

September, 2011

Getting the Most From Online Learning

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In the current climate of reduced (or non-existent) travel and training budgets, online learning has become a life saver for librarians interested in enhancing their professional knowledge and skills. In the past 15 months, for example, the Ohio Library Council has offered webinars on diverse topics like teamwork, online reader's advisory, ebooks, accessibility issues, legal reference services and early literacy. The American Library Association, along with its major sub-organizations—ALSC, ACRL, AASL, etc.—has offered everything from one-hour training sessions to full-day conferences in the online environment. Most of these real-time events are recorded so librarians can view them up to six months after they were originally presented, in the hopes that everyone who wants to can get the training they need. And library schools, such as Kent State University's SLIS, are offering more online workshops for both students and practicing librarians. So what's not to like about this brave new world of e-learning?



The simple truth is, while online learning can save us time, money and travel, which is a real boon during our Ohio winters, it also requires a greater amount of determined attention on the part of webinar participants. Attending a webinar from noon to 1:00 p.m. on a Wednesday afternoon may sound like an easy way to gain new knowledge while eating lunch at your desk (what a time saver!), but almost inevitably there will be interruptions. There's the patron who "just needs to ask a 'quick question'" —as if such a thing really existed; the co-worker who needs to know where to find the phone number for the copier repair service; the trustee who drops by for an unscheduled visit. Before you know it, you've heard the first 10 minutes of the session and the last five minutes, or missed the session altogether. Oh well, you sigh, you can always view the recorded session later. But for many of us, "later" never seems to be a good time.

In order to be an effective e-learner, it may help to keep these simple guidelines in mind:

- 1) Make sure everyone on the staff—or at least in your department—knows when you will be attending a webinar training event. Webinars should be noted on the calendar the same as a meeting or off-site workshop.
- 2) If you have an office, close the door and put out a sign stating, "Meeting in Progress—Do Not Disturb." If you don't have an office, try to use a computer that is located out of the main traffic area. If possible, set up a screen or other physical barrier such as a room divider to block the view of other staff and patrons.
- 3) Invest in a headset or headphones to help you focus your attention on the presenter and eliminate peripheral noises and conversations.
- 4) Test out the technology before the session begins—the sooner the better! Most webinar registration messages include information on how to test the audio, video and software setups

on your computer. Don't wait until five minutes before the webinar begins to do this. Arriving late to a one-hour online training session can cause you to miss valuable information, and no one can learn effectively when they're flustered.

5) Actively participate! Most webinars offer attendees multiple opportunities to ask questions and interact with both the presenter and other librarians via chat or instant messaging, or through audio communication using a headset. Engaging in conversations during these sessions helps the presenter gauge how the training is going, allowing her/him to respond immediately to issues important to the participants.

New eDegree at KSU-SLIS

While continuing education remains the most effective form of keeping current with new trends and developments in the field and developing new skill sets for professional librarians, library school education has progressed by leaps and bounds in the online environment over the last ten years. Following national trends, Kent State University SLIS recently announced the development of an eDegree plan that will allow new students to earn their MLIS degree completely online. Beginning in the fall 2011 semester, students can select one of four tracks to focus on in their online coursework:

- 1) Public Librarian
- 2) K-12 School Library Media Specialist
- 3) Children's & Young Adult Librarian
- 4) Museum Studies Professional

As in the traditional MLIS degree program, each of these focus areas includes five core courses and up to six elective courses, or five electives and up to four workshops, resulting in a 36-hour degree plan. Currently, the KSU-SLIS eDegree is being offered on a Two-Year Option (two courses per semester over six semesters) and a Fast Track Option (three courses per semester for four semesters). More information about the KSU-SLIS eDegree program—including course schedules, a list of technology requirements and a frequently asked questions section—is available at <http://www.slis.kent.edu/content/view/393/83/>.

There's no doubt that e-learning is here to stay. No matter what area of the field you work in—academic, public, school, special—more online training events are becoming available every month. If you haven't taken the plunge yet, give it a try! And if your first foray into e-learning wasn't as successful as you'd hoped, take another chance when you come across a compelling topic. At the very least, your webinar experiences will better prepare you to interact with patrons in the online environment. And at best, you'll emerge with new knowledge and skills that will help you provide better assistance to everyone your library serves, especially those who just have a "quick question."