# Leadership institute goes online to reduce travel time, enhance job skills of Arizona library staff

*Online learning tools extend training reach*

## Situation

The Arizona State Library designed the Arizona Library Institute, Virtual Extension (ALIVE!) to help public library workers in Arizona enhance their job skills without the time constraints and financial burdens of travel. Like the face-to-face Arizona Library Institute that takes place for one week each year, ALIVE! targets staff who may have leadership responsibilities, but do not necessarily have advanced degrees.

For the last dozen years, the State Library has facilitated a week-long Library Institute to offer in-depth training to rural libraries. The Library Institute is limited to approximately 30 participants each year and library staff often have to wait several years before securing a spot in an Institute. In 2009, the State Library staff committed to offering a more robust online training opportunity to help address the needs of rural librarians at a time when staff and budget shortages have severely impacted travel opportunities. Geographically, Arizona is the sixth largest state, and rural librarians sometimes must travel up to six hours for face-to-face training. ALIVE! provided isolated library workers with a new, less expensive, and more convenient approach to learning.

ALIVE! ran from January through May 2010 and consisted of five monthly modules. Each module included three components, two of which were available through WebJunction-Arizona: a self-paced course; interaction with the online ALIVE! group and discussion board; and a real-time, online discussion through a webconferencing tool. Course content focused on improving the library experience for users: managing difficult patrons, virtual reference, library ethics, customer service and reaching reluctant readers.

ALIVE! took advantage of existing curriculums already offered through WebJunction, and built on those by

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allowing Arizona library workers to engage with one another and with the presenters, all of whom were Arizona professional library staff members with an expertise in the field they discussed. In addition, participants worked with technologies that were new to many of them, including chat tools and virtual learning systems. ALIVE! provided a structured opportunity to explore those tools.

## Program goals

**The goals of this training program, as defined for learners, included:**

- Enhance job skills through the content of the modules offered

- Develop confidence in using online educational tools, including webconferencing, chat and whiteboard tools.

**The goals of this training program, as defined by the State Library, included:**

- Testing a robust online model of delivering training to Arizona library staff

- Developing staff skills in developing, setting up and delivering online training

- More fully promoting both the courses offered by WebJunction and the online tools available through the WebJunction online learning community portal.

**The goals of this training program, as defined for the trainer, included:**

- Designing an online learning experience that facilitated engagement and addressed different learning styles—visual and verbal, interactive and individual, synchronous and asynchronous.

## Implementation

To implement the program, the State Library contracted with a program facilitator to work with the State Library's continuing education coordinator. They selected existing courses offered by WebJunction to anchor each module, designed activities for each module, and recruited a presenter for each of the real-time, online discussions. The ALIVE! pages on WebJunction included an online application, discussion forums and related documents. Marketing materials were also distributed both online and in print format.

Applicants could choose to attend the entire program or they could enroll in individual modules. Through the application process, the trainer learned about each participant's skill level and experience with online tools. The organization learned why participants were interested in the program; the majority joined in order to earn contact hours toward Arizona Library Practitioner Certification. There were 26 library workers in the cohort; three withdrew due to lack of time.

From the beginning participants could choose which modules to take, thus their needs and interests drove their coursework. Participants determined their own level of engagement with each module. Each learner decided how long to spend with an online class. The trainer provided additional reading and recommended additional WebJunction classes for those wanting to further explore each topic addressed in the modules.

Collaboration was also built into the program design. By signing onto WebJunction-Arizona, learners created a profile that was then shared with other learners when they registered for ALIVE!. Group work was built into the modules to further encourage collaboration among the learners. For example, in the virtual reference module, the trainer assigned chat buddies who conducted online reference

interviews using the techniques previously learned in the self-paced course. In the ethics module, chat buddies selected case studies from the online course to discuss with one another, and then to post in the discussion forum to share with all the participants.

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## Successes

- Participants explored the course catalog in WebJunction, some for the first time. The confidence gained in navigating the online course catalog should help participants continue to take ownership of their own learning.

- Some participants continued to network after a specific assignment ended. Each module included an assignment that required learners to interact with one another. The learners became acquainted with one another, and began to develop professional relationships.

- The online discussions were thought-provoking. The discussions were led by State Library staff, as well as professionally trained staff from other libraries. Each had expertise in the subject area, and brought a new perspective to the online course that learners had completed prior to the discussion.

- The time burden for each module ranged between four to seven hours each month. The amount of time on task allowed for a thoughtful study of the topic, but did not seem to overburden already taxed library workers.

- The use of RSS was encouraged and helped to inspire more interaction and engagement.

- In terms of behind-the-scenes implementation, having a staff person dedicated to work with the trainer for tech support was crucial to making this successful. In addition, a training session several days prior to the live

session on how to use the Web tools was very helpful to participants. This eliminated most technical problems, leading to a smooth-flowing webinar.

- Initial comments from learners indicate that they are applying their course work to job situations:

  - "I'm having a monthly volunteer meeting tomorrow and am looking forward to sharing some tidbits from my coursework!"

  - "I don't know the history behind this policy. I'll check into it."

  - "I never thought that I was the person to pass judgment on someone and treat them differently because of it, but after working on this course I began to pay attention to how I automatically reacted when certain patrons came in as well as how the other staff members did."

## Advice for others using this training approach

- Develop marketing materials to promote this type of program.

- Pay close attention to the navigation and flow between Web pages, courses, etc., when using multiple systems. If it's not intuitive, participants get lost and a little discouraged.

- Build in significant training time with the web-conferencing and other online tools for the learners.

- In addition to the trainer, have at least one or two support staff to help with chats and technical issues.

- Plan enough time with IT support and the webmaster and CE coordinator to set up virtual materials, and understand and exploit the strengths of the content management system.

- Limit each webconferencing session to no more than 60 minutes.

### TOOLS USED

- WebJunction-Arizona
- Wimba Classroom (webconferencing tool)
- Discussion boards
- Self-paced courses

### LINKS

WebJunction-Arizona: http://az.webjunction.org

ALIVE! site: http://az.webjunction.org/716

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