Online training for the information professional – benefits and challenges

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For every slice of useful information on the internet there is an unknown, but certainly greater, amount of useless information. Sorting through this maze is the information professional's job. Recognizing the difficulties and showing how to work around them, through training sessions, is my contribution to easing that workload.

The information professional not only benefits directly from their own professional development activities, but in addition, information gained from the provision of professional development can help information professionals deliver the service level they want to their patrons.

Someone commented to me recently, "Surely librarians don't need training on how to search and find information?" My response was something along the lines of: Librarians search millions of bytes of data each day, and their researching and information retrieval skills and knowledge of their subject areas are phenomenal. However with that amount of information and that much data to plough through each day is it any wonder that sometimes they miss things. Any little bit of help in finding what they or their end user is looking for, can only makes their job a little easier.

It's not just Wiley systems they have to contend with but hundreds of others – each with their own peculiarities. It would be very nice if the page and search query structure were the same for every different system used by information professionals, but this is just, well, unrealistic. The situation is further complicated by language and terminology used. Firstly many Web pages are in a language that is not the researchers' first language, and secondly, terminology is not consistent.

I am an online systems trainer for Wiley-Blackwell and work from their offices in Oxford, England. The Wiley-Blackwell portfolio includes Wiley InterScience, Blackwell Reference Online, Compass Journals, The Cochrane Library, Essential Evidence Plus and EBM Guidelines. Each week I deliver training sessions (in English) to librarians, researchers and other information professionals, as well as medical and pharmaceutical professionals, across the globe. Occasionally this is face-to-face, but in the main the sessions are delivered online. At present we use a combination of Webex (an online meeting/conferencing system) and a separate teleconferencing system. This separation of the two essential technological components is an issue in itself and one that I am personally advocating for change.

I am regularly asked how I do it, just how do I juggle the globe? Training in this "global space" intersects language, culture, context, place and time. That intersection is the common factor, yet is fluid and ever changing. In any one session I am likely to have a mix of cultures, locations and languages, from New Zealand to India, Alaska to Argentina. For many of my trainees, English is their second language.

So how does one tie this mix together – the language, technology, time and distance? I have to say at times with great difficulty. It requires commitment to delivering as good a level of customer service as you can in the circumstances. It means finding ways to overcome difficulties and knowing when to stop, take a break and look at alternatives.

Online training in a global space is not a simple case of throwing together a PowerPoint presentation and talking to your computer screen. In my experience, the key to delivering useful training sessions in a global space – whether online or face-to-face – is effective communication strategies. The key ingredients to effective communications strategies are understanding the participant through:

- awareness of the diversity of context, culture and experience of each participant, including ourselves;

- openness to different ways – of knowing, learning, living and working;

- and a lingua franca or common language. When I talk about a common language here I am not referring to a specific language such as French or English, but a way of communicating that recognizes common or similar concepts, terminology and ways of understanding, thereby dissolving some of the barriers to inter-language communication.

Much research and literature in education or training focuses on instructional design, technology, student interaction, reflective practice, communities of practice, social networking, Web 2.0, the list goes on... The base for much of this is on courses spanning several hours or weeks. The online trainer in a one hour session does not have the luxury of several weeks or even hours of opportunities to interact with each trainee; we have just 45 minutes or less to make an impact.

There's no such thing as a typical session

Every session has its own identity, and I couldn't pick one and say this is typical, even if many aspects are similar. A recent online session to the Americas is a good example of the diversity and challenges to training in a global space. In this session I had nine attendees online, the majority from the US and Canada, with one from Brazil. The challenges in this particular session were that the attendee from Brazil had only basic English language skills and she chose (whether because of technology or her language skills) not to connect to the teleconference component of the session. This meant I had to adapt the pace of the demonstration and to make sure to go through each step t slightly more slowly so that she could still follow the visual demonstration. Sessions I conduct to the Europe and Asia regularly have non-listeners online – more often than not these trainees are from a non-English speaking background.

In the example session, the attendee from Brazil was able to relatively successfully interact using the online chat feature. However for me this meant juggling questions from the audio as well as chat components, and wherever possible to let all attendees know the questions that were being asked. Naturally it is much easier to relay the chatters' questions than the other way around. This probably is the most problematic part as there comes a point where you may have to postpone answering the chat questions until the end of the session as it can become too disruptive in the short timeframe. Following the main session I spent another 10 minutes online with the trainee from Brazil with some more personalized attention to her questions. Of course putting in this extra time at the end of a session is not always possible and as mentioned earlier, that is the time when one has to stop and look at alterna-

tives. These alternatives might be to email the required information to the trainee, point them to our range of self-paced online tutorials and/or invite them to another session.

In another recent session to Asia I had an attendee online from Nepal. The problem there was not so much the language difficulties but the internet load sharing in Nepal. The trainee was only able to stay online for about 20 minutes and in addition he was not tele-connected.

These examples also highlight a specific issue that we can do something about and that is implementing VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol – is the technology that allows us to use the internet for voice calls). The benefits in terms of technology (and location) are immediate as the trainee can listen to the presentation, and ask questions if they choose, directly through their computer. In addition, for trainees from a different language background, the ability to at least hear the demonstration and therefore to be able to follow the on-screen visuals more easily, can enhance their ease with communicating in a foreign language speaking context.

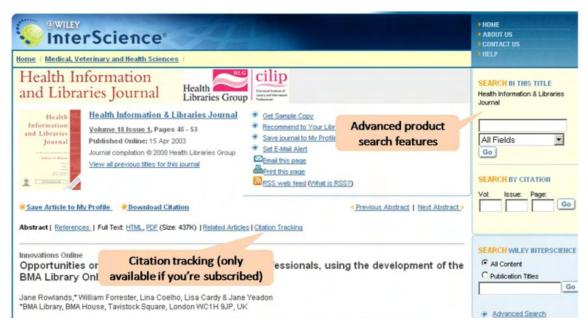## What questions do information professionals ask?

Regardless of culture or context, the information professional generally asks about searching techniques specific to our systems, and where to find particular features on our websites such as usage statistics, ArticleSelect, roaming access, accessing non-subscribed content, downloading citations (how and what is available), HTML/PDF full text versions and pricing.

Frequently missed features of the Wiley InterScience interface

The features often overlooked on our systems include online self-paced tutorials, user guides and other useful information, search tips, saving searches/titles/articles, setting up email alerts and roaming access, citation tracking features, and advanced product search features available within specific products. Even simple, but useful features, like viewing the full text HTML version in full screen width are easily overlooked. Features are generally not noticed because either the user is not aware of them in the first place or they are not obvious. Once I point out a feature, "Wow, I didn't know about that! That's very useful" is a very common statement.

Recent developments in Wiley-Blackwell offerings

For the latest information on Wiley-Blackwell you can access our library newsletter. This newsletter includes information on recently added titles as well as highlights from specific subjects and products. A new issue will be out in January. To subscribe to the newsletter click on the "Email Alerts for Librarians" link in the right-hand column. By subscribing to the newsletter you will also receive our monthly training calendar. Training is free and open to anyone – whether subscribed to our content or not.

Both Current Protocols and ELS – the Encyclopedia of Life Science – are undergoing a facelift and their new designs will make it even easier to find new and existing information in a more user-friendly way. Look out for the new ELS interface in January 2009 and Current Protocols in March 2009.

The Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews (aka WIREs) will be launched in January 2009. WIREs is a new publishing model that combines the traditional encyclopaedia and review journals. WIREs will bring together interdisciplinary research from high-profile areas at the interface of traditional sciences such as cognitive science, nanomedicine and nanobio-technology, together with data mining and knowledge discovery.

The big development in 2009 will be the launch of the new Wiley-Blackwell online platform. At the time of writing the new system is expected to launch in mid-summer. The goal is to incorporate the best of Wiley InterScience and Blackwell Synergy. A list of planned features will be communicated closer to the launch; however I can confirm that there are plans to include access icons at the product and table of contents level, as well as Shibboleth compliance/access.

Summary

The possibilities for information publication and dissemination via the internet continue to grow at increasing speed. For every slice of useful information there is an unknown, but certainly greater, amount of useless information. Sorting through this maze is the informa-tion professional's job. Anything we, as trainers, can do to make it easier is always going to be welcome. Recognizing the difficulties and showing how, through training sessions, to work around them is my contribution to easing that load.

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