Peer to Peer

UConn's experiment with student “ambassadors” for vendor-funded training on specialized searching

By Stephanie Willen Brown & Chelsea C. Hammond -- Library Journal, 9/15/2008

Free library training! All expenses paid! This sounded pretty good to us in the University of Connecticut (UConn) Libraries, and it sounded great to our students. The Scopus Student Ambassador (SAm) program, funded by Elsevier, permitted the UConn Libraries to hire graduate students to teach citation searching, using both Scopus and Web of Science, to other graduate students. The training doesn't cost the libraries anything, and it is free for graduate students, benefitting both UConn Libraries and UConn graduate students. The peer-to-peer training model we used can be replicated in many types of libraries.

UConn's primary campus is located in Storrs, with five regional campuses statewide and separate schools for law, social work, medicine, and dentistry. The library has a strong liaison program that provides personal contact to majors and graduate students as well as faculty in virtually all disciplines; this program currently features 37 librarians at six campuses. We've seen that graduate students are often aware of resources available in their subject, and faculty work with databases they used while they were in graduate school. In fall 2007, the university's total student enrollment was 28,677; our citation searching training program targeted some 6400 graduate students in Storrs.

SAm arrives

While some UConn faculty are cognizant of using citation searching tools, they are not often practiced in the use of the resources nor do they know the advantages, such as doing a broad interdisciplinary search for a primary topic. The UConn Libraries offers segments of the ISI Web of Knowledge suite from Thomson including Science Citation Index, Social Sciences Citation Index, and Arts & Humanities Citation Index. Three years ago, it licensed Elsevier's Scopus, a similar citation searching database. Elsevier offered quite a bit of material to promote the subscription, including some nice sticky notes and pens as well as myriad training brochures and site visits. It also offered an enticing program, SAm, in which it would pay for two UConn grad students to teach Scopus to other grad students.

There was some initial resistance to Elsevier's offer among our science librarians. They were primarily concerned that one library resource would be promoted to the exclusion of another, potentially doing a disservice to graduate students. They came up with a compromise: the SAm's would teach their peers how to do “citation searching,” in general, using both Scopus and Web of Science. We were thrilled when Elsevier accepted this alternate proposal.

In early spring 2007, some of the science librarians drafted a job description and developed a teaching agenda for the program. The group met with several graduate student candidates and ultimately hired two. This task team set about training the graduate student trainers in the fine points of citation searching and using both Scopus and Web of Science. Professional trainers from both...
of citation searching and using both Scopus and Web of Science. Professional trainers from both database vendors came to campus to explain their product to the graduate student trainers and library staff, boosting everyone’s knowledge of these tools.

Finally, when the class outline was set, the two graduate student trainers conducted a mock training session for library staff, enabling them to practice their technique and receive feedback from more seasoned library trainers.

Incentives as encouragement

Elsevier encouraged us to experiment with promotional ideas, so we tried a variety of methods. By far the most successful was to email UConn’s graduate student mailing lists; virtually all of our attendees indicated that they had heard about the session through email or from a friend or professor. Some of the less successful methods, as determined by comments on evaluations, were posters in various academic buildings and in the student union, notices on the libraries’ web site, and a series of Facebook ads in summer 2007. This is consistent with the peer-to-peer tone of the training: graduate students responded well to emails from other graduate students.

The task team debated many of the incentives that Elsevier offered for the sessions, such as “Lunch-n-Learns” where the company would pay for lunch and the graduate student trainers would demonstrate citation searching to attendees. We tried this in the first semester but found it difficult to offer both food and hands-on training, as no food is allowed in campus computer labs. The group determined that hands-on training was more important than food, so lunch went out the window. We asked Elsevier if we could offer $10 gift cards instead of food, and the company agreed. After a summer trial, we all decided that this was an excellent incentive because it was popular, easy to obtain, and didn’t create crumbs in the training rooms.

In the beginning

The first session was held in March 2007; training ran through four semesters, ending in early April 2008. In total, 390 students have attended 44 sessions. The majority of sessions took place in the library, giving students hands-on time to do their own searching; others were taught in graduate student labs and at regional campuses.

The comments have been overwhelmingly positive, including, “I recommend for all incoming grad students,” and attendees’ comments often included words like informative, excellent, helpful, and wonderful. While only one participant explicitly said, “looks good. Previously I only used Google Scholar,” we suspect that the sentiment is shared by many participants.

The program was successful in usage terms as well. For the first eight months of the fiscal year (July 2007 through February 2008), Scopus use increased more than 100 percent in sessions, searches, and number of “active users.” Web of Science usage, while not as dramatic, increased by 30 percent over that same period. Both statistics indicate that the program succeeded in encouraging UConn library users to explore both tools.

Peer-to-peer training

We designed the training sessions to be “peer to peer,” which involves education for a specific group that is led by members of that group, because this type of training offers unique benefits that professional-expert training does not. With peer-to-peer training, there can be a strong identification between leader and group member and better leader understanding of group member perspective. Some students may feel more inclined to join these learning experiences, since they actually learn more in this type of situation.

The success of peer-to-peer training hinges upon the learning process being facilitated by a group member. This aids a sense of connection between teacher and student and can create a more relaxed atmosphere, where the student may feel more comfortable asking questions. In our training sessions, we made it very clear that the trainers were information searchers, too, at the same level both professionally and academically as those attending the sessions. In other words, we made a concerted effort to establish the peer relationship in order to set the tone for the rest of the meeting.

The trainers also stressed their nonprofessional librarian status and attempted to use language that was free from librarian-lingo whenever possible. We tapped personal experiences as teaching examples and focused on concepts and processes from a user perspective. All in all, many learners
feel more comfortable learning from someone whom they perceive to be like them than they do learning from a professional expert.

When a nonprofessional trains peers, that person brings a unique perspective to the learning experience. The facilitator is an actual part of that group and hence has an intimate understanding of what it is like to relate to that topic of learning from the point of view of that particular group. Professionals have acquired knowledge about given topics from a higher-level, more formalized viewpoint; while that may give the professional certain capabilities, it may also limit their understanding of how a nonprofessional would understand or relate to a given topic. When peers teach other peers about library topics, those facilitators bring a viewpoint of that topic that is unencumbered by professional development. The peer trainer will have in-depth understanding of the learner perspective and can use that understanding to develop and express content in a way that might better facilitate learning.

**Broad applications**

Peer-to-peer training holds great potential for all types of training and educational scenarios with different types of libraries, not just academic facilities giving training on databases. For example, public libraries could set up training programs for teens about using library resources that are facilitated by other teens, or have seniors teach other seniors how to find medical information using MedlinePlus and other reliable resources. School librarians might consider setting up programs where students teach other students about using the library to help complete book reports. Corporate librarians might offer brown bag lunches where one employee facilitates a round table discussion about how other employees could use the in-house librarian and library resources to their best advantage. The possibilities really are endless.

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**Resources**

Peer-to-peer training can be used in all sorts of environments and situations. A number of articles discuss the applicability of this type of training to various situations, including the business sector, social work, and education. Here are a few examples:


**Working Smarter, Finding More**

Citation searching is a very powerful way to find information via the cited references associated with specific articles. There are two types of citations: those references that the author of the original document has cited in that work and those articles that cite that document in the future. In effect, the references that the author of a specific work has cited can be viewed as links to past information, as all of those citations would predate the specific document they are cited within. Those articles that cite the specific document in the future, after it has been published, provide insight into how the topic evolved. For example, Peter Eimas and others’ 1971 *Science* article “Speech Perception in Infants” has nine references at the conclusion of the article. Those references are “backward” citations; they are the articles that Eimas and his coauthors cited in their original paper and thus are sources of information that predate the 1971 article. Since “Speech Perception in Infants” was published, it has been mentioned in other articles over 200 times. Those 200 references are “forward” citations, as they represent articles that cite the original 1971 article. A single document could therefore yield access to tens, even hundreds, of new sources.

Both Scopus and Web of Science provide hyperlinks to records of all the citations—all backward and forward—within individual articles. Following the citations helps develop a web of information; this set of articles may cross traditional subject boundaries, enabling a more encompassing search.
Citations from traditional subject database searches are limited to the confines of the database’s subject. However, these citation searching databases often encompass a broad scope that includes topics from biological and medical sciences to social sciences. This allows for a more inclusive search. For example, articles related to the topic of computer-mediated communication (CMC) can be found within the subject boundaries of communication science and psychology; however, information related to CMC can also be found in the education, computer science, and medical science literature. Simply searching a traditional social science subject database like PsycINFO may limit the amount of information to which the searcher has access. Hence, citation searching can lead to broader results and, ultimately, a more thorough search.

The beauty of citation searching is that the researcher needs only one or two relevant articles to investigate a topic, because the references associated with those articles will lead the searcher to other related articles. Following the chain of articles eliminates some of the guesswork about the search terminology and topic area and may reduce the number of searches.