



Evidence Summary

Public Library Clients Prefer Formal Classes for Initial Training on Library's Online Resources and Informal, On-Demand Assistance for Further Training

A Review of:

Ruthven, J. (2010). Training needs and preferences of adult public library clients in the use of online resources. *The Australian Library Journal*, 59(3), 108-117.

Reviewed by:

Diana K. Wakimoto
Online Literacy Librarian, California State University, East Bay
Doctoral Student, San Jose-QUT Gateway Program
Hayward, California, United States of America
Email: diana.wakimoto@csueastbay.edu

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Abstract

Objective – To discover public library clients' needs and preferences for modes of training on the use of the Internet and the libraries' online resources and to apply these findings to improve training offered by public library staff.

Design – Multiple exploratory case study.

Setting – Two public libraries in New South Wales, Australia: a regional library (Mudgee Branch of the Mid-Western Regional Council Library Service) and a metropolitan library (Marrickville Central Library).

Subjects – A total of 24 public library clients. The participants were split evenly between the

two libraries, with 12 from the Mudgee Branch and 12 from the Marrickville Central. The respondents were further subdivided into two groups based on age (35 to 44 years old and 65 or older) and evenly distributed by sex within the groups.

Methods – This study used naturalistic inquiry to frame the multiple exploratory case study of two public libraries. Ruthven used maximum variation sampling to guide the selection of participants. Library staff helped the researcher to identify possible participants at Marrickville, while the researcher advertised for participants at Mudgee Library and at an Internet/database course taught at the Mudgee Business Enterprise Centre. She used snowball sampling to find additional participants at both sites. Ruthven conducted semi-structured

interviews with the participants, with questions covering their preferences, recommendations, and needs for online resource training. The data from the interviews and search logs were analyzed using inductive data analysis.

Main Results – Participants preferred small group, face-to-face, formalized instruction for initial training on online resources. For further training, participants preferred individualized assistance and immediate support instead of formal classes. They noted a lack of training opportunities and a lack of help from library staff as sources of frustration when trying to learn to use online resources at the public libraries.

Conclusion – Public library staff should offer formalized classes for those beginning to learn about using online resources, and focus on ad hoc, individualized assistance for more advanced learners. Since offering this type of instructional program is dependent on staff knowledge and staff availability, library staff members need to be trained in the use of online resources and classroom presentation skills.

Commentary

Ruthven's research will be of interest to those involved in computer or online training classes and planning the best allocation of resources for these classes.

The literature review's strength is its overview of previous research related to user preferences in computer training and Internet usage, with international coverage. However, spending less time on a discussion of online tutorials, which was "not a primary focus of this study" (p. 110) would have allowed Ruthven to discuss more fully the research base directly related to her study, especially the training for older adults (Dickinson, Eisma, Gregor, Syme, & Milne, 2005; Webb, 2003).

While Ruthven used a relevant methodology for her study, her procedures were not fully explained except for her selection of interview

participants, which was well-reasoned. The inclusion of the basic interview guide would have been appreciated. Additionally, Ruthven noted that she analyzed data "obtained from interviews and search logs" (p. 112), but did not explain what these logs contained or from where she obtained them.

The results were clearly reported both in the narrative and in the tables; however, while the participants were divided into multiple sub-groups, the results were only reported in the aggregate. While the tables noted some differences between the two libraries in terms of modes and content of training desired, a discussion of these results within the text, along with the percentage of participants whose responses led to these results, would have strengthened the article.

It appears from the author's biography that this article is based on Ruthven's doctoral thesis. Detail that is lacking in this article is most likely found in her thesis. This detail would have clarified the methodology and reasons for selective reporting of the findings.

The conclusions appear to be supported by the reported findings, and Ruthven does not overgeneralize her findings. Tying her findings to communications richness theory enhanced their validity, thereby strengthening her conclusions, which would have been further strengthened if quotes from the participants had been included.

This study of public library computer users' training preferences covers an important topic for public librarians and administrators who provide instruction and want to improve the effectiveness of the content and delivery mode. Future research could replicate the study in other libraries to determine the generalizability of her findings. Also, research into the effectiveness of implementing Ruthven's findings would be useful to determine how they impact adult learners.

References

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