The C's of Our Sea Change: Plans for Training Staff, from Core Competencies to LEARNING 2.0

BY HELENE BLOWERS AND LORI REED
“In our library’s experience, providing a staff core competency program to support the technology changes that have already happened is a wonderful complement to a self-paced discovery program like Learning 2.0.”

As anyone who has worked at the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County can tell you, the two C’s in our library’s acronym, PLCMC, primarily stand for one thing: constant change.

In libraries and other organizations alike, it seems that the word “change” has become interconnected with the word “technology.” So much so, in fact, that a whole new industry specializing in change management has been developed just to deal with the human challenges created by constant change. (See if you can say that three times fast.) Within many libraries, including our own, change management often falls to the employee-development and training team.

Here at PLCMC in North Carolina, our experience with developing training programs and learning opportunities for staff spans the entire spectrum. On one end, we’ve developed a core competencies training program. This keeps workers afloat by providing them with the technology skills they need to support the change that has already occurred. At the other end, we’ve created Learning 2.0, a discovery learning program that focuses on self-exploration and encourages staff to take up creative challenges (yup, here’s another use for those double C’s) as they learn about new technologies on their own. While neither of these programs can be mistaken as a carbon copy of the other, they both strive to produce a common connection between training and learning.

To share these models with you, Lori Reed, a training specialist at PLCMC, outlines the staff core competencies program that she developed. Then Helene Blowers, technology director at PLCMC, explains how she built on that program with Learning 2.0.

Conquering a Decade of Change

If the last decade alone has taught library staff anything, it’s that we can’t ignore technology. Today, staff members in all positions, including custodians and senior managers, need to interact with computers. The days of simply sticking an out-of-order sign on a printer because you don’t know how to change the ink cartridge are long gone. Or are they?

Although no conscientious staff member wants to admit that such things happen at his or her branch, the truth is that we all know they do. Out-of-order signs get placed on PCs because workers don’t know the passwords. Simple boot-up problems created by floppy disks left in disk drives can prompt panic calls that require a scheduled technician visit. Most of the time, these types of problems can easily be addressed with a little knowledge and training built around a set of staff core competencies.

In our library system, a structured staff core competencies program grew out of a need to reorganize our IT support structure. We also wanted to provide workers with a basic skill set that would support the day-to-day technology functions required by their jobs.

My position as core competency trainer originated from this reorganization. My goal was to develop and implement a structured competency program for more than 500 staff members at 24 locations. I wanted to provide the training and resources that all workers need to improve our technology-support service to patrons.

My first task was to research what had been done in other libraries. In reviewing our system’s needs, I saw that after nearly a decade of continuous change, technology was a part of almost every core library service that we offered. It therefore needed to be supported at all staff levels. A quick Google search gave me a selection of sample core competencies for libraries. I eventually based our program on the original list of competencies created by our IT department. I then modeled our competencies on the two-tiered list established by the State Library of North Carolina.

My 6 years of experience as an automation support coordinator for PLCMC helped me realize what staff members at all levels needed to know so they didn’t feel like they were in over their heads. I worked closely with our IT department to find out what it wanted staff to know and what kinds of questions were coming in to our help desk. Our competencies eventually evolved into a four-tiered list of more than 100.
Four Tiers of Core Competencies

The PLCMC Information Technology Core Competencies are set up as building blocks for staff members to provide them with a firm foundation in using computers and technology. The training that’s based on these building blocks allowed them to learn more about computers and technology as well as strengthen their existing technology skills. All of this enabled workers to perform their jobs better and to assist the public more effectively. Core I is the foundation for all other competencies; each tier builds upon the previous one.

Before training could begin, I needed to conduct a preassessment to get an idea of what the staff already knew. In November 2005, with help from our Web services department, I put an online version of the core competencies checklist on our intranet and used Microsoft Access to store the data. Each staff member could go into the intranet and update his or her checklist periodically. Additionally, managers and supervisors could access their employees’ checklists to follow their progress.

After running the first round of reports, I determined that the majority of our staff needed training in computer hardware and troubleshooting. Because it’s best to learn about these two subjects by doing, I conducted the first round of training in a classroom setting. This first session, Computer Hardware the Easy Way, allowed workers to get hands-on experience by opening the PC case, learning the names of all the components, and, the staff favorite, taking apart a floppy disk to see how it works. Since some folks couldn’t make it to this session, I asked that attendees go back and train at least two co-workers who weren’t there. Not only did this bring the learning experience back to those who couldn’t attend, but it also helped reinforce what participants learned in training.

My training partner, Julia Lanham, put together an online tutorial that provided an additional option for those who couldn’t attend the training or just wanted a review. For subsequent training, we relied heavily on online tutorials and tip sheets. Because I created hyperlinks from the core competencies checklist to these tutorials, the very act of completing the checklist became a learning experience.

A few weeks after the hardware training, I received the following comment: “About a week or two before the Hardware the Easy Way class, a patron told me there was something wrong with my mouse while I was working on the Circulation Desk. After this class, I went back to work and cleaned the mouse. I noticed a very big difference in ‘mouse performance.’ I did not know they could be cleaned!” Comments like this reinforce the importance of this basic training.

As a follow-up to the classroom training, I visited each of our 24 locations to offer small-group and one-on-one sessions. Our training for Core I began in January 2006. By March 2006, we went from an average staff competency score of 71 percent to 95 percent. We’re currently training for Core IV.

Covering New Change

The core competencies program that Lori developed has helped staff members become comfortable with the skills they need to support the technology we already have. But our library system also needed to find a training approach to help them keep up with new and emerging technology.

As technology director for PLCMC, part of my charge is to continually evaluate and introduce technologies that can help the library offer new services as well as reach out to new users. Over the past few years, I’ve worked
on many initiatives that have helped PLCMC move forward. But as anyone who deals with hardware or software can tell you, the benefits that you get from technology tools are only as good as the skills of the operator. Without knowledgeable or skilled workers, implementing new technology within your library can be fruitless. Therefore, I feel it’s important to maintain a significant focus on educating staff.

In the course of trying to come up with a training program to introduce these new technology tools—which are collectively called Web 2.0—I first started a Tech Talk series that offered training on blogging, RSS and newsreaders, downloadable audiobooks, and podcasting. This traditional teaching model worked well for those who could attend the workshops. But as the workshop series entered its fourth month of only reaching a limited number of staff members, it became apparent that I needed a different approach.

Traditional classroom instruction is wonderful when you have a captive audience and time on your side. But with these new tools exploding all over the Internet and gaining popularity as fast as you can say “YouTube” three times, I began to realize that there was no way we could physically train even our librarians, let alone all of our staff, at anywhere near the rate that the tools were gaining acceptance. As I pondered this dilemma even more, it dawned on me that I shouldn’t be focusing my efforts on developing a new training curriculum. What I needed to do was create a program that would encourage staff to utilize lifelong learning skills of their own. Enter the idea of Learning 2.0.

Creating New Challenges

Learning 2.0 is an online self-discovery program that encourages library professionals and other employees to dive right into new technologies, specifically Web 2.0 tools (blogs, wikis, podcasts, online applications, etc.), and rewards them for completing 23 “Things” (or small exercises) on their own. It’s based on “43 Things You (or I) Might Want to Do This Year,” an article written by Stephen Abram (Information Outlook, February 2005). The program is built on the idea that participants learn best when they’re engaged in their own learning and are motivated to learn.

In developing this program, which I launched in August 2006, I chose to spread the discovery exercises out over 9 weeks to give staff ample time to complete them. I also didn’t want to overwhelm these folks with too many new concepts at once. This approach seemed to work well for most staff, even those who didn’t jump in until the fifth or sixth week. Spreading the program out over several months also created an unanticipated benefit for participants. While staff members were busy learning about all these new social networking tools, they were also experiencing a real online social network for themselves through their blogs.

Best Practices for Learning 2.0

Thinking about creating a Learning 2.0 program for your staff? These are some best practices:

- Design the program for late bloomers.
- Allow participants to blog anonymously.
- Use 1.0 methods to continually communicate with participants.
- Focus on discovery and offer optional challenges.
- Encourage staff members to work together.
- Remember, it’s not about doing it right. It’s about exposure.
- Practice transparency and radical trust.
- Continually encourage staff to “play.”

For further information about these best practices, see Helene Blowers’ blog at http://librarybytes.com/learning2.html.
Blogging was one of the predominant activities of Learning 2.0 in that participants were required to record thoughts about their discoveries through personal blogs. Since the prospect of publishing personal thoughts on the Web was scary for many participants, I allowed them to blog anonymously. For tracking purposes, the program also utilized a log (basically an Access database on our staff intranet) that allowed only me to see who was participating and how many of the exercises he or she had completed. In retrospect, this decision was one of the best things about the program. It not only gave those who were uncomfortable with publishing their thoughts a nonthreatening way to participate, but it also increased the fun as staff members tried to figure out who was blogging as whom.

Other than exploring the 23 Things, the exercises themselves had very few requirements and focused on encouraging discovery rather than on following step-by-step instructions for “doing it right.” For those who wanted more, we added optional challenges. For example, during the third week’s exploration exercises, participants were simply asked to take a look at Flickr, the popular, free image-hosting site, and to blog about a photo they liked. Those who wanted more were encouraged to create their own account, upload a photo, and tag it with a unique tag—PLCMCL2—to associate it with other participants’ photos. I wasn’t surprised to see so many people taking up these extra challenges. It reiterated what I have always known: Libraries are full of high achievers.

Chasing Carrots
The motivation part of this program was funded from a staff development budget and rewarded everyone who completed it with a new MP3 player. In creating an original budget for incentives, I selected an MP3 player as the prize because it provided staff with a useful tool to support one of our library’s existing services: downloadable audiobooks. I originally budgeted $35 per player for each person but through a great closeout offer was able to purchase a much better player with lots of extra features (a 1-gigabyte SanDisk) for just a few dollars more. Drawings for a new laptop and PDA were also thrown into the prize pool. As one savvy children’s manager said to me one day, “Learning 2.0 was merely summer reading for kids repackaged with different incentives for staff.”

In analyzing the staff’s participation, it was clear to me that these incentives helped. In total, 352 staff members started the optional program on their own. In the end, 226 were rewarded with an MP3 player for completing the 23 exercises. But the reward of finishing the program was much more than a new gadget. As one staff member noted in her blog, “It helps to have nice little incentives of course, but I think the true reward (whether or not we want to admit it) is that we’re improving our minds and keeping up with the zooming world of technology that is around us.”

PLCMC Learning 2.0
The 9-week program introduced employees to 23 discovery exercises they could do to develop their knowledge about emerging technologies.

- Week 1: Introduction
- Week 2: Blogging
- Week 3: Photos & Images
- Week 4: RSS & Newsreaders
- Week 5: Play week
- Week 6: Tagging & Folksonomies
- Week 7: Wikis
- Week 8: Online applications & tools
- Week 9: Podcasts, Videos, & Downloadable audio plus 1 month of extra exploration time

http://plcmcl2-things.blogspot.com

Celebrating Community
“How Learning 2.0 fostered teamwork and true fun I could write about for hours. Every time someone finished, we all celebrated with them.” This thought, posted by a branch manager in her blog, expresses what’s truly best about this unique approach to learning: teamwork and community. Through the process of blogging itself, workers experienced an online community. But the ad-

Sites You Can Check for Details

PLCMC Core Competency blog
http://plcmccore.blogspot.com

PLCMC Information Technology Core Competencies

PLCMC Learning 2.0
http://plcmclearning.blogspot.com

Learning 2.0: 23 Things
http://plcmcl2-things.blogspot.com

Learning 2.0 Best Practices
http://librarybytes.com/learning2.html
Motivational poster that staff member Mary Kyle created with Fd’s Flickr Toys

Copy-Cat Learning 2.0

Since launching Learning 2.0, I’ve been contacted by at least 2 dozen other libraries that wanted advice on how to develop programs of their own. The great thing about Learning 2.0 is that I created it with the same free Web 2.0 tools that it introduces to staff. I used Blogger.com to publish all the exercises, Bloglines for tracking all staff members’ blogs via RSS, Odeo to host the podcasts, Flickr for photos, and YouTube for videos. Because these tools are free and open, you don’t need your own Web server or domain to create an online program. You really just need ideas and effort. (A good memory for multiple login accounts helps too.) But even with all of these tools, you really don’t have to re-create this stuff from scratch (unless of course you want to).

Utilizing a Creative Commons license, I’ve made all of the content on the Web site available for anyone to use, and several libraries already have. In October 2006, the Yarra Plenty Regional Library system in Melbourne, Australia, launched Learning 2.0. And closer to home, the Missouri River Regional Library has expanded the program to 29 Things to include discovery exercises for MySpace, Gmail, and more. With so many new tools and technologies emerging these days, there’s always room to improve the Learning 2.0 concept and to prepare for the next wave of technology.

Supporting Constant Change

With so much dependence on technology in addition to all of the emerging technologies that allow librarians to create new forms of service and reach out in new ways to users, we think it’s important to have a staff development and training program that approaches learning on many levels. In our library’s experience, providing a staff core competency program to support the sea changes that have already happened is a wonderful complement to a self-paced discovery program like Learning 2.0. Each is unique in its goals and objectives, and each approaches learning from very different angles.

In the end, what’s most important for our library system isn’t the selected methodology or training approach. It’s that these programs work together to create an environment that continuously encourages staff members to learn together as they ride the ebb and flow of the seas (and C’s) of constant change.

Helene Blowers is the technology director for the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County (N.C.). She holds a B.A. in organizational communication from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is the co-author of Weaving a Library Web: A Guide to Developing Children’s Websites. She publishes her thoughts on libraries and technologies at LibraryBytes (www.librarybytes.com) and attributes her accomplishments within libraries to a strong commitment in empowering users. Her email address is hblowers@plcmc.org.

Lori Reed is a training specialist for the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County. She has an associate degree from Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, N.C., and is completing her B.S. in communication at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C. She is a member of the American Society for Training & Development and has been in the training field for 15 years, the past 7 at PLCMC. You can follow along with her Learning 2.0 journey at http://learningexpress.blogspot.com. Her email address is lreed@plcmc.org.
Copyright of Computers in Libraries is the property of Information Today Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.