

Libraries as a training nexus

Abstract

Training and development, they are the catchphrases of the present but could they also be the gold of the future? Libraries are the gatekeepers of information but with an ever changing future and globalisation of information, should libraries now transcend from custodian to educator? If this is the destiny of the information industry then the training of our own staff to effectively educate, illuminate and prepare our patrons is of paramount importance. As libraries change and the boundaries are redefined we must embrace our new purpose as information instructors rather than mere keepers of knowledge. To do that, we must re-evaluate the importance of workplace training.

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I'm a strong believer in professional development and am always encouraging others to expand their horizons and to develop their skills further. This is in part a reflection of the trainer's hat – an invisible cap I wear every day and stems from a stubborn determination to see and develop the potential in everyone. It is also in part a reflection of my love for training. There is no greater joy for me than passing on my wisdom and experience to another. Inspiring my peers is a core passion which has led me to write a paper on what I believe makes excellent training but more importantly that libraries are primed as a training nexus. This paper aims to define training as a series of links in particular focusing on the ingredients of excellent training within the Library environment.

This paper will attempt to highlight why libraries work well as a training nexus before sharing with you five elements (or what I've affectionately termed ingredients) to excellent training. I hope that as we journey together you too will be inspired to see training the same way as I.

Let us begin by looking at what the Macquarie Dictionary says about training.

The Macquarie states:

Training: *noun* 1. the development in oneself or another of certain skills, habits, and attitudes.

This is true. Training is definitely about developing proficiency in skills, habits and attitudes but I would like to challenge this statement by saying I believe *excellent training* is much more. Excellent training is about having fun. It's about developing rapport and engaging your trainee (be they staff or patron), but most importantly excellent training is about investing in the future.

Why libraries are suited to training

Libraries work well as a training nexus because we serve as a link between the patron and information, this linkage signified most aptly where learning is concerned. All libraries embody this association, from Public through to Academic and Specialist. We support the education and learning milieu by being bastions of knowledge, ever ready to assist in the learning process, guiding and directing our patrons down the information highway, or to the fiction collection.

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We train our patrons in the use of the internet, how to search the library catalogue and from there to then locate books on the shelves. We train them to utilise electronic resources and much more. All of this is not new to libraries; we have known this for some time now. We have embraced this responsibility because training is about empowering others and we do this on a daily basis with our patrons, but while we focus on training the patron, do we spend enough time training ourselves? I believe intuitively we do, but we can always improve our workplace training techniques.

Library professionals make great trainers for we possess the latent skills to identify a patron's needs and then help them achieve their goal. We are information detectives, ready to lend a helping hand, but ultimately instilling those we serve with the skills they need to independently strive forward.

Being at the core, helpful, friendly and generally fix-it people, we are always ready to guide, advise, assist, support and direct. These are the qualities that define a good trainer. With such natural talent at the beckoning it's hard then *not* to identify libraries as a suitable natural environment to training.

The ingredients of excellent training

I have identified five ingredients to excellent training. Each of these can be utilised to enhance your own training program. The five ingredients are: Empowerment, Confidence, Flexibility, Rapport and Patience.

Empowerment

If someone was to ask me what is the first element of excellent training I would say, empowerment. I have been fortunate enough to work in an industry that upholds the guiding principle of empowerment. At Vision Australia we are committed to empowering our clients and I have witnessed first hand the joy and fulfilment achieved as a result of empowerment. To be able to perform a task single-handedly without reliance on another is a very rewarding feeling.

How many of you can remember the first time you learnt to drive a car, or search the internet, or cook a meal – when you said to yourself “I can do this”, but more importantly “I can do this well!” How did that success make you feel? Happy? Excited? Confident? Satisfied? Most likely it was some or all of these but I'm sure it was empowering and this is what excellent training is all about.

Empowerment is a motivational feeling and the best way to empower staff is to focus on two areas – Self Reliance and Self Assessment.

Self Reliance is my term for individuals who have been trained to a standard that enables them to perform their responsibilities well and with minimal supervision. Autonomy is empowering and the sooner your learner can perform a task single handily the better for their learning success. I aim to train learners in skills that will quickly allow them the opportunity to practice and operate on their own. However this is a precarious tightrope for us trainers because we want autonomous individuals but not at the risk of compromising workflow accuracy. So a quick way to build this

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Self Reliance is to identify some of your learner's strengths and assign appropriate tasks that will support their learning development. Follow with a dose of encouragement and you soon find an empowered learner.

The second area is Self Assessment which I believe is a very healthy practice to adopt (even outside of training.) I find Self Assessment is an amazing ability for it enables you to consider your own strengths and weaknesses and identify areas of improvement. The link to Self Reliance is obvious for identifying your own strengths helps to remind you of tasks you can do well (and also autonomously). It's also humbling to know that you aren't perfect and that we do at times get things wrong. Training should not be about perfection. Competency yes! Improvement yes, but never perfection! So the best way to demonstrate Self Assessment is by assessing your own training and by making learners aware that they will get an opportunity to assess you in turn. You can also drop tidbits during the learning process by sharing experiences where you yourself have identified a weakness (and also a strength) from past mistakes. The important thing is to maintain a positive approach but to ultimately reassure your learner that we all have strengths and weaknesses and to understand both is an incredibly empowering feeling.

Lastly empowerment is a gradual process, it cannot be instilled overnight, it must be massaged gradually. However its progress is assisted by the next ingredient, Confidence.

Confidence

Confidence helps us to persevere. It fosters an atmosphere where the learner has the courage to ask questions, to seek answers and to clarify understanding. Confidence is essential in learning and we as trainers have the task of helping our learners maintain their confidence during the training process.

An excellent training program will engage and invite new staff members to investigate further, ask questions and build the confidence they require to do their job successfully and with satisfaction. We all know what it feels like to be a new employee in a new workplace. The unfamiliar can be daunting to many. The sign of excellent training is one that recognises and supports this adjustment process by focusing on building confidence in its new staff (or patrons).

Increased confidence has the benefit of increased productivity. If you come to work knowing that you can perform a task and perform it well (and with excellent training this is bound to be the case) then your productivity is going to rise. The trick of course is getting new staff to this point.

We create confidence by setting goals and asking learners what they want to achieve from the training (or what they want to achieve from their new employment opportunity). Goals are necessary in maintaining the flow of confidence. As each task and goal is completed the sense of achievement feeds one's confidence. When partnered with autonomy the relationship between confidence and empowerment becomes clear.

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I think a good by-product of confident learners is their ability to ask questions without fear of reprisal. A good training session will encourage this and create an environment where learners are not shy from approaching a trainer, peer, team leader or manager for answers.

I cannot stress more clearly the importance of building staff confidence quickly during induction and training as this may make or break an employee's decision to stay with a company. Training is the opportunity to sell a library to an employee, to mould them to our processes but also to understand how *they* the individual operate. By using an excellent training program to instil staff confidence and leading by example creates a win-win scenario. For just as the new employee adjusts to us, we the trainer must also adjust to them. Thankfully workplace training is incredibly flexible in this regard and hence we go onto the next ingredient, flexibility.

Flexibility

When I first came into contact with workplace training and assessment it was during my studies to become a Library Technician where I was introduced to the TAFE system of education which was incredibly flexible and therefore became in my mind the marksmanship of excellent training. For example, how many of you are familiar with the three different styles of adult learning? For those of you who may not be familiar let me introduce them to you: Auditory (hearing), Visual (seeing) and Kinaesthetic (doing.) To discover people learn better based on their preferred learning style was a revelation. Workplace training celebrates this diversity by affording a flexibility that matches the working environment which as we all know contains a multitude of diverse individuals, to their unique training and learning requirements.

I think libraries in particular should pay attention to investing in flexible training. Our industry is structured and organised by necessity. This is exemplified by processes such as the Dewey Decimal System and AACR2 to name a few. Then through the door walks workplace training which advocates flexible learning approaches at which point our structured and organised strengths can possibly become our Achilles Heel.

How to avoid this?

Well there are many ways to approach a flexible training program. At Vision Australia new staff in the Readers Services team are instructed in core processes and procedures by referring to a centralised training manual – however the success of each new inductees training experience has been on the flexible approach to learning. This same process has been incorporated into our client training in digital technology. We observe, we learn and we adjust to the individual's needs in order to facilitate a training experience that empowers the trainee in learning a desired skill.

The training program that is rigid and unbending is asking for trouble. You need to be capable of adjusting to the personalities of each individual learner. When you sense something is not working, or learners are repeatedly making the same mistake time and time again, you need to change tactics, you need to adapt and adjust to the individual, while making sure both you and your trainee keep your eye on the prize.

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This requires great facility on the trainer's part (and perhaps a dose of humility) to say to themselves "I'm doing something wrong. I need to meet this person half way. What worked previously isn't going to work now. What do I need to change in order for this to succeed?" This self-scrutiny takes guts. It takes courage to admit your technique might be flawed, but we're human, we are allowed to make mistakes. It's whether we have the ability to recognise this that matters most.

One's flexibility to your learner is a sign of your ability to develop rapport and in turn empathy, which leads us to the next ingredient.

Rapport (including Empathy)

Being approachable and empathic are two powerful qualities of an excellent training program and an excellent trainer. In our fast paced working environments we are more and more hearing the words "Emotional Intelligence" which finds a steady home in the training program. As human beings we need to connect with others, regardless of our personality type, disposition or whether we are introverted or extroverted. Training is often a period of bonding and this is unavoidable. An excellent training program should capitalise on this process. Building a strong rapport between you and your learner is integral to training.

In order to empower, instil confidence and be flexible, we need to be capable of reading our learners effectively. This is where empathy plays its role. Ever heard the saying "Walk a mile in each other's shoes?" This axiom applies to training. We as trainers need to remember that learners may be new to the concepts that we know intuitively. We must also remember that change can be a scary thing, and a new job or leaning a new skill can be rather challenging. Humans seem to be allergic to change, we don't respond to it well. In fact, I'll be honest; I think we're totally scared of it, but the learning process often involves change and a good trainer equipped with an empathic radar is capable of keeping this in mind.

The added bonus of empathy is of course rapport. The teacher-student dynamic is a by-product of the training process. When a successful rapport is developed learning becomes easier. To get to this point however we have to build up the trainee's confidence, empower them to ask questions, reassure them that it's ok to get things wrong, and lead by example with flexibility and empathy. Sound tough? Well it can be, but this is where patience is your ally and hence we come to the last ingredient of excellent training, patience.

Patience

Now I must say it... patience is a virtue. Where training is concerned however it's a life saver. The success of an excellent training program lies in the trainer's ability to be patient for it ensures the learning experience is not compromised. Once you lose your patience, you've lost your learner and most likely their respect. Gaining this back can be a difficult process, so the rule of thumb "Prevention works better than a cure" holds true here.

Patience is paramount where communication barriers are present or where learning styles differ. A talented trainer might learn visually and therefore structures their

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training around diagrams, images, video demonstration etc, but your trainee might learn kinaesthetically, or by listening. As a trainer you learn to adjust, but when your trainee is still having difficulty grasping procedures and workflows, a dose of patience soothes frustration and ensures that empathy guides your actions.

Your ability to be patient and understanding with your trainee encourages them to return and ask further questions. Patience is a strong ally of confidence and should be practiced liberally during training. Not only is it a sign of emotional maturity but it reflects well on your professionalism. Within a library context it is crucial, as our structured systems can sometimes take time to learn. Knowing what we do about training's diversity and propensity towards flexibility justifies the importance of patience.

How to Develop Training Further

The best advice I can give libraries who are considering developing their training focus further is first and foremost accept that an investment in training is an investment in your library's future. Acknowledge that well trained staff equals pleased and satisfied patrons, a concept we already embrace but one that is hard to quantify, however our standard of service is almost always a reflection of the training processes in place. When you invest in training you make a commitment to continual improvement and development. What this means of course is time, energy, money and support. You may even have to create a training policy, but the reward of providing a consistent level of service to all patrons is worth the effort.

However you can assist this process by ensuring you identify the jewels among the rough, individuals who appear to have an aptitude for instructing or training others. These are your strongest allies in providing excellent training. Hone their skills, invest your energy in these individuals and develop them so they can become training superstars.

Finally invest in educating your staff in the Certificate IV – Workplace training and assessment qualification. This course provides a strong understanding to the fundamentals of workplace training and has been crucial in my own development in becoming a workplace trainer. I believe the Certificate works well with our professional training and experience for all the reasons highlighted in this paper.

Conclusion

As human beings we live to learn and experience new things. We want to know more. We place greater demands on customer service. The presence of training in libraries grows as our needs increase. The difference between training and excellent training lies in several elements. Empowerment instils in staff and patrons independence, confidence armours them with the courage to persevere, flexibility paves the way for diversity, rapport engages our empathic understanding and promotes communication while patience serves as a means of ensuring learning is not compromised. Library professionals make excellent candidates for good trainers as we possess a number of skills that help create a positive learning experience. Yet all of this means nothing unless we acknowledge the need to invest in training. Workplace training takes time, energy and effort. It should not be dismissed. It

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should not be disregarded. It should not be underestimated. As libraries change and adapt to the emerging trends in information delivery, our role as a training nexus becomes paramount. We have the skills, we have the people, we have the place and we have the power. Training and development are indeed the gold of our future. If we can create a well trained professional culture that continues to empower patrons and each other to develop further, what more could anyone ask? However the journey begins with us, with all trainers, both experienced and budding alike. I invite you all to take the step and transform your perception of training. I'm certain you will not regret it.