The Training Subsystem

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Whatever else may be said about "continuing education" in American libraries today, it may at least be accepted as fact that concern and deference are now directed toward it. It is encouraging, moreover, to be able to suggest that much of this concern and deference appears to be of relatively recent origin. Although, as so often in the library profession, there are no "base-line data" that would indicate relative levels of concern for the subject at any point in time, it seems reasonable to assert that the current level is vastly higher than it has ever been in the past. Conferences and workshops on staff development, articles in the library press, and speeches on the subject virtually abound, creating an impression that untold manlives of time are being devoted to it in the nation's libraries and library schools.

Despite all of this new talk about continuing education, however, few libraries actually seem to be doing much about it in any organized or concerted way. Or at least this would seem to be a reasonable deduction to draw from replies to a query sent late in 1970, by the author, to 145 (69 public and 76 academic) of the largest libraries in the land. "Does the library carry a discrete budget line for continuing education?" the survey asked. Fifteen replied yes, ninety-one replied no, and the balance replied not at all. Of these fifteen affirmative replies, six institutions reported that the line amounted to less than $2,000 per year, an additional six reported spending less than $5,000, and the remainder spent between $5,000 and $12,000 annually.

Perhaps it is too much to hope that large libraries could so quickly have adjusted their internal organization, and the budgetary reflection of that organization, to show by 1970 all costs of the continuing education of their staffs in a separate fiscal category. Accordingly the same survey asked other responding institutions to estimate the amount currently spent from all budget categories on continuing education;
only twenty-four found it possible to reply at all, of which fifteen estimated $2,000 per year or less; the balance furnished replies ranging up to $10,000.

Clearly these unimpressive figures reflect unfairly upon a substantial number of the nation’s largest libraries. For a number of reasons, questions concerning the continuing education of staff can be difficult to answer. Among such reasons one must include:

1) an unquestionable vagueness to the term “continuing education”; it can mean much or little depending upon local experience;
2) vagaries of local budgeting law or practice, which may require that continuing education costs in effect be “buried” as part of the cost of “travel” or of “general expense,” or indeed prevent their being shown at all; and
3) continuing education shades imperceptibly into the broader “system” of staff development generally, which in turn blends into the normal operation of a well-run organization.

In addition, of course, it must be observed that some libraries with remarkably advanced recognition of the inexorable need for an ever-active upgrading of the expertise of their staffs have simply chosen other routes to fulfilling this requirement than by thinking of it and treating it as a single, discrete, “training subsystem.”

The paramount importance for tomorrow’s services of continuing education today will not be dwelt upon here, but its recognition manifests itself in a number of ways in America’s larger libraries. In order to gain some sense of the degree to which such recognition shows itself, the author queried the same 145 large libraries concerning their present practices regarding: 1) orientation of new employees, 2) in-house training offered, 3) high school or college level instruction made available, 4) out-of-house workshops utilized, 5) study or research leave opportunities, and 6) encouragement to participate in conference activities. Results of the responses to these inquiries are given here seriatim.

Fifty-four of 117 responding libraries reported having some kind of formal orientation program for new staff members. The number of hours of class contact for such orientation ranged from a low of one to a high of twenty-one, but with an unimpressive median of four. Fifty-six libraries furnished, in one way or another, formal courses of in-house, inservice training for staff members. Most frequently cited as examples were courses surrounding the general areas of human rela-
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tions (e.g., supervision, sensitivity training, and personnel management generally) and skill training (e.g., typing, searching, storytelling, and languages).

Seventy-three institutions responded affirmatively to this question: “Can employees take high school or college courses for credit on released time?” Clearly, however, there was some confusion as to the meaning of the question, because eight of the affirmative respondents, when asked to define the conditions of such opportunities, replied, “If time is made up.” Otherwise the major qualifier, stated in one way or another, was that courses so taken should somehow be calculated to improve library effectiveness. Thirty-seven institutions reported that they paid all or part of the expenses of courses so taken. Responding institutions indicated that a total of some 1,100 such courses had been taken by staff members during the previous year, ranging institution-to-institution from 1 to 275, but with a median of only 4.

In response to the query as to “out-of-house” seminars and workshops utilized, 92 of 107 replying indicated that they did indeed pay staff members’ expenses in attending formal training programs elsewhere. An estimated 850 staff members had availed themselves of such opportunities in total during the previous year, ranging from a low of one in each of two institutions to a high of forty in each of two institutions; the median per institution was six. Fully 104 institutions granted some kind of leave for study or research, twenty-four with pay. Most frequently observed practices here were one or another variation of the “sabbatical leave,” primarily in academic libraries. Some libraries required guarantee of return upon completion of the leave.

Substantial variation lies in the issue of reimbursement of costs incurred by staff members in attending conferences. Ninety-three institutions reported that they at least participated in paying the expenses of staff members at conferences, but these responses were hedged around by qualifications. Twenty-seven did so to the extent to which funds were available; twenty-four did so only when the staff member had official duties to perform. Ten required that the staff member be a member of the association, three paid for higher administrators only, and two limited the number of such trips per year. Given such opportunities (or restrictions, depending upon how one looks upon it), an estimated 1,740 librarians from the libraries polled last year had at least part of their expenses to state conferences paid by their respective
institutions, 715 to regional conferences, and 1,430 to national conferences.

As was pointed out earlier, it is patently unfair to state, or even imply, that the large libraries of the land should necessarily have organized their opportunities for the continuing education of staff into carefully coordinated and articulated systems, yet they should doubtless have been at least thinking of it in those terms. Certainly the experience in some other industries and in the library community as well, is that the most comprehensive and efficient programs of continuing education and professional growth of staff are those which have been systematically developed.

There has been wide recognition and considerable literature in the general management field of the desirability for large organizations with needs for the continuous upgrading of the expertise and self-fulfillment of staff to develop training subsystems in their personnel management units. There has, on the other hand, been practically no literature, and apparently only limited recognition of the desirability of such a systemic approach to the problem in America's large libraries.

It is probable that most continuing education opportunities in libraries have come about in response to specific, individual, ad hoc staff requests received by management over a period of time. Acceded to once, of course, a particular activity thereafter carried with it the full force of precedent and was usually difficult rationally to deny the next time. It became an unplanned module in an unplanned system, a kind of alien pebble wrapped into a growing geologic accretion, the ultimate structure of which was known only to the Almighty. There must be a better way.

The "nonsystem" of the past, however, in the eyes of current experts in the field, has had one substantial and persistent redeeming virtue: namely, much of the content has been determined in fact "from the ground up"—by the staff members who were to draw upon the opportunities they sought—rather than being forced upon them from the top down. This essentially passive role of library management in continuing education understandably accounts for the present belief by many librarians that the major benefits from more active management participation in the future will accrue to libraries themselves more so even than to librarians. At any rate, it is perhaps obvious that the content and methodology of any training subsystem in libraries, as in any other industry, should represent the best and most prudent structured input from all segments of the organization, including student assis-
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tants, clerical and technical employees, professional and subprofessional staff, lower, middle, and top management, and perhaps even patrons. Properly sought, each group will be able to present its own views of unique value to the total enterprise.

A helpful yet simple example of the systemic approach to a training module resulted from a recent activity of the National Industrial Security Association; this example proposes the following series of possible steps toward the development of a training subsystem for any organization:

1. State the real NEED you are trying to satisfy.
2. Define the training OBJECTIVES which will contribute to satisfying the real need.
3. Define those real world limiting CONSTRAINTS which any proposed system must satisfy.
4. Generate many different ALTERNATIVE systems.
5. SELECT the best alternative(s) by careful analysis.
6. IMPLEMENT the alternative(s) selected for testing.
7. Perform a thorough EVALUATION of the experimental system.
8. Based on experimental and real world results, FEEDBACK the required MODIFICATIONS and continue the cycle until the objectives have been attained.5

These guidelines, which are fleshed out in some detail at their source, could well be adapted for use by a library planning team.

The literature of management also contains helpful examples of planned and coordinated training modules from other industries. The training and education programs conducted for its personnel by the Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York are an example.6 Programs are enumerated for each of several groups of employees: orientation and skill training for new appointees; supervisory training; and management development programs for junior, administrative, and executive officers. Both objectives sought and methods used are listed for each program.

The Mutual Life Insurance Company of course is a huge corporation “where literally millions are spent on training each year.”7 Libraries obviously must be more modest in the programs they devise for themselves. Yet the self-actualization of an organization is just as important for a library as it is for an insurance company, and it can only be attained through the self-actualization of its individual staff members themselves. It would seem, therefore, to be worth at least a similar ratio of effort. Many, of course, would argue logically that since li-
brarianship is an education enterprise it is worth a great deal more effort.

As indicated in the survey described at the opening of this paper, most libraries, even without benefit of systematically developed training programs, are already spending some monies on staff development, continuing education, and professional growth, with costs distributed throughout the budget. Their rationalization, articulation, and incorporation into a single, coordinated module would therefore, even without expenditure of more money, seem to furnish the following benefits: 1) overlapping effort, if such exists, can be reduced or eliminated; 2) gaps in coverage can be readily identified for remedial action; 3) a fairer distribution of opportunity across the staff can be attained; 4) efficiency is likely to result from the fact that all training activities will have been planned beforehand; 5) personal development opportunities will be more readily understood by prospective new staff members; 6) there will be improved recognition of the value of training both to the individual and to the organization; and 7) greater visibility of training opportunities will spur wider staff participation in them.

In addition, it appears likely that greater visibility of the library training program will help library managers to elicit increased support for the activity from the library's fund sources. It should also motivate the library administration to "sell" its fund sources more zealously than has often been true in the past on the necessity for increasing dollar support to the continuing education of staff.

Although best practice seems to call for continuing education opportunities to be planned and implemented centrally, it is desirable for at least three reasons that a kind of program budget accounting mechanism be utilized that can show the distribution of all costs of the program back to the beneficiary operating units. A first reason is that without it the large budget line for continuing education takes on an appearance of "administrative overhead" which can too easily become a prime target for would-be budget reducers. Second, it places the responsibility for finding benefit in the program directly where it belongs—upon the shoulders of the middle-echelon line supervisors whose units are being charged for the system anyway. Third, it is only through such a system of "charge-backs" that any meaningful input/output evaluations of the training subsystem can be accomplished.

In summary, it appears that the American library community is becoming increasingly aware of the need for attention to the continuing
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education of staff and that substantial resources are being put to the purpose. It is as yet, however, seldom thought of as a subsystem of the total library system. The possibility of coordinating all continuing education opportunities into a single, institution-wide training module is becoming increasingly attractive, and some experience exists which can show the way to others, although little of this experience exists in libraries. It does, however, appear likely that such training subsystems will be much more widely in evidence in large libraries in the years just ahead than they are today.

References


7. Ibid., p. 23.