



Evidence Summary

Face-to-face Training is the Preferred Modality of Professional Continuing Education for Librarians of All Ages, but More Evidence is Needed

A Review of:

Lynn, V. A., Bose, A., & Boehmer, S. J. (2010). Librarian instruction-delivery modality preferences for professional continuing education. *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, 98(1), 57-64.

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Abstract

Objective – To establish the preferred modality for professional continuing education (CE) among members of three library associations. The primary hypothesis was that face-to-face training is the preferred modality, and the secondary hypothesis was that younger librarians are more likely to favour online or blended training modalities. In addition, the authors sought to investigate which factors influence participants' decisions to take up training.

Design – Online questionnaire.

Setting – Three library associations based in the United States of America. These were the American Library Association (ALA), the

Special Libraries Association (SLA), and the Medical Library Association (MLA).

Subjects – A random sample of 328 members of the ALA (86 participants), SLA (63 participants), and MLA (291 participants). Some participants were members of more than one association.

Methods – Participants were recruited to complete an online survey via direct e-mail contact (MLA), messages on email discussion lists (SLA) and social networks (ALA). The survey asked about participants' experience of, and preference for, five different training modalities for CE. These were: face-to-face (classroom instruction), web-based synchronous (with real-time participant-instructor interaction), web-based

asynchronous (with instructor involvement, but not in real time), blended (a combination of different modalities), and webcasts (live online presentations with limited participant-instructor interaction). Participants were then asked to rank factors which would influence their decision to undertake CE courses. The factors were cost, opportunity to socialize/network, time away from work, learning at their own pace, and having immediate access to either the class instructor or other participants. Participants were also given space to comment on both CE modalities and influencing factors.

Main Results – There was a statistically significant preference for face-to-face instruction in this sample, being preferred by at least 73.1% of participants in all age ranges. Younger librarians did not display a preference for online or blended training modalities. There was a significant difference in second preference between ALA and MLA members, who both preferred Web based asynchronous training, and SLA members, who preferred the web-based synchronous format. Participants' preferences for all modalities apart from face to face were significantly different depending on whether or not they had experienced the particular modality. Cost was ranked as the most influential factor in the decision to undertake CE by members of all three library associations (significant at $P < 0.001$). The second most important factor was immediate access to the class instructor. This was also significantly higher than the other factors, which did not differ significantly between one another. Participants raised other issues such as the importance of the location of face to face training or hosted webcasts, and the likelihood of self paced training being put aside in favour of everyday work.

Conclusion – The results confirm the hypothesis that face to face is the preferred training modality for this sample of members of the ALA, MLA and SLA. However, the secondary hypothesis, that younger librarians are more likely to prefer online or blended training methods was disproved in this

sample. Since this is the case, and there is a strong influence of cost on the uptake of CE courses, the authors suggest that providers of CE should consider these results when planning training to suit the needs of their members.

Commentary

This article begins by giving a clear explanation of the different training modalities investigated in this study, and the contexts in which training is offered to members of the three library associations surveyed. A little more explanation could have been given to the system of professional development operated by these associations, with an unqualified mention of "credits" which may be out of context for readers who are not involved with these library associations. Hypotheses regarding participant preferences for different types of training for CE were based on a small number of studies, most of which were about health professionals rather than librarians. No hypotheses were made regarding factors influencing participants' decisions to take up training, and there was no reference to the literature on this subject. References to such studies would help readers to understand how the authors decided on the factors to include in this part of the questionnaire. The questionnaire itself has a clear and comprehensible format, and is included as an online-only appendix to the article. It is also well described in the text. The questionnaire was piloted on a group of librarians before use. The authors appear to have chosen not to collect data about the ethnic origin and gender of participants.

Face-to-face was found to be the preferred modality of CE for the sample. This finding is statistically significant, but it is important to emphasize that the sample does not represent an even distribution of members of the three library associations, with the majority coming from the MLA. This is most likely due to the fact that the authors used random and convenience sampling and had to employ different methods for contacting members of

the different associations. In addition to this, two thirds of the sample were aged over 44 years or had been working as a librarian for over 10 years, which impacts on the sample as a whole. This may have been a demographic reflection of the librarian population in the United States of America, but this was not mentioned explicitly in the text, so can only be inferred.

The participants were distributed thus: 18-34 years (n=37), 35-44 years (n=46), 45-54 years (n=106), and 55 years+ (n=135). The disproof of the secondary hypothesis, that younger participants would prefer web-based or blended training modalities, should be treated with caution on the grounds of the relatively small participant numbers in the 18-34 age group.

This study looks at an interesting topic, and uses a strong questionnaire, but further research is needed to confirm its findings. A detailed discussion of the findings in relation

to similar studies was not possible, due to the lack of such studies. The authors highlight the limitations of their research, such as the high proportion of MLA members in the sample, and the influence of experience of a training modality on their preference for it. On their own, the results of this study should not be used to inform the development of future training. There is plenty of scope, however, for further research in this area, and the authors suggest several topics for this including the relationship between the content, structure or objectives of courses and their optimal instructional modality; the inclusion of web 2.0 and mobile technologies in CE for librarians; and studying a more evenly proportioned sample across the three library associations surveyed. Other interesting topics could be a more detailed qualitative study on participants' motivations for deciding whether to undertake training, or a study of preferences from the perspective of trainers rather than participants.