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Employee Development Using WebCT Vista

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Abstract

In an effort to make required training easily available to academic library employees, the author used the campus course management system (CMS), WebCT Vista, to create online learning modules for the library. Also discussed are general benefits of online learning, the technology competencies that prompted the development of the learning modules, and the design and components of the learning modules.

Background

Much has been written in the last few decades on distance education, from correspondence courses to synchronous training using e-meeting software. In the past 10 years a number of publications present research in the area of online bibliographic instruction. Authors also have explored distance training, the practice of providing employee development opportunities online or in some other non-face-to-face format, in an effort to "invest in their employees to ensure greater job satisfaction, enhance career development, and foster loyalty," as well as to save training costs. 1 Little has been written, however, about putting library employee training online, and most of this literature presents plans for online new employee orientation. Westwood and Johnson, for example, offer an excellent source for preparing and putting new employee orientation online.2 In another study, Haley looked at whether library employees' preferences for online training related to demographics such as age, educational level, and duration of library work experience.3 Nothing has been written specifically about using a course management system (CMS) to deliver employee training. This paper attempts to fill the identified void by describing the experience of an academic library with 150 employees that used a CMS to develop and deliver training. The issues and ideas presented should provide suggestions for other libraries with established employee training programs or that are planning training programs.

In November 2007, Georgia State University Library celebrated the grand opening of its extensively renovated spaces. Two buildings, Library North and Library South, underwent a $20 million transformation. Improved lighting, new furniture, over 50 study rooms, and expanded pedestrian bridges connecting the library buildings all have contributed toward a more welcoming, user-centered space. Students love the renovations and are spilling through the doors

in waves.
Not only were the physical spaces renovated, but the library became a bit more high-tech: Over 350 new computers were installed in the library's new Information Commons and Learning Commons. All of the computers are equipped with over 100 software programs, including the Microsoft Office products, SPSS, SAS, EndNote, and AutoCad. The library circulates laptops for use within the buildings and provides wireless Internet connectivity and wired network ports for these laptops and students' own equipment.

While the library gained more new technology, the library staff remained the same: while many employees were fairly comfortable with technology, just as many would admit to being not too technology-savvy. The library, in collaboration with the campus Information Systems & Technology (IS&T) department, established two Computer Technical Support Desks, one in the Information Commons and one in the Learning Commons, which are staffed by student employees of IS&T. The student assistants who provide support from these desks are diligent workers, and they remain quite busy. If patrons are waiting for help at the Computer Technical Support Desk or if a student assistant is away from the desk troubleshooting at a patron's computer or a printer, then library employees are expected to provide technical support, as well. With so much new technology, library administration was challenged to ensure that library employees could provide adequate technology support to patrons.

Public Services Technology Competencies

As the Training & Assessment Librarian, I anticipated the changes that would be brought about by the library's transformation and began identifying the technical skills and knowledge required of every employee working at one of the public service points: the Research Support Desk, the Media Center Desk, and the Circulation Desk. I involved representatives from the Learning Commons, Liaison & Outreach Services, and Access & Media Services departments in developing the competencies list, which we entitled the Public Services Technology Competencies. Two versions of the competencies list were created. Access & Media Services, which was not expected to provide the same level of support as other departments, followed an abbreviated version. The Learning Commons, Liaison & Outreach Services, and a few employees from various departments that work shifts at the Research Support Desk followed the complete version.
Once we finished developing the competencies list, we needed a process for assessing employees' knowledge and abilities relative to that list. We decided to allow employees to self-assess, in hopes that they would honestly evaluate what they already knew and what they needed to know. Access & Media Services determined, without pre-assessment, that all of its employees would receive all of the training offered.

I produced a checklist-style document for self-assessment and put the checklist and some related materials on the library's intranet for viewing and printing. After the Public Services Technology Competencies was presented during a monthly meeting of public services employees, I asked employees to complete the self-assessment instrument and return them to me by a stated deadline. Almost everyone turned in the self-assessments quickly, and employees seemed realistic about their knowledge and skill levels. Some employees even added additional items to

the list on which they felt they needed training, so the self-assessment became an ad-hoc survey tool, as well.

From past training requests, I anticipated the items from the competencies list that would require the most attention, and I planned some face-to-face training accordingly. Additionally, I knew some items from the competencies list would not need a full-blown face-to-face class; some would need handouts or maybe just phone calls and explanations to one or two employees. Based on immediate need, I quickly scheduled face-to-face training opportunities on using microforms and on our print management system. (The fact that our microform readers scan images to a PC-based software program made this a technology-related competency.) Handouts for these classes plus some web pages on other topics, including student logins, file management, and some databases with unusual characteristics, were posted on the technology competencies intranet page (see figure 1). In some cases, when only one employee needed help with a particular item on the list of competencies, I scheduled a one-on-one training session.

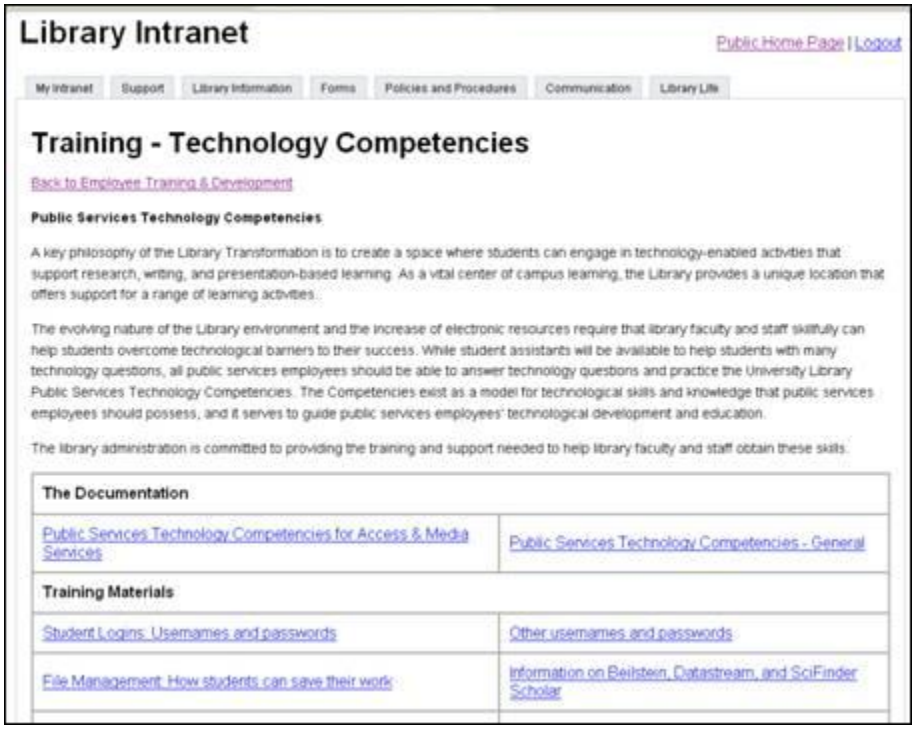

Figure 1. Competencies information on the library intranet

Issues

Based on the self-assessments, employees needed much more training than just print management and microforms. This was exciting for me, since employee development is my job, but very difficult given the number of employees affected and their work schedules. As is the case in most libraries, University Library employees' varied work schedules make scheduling face-to-face training very difficult. On a typical weekday the library is open to employees from 7 AM to 12 AM. We have full-time, 9 AM - 5 PM employees; full-time employees who work only evenings and weekends; part-time employees; and many employees who take advantage of our flex-time system to start and leave early, start and leave late, or stretch the day to

accommodate several hours off to attend a university class. Another consideration was that employees who needed to acquire the expertise outlined in the competencies document all work at a public service point, which makes scheduling training even more difficult due to desk shifts that must be covered.

An additional factor of planning training was that face-to-face instruction, while ideal for information retention and participant engagement, is impractical when only a few employees need training on the topic being presented. The self-assessments uncovered some topics with which nearly every employee felt comfortable, but the few who indicated they needed training could not be ignored. I needed a way to provide the competencies information to everyone, regardless of work schedule. It was also necessary to provide the information in such a way that topics could be skipped by those who knew the information well. The obvious solution was self-paced, online training.

There are three major benefits to providing employee training online. The first is making the content available in a format that allows employees to access the content when it is convenient for them. Rather than committing 1.5 hours to a class on Tuesday at 2 PM, for example, they can spend 15 minutes here, 30 minutes there, devoting time to the content when they can. With over 50 public services staff members covering 97.5 service hours a week, this was an important consideration for our library. Another major benefit is that online training can be just-in-time training. The day that an employee struggles with releasing a print job for a student, for example, she can access the online course for a refresher on the topic. The third benefit is to the trainer. Providing face-to-face training for the two or three people who need it is inefficient. On the other hand, presenting a class and requiring all employees to attend often causes much employee frustration and leads to more questions from employees later, because the training lacks any context.

The next issue to think about was what form the online training should take. In a previous position as Instructional Design Librarian for another institution, I created a number of web-based tutorials for students and for library employees. These were fairly basic, and some had short quizzes built in as assessment tools. I wanted the competencies training tool to be more dynamic than these static, web-based tutorials. Our library currently uses an intranet for internal communication, and we also use a wiki for collaborative projects. I did not believe that the collaborative nature of the wiki would be an appropriate medium for conveying the technology competencies training. I needed a way to monitor employee progress, since employees were not being asked simply to review the information, but rather to become proficient in particular skills and knowledge. The intranet would not inherently provide a system for monitoring progress.

I decided to take advantage of our campus course management system (CMS), WebCT Vista. I had experience using WebCT Vista to create library instruction modules and from collaborating with a teaching faculty member in my previous position as Instructional Design Librarian, so I was familiar with the interface and had received training on WebCT Vista. I needed to incorporate an assessment instrument into the online training, and WebCT provides tools that allow for easy creation of quizzes with a variety of question types. For all of these reasons, WebCT seemed like a simple and logical solution to deliver employee training.

General Benefits of Using a Course Management System

A course management system such as WebCT Vista offers a number of general benefits to the instructor and the students. Online course instructors/designers have available to them multiple formats in which they can deliver course content, from podcasts to printable PDF worksheets.[4] Another benefit to the instructor is the ease of updating course content.[5] Instructors can login to their courses from anywhere in order to make changes and correct errors. Online instruction means that all students are receiving the same basic information, which allows instructors more time to focus on the specific needs and dynamics of each particular class.[6] As class needs change, ease of expanding the course is another benefit to putting a course online. Adding any component—another web page, another section or unit, an additional assessment, or another video or audio file—is simple, and dropping components is just as easy.

Course monitoring is simple, as well. Once students are added to a course, the instructor can track all students' activities through the CMS.[7] Most CMS's provide information such as which students have accessed the course; how many students currently are logged in to the course and who they are; students' assessment scores; and even how much time they have spent logged into a course. All discussions, chats, and email messages shared by instructors and students through the CMS are retained, creating a communication record.[8]

Students experience a number of benefits in the online classroom, too, the main one being flexibility. Although the face-to-face interaction with instructors and other students is missing, online students appreciate the flexible, anytime/anywhere model of distance education.[9] Online students who want to discuss an issue with an instructor are not bound by the instructor's office availability.[10] Course management systems allow students to communicate with the instructor, and vice versa, using email, chat, and discussion boards, all built into the CMS interface. Students who normally might be timid about participating in a discussion, answering or asking questions in a traditional classroom might be more inclined to "speak up" on a discussion board or chat session, since there is a certain anonymity in an online class.[11] Students also might appreciate that online discussion seems to be a more democratic forum than the traditional classroom, which can be dominated by the instructor.[12] Online students like that they tend to receive more individualized attention from the instructor than they do in traditional classes.[13] Online instructors are more inclined to give ongoing feedback to every student, whereas in traditional classes, instructors typically give the most feedback to students who participate the most.

The general benefits of using a CMS for traditional education carry over to employee training. Trainers can present content in a variety of formats and take advantage of the monitoring features to keep track of employee progress. Employees can fit training into their work schedules more easily and interact with the trainer to get clarification.

Constructing the Learning Modules

To begin setting up the technology competencies course in WebCT, I contacted the WebCT support desk on campus. Since I am library faculty and not "teaching" faculty, I explained why I

wanted a course and provided my WebCT user name. Within 24 hours of my request, the support desk created a course with me as the instructor. It was that simple.

Learning modules in WebCT can contain "content pages," which look and function like standard web pages. A content page either can be created outside of WebCT and uploaded into a database of files within WebCT, or the instructor can create content files within WebCT. WebCT even has an HTML editor, so the instructor does not have to code pages (but that option is available, too). Other component options that can be added to learning modules are URLs, which link to web content outside of WebCT; assessments; whiteboards; chats; discussions; assignments; and syllabi. WebCT automatically generates a sidebar on the left side of each learning module, and each component of the learning module is a navigational link in the sidebar.

I presented the technology competencies course content in eight learning modules that can be taken independently to make it easy for the employee who has a mastery of some of the topics and does not need to access all of it, and also easy for the employee who wants a refresher on a particular topic. I chose to create my own content pages, so that I could incorporate a style sheet. I uploaded the Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) file like I uploaded the content pages, and WebCT recognized and applied the style just fine. Some content I wanted to incorporate into the modules existed elsewhere—mainly on the library's intranet and on the university's public web site. Rather than duplicating this content on the new content pages and having to monitor changes at all of the original source pages, I used WebCT's URL feature, which allows for linking to a web page and displaying it within WebCT. I linked to various pages of the Research Support Desk Manual on the intranet, other intranet pages I had created, and web pages from the university's Digital Aquarium, the high-end, multimedia campus computer lab, and the Instructional Technology Center (see figures 2 and 3).

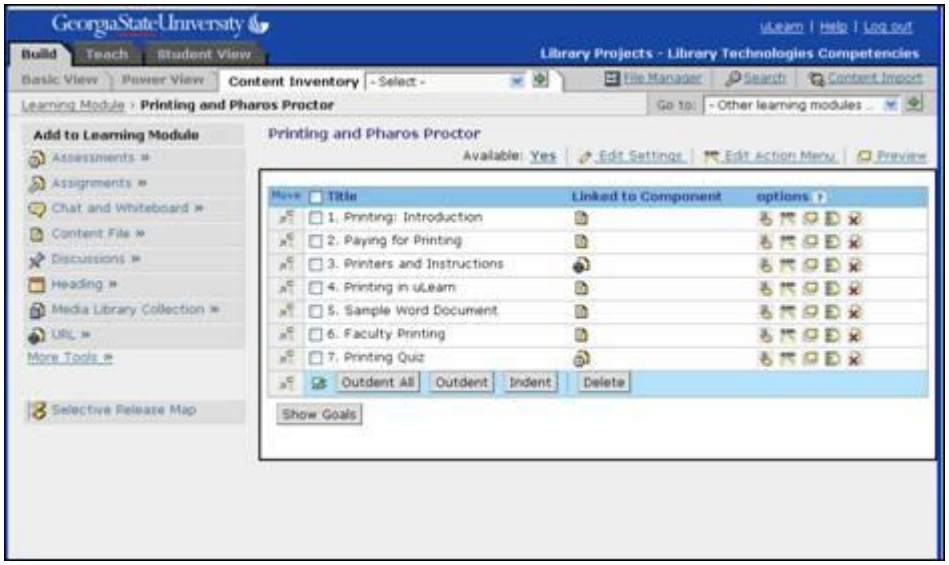

Figure 2. The design/editing side of one of the learning modules

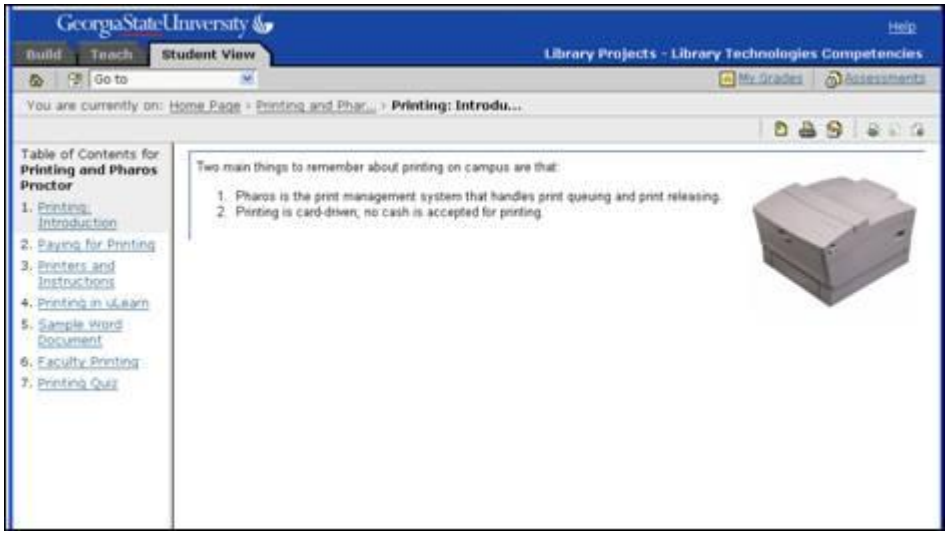

Figure 3. The student view of the same learning module

Incorporating Videos and YouTube

Some of the most frequently checked items on the technology competencies self assessments were the items having to do with microforms—loading microfilm and fiche, advancing, focusing, scanning, printing, and other topics. I scheduled face-to-face sessions on using the microform readers and scanning software, but this is use-it-or-lose-it technology; i.e., if you neglect to use it regularly, you forget how. I made three short videos on loading microfilm; loading microfiche; and zooming, focusing, and rotating microforms. I created a library training account at YouTube (http://www.youtube.com) and uploaded the videos there. YouTube provides a piece of code with each video that allows the video to be embedded in a web page. I used this code to embed each video into its own content file (see figure 4). The videos were the most popular item among all of the learning modules, and they even received a few ratings and comments from external viewers who found them by searching YouTube.

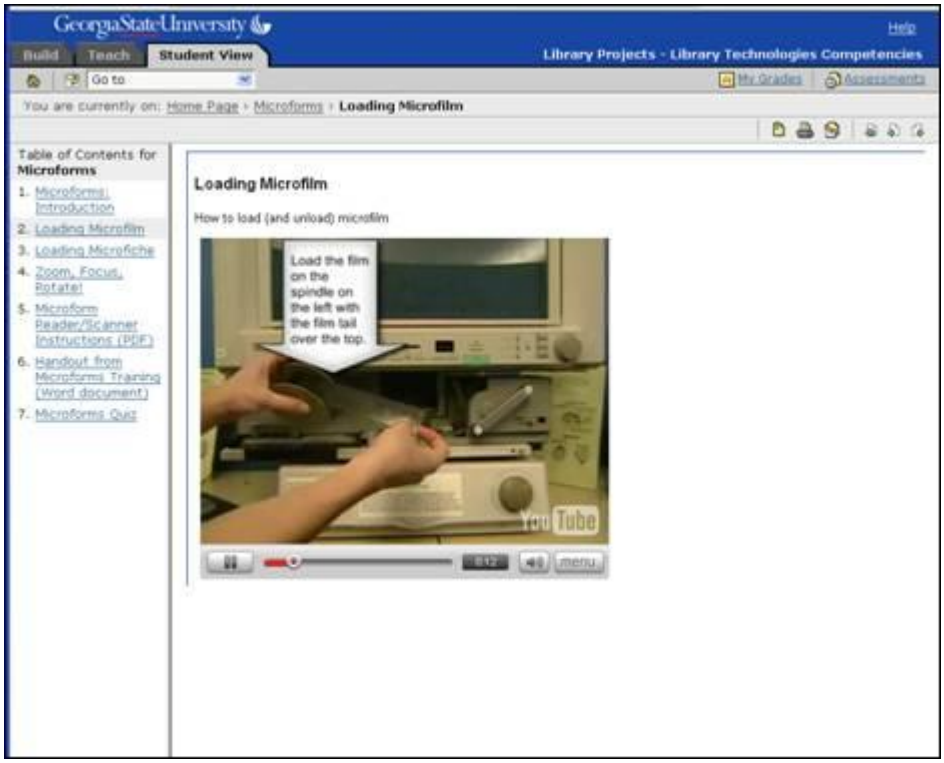

Figure 4. Loading Microfilm video

Camtasia Screen Animations

One learning module was devoted to software applications that are available from library computers. Employees are expected to be able to provide basic support on the Microsoft Office applications Word, PowerPoint, and Excel. These "basic support" tasks are best learned by observing and practicing, so I developed eight short screen animation videos using Macromedia Camtasia (see figure 5).

When the library upgraded to Microsoft Office 2007, these animations came in particularly handy. Most employees attended at least one Office 2007 training class, but the animations highlighted very specific tasks that fall in the use-it-or-lose-it category and with which students frequently request help. Animated tutorial topics included: printing gridlines in Excel; changing margins, changing page orientation, adding footnotes, and inserting a table in Word; and animating objects, applying slide transition, and applying a theme in PowerPoint. The longest animated tutorial was two minutes, and the shortest was 30 seconds.

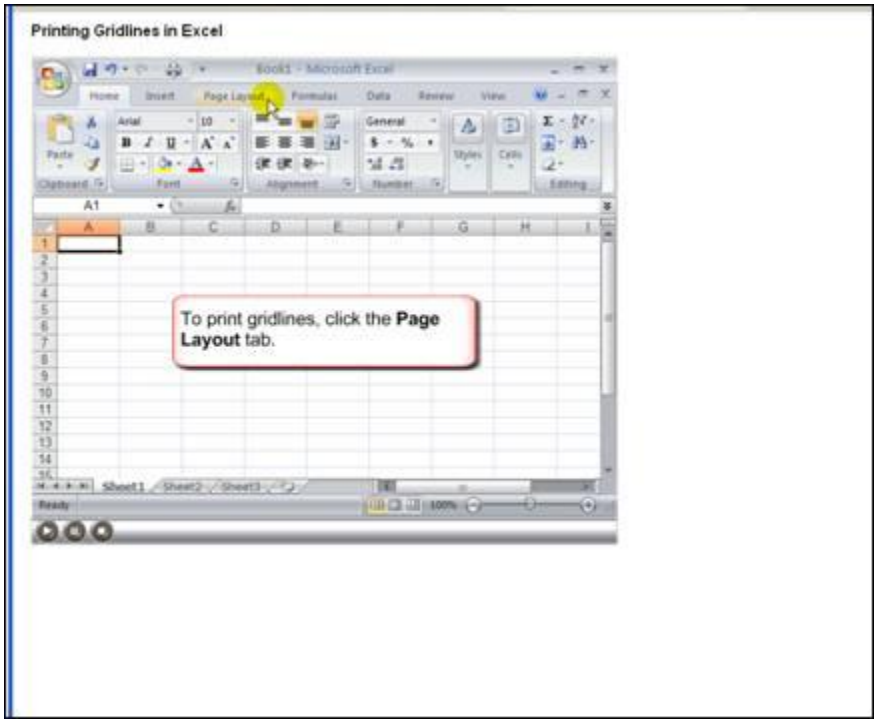

Figure 5. Sample screen animation tutorial: Printing Gridlines in Excel

Assessments

As noted previously, course management systems, WebCT included, provide tools that allow for easy creation of quizzes and other assessment items. Our campus also has Respondus and Quiz Master site licenses, so I was not limited to WebCT's native assessment tools, although they are what I used. WebCT Vista allows for complete customization of assessments. The instructor can set when to display the assessment, the number of tries a student is allowed for each assessment, how long a student is given to complete the assessment, whether the questions are delivered all at once or one at a time, and other options. It is also quite flexible as to how answers can be submitted; for example, if there is more than one correct answer, then the instructor can indicate multiple correct answers and WebCT will recognize all that are entered. WebCT maintains records for the instructor, including quiz attempts and quiz scores for each student.
In the case of the technology competencies quizzes, I chose to use build a brief quiz within each learning module. I employed multiple choice, single response; multiple choice, multiple response; true/false; and fill in the blank question types (see figure 6). The quizzes are between 3 and 6 questions and graded, and the grades are recorded in the instructor's WEBCT Vista grade book. This allowed me to check progress, find out who had completed all of the assessments, and give progress reports to supervisors. I allowed for two tries per quiz, and I imposed a time limit of five minutes on each quiz. Even considering these limits, the quizzes were not designed to be difficult. All of the questions could be answered from content within each learning module. In fact, employees were free to "cheat" and look back over the module content for help answering the questions (although this bonus feature was not advertised). The intent was to provide a review for employees and to highlight the important pieces of information.

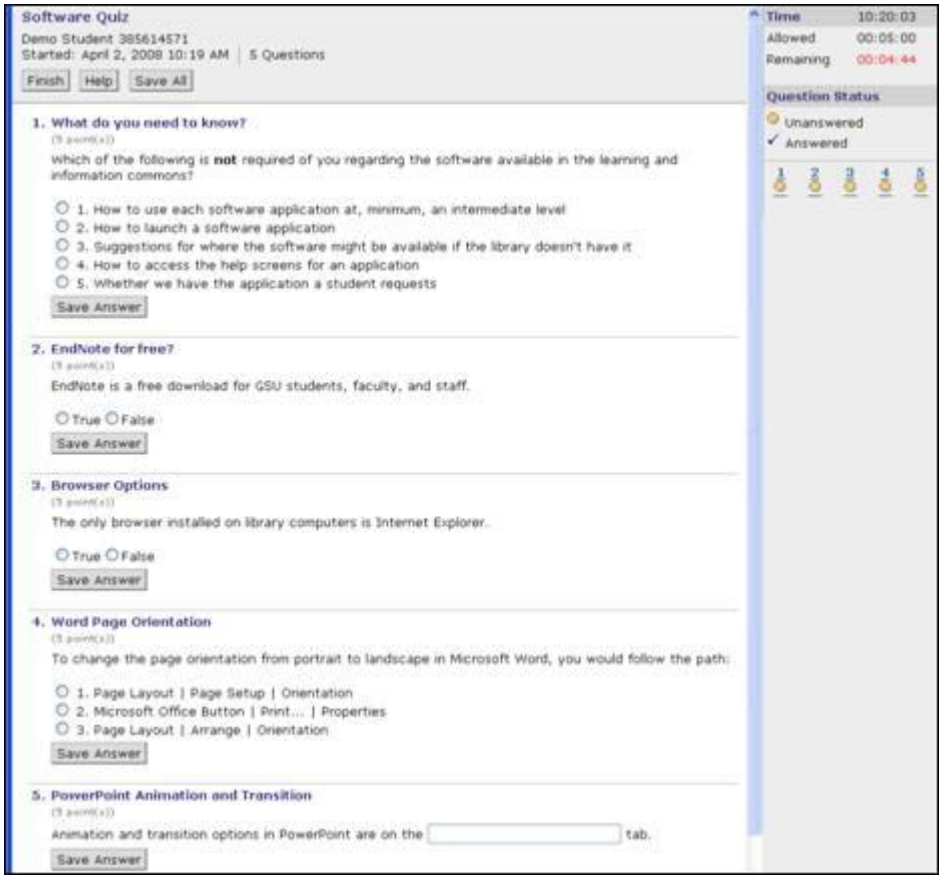

Figure 6. Sample quiz

Testing

Once I completed the first draft of the modules, I recruited testers from among the group of employees who would be using the tutorials for training. I wanted employees to review and test the content who were somewhat familiar with and who had a stake in the content. Three testers provided valuable, thorough suggestions and corrections. After testing was completed and the modules had been edited, the Public Services Technology Competencies course was announced to all relevant employees along with login instructions.

The Challenges

The greatest challenge in implementing this technology competencies training plan was getting buy-in from three department heads and approximately 50 employees. One department head imposed a deadline for employees to complete the learning modules, which helped to motivate the employees in that department. Some employees were reluctant to complete the modules, because they believed they would be quite time-consuming. I assured them that, based on testing, all of the modules together would take fewer than 2 hours to complete and reminded them that the modules did not have to be taken in sequence or in one sitting. These assurances proved to motivate some employees. Other employees did not see this as serious training, because 1) it was online, and 2) it was not fully endorsed by their department heads. For a project like this to have the greatest impact, completion of the training should be tied to employee goals or evaluation.

Employees continue to ask me questions about and request training on topics covered in the learning modules.

Another challenge was accessing the course in WebCT Vista. Some employees have student and employee status, which means that they have two usernames and did not know which one to use. Library faculty have a different username format than staff, so login instructions had to be very specific. The WebCT support unit on our campus was not very helpful with the login process. I requested a list of usernames from the support unit so that I at least could tell employees their usernames, but they would not provide a list for security reasons. The support unit told me to instruct employees to contact them for login assistance. I wanted to be able to help employees and cut out the third party, but unfortunately, I could not avoid this additional layer of red tape. Most employees were able to access the course without any problems, but a few employees had to go back and forth with me and the WebCT support unit before they could log in successfully. Although the learning modules were straightforward and testing proved them simple to navigate, a potential challenge is employees experiencing difficulties navigating a complex training tool.[14] A face-to-face orientation, perhaps held during a meeting at which the training is announced, could save employees' time and prevent frustration in the long run.

The Successes

While I have not created any follow-up assessment tool to evaluate employees' feelings on how the technology competencies learning modules helped them better perform their jobs, the training appears to have been successful. Anecdotally, through conversations and emails, I know that employees appreciated being able to work at their own pace and the ability to review modules at will. Employees liked the different types of content, especially the videos and screen animations, and some genuinely were concerned when they didn't score 100% on every quiz. Everyone wanted to succeed.

Supervisors appreciated getting reports on who had completed the required modules. A module was considered completed when an employee took the quiz for that module and passed. While other information is available to the instructor, including time spent in the modules and exact quiz scores, no supervisors requested this information.
Overall, employees now seem more comfortable with the technology the library provides, which I believe can be attributed to their knowing where they can find the information they need to learn about the technology. Employees' anxiety about the library providing access to an array of resources combined with no central place to go to learn about them led some people to believe they knew less than they did. Now employees know where they can go to find out more about, for example, student logins, printing, and whom to contact when they need next-tier technical support.

Moving On

The success of the technology competencies modules encouraged me to use WebCT to deliver additional training opportunities. In fall 2007, the Customer Service Working Group created a customer service policy for the library. The library had provided customer service training occasionally over the years, but it was never focused or specific to University Library, since the

library never had a defined customer service policy statement. In December 2007, the library adopted the University Library User Service Statement. At the time the new policy was implemented, the older training policy was amended to require that library employees receive customer service training during their first year of employment and every three years thereafter.

The Customer Service Working Group anticipated easy passage of the policy and already had begun creating training that would introduce library employees to the new policy and that would fulfill the new requirement that new employees complete customer service training within their first year. The training class "Customer Service the University Library Way" was offered in January 2008. The training consisted of an introduction outlining the necessity of good, consistent customer service and what the new user service statement means for library employees. This was followed by volunteer actors and actresses from the library staff enacting the five tenets of the user service statement. The class was offered two times in a face-to-face format, but even with the two sessions on different days and at different times of the day, we could not accommodate everyone who wished or needed to attend.

A member of the user service working group and a library assistant in the Collection Development who was also a film major brainstormed the idea to videotape the training class scenarios in order to use them again. The Collection Development assistant was willing to videotape one of the classes for use in future training sessions. He also recruited an associate in another campus office to help with the taping.

The first training session went well and the scenarios were well-received by the audience. The scenarios generated discussion, as well as laughter, and based on anecdotes and evaluation form feedback, made much more of an impact on employees than generic customer service workshops we have hosted in the past. The second session was videotaped, and the cinematographers generously gave their time to edit the videos, as well.

As the film was edited, I worked on the text that would take the place of the face-to-face class introduction, discussion prompts, and brainstorming. Once the videos were edited and ready to go online, I put everything in WebCT modules. Each module covers one of the five tenets of the user service statement. The employee accessing the modules online will read a bit about the tenet, watch the video depicting that aspect of the policy, and then react, based on questions presented in the module, to what occurred in the scenario as compared to the policy. At the end of each module, the employee will take a quiz that will tie everything together. I can generate reports on who completed training and when it was completed, and the results can be documented for the employee's human resources file since we now have a customer service training requirement. After completing the online component, employees will be asked to attend a face-to-face, 30-minute debriefing and discussion session. This undermines the convenience of the online course, but I believe it is necessary given the nature of the topic and the content.

By putting this training online, it will be easy for employees to get the refresher training they need without having to wait for the next face-to-face class. Brand-new employees will be encouraged to attend face-to-face training, but seasoned employees who need their three-year refresher can review the WebCT modules.

Keeping it Fresh

I review the technology competencies modules quarterly to update the content, and the next update will include an online evaluation form for the whole course. Employees also are reliable about sending me corrections and suggestions as they work through the modules, and I encourage and rely on their ongoing feedback

The Customer Service Working Group has plans to upgrade the WebCT Vista customer service videos. The original videos were shot in a meeting room with unrealistic backgrounds and few props. We plan to act out the scenarios again at the actual public service desks in order to make more authentic recordings. The learning modules will remain in WebCT, but employees will be able to relate to them better.

Conclusions

Although a face-to-face, hands-on class is sometimes the most desirable format for technology training, efficiency and outreach to the greatest number of employees also are important considerations. Putting technology training online can reach a larger employee audience while maximizing convenience to the individual learner. With proper planning and the incorporation of highly engaging and interactive content, the reach of online learning can go beyond technical topics. Effective training on soft-skills topics—like customer service skills—can also be put online.

When planning employee development, inventory the skills and tasks necessary for the project, and then honestly evaluate your strengths. Investigate what campus technologies exist and what technological support is available to you.15 If your campus uses a CMS; provides quiz-development software; and/or offers support through workshops, consultations with instructional technologists, and the use of a technology lab; then use these resources before you invest in them or try to train yourself on using them. Seek out the people who can help you produce the best product by providing their expertise.16

The experience of delivering training using a CMS at Georgia State has shown how this effort can benefit both the employee and the library. Employees appreciate the convenience and efficiency of the online training opportunities created for them, and they easily can keep their skills and knowledge current. Their technological proficiency means that they can provide outstanding service and support to patrons, which, in turn, benefits the library.

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