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### Training to Learn: Developing an Interactive, Collaborative Circulation-Reference Training Program for Student Workers

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# Training to Learn: Developing an Interactive, Collaborative Circulation-Reference Training Program for Student Workers

*Laura Surtees\**

## Introduction

Situated in the immediate line-of-sight of library entrances, service desks, whether circulation, reference, or information commons, serve as the first point of contact between library patrons and library staff.<sup>1</sup> At college and research libraries, these desks are increasingly staffed by student workers who field a barrage of navigational, technological, or reference-related questions and act as mediators between patrons and professional librarians. Students unfamiliar with the library, its resources, or the research process are more likely to turn to a peer rather than approaching a librarian. Financial and personnel constraints result in libraries relying on student workers for evening and weekend staffing, thereby increasing the volume and diversity of their patron interactions.<sup>2</sup> Thus, student workers at service desks play a pivotal role in disseminating information about library facilities and resources to patrons.

These first interactions with student workers contribute significantly to the user experience and perceptions of library services.<sup>3</sup> This significant responsibility therefore requires librarians to think more holistically about job training in order to prepare students for communicating with patrons and creating positive interactions. In my capacity as Coordinator of Rhys Carpenter Library at Bryn Mawr College, I supervise the circulation desk and train student workers. In the fall of 2018, I revamped the circulation desk training program to be a pedagogically sound and comprehensive program that is focused on customer service, library basics, and information literacy through active learning and in particular a peer-learning model.

Peer-learning has proven to be a useful methodological tool for training tutors in various situations in higher education, including writing programs and reference services, and it can be easily applied to circulation training.<sup>4</sup> It is the process of learning from and with peers and provides a method of information acquisition through collaborative conversations and problem-solving focused on “knowledge-building” in contrast to “knowledge-telling” and content memorization.<sup>5</sup> Peer-tutors guide each other through the process of learning in a non-hierarchical and reciprocal format.<sup>6</sup> The adoption of peer-learning as the core pedagogical framework of the circulation training program at Rhys Carpenter Library has bolstered communication and information literacy skills of student workers, increasing the effectiveness of patron-to-student worker interactions in the library. In this paper, I focus on the integration and adoption of peer-learning as a pedagogical tool for the newly developed 2018 training program at Rhys Carpenter Library and an assessment of its successes and failures within the first year of its implementation.

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## Design of Past and Present Training Program

Rhys Carpenter Library is a branch research library specializing in classics, archaeology, history of art, and architecture and urbanism at Bryn Mawr College, a small liberal arts college located outside Philadelphia. It serves a diverse population of undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff, and outside researchers and scholars. A single service desk, still referred to as the circulation desk, in practice functions as an information commons.<sup>7</sup> Student workers field navigational, ready reference, and more in-depth research questions. When properly trained, students can provide reference support.<sup>8</sup> However, overhearing and observing interactions with patrons from my office, it became clear that students were not prepared for questions beyond circulation and basic navigation, if that. It was evident that I was training the workers to be “circulation assistants” and not library liaisons, which is more aligned with the reality of their responsibilities at the desk. This made me rethink the format of past student worker training.

Previous training consisted of a two-to-three-hour orientation of the library and the basics of the ILS followed by a brief ILS tutorial. In reality, it was a system of trial by fire where students acquired knowledge about library functionality, organization, and management on a “need-to-know” basis and required significant *ad hoc* oversight from one of the two librarians in offices behind the desk. After my first year as Coordinator of Carpenter Library, I recognized the deficiencies of this method. In 2016 and 2017, I developed and implemented a two-day training program which followed a traditional library-training approach with a strong focus on the acquisition of basic circulation skills predominantly through demonstrations and lecturing. This training provided all workers with a baseline of knowledge, but the students’ retention of the content and inability to process the information called into question the effectiveness of the training as evidenced by the amount of my time and energy devoted to overseeing and correcting student workers. This led me to reevaluate and revise the program.

In the fall of 2018, I modified the teaching methods and overall structure of the program to shift the focus from learning the ILS to enhancing customer service and information literacy. Drawing on research and experience from other libraries, I emphasized peer-learning to improve comprehension, retention, and application but also to model positive and effective interactions with library patrons, particularly other students, through hands-on activities.<sup>9</sup> In addition, it was evident that two days were insufficient to address the breadth of information skills required for this position and that continual multi-modal training throughout the year was a necessity.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, I designed a new multi-part student worker training comprised of a two-day orientation and training, a mandatory shadowing shift with an experienced peer before working independently, a minimum of one regularly scheduled shift that overlaps with a librarian, one-on-one check-in meetings once a semester with a librarian, online tutorials, bi-weekly or monthly quizzes and worksheets,<sup>11</sup> and monthly group circulation meetings. This multi-staged and multi-faceted training program allows me to continually assess students’ knowledge acquisition and retention and immediately intervene to address gaps.

## 2018 Two-day Training Program

To avoid scheduling conflicts, all student workers return to campus early to participate in a mandatory two-day training the weekend before the start of the semester. The goal of the weekend training is twofold: to learn [and for returning workers review] the library system and library resources, and to foster a sense of community amongst the circulation workers who typically work independently at the desk. Rather than following a traditional library-training approach focusing on demos and lecturing, this program emphasizes “knowledge-building”<sup>12</sup> within a collaborative participatory environment whereby student supervisors and returning workers play a key role in facilitating peer-learning.

## Peer-learning and information literacy

The training program is geared towards familiarizing student workers with the services and resources provided by Library and Information Technology Services (LITS) and improving their information literacy. Active learning is incorporated throughout the training to increase engagement and retention of information. Many students work in the library from their sophomore year onwards and therefore over the years they have acquired considerable work experience and knowledge of the library and its resources. To capitalize on their knowledge and give them more responsibility, I ask returning workers to play a larger role in training their peers. Returning workers act as peer-mentors guiding their peers in a collaborative process of discovery and problem solving (and benefit from the review). The non-hierarchical and reciprocal structure of peer-learning encourages active participation in the learning process and facilitates retention through the application of knowledge. By breaking traditional hierarchies of learning, workers guide their peers through open dialogue and collaboration.

## Peer-learning and Scavenger Hunts

Peer-learning is incorporated into two interactive library scavenger hunts that I created.<sup>13</sup> The first focuses on circulation and ready reference questions answered predominantly through the exploration of the library website. The second addresses reference services and navigating the physical spaces within the library, particularly finding print resources. For each scavenger hunt, student workers complete a worksheet that is evaluated for accuracy and collected for assessment. Prizes are offered as an incentive, with the stipulation that students work through all the questions as a group. I circulate throughout the room to promote collaboration and conversation throughout the exercise. Questions are designed to provide context and introduce new concepts and resources in digestible sections without reverting to lecturing and reviewing a list of rules in the training packet. The scavenger hunt replicate common questions and scenarios that workers can troubleshoot and answer using the LITS website. Workers have to first determine what information was needed and then discuss where this information might be located on the site. Not only did they have to find practical information about library policies and procedures, library resources, and circulation services, they also have to assess the value of the information and apply it to the appropriate situation. The website scavenger hunt highlights the range of questions they might be asked at the desk and presents a methodology for how to work with a library patron to navigate the website effectively.

The second scavenger hunt concentrates on reference questions and basic research skills. As the sole service desk in the library, student workers field a range of questions from ready reference to in-depth research. Being able to ask their peers rather than a librarian can alleviate the stress of the research process and result in a positive interaction with an academic library. Student workers, therefore, take on a liminal role between student and library staff. While in-depth research questions are referred to librarians for research appointments, many ready reference or basic research queries can be answered or mediated by the student workers. The challenge is to train the student workers to determine what is being asked by the patron, how to find that information, and when they should refer the question.<sup>14</sup> This scavenger hunt replicates broad research topics and walks them through the reference interview process by providing a template for answering research questions including deconstructing and narrowing a topic, identifying keywords and concepts, using the library catalog, print and online resources, research guides, and assessing the relevance of these resources.

Questions on the research scavenger hunt mirror many of the topics covered in one-shot library instruction, which improves the students' own information literacy while simultaneously providing a framework for answering similar patron questions. For this exercise, groups are comprised of a combination of two to three returning and new workers who discuss how to approach and answer the given research topics. Ranging from sophomores

to seniors who represent plethora of disciplines, the student workers draw on their research skills and experience to determine a research strategy. This exercise focuses on the structural organization of information, access to that information through the OPAC and databases, the research process, and how to decipher questions through the reference interview model. Peer-learning provides an effective avenue for working through a research problem as a group. The goal of the scavenger hunt is to familiarize the workers with the range of resources and research topics but also to model the reference interview process for questions at the desk using peer-learning methods.

## Peer-learning and Role-playing

Workers are introduced to a day in the life of the circulation desk through experiential learning facilitated by peer-learning and role-playing. Role-playing was introduced as a fun yet pedagogically sound way to diversify the training program, increase active participation, and reduce anxiety amongst new workers on what they will encounter at the desk.<sup>15</sup> While the new workers are learning the ILS, returning workers prepare sketches of common scenarios encountered at the desk that they act out for all workers. Returning workers are given autonomy in deciding on the topics and themes for role-playing. While I provided some guidance, they chose topics based on their experience of what questions and situations are the most common, relevant, and challenging. Role-playing is incorporated to create a light, fun environment that simultaneously facilitates problem-solving as a group. Students present scenarios from two perspectives: what not to do and what to do. They do this in order to highlight customer service as well as showcase common tasks at the desk. While the “what not to do” sketches are exaggerations of behaviors and create comic relief, they provide a jumping off point for group discussions following each scene. Designed to promote participation and solicit comments from all workers, I encourage everyone to draw on their own personal and professional experience to determine how to respond to these scenarios.

## Peer-learning and Student Managers

A primary goal of the training is the creation of a collaborative community of workers in Carpenter Library. With the exception of the last shift of the night, students work alone at the desk. During the day, there are two librarians in offices behind the circulation desk who are available for consultation and help. However, in the evenings and on weekends there is no professional staff. To provide support during these times, there are three student supervisors who conduct walk-throughs of the library and are ‘on-call’ to answer questions by text, phone, or email. This structure was designed to provide non-hierarchical venues for asking questions and have the workers learn from each other throughout the academic year.

Ongoing training is necessary to avoid complacency and errors.<sup>16</sup> Monthly circulation meetings provide a review of policies, an opportunity to learn new skills, and to foster community. Each meeting focuses on a theme or particular skill. While the student supervisors organize and run the meetings, in consultation with me, they draw on knowledge of the other student workers. For example, a student who also works in the mending department in the main library explained the mending process, had students search for books in poor condition, and discussed how and if they could be mended. This has led to student workers being more aware and consequently more proactive in identifying damaged books.

## Peer-learning and Shadowing Shifts

The training program covers a broad range of material and draws on various learning styles and formats. Role-playing provides one mode for introducing student workers to common scenarios and how to manage a diver-

sity of situations at the circulation desk. Watching or even participating in these role-playing exercises provide a model but cannot prepare students for what they may encounter at the desk, particularly difficult patrons and high-pressure, high-volume situations. To reduce their anxiety before working alone, all new workers are required to complete at least one shift where they shadow a returning worker. Again, this component of training emphasizes peer-learning as returning workers oversee and guide the students through interactions and transactions with patrons. New student workers appreciate having a supportive experienced peer during their first shift at the circulation desk helping them through real transactions. The shadowing shift reaffirms the weekend training program, provides a safety net as new students familiarize themselves with procedures and spaces of the library, and builds their confidence. New students have expressed that this is one of the most helpful components of training.

### **Assessment of Training Program**

Over the last four years of training students, I have continued to revise the content and structure of the training program for circulation assistants at Carpenter Library based on formal and informal comments made by student workers and my own observations during training and at the desk. Previously, I had not adequately prepared them to use their knowledge of the library within the context of their work experience. It became evident that alternative methods for disseminating and applying content were required in order to enhance the effectiveness of the training. The lack of cognitive and transformative experiences in the training program hindered student workers' learning.<sup>17</sup> To address this pedagogical gap, in the fall 2018, I reduced lecture-style teaching of circulation and reference services in favor of a non-hierarchical peer-learning and active learning model. This prepares them to act as peer tutors of library skills and information literacy at the desk. Peer-learning facilitates the process of knowledge-building through experiential learning, learning by thinking (abstract conceptualization), reflective observation, and active experimentation as described in Kolb's Cycle of Learning.<sup>18</sup> Overall, this year's training program was successful with higher retention of information and preparedness of student workers. There is, however, room for improvement.

To assess the effectiveness of the program, I asked for feedback from the workers at the end of each day of training. Workers were asked three questions: (1) List one thing that you learned today, (2) What questions do you still have?, and (3) What would you like to learn more about? Feedback guided modifications to the content and structure of the training. For example, students wanted to know the organizational structure of call numbers. Students had participated in a shelving activity earlier in the day, but I designed it to focus on the concrete experience of shelving rather than how the system functions. I incorrectly assumed classification systems to be too specialized to be of interest to the student workers. In response to this request for further explanation, student workers completed a tutorial on Library of Congress call numbers, and I will incorporate an activity that requires conceptualizing classification systems before requiring experiential or experimental application of the system in future training sessions.

Additional feedback was collected through one-on-one check-in meetings I held with all student workers in the first month of the year. Students are given a check-list of tasks, locations, and procedures to review as a tool for identifying gaps in their knowledge and come to the meeting with questions and honest feedback. Patterns emerged amongst the workers' comments suggesting areas to be address in circulation meetings and future training sessions. I solicit feedback on the two-day training during these meetings in order to discover methods of training that would be more conducive for their own learning process, which could be integrated into future programming. Some of the suggestions have become topics of monthly circulation meetings, which are tailored to the interests and needs of the current workers.



During the first month of the fall semester, I spent less time overseeing transactions at the circulation desk than in previous years. Student workers exhibited confidence and a deeper understanding of the library and its services. They also performed better than previous years on circulation quizzes. Requiring at least one of the student worker's shifts to overlap with a librarian helped to mitigate discrepancies in procedures and immediately address problems. I believe there is a significant correlation between the new training program and their application of their library knowledge.

In reflecting on past training programs, I recognize a disconnect between my learning outcomes and pedagogical methods. My teaching philosophy emphasizes the importance of active learning but in reality, my teaching was bogged down in the minutiae of circulation services. Acknowledging that student workers would not retain much of the information until they were on the job, I switched the focus from content to experience and tried to find ways to model positive library experiences for both the workers and patrons. I feel that the best way to do this is through active experimentation and concrete experience. The growing literature on the application of peer-learning in reference services suggests peer-learning is an effective training method and one that corresponds well with my training goals of information literacy and community building. My initial implementation of this method reinforces this conclusion.

Peer-learning provides a useful framework for facilitating the learning process. But reflective observations need to be more explicitly integrated into future activities. While experiential learning is helpful, learning theories by John Dewey and David Kolb emphasize the necessity of reflecting on that experience in order for the learning process to be transformative.<sup>19</sup> In role-playing scenarios, discussions following each scene create opportunities for open reflection as a large group on what works and does not work. For future scavenger hunts, I will include a metacognitive component where workers record the process of discovery rather than simply providing the correct response. This would require them to be more mindful of facilitating peer-learning and allow me to review their processes to identify teachable moments for information literacy. Similarly, I will re-write the research scavenger hunt in the format of the reference interview to provide examples of effective follow-up questions to guide them through the process. This activity will model how to break down the research process and demonstrate the effectiveness of this mode of inquiry. In addition, to reinforce the effectiveness of reflective observation, one of the role-playing scenarios presented by the returning workers will include a mock reference interview. Introducing workers to the reference interview through the research scavenger hunt and then following up in a role-playing activity reinforces the method in different learning styles. Short writing reflections or discussions in pairs or small groups are other mechanisms for reflection that could be introduced to broader conversations, such as what constitutes good customer service or the role of academic libraries on campus, encouraging them to draw on their experiences, be presented with new ideas, and think more holistically about their position in the library. In general, I need to be more transparent about the learning outcomes of a given activity and its relevancy to the job in order to promote mindfulness in carrying out the tasks and to improve interpersonal interactions. This includes being more explicit about the peer-learning model and the important role that returning workers play for its successful implementation.

## Conclusion

Throughout the training, peer-learning was utilized as a pedagogical framework to dismantle hierarchies of learning, facilitate collaboration amongst student workers, and model modes of communication and engagement with patrons. Empowering the students with the necessary skill sets to help patrons with everything from simple directional tasks to more in-depth reference-related questions gives them agency and confidence to im-

part this knowledge to others while further developing their own information literacy. In addition, modelling peer-learning as the foundation of our training program introduces students to a valuable pedagogical tool that they can apply to patron encounters thereby expanding information literacy across campus.

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