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Digital Staff Trainings Tools for Rural Public Libraries in Georgia: Challenges, Trends, and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

For many public libraries, particularly those in rural areas, a lack of funding, staff time, and distance from training locations create barriers to providing training and development to their staff. While studies exist on issues facing rural libraries and on the use of digital training tools in libraries, few studies have combined the two topics. The purpose of this study is to examine the use of digital staff training methods at rural public libraries and includes describing the formats and content of that training. The sampling method will target library administrators and trainers, reached through Georgia Public Library Service's listservs for staff in these roles. Data was collected by means of an online survey consisting of multiple choice and open-ended questions, and was analyzed by content analysis according to themes revealed in an exploration of current literature. Responses to certain questions were categorized in tables, and results were reported in a narrative describing themes and patterns that emerged from the data. The results of the study will assist rural public library directors, training staff, and trustees in exploring the ways that digital training can be used to improve their services to patrons by providing staff with training and education opportunities that are otherwise restricted or unavailable due to distance, time, and financial constraints.

KEYWORDS

rural libraries, public libraries, professional development, continuing education, staff training, digital training, e-learning

INTRODUCTION

For many public libraries, a lack of funding and staff time create barriers to providing training and development to library staff. Particularly in rural areas, defined by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (2013) as a library service area with a population of 25,000 or less, distance from training locations or events can create an additional barrier. The proliferation of online training tools and methods, combined with the enthusiasm of rural librarians for their profession and institutional support for staff development, may provide an avenue to access training and development opportunities that are otherwise out of reach.

With the necessity of including training and development in institutional planning in mind, an important area for study is an examination of attempts to create a culture of learning at rural libraries as a further way to address isolation from learning events and lower staff educational attainment. To form a basis for evaluating the effects of digital and online training methods in rural public libraries, a study of how these methods are currently used in rural public libraries is necessary.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While a variety of digital learning tools have been discussed in the library staff training literature, few studies address the utility of these tools in overcoming barriers to addressing staff skills in demand specifically in rural public libraries. The literature discussed below will cover the nature of rural libraries' lag in staff development and training, online and digital training methods in use in libraries, and ways that rural libraries in particular take advantage of these methods to address staff training and development needs.

Barriers to Staff Education in Rural Public Libraries

In examining challenges to digital inclusion in rural public libraries, Real, Bertot, and Jaeger (2014) analyzed data from the 2012 Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey (PLFTAS). Among many data points showing evidence of a digital divide between urban and rural communities, Real et al. found that staff time and skills had a significant effect on patrons' digital literacy. Despite both patrons and staff of rural public libraries ranking access to broadband internet and computing equipment as a critically-important library service, rural public libraries trail urban and suburban libraries in all forms of technology training for patrons, including classes, one-on-one sessions, and online materials. The authors attribute this not to a lack of enthusiasm on the part of library staff but to the public library funding structure. Real and Rose (2017) discussed the effects of public libraries' heavy reliance on local government agencies for funding; rural areas tend to be less populous, with lower average salaries and land values affecting local tax revenue. This results in low budgets for libraries and low pay for librarians, attracting applicants with lower educational levels and less specialization; and in lack of staff numbers to spread duties out and allow time to carry out technology training or to gain the expertise to provide such training.

In the Library Continuing Education Summit organized by the Tennessee State Library and Archives in 2008, a number of educational needs and barriers across multiple types of libraries were identified that agree with Real et al.'s (2014) findings. In discussing the summit's findings, Pinkston (2009) mentions contemporary survey results showing that training is needed in traditional library services, such as reference, along with newer digital literacy services. Although some of the libraries participating in the summit did employ online training tools, and were not specifically rurally-located, they still identified lack of travel money for conferences, lack of staff time, and geography or distance as major barriers to library staff accessing training opportunities. Likewise, Fischer (2015), when studying challenges in small and rural library management found that staffing issues, including training, are of the highest concern. As with Real et al., Fischer found in the results from her quantitative survey not only that the public library revenue structure's reliance on local tax funds was a major cause of the financial barriers to training access, but that the lack of finances, and the associated issues of travel, bringing in trainers, and hiring sufficient staff to allow scheduled training time, were greater barriers to small and rural library staff than enthusiasm and interest in gaining new skills.

Digital Staff Training Tools and Methods

Although the gap in staff skills addressed by a program studied by Quinney, Smith, and Galbraith (2010) rested more on the expectations of digital-native users of an academic library, the examination of the design and success of the program to use digital tools to train public library staff on digital literacy and patron-employed technology is relevant to the research questions. Leaders of an academic library surveyed staff and students on their use of digital media and technology and developed a program of activities and rewards to encourage staff familiarity with technologies used by library patrons. The program incorporated a number of self-directed tasks and challenges that were small in scale, enabling staff to complete them within their normal schedules, and were accessible from any internet-enabled location. Although the program was not aimed at a rural context, its design to address time and location constraints is applicable to rural libraries.

Mackay (2001) also points to the targeted use of technology as a way to overcome barriers of staff time and travel. Although examining the case of an academic library, Mackay identified ways that technology can play a key role in rural library staff learning. Acknowledging the difficulties of staff at remote branches in traveling to a central location for training events, she described the success of a Scottish academic library system in providing staff training targeted at specific skills or topics via video conferences. While acknowledging that training-the-trainers programs can have some success in remote library locations where access to training opportunities is limited, Mackay warned against the dilution of learning quality that can occur in these programs, making direct access to experienced trainers via video and web conferencing more desirable. Real, Bertot, and Jaeger (2014) also recommended targeted staff training, possibly including online or other distance learning, to enhance staff competencies in rural libraries whose budget does not allow large staffing numbers or MLIS-degreed librarians. Real and Rose

(2017) found that participation in regional consortiums could provide, among other benefits to rural libraries, access to more training opportunities and specialized librarians both face-to-face and online, in formal training events and casual interactions.

As with Mackay's findings in Scotland, an analysis of librarian professional development in Pakistan found that libraries in rural areas of the country often neglect staff training and development, due to difficulties in travel and low budgets (Ullah, 2014). The study recommended taking advantage of modern communication technology not only to provide library staff with online training, but also to enable employees to interact with others in the field through online discussion groups. Green and Cifuentes (2008) also noted the ability of online discussion groups and follow-up tasks to reinforce materials introduced at in-person training and development sessions. In studying the effects of different levels of assistance or facilitation given to staff in online training activities, Dalston and Turner (2011) found that staff who were given the opportunity to interact with their trainer and colleagues during and after the training courses showed increased retention of information, confidence, and competency. Their findings on different completion rates of course materials according to library size reinforce the benefit of the flexibility of selecting and scheduling digital learning.

Creating a Culture of Learning through Digital Training

In addition to interaction during and after training, Epps, Kidd, Negro, & Sales (2016) discussed staff involvement in the development of a library's training and development program. Through surveys and discussion forums, staff aided in identifying training needs that were used in developing an online course. In a study of staff training at cultural sites, Murphy (2018) found that online learning activities, in this case a Google Forms quiz, complemented traditional lecture and manual-reading forms of training activities, and created more opportunities for staff to self-assess and participate in the development of the overall training program. Among the principles of blended online and face-to-face training that Murphy developed as a result of this study were the ability of online training tools to collect data on individual and overall training needs, and to integrate feedback collection in the training tools.
Online interaction through social media, listservs, and other venues may particularly benefit rural library staff, given the enthusiasm for their profession with 97% of rural public librarians rating themselves very or somewhat satisfied with their careers (Real et al., 2014).

While the literature reviewed explores a variety of ways that technology and internet access can enhance rural libraries' staff training capabilities, the importance of institutional support for training and development was frequently emphasized as well. Epps, Kidd, Negro, and Sales (2016) found that staff involvement in the development of training programs could lead not only to greater buy-in but also to a shared vision for library services. In rural libraries, staff may be isolated from colleagues within the same library system as well as from the learning opportunities in the greater library field. In their examination of a case study of the creation of a library staff development committee, Davis and Lundstrom (2011) found that staff involvement acted as a form of learning-by-doing, improving communication skills between employees and departments or locations. According to this study, creating a formal training and development committee or plan can also promote participation and engagement among a library's staff. As budgetary allocations so often show, or are interpreted to show, institutional priorities, the financial barriers to staff training and the potential savings to rural libraries through digital and online training and development must be a top consideration as well.

PURPOSE, OBJECTIVE, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to examine the use of digital staff training methods at rural public libraries. The objectives are to identify libraries that utilize online staff training methods and to describe the formats and content of the training. While the study focuses on rural public libraries, given the gaps discussed in the literature specifically addressing digital staff training in rural public libraries, the study aims to gather a fuller picture by also collecting data on the planning and use of digital staff training in urban and academic libraries. The data may be used to aid rural public library directors and training staff in selecting and implementing digital staff training methods that fit into their overall staff develop-

ment programs, and planning to avoid possible obstacles.

These research questions frame the study:

RQ1: What rural public libraries use digital staff training?

RQ2: How are those rural public libraries using digital staff training?

RQ2A: What digital staff training tools or methods are in use?

RQ2B: How are these tools or methods selected and implemented?

METHODS

An anonymous, online survey was developed using Qualtrics Survey Software, which also hosted the survey. The survey was approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Research Board. It was distributed to library staff in Georgia on the Georgia Libraries Association and on the Georgia Public Library Service Continuing Education listserv; while respondents were asked for their general position, the survey was open to all levels of library staff. The survey consisted of 13 primarily closed-ended questions, with all questions optional and most including the option for respondents to elaborate on their choices or write in their own choices (see appendix for survey questions).

RESULTS

A total of 189 surveys were started over a period of two weeks. For 24 of these, no questions were answered, and the following data are based on the 165 surveys for which at least one question was answered (the bases for questions vary, as not all respondents answered all questions). One hundred sixty-three respondents answered the question of their role within their library. Thirty-nine were branch managers, 19 library directors, and 9 training or development staff; 97 entered other job titles involved in access, reference and instruction, youth services, adult services, systems and information technology, circulation, cataloging, marketing and outreach, and administration. Seventy-nine respondents report working in a rural library, while 26 report working in a library system that includes rural branches.

One hundred thirty of the 163 respondents indicated that digital staff training tools are in use at their library. Of the remainder who do not use digital staff training tools, 9.15% indicated that they want to use them in the future; the remaining 5.88% do not have such plans. Having answered questions on their role within the library, their library's urban or rural location, and the inclusion of language on staff development in their library's mission statement or other documents, respondents whose libraries do not use digital staff training tools were sent to the conclusion of the survey.

Among those who do use digital staff training tools, webinars were the most popular format, with 88.33% of respondents indicating that live webinars are in use at their library, and 81.66% reporting the use of asynchronous or recorded webinars (total responses add to more than 100% because respondents were able to select more than one tool). Other popular tools were training courses (67.50%) and archives of library documents (65.00%). Write-in responses included database training manuals provided by those databases, and practicing or roleplaying with the library's online reference service (Table 1).

Table 1: Digital Staff Training Tools Used (n=120)

Training tool	Number of responses	Percentage
Live webinars	106	83.33%
Asynchronous webinars	98	81.66%
Training courses	81	67.50%
Archives of library documents	78	65.00%
Podcasts	20	16.66%
Quizzes	13	10.83%
Games	7	5.83%
Other	7	5.83%

In response to the question of why their libraries had chosen to use digital staff training tools, respondents' answers coincided strongly with the concepts that emerged in the literature review. Time taken from day-to-day work to attend live training events, the cost to travel or bring in presenters, and distance of rural libraries from conferences and other training events were all factors in the decision to use digital staff training tools (Table 2).

Table 2: Reason for Choosing to Use Digital Training Tools (N=120)

Reason	Number of responses	Percentage
Time	94	78.33%
Cost	74	61.66%
Distance	64	53.33%
Learning Types	44	36.66%
Other	18	15.00%

Of the 120 participants who responded to this question, all but 26 selected multiple answers to the question of why digital staff training tools were in use at their library. When asked in the next question to select a primary reason, 46.02% indicated that time constraints were the primary obstacle to face-to-face training that had led to the use of digital training. Cost of face-to-face training was still a significant reason to use digital training, chosen by 23.89% of respondents. Two of the 15 respondents who selected Other stated that variety of available topics was their primary reason, and one could not choose a single reason and wrote in "all the above."

Taking a more granular look at why particular digital staff training tools were chosen, similar themes were seen. Open-ended responses to the question of why live webinars were chosen for staff training showed, again, that time was a primary reason, particularly in enabling staff coverage of other library functions. As with digital tools overall, respondents frequently mentioned that online training provides access to a greater variety of topics and experts than is available from their library's face-to-face training capabilities; this type of response includes time, cost, and distance aspects as obstacles to obtaining a variety of training. With this particular format, the possibility of participation and interaction was cited by 21.43% of respondents as a reason for its use, coded under learning type reasons.

Time factors, particularly the convenience of scheduling training time around staff duties, were cited by 77.65% of respondents to the question of why asynchronous webinars were in use at their libraries. Several noted that small staff size, or staff comprised of mainly part-time employees, made scheduling live and face-to-face training difficult; in fact, more than one noted that rather than incorporating scheduled training time, recorded webinars "allow staff to multitask" by watching webinar recordings during a slow period at the circulation desk.

Although online archives of library policies, manuals, and other documents appear to have different uses than webinars, their utility to the respondents can still be coded with the same themes. Several respondents mentioned that these archives of documents support consistency of training and library practice, both in orienting new hires and refreshing the training of existing employees. The importance of consistent training across all locations and employee types can fall under the category of distance as an obstacle to staff training. There is also a time element to the utility of online archives of library documents as a staff training tool: respondents mentioned that this format was chosen because it is available any time, and enables distributing updated policies and other information to part time or seasonal staff whose schedules may not allow attendance at face-to-face staff meetings or development events. One respondent mentioned that search functions of online documents also save time in locating information, compared to a collection of printed documents. A cost element emerged as well, with two respondents mentioning that having policies online for staff reference saves paper compared to a binder of printed policies, and allows them to be used as online handouts in face-to-face training events rather than printouts.

As with archives of documents, respondents indicated that the choice of online training courses addressed a particular training need, but that the overarching reasons for digital training tools are still relevant. Of the 61 respondents who selected this option, 28 gave answers showing that training courses are used to offer specialized and in-depth development for staff needing skills in a particular task or area of library work. Related to this, others mentioned that face-to-face staff training events happen infrequently or cover more general topics, so that online training courses allow them to study topics and materials beyond general library tasks. Another benefit of training courses is that they allow accountability. One respondent whose library uses Niche Academy mentioned that it "provides an easy interactive way to share material while checking for comprehension"; others mentioned that supervisors can check staff progress on specific courses or gather certificates of completion in order to fulfill training requirements; one simply said "so they can keep in [sic] eye on us."

Although quizzes, games, and podcasts were not popular choices, the responses to this question did reveal their place within an overall staff training and development program. Quizzes not only form a component of training programs, but also play a role in both planning and evaluating training programs. Eight of the 11 respondents whose libraries use quizzes for staff training mentioned that they are used to reinforce and test information retention of other training tools; four mentioned that quizzes are used to evaluate future staff training needs and effectiveness of past training methods. Four of the six respondents using games in staff training also mentioned information retention; two also mentioned the related issue of staff engagement in the training process. As with every surveyed method of digital staff training, the convenience of podcasts in fitting into staff schedules was of key importance, with nine of the 17 respondents mentioning their convenience and availability. The benefit of the relative newness of podcasts as a media form also emerged from the responses, with three stating that podcasts offer current information, that they can be accessed on a variety of devices, that students request or recommend them, and that they are "Up to date with today's times."

Cost as a factor in access to staff training was evident in responses to the question asking for sources of digital training materials (Table 3).

Table 3: Sources of Digital Training Materials (N=94)

Source	Number of responses	Percentage
Free-to-access online materials	85	90.43%
Produced by the library	44	46.81%
Purchased by the library	40	42.55%

Free-to-access materials were pre-eminent; of the 94 respondents who answered this question, all but nine indicated that free materials are among their sources of their digital training, and 35 of those indicated that it was their only source of digital training materials. Sources of free online training included mainly those produced by library organizations, including Georgia Public Library Service, Georgia Library Association, Georgia Public Information Network for Electronic Services (PINES), and Georgia Library Learning Online (GALILEO). Publishers, trade publications, and vendors of library materials, such as Booklist and Baker and Taylor, were also listed as sources of free training material, as well as videos on more general training topics such as customer service found on YouTube, WebJunction, Firespring, Skillsoft, and Tech Soup. Training materials produced in-house by library staff could also be seen as a product of cost as a barrier to training, if they are produced as part of the normal operation of the library or assigned duties of employees. In regard to purchased training material, 18 of 31 respondents whose libraries purchase materials mentioned subscriptions to online learning platform Lynda.com. One described sending the library's dedicated training staff person to a "train the trainer" event hosted by Disney, and subsequently delivering the training to the full library staff: although not a free training tool, nevertheless a method of reducing training costs.

In examining the institutional framework supporting staff training, the survey data shows that 89.74% of respondents' libraries mention staff training in the mission statement, employee manual, or

other library documents. In addition, 57.55% of respondents' libraries have some requirements for types, topics, or amount of digital training. A total of 29.41% indicated that staff are required to access certain training elements, and 20.59% indicated that staff are required to accumulate a certain number of hours or other time span of digital training. In keeping with the difficulty of scheduling staff training around regular library tasks as discussed above, only 9.56% of respondents stated that staff are required to participate in specific live online training events. Similarly, flexibility was mentioned in response to this question and others regarding the choice of digital training; responses show it is more common for libraries to require a certain amount of training take place, but the schedule and format is left to the staff members' decision.

The necessity of staff initiative in accessing training was also evident in responses to the question of who at the library is responsible for selecting and planning digital training. Only 22.81% of respondents' libraries employ a dedicated training staff member; in 35.09% of libraries, it is part of the director or branch manager's responsibilities, and in a further 35.09% it is left to the initiative of the staff members themselves. The 7.02% of respondents who selected Other mentioned human resources staff, faculty committees, and administrative teams as those responsible for selecting and planning digital staff training.

DISCUSSION

Collecting data not only from rural public library staff but also from respondents working in libraries that are neither rural nor public, this study both confirmed themes from the literature review regarding the obstacles to rural public library staff training, and revealed new information on the utility of digital staff training tools that is particularly relevant to rural libraries. Among the factors of time, cost, and distance as barriers to accessing staff training in rural libraries, none had appeared or been addressed as more common or significant in the literature. However, respondents to this study consistently mentioned time, convenience of access, and flexible scheduling in response to questions regarding why digital training generally, or particular tools specifically, were in use at their libraries.

Although the three factors of time, cost, and distance were considered separately in the survey, it is clear from responses that they are in fact closely intertwined; responses frequently cited or implied more than one factor. Real, Bertot, and Jaeger (2014) mentioned that rural public library budgets tend to lag behind those of urban libraries, due to a smaller or lower-assessed tax base that forms the basis of library funding. As a result, rural public libraries lack the budget not only for purchasing training materials or bringing in outside trainers, but for paying travel and registration costs for staff to attend conferences; or for hiring sufficient staff to incorporate training and development as a part of employee's regular tasks, rather than multi-tasking or watching webinars during slow times. Similarly, a library whose staff numbers are low enough so that training and development must be multi-tasked is not likely to be able to construct schedules allowing time away to travel to training events. In these situations, cost factors affect time factors and distance factors.

Another theme from the literature reinforced by survey answers is the ability of digital training to serve different learning styles. Several respondents mentioned the importance of learning by doing; staff training with digital tools allows them "to remain current on the latest technology," including platforms, formats, and devices, a result also discussed by MacNaughton and Medinsky (2015), particularly in regard to the steep learning curve faced when onboarding new staff.

Given the difficulties of increasing public library budgets and, therefore, staffing and ability to travel, digital training tools provide a way to create or enhance training and development programs and improve employees' abilities to serve library users. Two new themes emerged from examining the study responses: consistency and variety. While Murphy (2018) had noted the strength of digital training in creating consistent outcomes in patron services, several respondents wrote in that digital tools allow consistency in the training offered and information distributed to staff, particularly in a library system with multiple locations.

The variety of training topics available online and the ability to take advantage of resources and knowledge beyond that of an individual library and its staff is an important aspect of digital training.

One respondent to the present survey noted that with online training materials available from the state public library service and online training websites, "there is no need to reinvent the wheel!" Another responded "There are online and digital resources that are of very high quality and provide expertise outside of our individual skill sets." The consistency of message and variety of topics made possible by digital training tools are particularly important to rural public libraries that lack the budget to employ specialized staff and enable staff to travel to face-to-face training events.

Multiple respondents to the present survey mentioned that their libraries aimed to create a "culture of learning," and the fact that most of respondents' employers include staff training and development in their institutional documents seems to bear this out. However, the large number of libraries that rely on employees' own initiative to access digital training could show a need for a more purposeful and directed training and development program, in order to maximize the limited training time and funding that is available. In line with the findings of this survey, a 2019 survey of Georgia public libraries by Knight, Moxley, Snoddy-George, and Stricker found a positive correlation between the presence of a designated staff member overseeing continuing education and a more digitally literate workforce. Their survey also found that rural libraries are less likely to employ a designated continuing education staff member, causing their staff to lag behind in digital literacy.

Libraries with small staff numbers, as many rural public libraries tend to be, cannot be expected to hire a full-time training employee; however, a formalized development plan could be implemented for individual employees as part of periodic employment reviews. Formally incorporating digital training into staff tasks would take advantage of the breadth of specialized topics for different interests and job positions that was noted by many respondents as a reason to use digital training tools, allowing rural libraries with small staff numbers to better serve patrons. Including training tasks among routine staff duties would also signal organizational support for library employees' individual professional development in the field despite the physical isolation from colleagues that often exists in rural libraries.

Several respondents noted that continuing education was encouraged as part of periodic employee reviews, and the progress tracking and creation of completion certificates incorporated in online courses could reduce time investment of supervisors, who often wear many hats at small, rural libraries. Incorporating these tracked or confirmed digital training tools could also address the difficulty mentioned by one respondent in maintaining a record of professional development.

Another tool to promote the culture of learning that many respondents indicated is important to their libraries is the use of digital tools that encourage staff engagement and buy-in. Online quizzes and games were mentioned by several respondents as useful in engaging staff in planning and carrying out training activities. Ullah (2014) and Green and Cifuentes (2008) both noted the ability of online discussion boards to facilitate engagement and knowledge retention among library staff; one survey respondent mentioned a similar tactic, with all library staff engaging with a recorded webinar as their schedules allowed, followed by a face-to-face discussion of the webinar's contents. The capacity for discussion in live webinars made it a strongly preferred choice among survey respondents as well. Incorporating staff interaction and opportunities for discussion, whether online or face-to-face in tandem with online activities, would seem to be an important tool for acquiring and retaining training information, as well as for building rapport and workplace culture among employees without frequent face-to-face interaction.

CONCLUSION

While making no recommendations for best practices, this survey does capture information on ways that digital tools are being used to address the difficulties library staff face in accessing training and development, and particular strengths of different tools and methods. For rural libraries hampered by small budgets, small staff numbers, and physical isolation from conferences and other library events, digital training tools not only provide access despite these barriers but also make available a greater breadth and depth of topics and material than is physically accessible. With many rural libraries serving as information hubs for their small communities, this greater variety in staff training benefits library patrons by promoting a wide breadth of staff knowledge and skills regardless of small staff numbers.

Nevertheless, a successful digital training program involves more than allowing library staff ac-

cess to online webinars, courses, and forms. The culture of learning that many libraries aspire to create among their staff requires human involvement, in the form of institutional support, managerial guidance, and collegial interaction. Different training tools can be used to address specific informational needs and access difficulties, and above all provide an opportunity to promote staff engagement with important topics and information in the wider field of libraries, with their coworkers and colleagues at remote locations, and with the role of their library as a community organization.

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