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Computer Classes for Job Seekers: 
LIS Students Team with Public Librarians to Extend Public Services

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Graduate library and information students provided a series of computer classes for job seekers at a main public library. Classes covered job searching on the Internet, cover letter writing, resume writing, interviewing skills, and social networking. Patron attendees reported a high satisfaction with the courses, students reported gaining confidence and valuable experience, and the public library staff valued the option of extending services through a ready pool of volunteers.

KEYWORDS service learning, reference services/learning, public libraries/services to the unemployed, job hunting

Public libraries are social institutions that respond to community needs. This is especially evidenced in how libraries create and deliver services for targeted populations. During the tightened economic times of the 1980s, public libraries provided customized services for business people, latchkey children, the homeless, and homeschoolers. Now, more than twenty years later in the midst of the eleventh recession since World War II, public libraries are serving as frontline providers of services for job seekers (“Recession job loss and creation” 2010).

In fall 2009 the American Library Association released the results of the public library funding and technology access study funded by the Bill &
Melinda Gates Foundation (Davis, Bertot, and McClure 2010). In 2007–2008, 44 percent of public libraries surveyed ranked services for job seekers a critical service. This figure increased by 50 percent in 2008–2009 when nearly two-thirds (66%) of the 4,303 libraries that responded to the survey classified their support for job seekers as one of their most crucial offerings. Further, 61 percent of libraries ranked access to government information—such as unemployment benefits—as a critical service. Job seekers are visiting libraries to use computers to set up e-mail accounts, complete online applications, prepare resumes, and use the Internet to search for and apply to jobs. According to Forsyth County, North Carolina, Public Libraries, responding to job seekers’ needs also involves teaching them skills they do not know that they need in their job search (Baumann 2009). While more than 99 percent of public libraries offer free public access to computers, few libraries are refreshing their services by purchasing updated computers (Davis, Bertot, and McClure 2010). Thus, while patrons’ needs for job-seeking support are increasing and the public is increasingly considering the public library as a primary delivery point for career information, public library financial support is decreasing. Public libraries are finding it increasingly difficult to offer hardware, open hours, and staffing to provide this much needed support.

SERVICE ENGAGEMENT THROUGH A LIBRARY INSTRUCTION AND INFORMATION LITERACY GRADUATE COURSE

Education for librarianship has long provided students with opportunities to meet and serve user communities. Whether offered within a formal course, through independent or field studies, or through volunteer experiences, these activities are now known as service learning, which is defined as “a teaching and learning methodology which fosters civic responsibility and applies classroom learning through meaningful service to the community” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2009). Coursework in public services, including classes focused on reference, reader’s advisory, and library instruction, are especially conducive to incorporating service learning (Roy 2009a).

A separate graduate library instruction and information literacy course was first offered in the School of Information (iSchool) at the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin) in the 1990s in response to student demand. Loriene Roy has described how, since its onset, students in the course work directly with library patrons and librarians in providing technology training, training on the use of specific reference sources such as databases, as well as providing help creating customized Web sites (Roy 2009b). With the relocation of the iSchool in summer 2009 to an off-campus renovated building halfway between campus and the Austin Public Library’s (APL) Faulk Central Library (Central), new incentives arose to coordinate course
requirements with a service learning experience at APL. In communication with APL librarian Bonnie Brzozowski in December 2009, this incentive quickly turned into a possibility for iSchool students enrolled in the spring 2010 course to design and deliver a series of face-to-face computer classes for job seekers in a training lab at APL.

**AUSTIN PUBLIC LIBRARY AND ITS MISSION**

Austin Public Library is made up of twenty-one branches, including the Central location in downtown Austin, Texas. The reference librarians at Central provide free computer classes to library customers, including introductory courses on topics such as using the Internet and a computer lab offered once a week where customers may come in and work with a librarian one-on-one. Computer classes are core services that have been offered at Central for about eight years and reflect a regular demand for computer instruction and assistance.

With the economic downturn and the unemployment rate on the rise in Austin, there was a need to add classes that focused on job searching, resume writing, and the like. Since the 2005–2006 fiscal year, there has been a 75 percent increase in job-search related questions asked at APL locations. Thus far in the current fiscal year, 18 percent more questions have been asked than the previous year. Additionally, the unemployment rate in Austin has risen from 4.2 percent in 2006 to 6.7 percent in 2009 (Porter 2010). Reference Department staff at Central noted an increase in the number of job search–related questions that have been asked during the past year and, as a partial response to this increase, decided to rename their computer lab the “Job Search Lab” to reflect that staff are ready to assist people with their job searches.

While it was apparent that extended services regarding aspects of the job-hunting process were needed by Central’s customers, staff constraints prohibited the addition of new services such as classes. Central already relies on volunteers to help teach regularly offered computer classes. In order to add classes or other services, new volunteers would have to be recruited and, in late 2009, the librarian in charge of computer class volunteers was actively looking for others who might be interested in teaching job-search classes.

Despite the great value that volunteers add to the APL system, they can be difficult to recruit and retain, and sometimes unreliability becomes an issue. One significant obstacle to recruiting and retaining volunteers is the criminal background check required by the City of Austin. The results of the check do not come in immediately—it can take up to a few weeks for a volunteer to be cleared to work. In terms of retention, the background check requirement itself can be off-putting, and if an individual does consent to a check, potential volunteers may lose interest during the waiting period.
One exception to the background check requirement is in the case of students who volunteer at an APL location for a grade or class assignment. Roy approached Brzozowski via e-mail in December 2009 about an assignment for her spring 2010 Library Instruction and Information Literacy class. Instead of recruiting additional volunteers, APL would access this group of eager students.

PREPARING A SUITE OF COURSES FOR JOB SEEKERS

Preparation for the computer courses for job seekers involved students outlining course topics; preparing for teamwork; designing course content; completing APL volunteer requirements, course delivery, course evaluation; drafting a dissemination plan; and completing a communal application to UT-Austin’s Human Subjects and Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Early in the semester students completed a learning styles inventory (Kolb 1976). The twenty-one students assembled into five teams of four or five students each based on their interests and aptitudes. They spent portions of three class periods in planning and followed a process outlined in the Sourcebook for Bibliographic Instruction (Branch et al. 1993). First, students identified the problem that they planned to address. They discussed employment and underemployment, and job-seeking skills, and they identified individualized assets, changing demographics, and the psychological impact of economic stress. Students drafted goals and objectives for each of the five planned computer classes. They developed their content areas from their goals and objectives. Discussion thread areas were created for each class on Blackboard, an online course management tool. Student teams met in class, communicated via e-mail and GoogleDocs, and met face-to-face outside of class to finalize content and rehearse.

Students discussed their preparation in their reflective essays.¹ Much of the class reading, including the text by Grassian and Kaplowitz and the other reading assignments or shared documents on Blackboard, focused on library instruction within academic library settings. In retrospect, the course readings could have included writings about the special needs and learning styles of adult education students (Grassian and Kaplowitz 2009). Preparing handouts for in-class presentations also helped students organize their computer classes and create handouts for the public. Students also wrote about their emotional responses to the assignment, typically reporting nervousness or uncertainty, although one student explained, “I can say with absolute certainty that anxiety was uppermost among my varied emotions the day of my class at Austin Public Library.” Such emotive responses diminished as students prepared for the classes, delivered them, and reflected on them: “The experience, results, and rewards I gained in doing so negated any anxious feelings I might have had before.” Students reported feeling relieved
after completing their classes and one student reported that she “felt a sense of true accomplishment.”

Students received approval to proceed with the training from the APL librarian who oversaw patron computer instruction. She advised that we organize a series of courses around a common theme, such as job seeking. Because APL’s other computer instruction courses lasted ninety minutes, she suggested that the computer classes for job seekers follow a similar format. Approval from the APL Human Resources Department involved completing the APL volunteer application and reading APL’s dress code and fire evacuation policies and volunteer procedures. Because the computer classes were offered as a class assignment, students were not required to undergo APL’s standard criminal background check for volunteers or secure a customized photographic identification badge. Students needed to complete UT-Austin’s Human Participant Training, Brzozowski completed the Visiting Scientist Agreement, and, as part of the IRB application, the APL Director completed a site letter permitting research to be conducted in the library. Successful completion of the IRB application provided the students, Brzozowski, and Roy with permission to review patron evaluation forms as well as end-of-semester reflective essays submitted by students. Consent forms were available for patrons at each class.

The computer training classroom, located on the second floor at APL, had space for a whiteboard, a networked computer with a ceiling-installed projector, and eight desktop computers on tables in four rows with little space to maneuver between rows. Because the small space would not have accommodated all twenty-one students in the Library Instruction and Information Literacy class, a decision was made early on that only the presentation teams would attend each class. Brzozowski shared her perspective that the public library patrons would likely prefer to be attending a class with other patrons with similar computer skill levels and would likely find an audience of students observing the class a daunting situation.

Seven weeks into the semester Brzozowski met with students for forty-five minutes, providing an overview of APL’s ongoing computer classes for the public, insight about prospective members of the audience, and answering student questions. She predicted that from five to twelve public library patrons would attend each class.

Brzozowski then designed a series of five classes based on the different aspects of the job-searching process from application to interview with a list of potential topics that could be covered within the scope of a class. The classes were scheduled during the regular iSchool class time during which five groups of from four to five students would arrive on five consecutive Tuesday mornings at 10:00 A.M. with each class to last an hour and a half. Brzozowski asked the resume writing team to include instruction on ResumeMaker, a proprietary database that allows patrons to create resumes, view sample cover letters, create and e-mail resumes, and read
advice on interviewing. It also includes access to an interview question bank and videos of interview scenarios. Flyers marketing the classes were posted within the main library and APL branches and were shared with local organizations and announced on the APL Web site. Public library attendees were not required to preregister to attend.

Class 1: Tuesday, March 30, 10:00–11:30 A.M.

*Job Searching on the Internet:* May include a review of local and national job sites, how to read job ads, strategies for finding “unlisted” jobs (the “hidden” job market), appropriate ways to respond to job ads, how to respond to job ads, and other organizations that provide job searching assistance.

Class 2: April 6, 10:00–11:30 A.M.

*Cover Letter Writing:* May include how to read job ads to know what to include in the cover letter, what people typically include in a cover letter, examples of good cover letters for a variety of people with a variety of qualifications, using Word to write a resume (basic Word skills, using templates, formatting a cover letter), and saving and distributing your letter (how to save, how to send it via e-mail).

Class 3: April 13, 10:00–11:30 A.M.

*Resume Writing:* May include what to include in a resume, types of resumes, examples of good resumes for a variety of people with a variety of qualifications, using Word to write a resume (basic Word skills, using templates), saving and distributing your resume (how to save, how to send it via e-mail).

Class 4: April 20, 10:00–11:30 A.M.

*Interviewing Skills and Tips:* May include preparing for an interview—how to read job ads, researching the company, example questions and appropriate versus inappropriate responses, and follow ups and thank-you letters.

Class 5: April 27, 10:00–11:30 A.M.

*Social Networking and Managing Your Online Identity:* May include the uses of Facebook and MySpace, including setting privacy features; LinkedIn; personal information that is searchable on the Internet; and how to present a job-appropriate online persona.
Students described the criteria they used in selecting content for their talks. Information needed to be informative, interesting, and appropriate. Content needed to be not only appropriate for beginners but also flexible enough to be of interest to those with some background. Students felt that their presentations should answer why the content was important to the task of job seeking. Students needed to provide background and definitions. Their search strategies in looking for content included meeting with the iSchool director of career services and searching for books and Internet resources. At least one student consulted with a public library speaker who taught similar job-seeking classes. Many of the students were graduating and, thus, while not experts on job seeking, were intensely absorbed with the topic. In fact, two students received and accepted offers to entry-level positions throughout the course of the semester and a third student accepted the position of director at a nearby rural public library.

Students incorporated different teaching styles—short lectures, live demonstrations, simulations, and active learning. Students were open to design the mix of delivery approaches; for example, one team divided content into two lecture segments interspersed with two demonstrations, while another team presented four lecture segments with a concluding demonstration. Students found that the class discussion and reading of learning styles and active learning techniques were useful. In reflecting on what they might have done to better prepare for delivering the computer classes, students thought a stronger focus on learner-centered teaching would have helped. They also felt that some cross-team communication might have ensured that each class provided supportive yet unique content. Because students were evaluated separately for their team contributions, each student presented at least fifteen minutes of content. In retrospect, some students felt that content could have been more easily presented in larger, more general segments. Marketing of the classes might also have provided summaries of the parameters of course content in addition to the name of each course so that patrons could determine whether to attend and what to expect.

**DELIVERY OF COURSES**

Audiences for each class ranged from five to nine people, in line with the average attendance for the general computer classes offered at APL. Roy attended each class as an observer. Initially, APL staff predicted that patrons would have some basic computer skills and would, for example, have used a keyboard in the past and would have experience using a mouse. An APL staff member attended each class. Brzozowski opened the first class, inviting patrons to the series of classes, informing them about other training available through APL, and reminding them to complete a paper evaluation form at the end.
This series of classes was designed so that each individual class had its own unique objective, with an aim of providing a foundational skill set to the job-seeking process in a twenty-first century setting, allowing the job seeker to feel both confident and competent throughout the process. The five classes were taught in an order of increasing complexity; they did not build on each other in content, but the skills from the first class were understood to be easier to master than those taught in the fifth class. Each group of students prepared a lesson plan addressing specific objectives and a handout for the class participants to take home for future personal reference.

“Job Searching on the Internet” took the lead in the series because the nature of job hunting has so drastically changed during a very short period of time. People who have had the same job for several years or even decades must completely relearn this important skill because of the heavy dependence on the Internet by employers who are posting new job openings. This situation was, in fact, the reality for one attendee who had maintained the same job for twenty years. The class focused on specific job-searching Web sites—www.monster.com, www.careerbuilder.com, www.workintexas.com, and JobView Austin (a job-searching resource to which APL patrons have access both on APL’s Web site and at several touch-screen kiosks at select library locations)—to frame the outline of the class, but the intention was to illustrate commonalities among these sites that could be applied to other electronic job-search resources. The important skills emphasized included not only the search itself but also how to protect personal information from nonreputable persons or organizations. Because the nature of this class was such that class attendees would have to visit several Web sites, and because the skill level and familiarity with computers of the attendees was unknown to the iSchool students leading the class, a basic Web site was created that listed the links to all of the job-search sites that would be used during instruction. All of the external links opened a new browser window to avoid unnecessary confusion as to how to return to the homepage of the supplemental site. This supplemental Web site also addressed the objectives of the class in some depth so that, should time constraints prevent a thorough explanation, attendees would have the option to return to the Web site and read more about topics that were and were not covered during the class.

The second class offered in this series was “Cover Letter Writing.” This class provided instruction on the anatomy of a business letter and applied that information to cover letters, explaining why cover letters are such an important part of the job-searching process. The iSchool students helped class attendees understand both how to discuss within the letters certain important skills that apply to specific job postings and how to complement what is already stated in a resume so that the cover letter is a value-added statement rather than a redundant waste of time for both the seeker and the potential employer. Attaching cover letters to e-mails was also discussed, which gave the iSchool students ample opportunities to promote
the “Resume Writing” class because they often noted that cover letters and resumes would be sent to a potential employer as a pair. The LIS student presenters used a job posting and demonstrated how to use the advertised job requirements as content within a cover letter. The cover letter was built in four segments: the header, introduction, the body, and conclusion. Finally, attention was given on how to deliver cover letters to prospective employers. This required a review of how to create an e-mail account and how to convert a text file to a PDF format. As noted previously, cover letters were presented earlier in the series than resumes because this skill is, in many ways, easier to master than resumes. However, there was some sentiment by those leading the class that perhaps “Cover Letter Writing” and “Resume Writing” could be switched in the order of the series because resumes were referenced so often in the cover letter class.

The objectives for the “Resume Writing” class were diverse, and to accomplish these objectives the iSchool student teachers developed a class that was split between content of the resume and aesthetics of the resume. The aesthetics were taught using both Microsoft Word and ResumeMaker through APL’s online resources. Microsoft Word was approached as a resume-making tool in two ways: creating a resume from a blank document and from a Word template. Using both books available for check-out at APL and specific job postings, it was demonstrated that resume content could be developed by matching the wording used in job descriptions and that certain resume formats are better suited for certain types of jobs. Some time was spent discussing the use of active verbs to help the job seeker sound like a strong and confident candidate for a position. The iSchool students also explained how to save a resume and then attach it to an e-mail so that job seekers would not feel unsure as to what to do with a resume once they had created it.

The “Interviewing Skills and Tips” class was a bit of departure from the format of the other classes in that, despite the entire series being billed as “computer classes” by APL, this class only used the computers for a brief few minutes to display video clips of mock interviews on ResumeMaker. The interview process was approached in three steps—prior to the interview, the interview itself, and after or follow-up to the interview—that were demonstrated by practicing actual interview scenarios. Some major points that were covered included how to practice interviewing beforehand, how to respond appropriately to illegal questions during an interview, how to send thank-you notes, and how to accept a rejection gracefully. This group of iSchool students gathered and organized a bank of common interview questions and related this information to workshop attendees, explaining why employers would ask certain types of questions. By providing an understanding of what employers need to know about potential job candidates, it was expected that interviewees would be better able to anticipate and answer questions in their interviews. Attendees were also encouraged to take a rejection as only
a minor setback and to react positively so that opportunities for networking and future positions would not be closed to them. The objectives of this class were complemented well by the noncomputer-oriented setup.

The final class, “Social Networking and Managing Your Online Identity,” was a lesson in both awareness of the dangers of divulging too much information about oneself and illuminating ways to use social networking to increase one’s visibility in a modern career marketplace. By creating a Facebook profile that exemplified every single “don’t” imaginable, this class attempted to make it abundantly clear that managing the persona presented to the world is important and, if not closely monitored, can damage potential professional networking opportunities. The iSchool students’ objectives addressed these issues in all of their complexity by focusing specifically on the well-known site Facebook and the perhaps less well-known site LinkedIn and how these two sites can be used to promote skills and experiences. The underlying message was that the benefits of being visible on the Internet can be both to a job-seeker’s great advantage and great disadvantage, so using sound judgment is critical. This class avoided warning people away from social networking all together; instead, it discussed how having an online presence can give a job seeker the benefit of recognition when information is thoughtfully presented.

PATRONS AND THEIR RESPONSES

The most challenging aspect of the assignment to teach the computer classes for job seekers was, of course, working with the public. As one student reported, “We may have known Monster.com frontwards and backwards, we may have planned out every section of the class down to the minute, and we may have showed up equipped with a Web site tailored especially for this group of people, but we certainly did not plan to have a student who had never once used a computer nor for someone who could not speak English.”

Graduate students are familiar with formalized learning environments and may be surprised when “unlike the calm and staid iSchool presentations, latecomers straggled in, people raised their hand[s] and asked questions while we talked, and the technology of active learning session happened without the audience realizing that we were expecting them to follow along with us.”

While patrons arrived at the classes with varying skill levels, iSchool students geared their courses at the introductory level. Still, students observed that the library patrons were different from their peer job seekers: “Many of the people that attended the workshops did not fit within [the] traditional profile of a job seeker; they were either older, or employed at one place for over 20 years or from a foreign country.” A student in the social
networking class noted: “It was fun to simultaneously help some people navigate LinkedIn and sign up others for their first email addresses.”

Nearly all patrons completed an evaluation form at the end of each session. Results of selected questions from the twenty-eight completed evaluation forms are shown in Table 1. Patrons were asked to provide feedback on the computer class content, the abilities of the students as instructors, the quality of the handouts and visuals, the comfort and arrangement of the training site, as well as their general opinion on the goals, length, and impact of the classes.

The most highly ranked aspect of the training was the training venue, which received an overall score of 4.96 on a scale from one to five. The next–highest ranked elements of the training spoke to the preparation of the students: the students were perceived as knowledgeable instructors (4.81 out of 5.00) who demonstrated strong presentation skills (4.74 out of 5.00) and were able to deliver current and relevant content (4.74 out of 5.00). The lowest-ranked aspects of the training were the length of the workshop (4.41 out of 5.00) and the impact of the classes on the improvement of the attendee’s job performance. These two categories might indicate that patrons were interested in more training and because they might have been unemployed or underemployed, they might not have been able to apply the training to their job situation.

The evaluation form also asked several open-ended questions and invited patrons to add any additional comments, all of which appear in the Appendix. Patrons noted aspects of the training they thought went especially well, including advice on answering questions during a job interview.

### Table 1: Patron Evaluations of Computer Classes for Job Seekers (N = 28)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
<th>Class 1</th>
<th>Class 2</th>
<th>Class 3</th>
<th>Class 4</th>
<th>Class 5</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content was valuable</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content was detailed</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>4.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content was current and relevant</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>4.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor was knowledgeable</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>4.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor had good presentation skills</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>4.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handouts were excellent</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audiovisual aids were helpful</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facility was comfortable and well arranged</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>4.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop had clear goals</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>4.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop was long enough</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop helped me to</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improve my job performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note: n varied from class to class with three surveys completed in class 1, four surveys completed in class 2, five surveys completed in class 3, nine surveys completed in class 4, and seven surveys completed in class 5.*
demonstration of an interview, and detail on specific resources such as LinkedIn. Patrons asked for further training, offering suggestions for future classes that would provide additional experience in interviewing or negotiating as well as more training on Web site development and repeating the classes on writing resumes and cover letters. Overall, comments were favorable and the most frequent comment was simply a thank you.

Students learned to adjust to managing a real class. “In the future, though, I will plan for possibly having to review material for late-comers, and avoiding being distracted by an attendee’s child.” Students were concerned that they knew little in advance about the patrons who might attend their classes, making it difficult to plan based on common technology skills. Students learned the consequences of trying to cover too much information in a short course.

**BENEFITS FOR APL AND ISCHOOL STUDENTS**

The job-seeker classes had a very positive impact on both Central and the APL system as a whole. As mentioned previously, public libraries are regularly adding services without an increase in funding, causing significant difficulty in maintaining appropriate service levels. By offering these classes, Central’s Reference Department was able to address a service need without having to ask individual staff members to overextend themselves.

Additionally, by offering these classes APL furthered its reputation as a responsive organization ready to address community needs. These classes even benefitted for those who did not attend. By offering and making the classes visible through press releases, fliers, communication with other organizations, and on the APL Web site, the mission of the library also became more visible. Simply by advertising the job-seeker classes with its regularly offered computer classes, APL was able to highlight its regular service offerings to a group of people who might need them now or in the future. Further still, the topics the classes addressed highlighted the knowledge and skills today’s job seekers may not realize they need, especially in the case of the “Social Networking and Managing Your Online Identity” class, one of the more highly attended classes.

The classes also helped Central’s reference librarians by providing them with a service to which they can refer more needy patrons. Sometimes customers with very little computer knowledge ask for assistance from the reference desk with job seeking on the Internet or some other aspect of the job-search process. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to provide adequate assistance to these customers because their level of need is so high (i.e., a significant amount of time would be needed to impart the
skills necessary for the patron to complete the tasks he or she may need to perform) and staff members need to be able to attend to other patrons who need assistance. Having classes or other programs to which these more needy people can be referred is of great value to both the reference librarians and the customers they serve.

The value the class attendees placed on the content offered and the class attendance levels are indicative not only of the need for these classes but also of the overall success of them. On average, the value of the content presented in the classes was given a 4.63 on a five-point scale, indicating that participants found the content of the classes useful and valuable. Between the months of January and April 2010, an average of 4.6 people attended each of Central’s regularly offered computer classes, compared to an average of 6.1 people per class in attendance at the job-seeker classes. Because the average attendance to the job seeker classes is at least comparable to this recent average, it indicates that, at the least, the classes were, as well-attended as the regularly offered classes.

In addition to benefiting patrons, the APL and iSchool collaboration produced benefits for both the library and students. Offering volunteer experiences for students avoided the strict City of Austin requirements on screening potential APL volunteers. Brzozowski reported that APL staff noted an increase in the number of attendees at other computer classes offered in the library, an increase they attributed directly to the classes for job seekers. Austin Public Library staff also continued to use the handouts that the iSchool students created.

Two iSchool students opted to continue offering computer classes for job seekers as their capstone or culminating graduating projects. The class hosted a Library Instruction/Information Literacy Open House to share their experiences and findings. This open reflective meeting was essential as not only a summary of the events but also as a group reflection. As one student reported, the “last class of the semester was an enormous boost to my self-confidence in terms of library instruction because I could see that our classes were successful.”

Students reported what they learned from the experience.

1. “I learned from Bonnie [Brzozowski] that instruction is not always terribly difficult, but it takes practice to do it well with confidence.”
2. “Finally, on the day of our workshop, I learned that you really cannot plan for everything.”
3. “It is better to cover less material more thoroughly than to attempt a comprehensive introduction that takes longer than expected and leaves little time for interaction with the patrons.”
4. “The biggest lesson I took away from this experience regarding library instruction might seem rather straightforward and obvious, but it was a
breakthrough for me. I learned that there is a great difference between presenting and teaching.”

5. “Another lesson I learned about library instruction through this project was that as an instructor, I need to stay calm, collected and patient because my attitude will affect that of the class. If I start to lose patience, participants are more likely to become frustrated and unsuccessful.”

Typical class assignments ask students to give formal presentations to each other. This assignment prompted students to step directly into the teaching spotlight: “teaching to your classmates is always very different than teaching to people who don’t know you and/or have to attend the class.” Students strengthened their teaching skills. One student gained experience in moving from a prepared script with extensive notes to a more conversational delivery style. Students learned to work in teams, not only in preparing their classes but also in the delivery, to make sure that patrons received one-on-one attention during the classes.

Students reported on the other skills they learned, such as flexibility. “We taught the class, and I think all of us did very well, but our success seems as though it should be attributed to our ability to adapt more than our ability to plan well . . . The fact that all four of us appeared to be patient and adaptable people was our strength.” Time management and pacing within a live course also was a challenge because “interacting with people just seems to take longer than anyone anticipates.” Students also wanted opportunities to provide classes to other audiences including university undergraduate students or on other topics such as basic Internet skills for seniors.

Students also were able to reflect from their hands-on experience how public libraries fulfill their missions by responding to patron needs. As one student remarked, “If a public library is meant to provide a benefit to the local community, ignoring job seekers is the wrong choice.” Another student reflected on patron’s “innate trust” in the ability of the public library to assist them. Because public libraries have been providing free public-access computing for more than a decade, this role “moves naturally” into one of assisting patrons in their job search. One student summed up her opinion of this role: “The library is a perfect place to assist job-seekers and I believe that this role will continue long after the recession ends.” Another student predicted that offering courses for job seekers would increase use of other library resources, leading to increased circulation and a way for the library to justify the funding needed to purchase and maintain such services.

Students learned that their efforts were well received, as noted on the patron evaluations, especially in the many expressions of gratitude: “while public libraries must have their own host of on-the-job difficulties regarding patrons, being treated like a valuable resource made the a class a very ‘feel good’ experience.” During the class one student walked with an attendee to the circulation desk to help her check out a book on display. The
patron volunteered that, after attending the computer class for job seekers on interview skills, she felt much more confident.

The benefits that the students received are innumerable. As two graduating students reflected:

- “Our resume workshop, given at the Austin Public Library, though largely a success, left me with a renewed sense of the challenges and victories of being an instructor.”
- “This experience was one of the most useful tasks that I have participated in during my time in the iSchool.”

CONTRIBUTORS

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NOTE

1. Comments from student reflective essays are noted in direct quotations throughout the article.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX FULL TEXT OF PATRON RESPONSES TO OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

What were the most useful aspects of the workshop?

1. I found all of it helpful.
2. The contents and highlighting the important aspects of cover letter writing.
3. Very clear explanation and examples.
4. Having additional support staff to add useful input present during class.
5. Writing online database in APL.
6. Detailed guideline to write resumes.
7. Confidence gaining.
8. Hints and tips on what you should and should not say or do in a job interview.
9. Resources given.
10. Interview rehearsal.
11. Being available, convenient for me to get to.
12. The mock interview.
13. Everything was helpful.
14. All good, also virtual interview.
15. Information about Twitter and MySpace.
16. The information showed me how to edit LinkedIn and the importance of LinkedIn to professional advancement.
17. Privacy options.
18. Privacy settings.
19. Tips about LinkedIn.

The least useful?

1. None.
2. Everything’s useful.
3. I am a frequent user of Facebook, which I use for networking. I would have loved that we had focused more on LinkedIn and the professional profile and searching for jobs.

Suggested topics for future workshops

1. Job seeking for foreigners.
2. Interview skills practice.
3. Negotiation skills; where can you find salary ranges?
4. More Facebook (this one was too short on Facebook), building a website, editing a website, putting information on a website.
5. Local job search options.
6. Resume and cover letter advice and expertise.

General comments:

1. Thank you! [six replies]
2. It was great for the time available.
3. Thank you for making this available.
4. Thanks so much!
5. Very good work.
6. I'm not English native speaker and it was hard for me to understand some of the speakers. Thank you very much. I think that this is a very good initiative. Very useful.
7. Very helpful.
8. Might want to expand handouts; gave other info sources which are helpful.