

Mining the Knowledge Base: Wiki Technology and Constructivist Learning and in a Reference Services Training Program

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In Fall 2009, University of the Pacific's Health Sciences Branch (HSB) Library initiated a reference training program to develop competencies and skills in order to promote a uniform level of reference expertise among its paraprofessional staff. Like many other branch libraries, HSB serves specialized user populations with minimal staffing. At the time of the training, the Sciences Librarian was the only provider of reference services and her presence at HSB varied, based upon her responsibilities to the Main Library, its Reference Desk and other departmental, school, and university-wide committees.

Due to scheduling constraints, like staggered work schedules, aspects of the training had to be asynchronous, online, and delivered in a shared learning space. Therefore, it was determined that the training would be delivered in a wiki format, informed by constructivist principles. Constructivism views learning and knowledge-making as social and cultural processes. Learners come into any situation with their own personal interests, expertise, and experiences, which assist in the formation and construction of new knowledge.

The collaborative functions of the wiki complemented the branch's team-oriented organizational structure. Each staff member selected materials of interest to them and augmented the wiki conversation with their previous experiences. Content on the wiki was user-driven, as participants were able to choose materials featured on the wiki. For the staff, benefits of using the wiki included the encouragement and exchange of dialogue, self-selected materials generated from personal interests, archival abilities, asynchronous communication, and a collaborative and constructivist learning environment.

To assess the success of this program, a confidence scale was designed to address 28 criteria, including reference behaviors, content knowledge, and library workflows. At the onset of the program, the paraprofessional staff rated their respective levels of confidence in performing the 28 tasks. At various points during the program, including the conclusion of the training, staff took the same survey again. After analyzing the initial and final results of the survey, it was determined that staff improved on 84% of the 28 criteria with 16% remaining the same.