



Practical approaches for incorporating online training into staff development initiatives

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Abstract

Online learning is no longer a novelty—it is now an accepted, even expected, component of professional development for library staff in the United States. While tools like learning management systems and formal self-paced courses have an important place in library staff development programs, many trainers are mixing and matching online elements of all kinds into training programs. Current professional development initiatives in the U.S. blend face-to-face learning events with webinars, videos, online tutorials, discussion boards and social networking tools, like Twitter. The sophisticated and tailored use of online tools in U.S. libraries shows that as technology catches up to learners' needs it can help the organization, trainer and learner better meet their learning goals.

For this paper the authors interviewed six U.S. library organizations and found that online learning helps these organizations, trainers and learners meet the following learning goals:

- Enhance learners job skills
- Facilitate community building
- Reduce travel time
- Experiment with new training formats
- Make content available to learners 24/7
- Expose learners to new technologies
- Enhance the perception of WebJunction
- Create new content
- Leverage existing contentment in a new way
- Make training available to learners faster
- Accommodate multiple learning styles

Web sites/portals, webconferencing tools, self-paced courses and discussion boards were the primary tools utilized by trainers to support collaboration between learners across a geographically dispersed area and to help learners take ownership of their own professional development. Secondary tools utilized included podcast creation tools, social networking, video conferencing and self-paced course authoring tools.

Program successes included robust participant interactions, application of new concepts by learners, extending an organization's training reach, and the team-based approach to developing training. The organizations interviewed provided the following advice for libraries interested in pursuing similar training initiatives:

- Ensure that adequate time and resources are allocated for successful program development.
- Leverage existing material—don't reinvent the wheel!
- Keep stakeholders informed of your progress when developing a self-paced training.
- Plan and practice extensively, especially with Web conference presenters—this will be time well spent.
- Consider learner workflow when planning the training program, especially if it includes multiple tools.
- Market the training program adequately, especially if the audience is dispersed throughout a state or country and if attendance isn't mandated.

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Introduction

Online learning is no longer a novelty—it is now an accepted, even expected, component of professional development for library staff in the U.S. While tools like learning management systems and formal self-paced courses have an important place in library staff development programs, many trainers are mixing and matching online elements of all kinds into training programs. Current professional development initiatives in the U.S. blend face-to-face learning events with webinars, videos, online tutorials, discussion boards and social networking tools, like Twitter. The sophisticated and tailored use of online tools in U.S. libraries shows that as technology catches up to learners' needs it can help the organization, trainer and learner better meet their learning goals.

In this paper, “online learning” is used to describe any training program where content is delivered primarily via a Web-based tool. As online learning has become commonplace, training programs in libraries often blend multiple delivery formats, including face-to-face and online technologies, to deliver robust programs that meet learners' needs in multiple ways.

WebJunction has been providing library staff in the United States with access to online learning since 2003, and in 2006, published *Trends in E-Learning*¹, a report on how U.S. library organizations utilized online learning in staff training programs. With 20/20 hindsight, it is clear the data was gathered just as Web 2.0 was emerging, and many strides have been made as technologies have grown more intuitive and ubiquitous, and trainers and staff are more comfortable training and learning in an online environment. Self-directed online learning programs like 23 Things, created by Helene Blowers, are still being utilized and iterated, while free webinars have become *the way* for library organizations to engage library staff from all over the U.S. around a specific topic. In fact, webconferencing tools are such an accepted component of continuing education offerings that sometimes U.S. library staff are shocked to learn that a training event *won't* be delivered online and made accessible through an online archive after the fact. In this paper, the authors examine current professional development programs in U.S. libraries that incorporate online learning into mainstream training programs, asking the following questions:

- How does online learning help the organization, trainer and learner meet their learning goals and requirements?
- What tools are utilized?
- How do these tools support collaboration between learners across a geographically dispersed area?
- How do these tools help learners take ownership of their own professional development?
- Where did trainers find success, and what advice would they offer someone else trying out that training approach?

¹*Trends in E-Learning* is available for download on WebJunction: <http://www.webjunction.org/publications-research/articles/content/443854>

Research Methodology and Organizations Interviewed

To obtain a snapshot of how library organizations are currently incorporating online training into staff development initiatives, WebJunction developed six case studies that highlight different facets of online training by interviewing staff members at six U.S. library organizations. The organizations interviewed were the Arizona State Library, Archives, and Public Records, the Baltimore County Public Library (BCPL), the Colorado State Library, the High Plains Library District, the State Library of Kansas and WebJunction. Interviews were conducted via e-mail in May and June of 2010. All of the state and public libraries interviewed partner with WebJunction in some way, either as customers of WebJunction's online learning services or as community members that have contributed training content to WebJunction.org. Each case study will be available on WebJunction.org as a stand-alone document in August 2010; the questions asked are available as an appendix to this paper.

Professional development initiatives examined:

- Baltimore County Public Library developed a virtual new-staff orientation program that makes staff orientation available at the library staffer's point of need, regardless of when they were hired, when they are scheduled to work, and their work location. Melissa Hepler, Sandy Lombardo and Jean Mantegna, all of BCPL, were interviewed about the Virtual Orientation.
- The Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records leadership program, Arizona Library Institute, Virtual Extension (ALIVE!) was designed with one main goal in mind: to help staff excel in their jobs at the public library. The program blended online self-paced courses with discussion boards and learners could participate in two ways: as a committed member of the ALIVE! Team or on an as-needed basis. Holly Henley, Mary Villegas, Mala Muralidharan, and Laura Stone of the Arizona State Library, and Jaime Ball of the Round Valley Public Library were interviewed about the program.
- Mary Beth Faccioli, at the Colorado State Library, and Eileen McCluskey, Trainer at the High Plains Library District, developed and piloted a combined online learning experience where facilitated online discussions were offered to a cohort of students taking a specific WebJunction course, "Managing Difficult Patrons with Confidence," over a specified period of time. Both Faccioli and McCluskey were interviewed about this cohort learning program.
- The WebJunction Online Conference overcame the travel and cost barriers associated with attending a face-to-face conference by offering a free online conference for library staff professional development. The sessions were recorded, so library professionals were also encouraged to review session archives as they aligned with learning goals after the conference was over. Jennifer Peterson was interviewed about the conference.
- The State Library of Kansas facilitated a series of online training events called 'Everyday Ethics for Libraries' that explored how library professional ethics, as presented in the Library Bill of Rights, along with intellectual freedom concerns and privacy, impact library operations, collection development, policies, planning and customer service. By offering the sessions online, the state library and state regional systems maximized their reach and used their limited resources effectively. Cindi Hickey was interviewed about this training program.
- Through the WebJunction Course Creation Gurus project, online trainers gathered online each month to focus on a topic related to self-paced course development. As professionals in the field of learning and information, learners brought their skills to the table and shared their own experiences as both a learner and guru. Kathleen Gesinger and Rachel Van Noord were interviewed about this project.

Why do library organizations utilize online training?

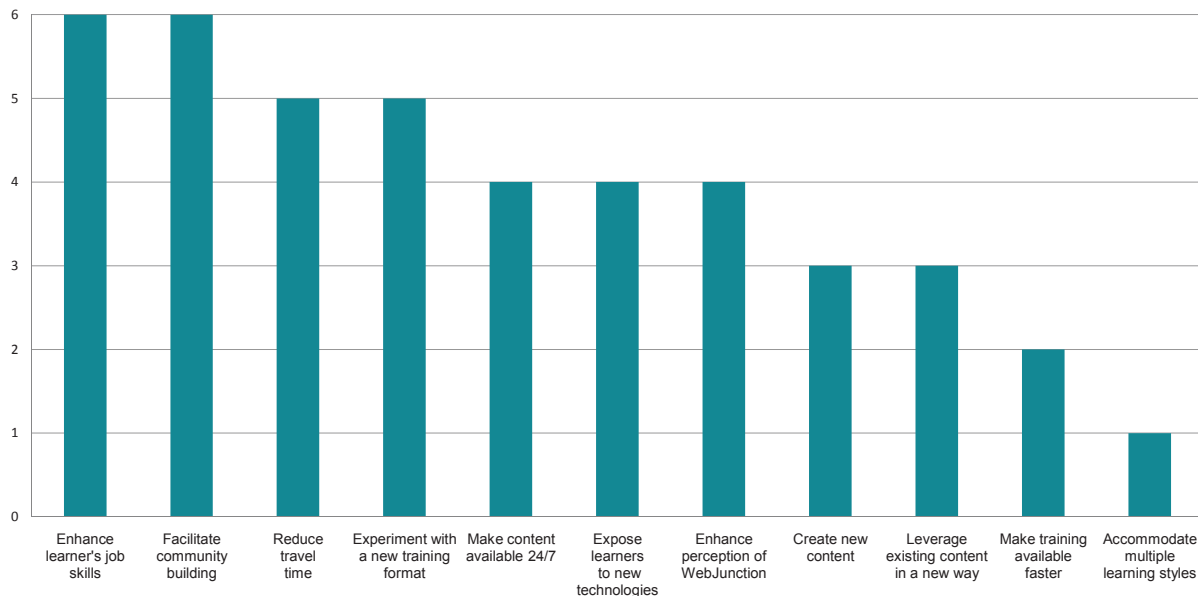


Figure 1. Reasons library organizations offer online training

The overwhelming answer to this question, according to the organizations we interviewed, is to further enhance the job skills of library staff. Additionally, these library organizations were looking for new ways to make training accessible to learners and used these training programs to further the goals of the trainer and the organization.

Making training more accessible to learners

The *Trends in E-Learning* report showed that in 2005 the perceived benefits of e-learning included convenience for learners, extended reach, cost-effectiveness and the ability for learners to direct their own learning. It's no surprise that these benefits were echoed and amplified by the organizations interviewed in 2010. Additional benefits were also articulated by these organizations: that online training helped learners connect with their professional community and that online learning allowed trainers to train to multiple learning styles.

Making training more convenient for learners was a goal of every organization interviewed. Reduced travel time was the biggest convenience cited by these organizations, with the availability of asynchronous content 24/7 following close behind. The 'Everyday Ethics in Libraries' program was an excellent example of how online training can provide learners with these benefits. Hickey illustrated this point in her description of the criteria used to develop the program:

"An essential criteria of the program was that it be available statewide and to accommodate that goal, a combination of desktop online sessions and video conferencing was employed. This was necessary because many Kansas library staff cannot travel for continuing education. Online tools enabled all interested library staff to participate in any or all of the webinars through either the live sessions or the program archives."

Related to increased convenience for learners is the idea that online training can extend a library organization's training reach. While it doesn't take much imagination to see how this would be important to a state library that's serving a geographically dispersed audience, it's also important to understand that the varied schedules of library staff in a public library setting make online training appealing to human resources staff and continuing education staff in city or county libraries as well. Staff from the Arizona State Library describe ALIVE! as an alternative training model that supplemented the face-to-face, week-long Library Institute that has been offered to public library staff for the last dozen years. In this case, the state library was interested in making the Leadership Institute available to more than the previously defined limit of 30 library staff per year, reducing the wait-time for those hoping to secure a spot in the Institute.

As an example of how online training can help a less geographically dispersed audience, the following were cited as reasons for developing the BCPL Virtual Orientation for new staff: reducing lag time between hire dated and new staff orientation, which previously took three months or longer, meeting the needs of library staff who work in the evenings/on the weekends; and reducing off-desk time due to travel to the half-day session.

Cost-effectiveness and the ability to direct one's own learning are wrapped up in the above reasons for incorporating online training into a library's training initiatives, and are extended by the fact that all of the organizations interviewed offer their online training to staff for free or at a reduced price. When combined with the reduction in travel time and the availability of content 24/7, the time and financial savings for learners to attend online training are immense, reducing many barriers for library staff who were previously unable to pursue continuing education in a timely way.

In addition to articulating the efficiencies gained by online learning, the organizations interviewed also described the community that developed as a result of their online training programs. Faccioli and McCluskey reported that the cohort-based training program they offered library staff in Colorado, which paired the self-paced course "Managing Difficult Patrons with Confidence" with live online Web-conferencing sessions to facilitate discussion between learners, "started to build a community of interested learners in Colorado around this demanding topic." The BCPL team reported that the development of the virtual orientation allowed new employees to more quickly engage with the library's culture—another example of how online training enables staff to create a deeper face-to-face connection with their colleagues. And the State Library of Arizona wrote that:

"...the program introduced participants not only to new learning systems, but also to each other. Participants began to 'friend' each other on WebJunction and to e-mail each other outside the program's framework. Collegial relationships became a rich source of creativity, professional support and information."

Online learning allows trainers to appeal to multiple learning styles as well. Ball specifically mentioned that her goal for the ALIVE! program was to develop an online learning experience that "facilitated engagement and addressed different learning styles—visual and verbal, interactive and individual, synchronous and asynchronous." While the other organizations interviewed were not as explicit about this goal, the sophisticated blending of multiple training tools indicates that accommodating the variance in learning styles was implicit in every training program examined.

Furthering the goals of the trainer and the organization

Trends in E-Learning also discusses perceived barriers for pursuing online learning: lack of funding, lack of staff time and lack of expertise. As the organizations interviewed described the goals of the trainer and organization for pursuing these online training programs, it was evident that each had found a way to overcome these barriers. Reasons cited for pursuing online training included opportunities to expose library staff and trainers to new technologies, leverage existing content, develop new content and enhance the perception of WebJunction among library staff.

Every case study interviewee mentioned the time investment of planning and preparing for their online training program, though it was evident that the amount of staff time spent was more than worth the effort as interviewees further described the successes related to providing online training for learners.

In some cases, preparation included developing content for the online training programs; in others, trainers focused on leveraging existing content as part of the learning initiative. Both Hickey and Peterson were explicit about their desire to add new content to WebJunction-Kansas and WebJunction.org, through the 'Everyday Ethics' program and WebJunction Online Conference, respectively. This desire was motivated in large part by the fact that WebJunction is a place where library staff have 24/7 access to Web-based content to help them have the resources and support they need to power relevant, vibrant libraries. As learners' needs change, new content gaps are identified and the goal of these learning initiatives was to develop new, timely and relevant content to meet learners' needs.

The other organizations interviewed tended to look for a new way to present existing training content more effectively or to an expanded audience. With these goals in mind, they leveraged existing content that had been used in face-to-face sessions or already existing self-paced online courses, and trainers spent time incorporating and often localizing that content into the training program they were developing. Both the ALIVE! program and the High Plains/Colorado State Library collaboration were developed to enhance existing self-paced online courses available through WebJunction, while the BCPL's virtual orientation leveraged existing content and enhanced it, creating an asynchronous, online module for staff to access at any time.

Exposure to new technologies, for both library staff and trainers, was mentioned by two thirds of the organizations interviewed—these training programs were developed as a way for both learners *and* trainers to gain additional expertise. A goal of the ALIVE! program was to help learners develop confidence in using webconferencing tools and chat, to enhance their own skills and to share these skills with patrons. Peterson noted that one of the goals for the WebJunction Online conference was to give presenters an opportunity to learn more about presenting in an online format. McCluskey reported that her personal goal for the cohort training program implemented in Colorado was to develop online facilitation skills. And the WebJunction Course Creation Gurus program was developed to specifically introduce WebJunction's state library partners to the online training tool *Articulate Presenter*. Not surprisingly, since the case study sample included WebJunction and its partners, an additional goal for a few of the training programs was to promote and enhance library staff perception and usage of WebJunction.

What tools were utilized?

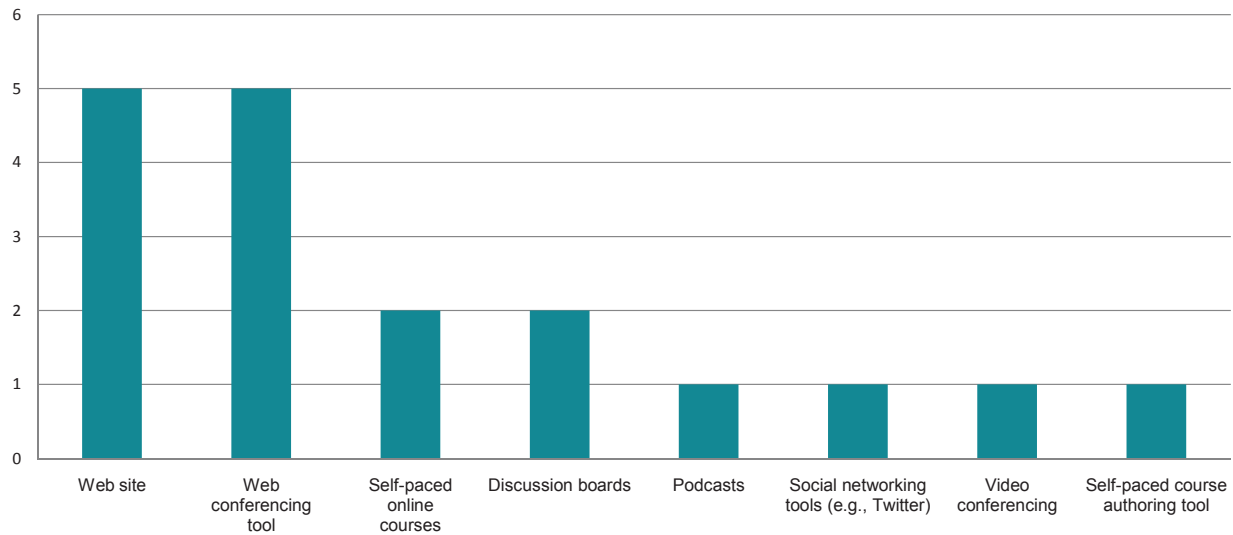


Figure 2. Online tools utilized in training programs

The tools utilized by interviewees varied, though two were consistent across organizations and each organization interviewed used at least one: a Web site/portal to deliver online content or a webconferencing tool. The other tools used—podcast creation tools, self-paced online courses, discussion boards, social networking tools, video conferencing and self-paced course authoring tools—were used much less consistently. The use of these secondary tools seemed to be driven by either or both of the following: the organization’s goals for the training program and/or the availability of the tool. Hickey mentioned that the State Library of Kansas was trying to utilize as many learning tools and formats as possible in the ‘Everyday Ethics’ program, including face-to-face meetings, to provide broad access to the content and provide learners with format choices. On the other end of the spectrum, the Course Creation Gurus program was dedicated to helping learners get up-to-speed with a single technology, ‘Articulate Presenter.’ The secondary tools used in the Gurus program (webconferencing, discussion boards and a Web portal) were employed as a means to provide this learning experience. It should also be noted that WebJunction makes the following tools available to its library partners: a Web site/portal, access to self-paced courses, discussion boards, and in the past has provided access to a webconferencing tool. Since all of the organizations interviewed partner with WebJunction it is not surprising that the results are heavily skewed toward these tools.

How do these tools support collaboration between learners across a geographically dispersed area?

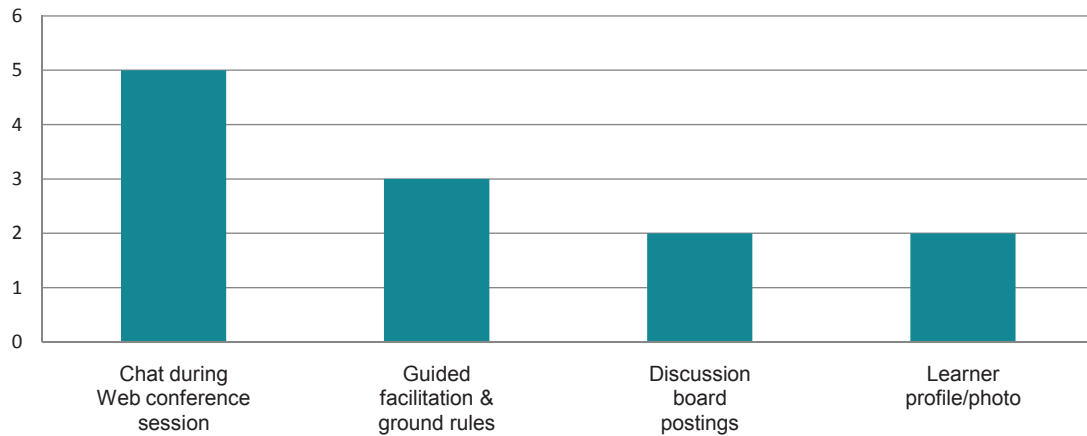


Figure 3. Mechanisms for facilitating collaboration during online trainings

Program facilitators were conscious of the need to facilitate collaboration between learners in the online environment. Learner conversations were facilitated during webconferencing sessions or through a traditional discussion board in almost every organization; some organizations utilized both technologies. Both the Arizona State Library and High Plains Library/Colorado State Library required learners to create an online profile or share their photo with the rest of the cohort so that learners would have an additional way to connect with each other.

How do these tools help learners take ownership of their own professional development?

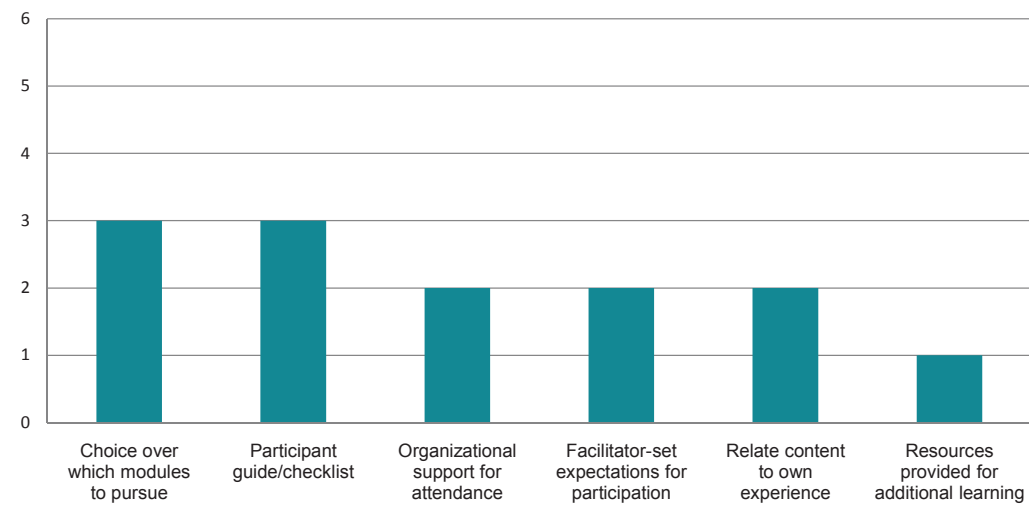


Figure 4. Ways learner ownership was encouraged during online trainings

Each training program required that learners take responsibility for their own learning, but the methods for facilitating this varied dramatically. Almost every program except the Virtual Orientation was optional, though most programs required learners to submit an application or formally join the cohort through a registration mechanism. Training programs with multiple sessions, like ALIVE!, 'Everyday Ethics' and the WebJunction Online conference, allowed learners to choose which training modules/conference sessions to attend, based on their own needs, and session facilitators played a large part in engaging learners during each module. Participation in shorter programs was more prescribed and tended to be facilitated through a participant guide or checklist, as reported by staff at High Plains Library/Colorado State Library and BCPL. Facilitators for both the ALIVE! and 'Everyday Ethics' programs explicitly required learners to relate the training to experiences in their own libraries, though the collaboration facilitated through live-online and self-paced discussions ensured that this was an outcome of nearly every training program studied.

Where did trainers find success, and what advice would trainers offer an organization pursuing a similar training initiative?



Figure 5. Program successes

All of the organizations interviewed considered their training programs successful, for a variety of reasons. Reasons cited related to learner experience included robust learner participation and evidence that learners had applied what they were learning to their jobs. Extending the reach of training was a positive outcome of the program, as reported by two thirds of the organizations interviewed. And finally, nearly every organization noted that the team-based training development model employed was both a reason for the training program's success and a success in and of itself.

Advice to library organizations pursuing a similar training initiative

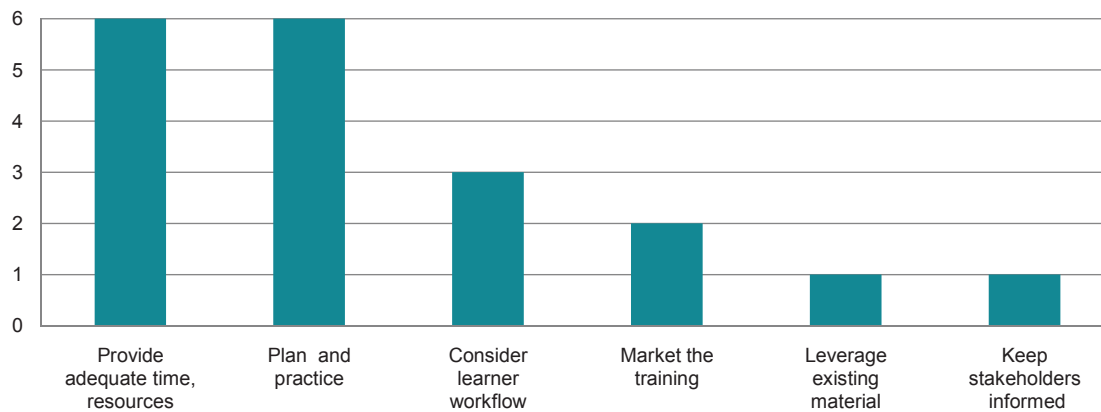


Figure 6. Advice to a library organization pursuing a similar training initiative

Every library organization interviewed strongly recommended allocating adequate time and staff resources to any library considering implementing a similar program. Every interview also indicated that trainers felt that the success of their training program was directly tied to the amount of planning and practice put into it. Other advice provided by the library organizations interviewed included:

- Ensure that adequate time and resources are allocated for successful program development.
- Leverage existing material—don't reinvent the wheel!
- Keep stakeholders informed of your progress when developing a self-paced training.
- Plan and practice extensively, especially with Web conference presenters—this will be time well spent.
- Consider learner workflow when planning the training program, especially if it includes multiple tools.
- Market the training program adequately, especially if the audience is dispersed throughout a state or country and if attendance isn't mandated.

What's next in online learning?

Based on the author's experiences and these observations of library organizations incorporating online learning into their training programs, the following are thoughts about what the next five years will bring to professional development in U.S. libraries:

- Lower barriers to using sophisticated technology will decrease costs for developing online training programs and continuous innovation will lead to more robust online learning. As technologies continue to improve, there is no doubt that training programs utilizing online learning will become more sophisticated and innovative.

- Additional opportunities for customization of the learning experience by the self-directed learner will be driven by these continuous improvements and innovations. Learners will increasingly, on their own, initiate collaborative cohort learning, both formally and informally with fellow learners.
- Trainers will continue to emphasize program design, high-quality content and robust facilitation over technology. The trainers interviewed clearly prioritized the learner experience over the training formats they used, which seems to be the hallmark of great training—there is no doubt this will continue in the years to come.

Appendix: Case Study Interview Questions

Situation:

1. Please describe your training program, approach and online learning tools utilized. Why did you decide to include online learning tools into this program?
2. How were online learning goals defined for each of these three groups: organization, trainer and learner?
3. Please describe the staff development or training gap you addressed with this approach.

Solution:

4. How did you decide what online learning elements to include in your program?
5. How was collaboration encouraged between learners in spite of geographic barriers?
6. Were learners encouraged to take ownership of their own learning? How did the organization, trainer and program design encourage this?

Lessons Learned:

7. In your experience, how did an online learning methodology help your organization, trainer and learners meet the learning goals described above?
 - What went really well?
 - What will you work on improving next time?
 - Where there any unexpected outcomes from this program?
8. What advice would you give to someone trying out this training approach?
9. With 20/20 hindsight, what did you, your organization and your learners wish you'd known *before* launching this training program?
10. Which online learning tools are mandatory for an organization trying to launch a similar program? What online learning tools (existent or nonexistent) would make a program like this even better in the future?



WebJunction's vision is to be the place where the library profession gathers to build the knowledge, skills and support we need to power relevant, vibrant libraries. Our mission is to promote learning for all library staff by providing open, affordable online learning communities.



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