

# A cohort learning experience provides accountability, community for self-paced learners



*Online courses give learners a new way to experience training*

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## Situation

In 2010, the Colorado State Library and the Colorado Library Consortium (CLiC) made a group purchase of self-paced classes from WebJunction to make online learning available to Colorado library staff at a reduced rate. Online learning has been of great interest because of reduced travel and training budgets faced by libraries, along with increasing needs for training among staff. Various efforts were made to support library staff with these courses. While these efforts were helpful to support staff, Sharon Morris, Director of Library Development Services at the Colorado State Library, saw a need to further add value to these self-paced classes and better market them to the Colorado library community.

Staff from the Colorado State Library and the High Plains Library District took on the task of developing and piloting a blended online learning experience where facilitated online discussions were offered to a cohort of students who would also take a specific WebJunction course over a specified period of time. The course chosen was “Managing Difficult Patrons with Confidence,” developed by LE@D, a program of the University of North Texas. The live-online, facilitated discussions were intended to address several issues learners often face with self-paced learning, including lack of motivation to complete a course, lack of contact with peers, and lack of contact with an “expert” or “teacher” to clarify concepts.

## Program goals

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

- Providing important, relevant learning opportunities for library staff in Colorado, at a subsidized rate to allow for greater access
- Supporting learning as much as possible considering the challenges commonly faced by learners taking self-paced courses.

***“By leveraging existing course content and using it with the online facilitated discussions, the trainers were able to create a valuable learning experience for participants without the immense time required to develop new content.”***

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

- Developing and successfully piloting a model that would leverage existing online learning material and add value with live-online components that address social dimensions of learning and other issues commonly faced with self-paced learning
- Facilitating an online discussion using a webconferencing tool.

## Implementation

Participants joined an initial online discussion before taking the self-paced course. In the first facilitated discussion, they got a brief introduction to the software, and introduced themselves to each other. They then discussed typical and challenging patron interactions they faced, any existing policies and procedures currently in place in their libraries, and finally individual learning objectives for the course. Participants were instructed to take the online class and join a second facilitated discussion two weeks later.

The second facilitated discussion integrated the content from the course into the online discussion. The trainers guided participants to think about the specific difficult patron interactions raised in the first discussion and used the course content to help them come up with solutions.

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Participants were asked to help each other with resources and ideas from their own similar experiences.

In both discussions, webconferencing tools were used to support the discussion. Participants used various status options to give feedback and used the chat as well as the teleconference to have a very lively discussion. The facilitators used the whiteboard feature in the system to record brainstormed ideas from the group.

Ground rules and expectations were set with participants in advance and within each session, so it was clear that any value would come from participation in the discussion, and not from the facilitators. Participants were asked to submit pictures of themselves, which were incorporated into the presentation to allow everyone to see each other as well as introduce themselves and share experiences. Facilitators encouraged conversation both in background chat and via the teleconference throughout, and all comments were skillfully brought into the conversation. Between sessions, participants agreed on e-mail as a means to communicate between sessions, though there was little activity among the group during this period.

A participant guide was distributed before the first discussion, with tips for the self-paced portion of the course. It also included questions that were pertinent to the course material for the participants to think about in advance of consuming the course content. During the first discussion, the facilitators pointed out some of the more helpful and pertinent links in the self-paced course. Participants were also encouraged throughout to review their library policies, and at the end of the last discussion, to create a plan of action to improve their skills.

## Successes

- By leveraging existing course content and using it with the online facilitated discussions, the trainers were able to create a valuable learning experience for participants without the immense time required to develop new content.
- The live-online sessions provided time boundaries for the consumption of the self-paced course, and allowed for peer-to-peer and learner-expert contact. Ultimately,

a community of interested learners in Colorado was developed around this demanding topic.

- The facilitated discussions went exceptionally well in terms of participation, both via chat and verbal discussion. The trainers prepared extensively using a Facilitator's Guide, so that each was clear on her role at all points in the sessions. This structure was imperative for dealing with any unexpected glitches, and allowed the trainers to skillfully deviate from the plan as needed in the moment.

## Advice for others using this training approach

- Be willing to get comfortable in the live-online learning environment. It takes time to learn how to do this well, and it's worth the time to do it.
- It's important to have two facilitators so the role of technical production squarely and clearly falls on one person.
- Advance planning, including run-throughs of the sessions, is highly recommended. The principle of freedom within form applies here—having clear structure at the outset allows flexibility when live and online.

### TOOLS USED

- Self-paced course
- Adobe Connect (webconferencing tool)
- Participant Guide
- Facilitator's Guide
- Chat transcripts, whiteboards and recordings were e-mailed to participants after each discussion

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## LINKS

**CLiC – I'm an online learner:**  
<http://www.clicweb.org/Learner/>

## CONTACT

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