be done when staff were not otherwise busy. The outline method was just as time consuming as the verbal method, as the outline merely was a guide overlying the verbal system. It still required 100% staff input.

Tracking Difficult

Verbal training also made following up on assistant training problematic. Some assistants were missing whole areas of training altogether as there was no way of knowing who was trained on what, other than staff memory. Staff would do their best to communicate where students were in their training, but often things fell through the cracks. This was somewhat alleviated by the institution of the outline, but due to the time-consuming nature of training, there were still large gaps in training as staff would get busy while training and tasks would remain uncompleted or unverified. Relying on memory was still a part of following up on training of assistants.

ADVANTAGES OF DIGITALLY BASED TRAINING

The problems with the previous training systems were all resolved with the implementation of the Blackboard training course.

Consistent

With all training assignments centrally housed, as well as all policies and procedures, a consistent and accurate message is conveyed to all assistants. Assistants complete identical training assignments in a predetermined order, ensuring that gradations of experience can be applied in training. This facilitated assigning assistants to specific tasks when working, for which their training can be verified.

Time Efficient

The Blackboard training course is a self-paced independent study. Assistants complete assignments on their own, with periodical guidance from staff. This assists already busy circulation staff in more effectively managing training by freeing their time to evaluate assistant training rather than having to conduct it in its entirety.

Tracking Made Easy

With Blackboard's internal grading system, it is easy to track which tasks assistants have completed and what score they achieved on each assignment. Staff can look up an individual assistant or an individual assignment to compare assistant scores. Staff check the grade book each day they work with an assistant in training, so that they may tell them which assignment to work on next, if necessary. Assistants may pace themselves in their assignments, but they must check with staff at the end of each level at a minimum.

BLACKBOARD

Documentation

All of the access services policies and procedures are housed in Blackboard via a wiki, making access convenient to all and ensuring that everyone can look up information as needed. Schedules, staff introductions, descriptions of departmental functions, basic library information, and more are housed in Blackboard making a centralized access point.

Announcements

Our announcement sections are used for alerts to any policy and procedure changes, to let assistants know about special events, reminders, and other short communications that need to reach all.

Assignments

Our training assignments are broken up into five levels as listed below. All levels incorporate the use of videos, discussion, quizzes, and other training tools to convey information and assess assistant development.

LEVEL 1—INTRODUCTION TO THE LIBRARY

All assistants start here to orient them to the library in general. Timekeeping procedures, a video tour of the library, and some basic job duties are covered at this level.

LEVEL 2—INTRODUCTION TO CIRCULATION SERVICES

All assistants then progress to learning the basics about circulation services. Other access services duties are reserved for more experienced assistants. Job expectations, library jargon, a supplies scavenger hunt, and other tasks orient the assistants to their new position.

LEVEL 3—SHELVING WIZARD

Assistants must at a minimum successfully complete this level to remain employed at the library. At this level assistants learn how materials are organized in the Library, and this is where we incorporate the use of LC Easy and Dewey Easy—for which they must submit screenshots of their scores. Training for stacks maintenance is also included in this level, which enables assistants to correctly carry out their core tasks—shelving, automated inventory, shifting, in-house-use collection, and shelf cleaning and straightening.

LEVEL 4—CIRCULATION DESK APPRENTICE

Assistants with at least a semester's successful experience as a shelving assistant are ready to take the next step in training—learning how to work at the Circulation Desk. In addition to specific circulation procedures in our integrated library system—Innovative's Millennium—customer service, communications, and privacy are also covered.

LEVEL 5—WEEKEND WARRIOR

This level is reserved for the one or two assistants working the Friday and Saturday night shifts. Assistants at this level must be able to work without supervision; this level is therefore limited to those students with 1 year of Circulation Desk experience who have proven themselves as highly dependable and motivated. Closing the library, emergencies, and other weekend-specific tasks are covered at this level.

Other assignments include special projects, and Document Delivery Assistant training.

Streamlined Communications

In addition to the announcements, the Discussion Board is a useful communications tool. For some assignments students must discuss a topic together in Blackboard. Other forum threads are used for reporting absences and schedule changes, which were often hard to track effectively before Blackboard when memory was relied upon. The absence rate has significantly dropped now that the number of absences and schedule changes can be accurately verified.

CALENDAR

Special events, time sheet reminders, and paydays are kept in the Blackboard calendar so that these special dates will display on the Blackboard entry portal upon log-in. This has dramatically improved the number of time sheets submitted on time, while reducing the number of times the “when do I get paid?” question is asked.

GRADE BOOK

The grade book is flexible: Some assignments, such as quizzes, are automatically graded and included and other assignments are manually graded by staff at the completion of the level and the score is recorded. Grading statistics can be gathered individually or comparatively, with additional reporting methods available.

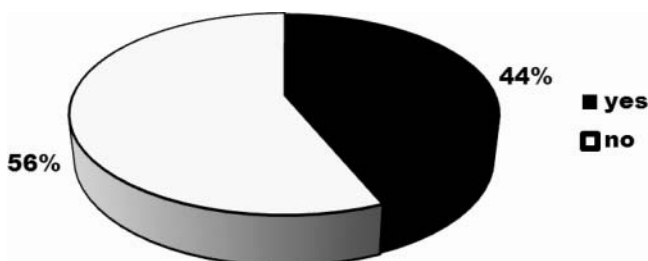
WHAT WE'VE LEARNED SO FAR

This is our second year using Blackboard, and we continue to tweak it to suit our needs. This will be a continual process as information changes and new needs arise. We have found that students and staff much prefer Blackboard to previous training methods, and we now feel like our program is successfully training our assistants and addresses all the issues previous training methods presented. We've also begun using this training course to train new staff members. Application of this method is not limited to academic libraries—it can be applied anywhere through the use of free course management software programs like Moodle. However, regardless of method used, the keys to successful training are consistency, efficiency, and follow up. With these issues addressed, training should be one thing off of the already full platter that is access services.

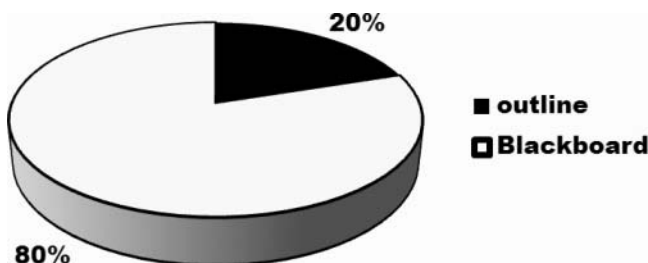
APPENDIX

Library Training—A Library Assistant Survey

1. Did you have training under the old outline system before the new Blackboard system this year? (If no skip to question 4)

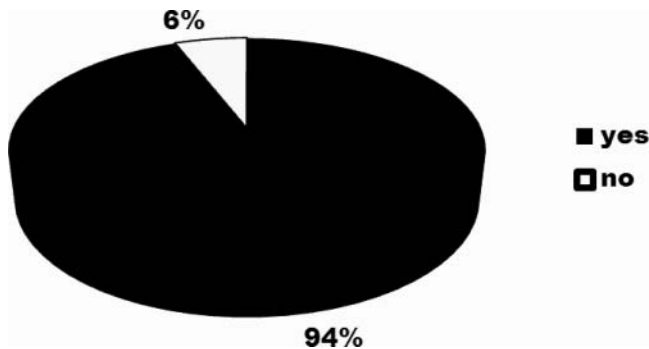


2. Which system do you prefer?



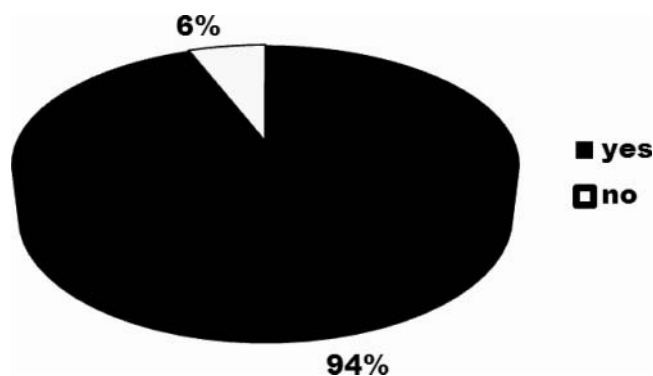
3. Why is that your preference?
 - Outline system is easier to understand and I learned more from it.

- It's more personal and less questionable.
 - It was easier to learn.
 - It is much more interactive and more informative. I have learned a lot of things using Blackboard that I did not know before. Something may have been left out in the outline system on accident.
 - It was much easier.
 - It is better to have to fill things out electronically than having a lot of paper work.
 - Everything in one place. Very easy to complete training.
 - It's more efficient.
 - It's more convenient than the paperwork!
4. Do you like the Blackboard training and communication system?

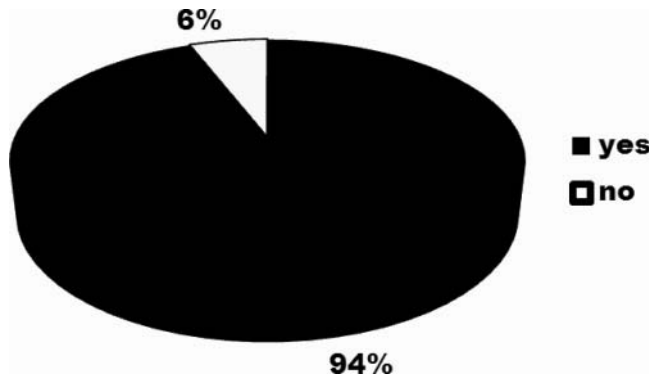


5. What do you like about Blackboard?
- Easy to use and navigate through.
 - Easier to understand.
 - I am used to the Blackboard format because I have used Blackboard in many of my classes. Blackboard is easy to follow and to understand.
 - You can stop and start the process as you have time to do the different sections and tests.
 - Very fun and different. The info you need about schedules is always available.
 - If I have any questions I can ask them and also inform staff when I will be out and I know that there is a record of it.
 - It's convenient, and everything is right together.
 - Not only did we train on Blackboard, but we were able to check for other assignments on Blackboard as well.
 - It is easy to get to!
 - It is easy to navigate around.
 - Again. Everything is in one place. Easy to manage.
 - I was able to watch the videos if you have a question about work outside of work.
 - Working at my own pace.

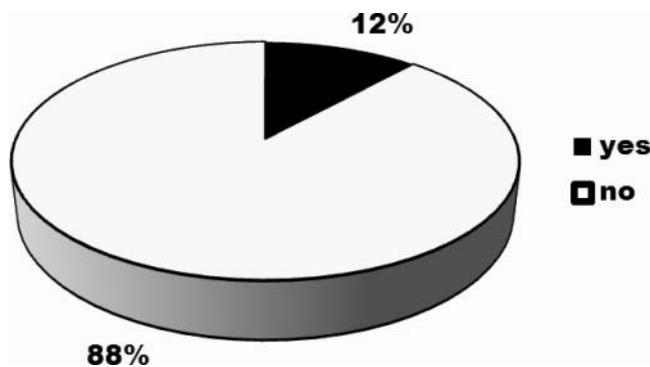
- It was simpler sometimes.
 - It allows us to be able to access the information needed to complete training from home. This helped me complete training in a shorter span and begin work faster.
 - Well it's more convenient, and I liked how we got to watch video demonstrations!
6. What do you not like about Blackboard?
- N/A
 - Blackboard can be slow on certain computers.
 - It's a little complicated and you never know if you did everything you were supposed to do. Also when you're looking for something, it's hard to find.
 - It's a pain to log in when systems are down.
 - Some of the questions to some of the tests had the wrong answers.
 - It has its glitches. Sometimes it doesn't want to let you in, but it's not an all the time thing.
 - Nothing.
 - It would be nice to be able to access two pages at one time, but overall there is nothing I dislike.
 - Certain things should be updated sooner.
 - Everything was fine.
 - I simply enjoy face-to-face training.
 - If you don't have access to a computer then you can't use it.
 - Sometimes the links have issues; but that's not a major issue because it is easy to contact others.
 - Sometimes the school's network doesn't work properly ... but other than technical problems, I like working with Blackboard!
7. Did the assignments prepare you for the job duties required of you?



8. Were the communication tools effective?
9. Was there anything not covered in your training that should have been?
If yes, please specify.



- Lots of details that had to be performed were not included in the training.
- You should make a section on transit books and ILL books for circ and document workers or include that in the circ section.



10. In what way would you improve library assistant training?

- Make it a little more detailed and specific.
- There is nothing I can think of. The most important thing is to practice over and over again.
- Make it more informative.
- Things are perfect as they are.
- I think everything is excellent.
- Maybe someone physically showing you what you needed to do.
- Nothing.
- I think it's the best that can be done as of right now.
- It would be nice to be able to see firsthand what we have to do because some of the video tutorials were confusing.
- A supervisor should go over stuff with a new trainee. Things like what exactly is expected of a new employee.

- Allow new trainees to practice shelving Folio, curricular support media, regular media, general collection, and juvenile stuff so that they have a basis for these areas in the future.
- By testing out the new methods.
- To have someone that has already been a part of the staff before give them a tour. This will allow trainees to ask any questions that may come to mind.
- The only thing that I can think of is to practice, practice, practice! Because “Practice makes perfect,” as they say.

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