Date submitted: 02/08/2010

# Library Assistants as Situated Learners: how they can learn more effectively

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**Meeting:** **107. Knowledge Management, Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning with Information Technology**

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 76TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND ASSEMBLY
10-15 August 2010, Gothenburg, Sweden
http://www.ifla.org/en/ifla76

## Abstract:

*Many libraries are working hard to facilitate user learning, but in fact, staff learning is even more important. It is the staff members who implement plans and services, and it is their adaptability to the growing world that will directly affect the success and effectiveness of library functions. The staff are therefore expected to upgrade their knowledge and skills continuously in order to contribute and enhance the library's roles and services in meeting the increasing user needs.*

*This paper presents a research on Library Assistants (LA) as situated learners and how they learn in a University Library in Hong Kong. LAs are core members of libraries and they often carry out a whole spectrum of duties and services that are indispensable. The most crucial target of this research is to explore, analyse and interpret the learning issue of the LAs and provide the administrators of the Library with some useful recommendations on how to facilitate a more effective learning environment for staff.*

## Nature of Problems to be Investigated

Adaptation to continuously and rapidly changing information world is the main challenge that the university libraries in Hong Kong are now facing. Libraries have been largely affected by advanced technology, changing societal expectations and the demand for better service quality. In order to be able to respond to environmental changes and user demands, library staff members need to further equip themselves so that they are able to offer necessary help to users. Libraries also need to re-think how their internal structure can be more effective and how they can build up a team of staff who can be more adaptable to the new circumstances.

Library Assistants (LAs) are core members of libraries. Although they are not the professionals in the field, they usually represent the majority in the staffing structure. They play an important role in supporting administrators and professionals by carrying out a whole spectrum of Library functions. They are the front line group by whom users are served and from whom users get the impression and image of the library services. To be able to perform such an important role and be able to compete and survive in the changing environment of libraries, LAs do not only need to upgrade their knowledge and learn technical skills but also develop new conceptions to cope with changes.

There have been many attempts in previous years to study the LAs. Nevertheless, most of the studies were done from a library management perspective conducted by librarians or information professionals, usually looking for better ways in managing the performance of this group of allied staff. Other studies focused on the aspect of human resources development, such as recruitment, staff appraisal as well as staff training and development (Jordan and Lloyd 2002; Reiner, Smith and Ward 2003; Blagden 2006). The research reported here is taking a different perspective. It is an interpretive case study research which took place in a University Library in Hong Kong. The broader aim is to draw upon educational studies that investigate the nature of learning and how learners learn from the social and cultural point of view.

Adopting the framework of 'Situated Learning' and 'Adult Learning', the research specifically aims to study the LAs as learners and to understand the characteristics of their learning and development in the workplace. It attempts to find out how these LAs learn and how they can learn more effectively. It is also hoping that by identifying the socio-cultural barriers to learning, the Library managers can have a better understanding of how the LAs can be motivated and facilitated to learn more successfully. Recommendations are drawn from the study for the Library to provide the LAs with a more facilitating learning environment. Due to limited space, this paper will focus mainly on reporting the interpretation of the findings as well as the implications and recommendations.

## Theoretical Framework

### Nature of Learning

Traditionally, psychological and behavioural perspectives on learning view the acquisition and transformation of knowledge as happening inside the brain, separated from the context of the learning environment. This focus on the internalisation of knowledge is largely cerebral. In contrast to the conventional explanation of learning, socio-cultural models posit that learning is "shaped by the context, culture, and tools in the learning situation" (Hansman 2001, p.45) This theory, led by the twentieth-century Russian psychologist LS Vygotsky, argued that "all human activities take place in a cultural context with many levels of interactions, shared beliefs, values, knowledge, skills, structured relationships, and symbol systems" (Hansman 2001, p.45).

### Situated Learning Theory

Situated Learning focuses on the relationship between learning and the social situations in which it occurs. Lave and Wenger (1991) situate learning in certain forms of 'social co-participation', instead of the brain of any individual. According to them, learning is a social process, a social activity that comes largely from our experience of participating in daily life and they claim that, 'no activity is not situated'. Hansman (2001) also believes that learning is an everyday event that is social in nature because it occurs with other people. Brockbank, McGill and Beech (2002) interpret social process as 'the context and conditions in which learning takes place, which will influence how intentional learning situations are created and undertaken".

The Situated Learning model advocated by Lave and Wenger (1991) is context-based. It suggests that we all learn by participating in activities with others as social beings. Situated Learning helps analyze motivation, identity, social interaction, participation, culture and practice in order to understand how learners can learn more successfully. The strong emphasis on 'Cognitive Apprenticeships', 'Communities of practice' and 'Legitimate Peripheral Participation' offer better concepts and tools to situate staff learning and enhance the learning contexts. Among these components, Legitimate Peripheral Participation is the key. Fincher (2003) says the importance of Legitimate Peripheral Participation has two effects. First, "the focus is not on learning, but on changing the identity of the learner". This is to say that legitimate peripheral participation allows not only the apprentice to learn during the participation but at the same time enables the novice learner to become a full participant and eventually the master. The second effect is that, "without the peripheral participation, the 'exchange value' replaces the 'use value' of increasing participation". That is, the exchange or interaction itself is of less value than the application of what has been learned from the exchange.

Library staff members are not isolated but their behaviours, learning and thinking are affected by the environment, including the people and the things happening around them. The Situated Learning model, focusing on the context and the learning environment, is particularly useful for understanding learning in a changing environment like the Library.

Situated Learning allows a framework and provides a practical guideline for the Library to better understand staff learning as well as the motivation of the 'old-timers' and 'newcomers'. Applying Situated Learning helps the Library in facilitating a more effective learning environment for the LAs. By redesigning the workplace and tasks, the 'old-timers' can be motivated to learn continuously while the 'newcomers' can 'legitimately and peripherally participate in authentic social practice in rich and productive ways.

Adult Learning Theory

Another theoretical construction that is useful for understanding LAs' learning is Adult Learning Theory. Jarvis (2004) has suggested that human beings have the need to learn and they are lifelong learners and that the provision of education across the lifespan is one way by which people can satisfy this need (p.38). Malcom Knowles (1980), a pioneer in the field of adult learning, has attempted to develop a theory specifically for adult learning. Lieb (1991) has summarised Knowles' principles and identified the following characteristics to illustrate how adults learn best:

First, adults are autonomous and self-directed. They can take responsibilities but need to be free to direct themselves. Therefore, the learning process should involve active participation and reflect their interests. Second, adults have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge and they need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base. Third, adults are goal-oriented. They appreciate an educational program with clearly defined elements. Fourth, adults are relevancy-oriented. They are ready to learn when they experience a need to know or to do something in order to perform more efficiently. In other words, they must see a reason for learning something. Fifth, adults are practical. Learning has to be applicable to their work or problem solving. Adults need opportunities to apply what they have learned. The immediacy of application is a critical learning motivator. Sixth, as do all learners, adults need to be shown respect. Thus, learning opportunities should not be remedial or be associated with deficit thinking. That is, staff training should have positive constructs and not be concerned with deficiencies.

## The Context of the Case

Library jobs in Hong Kong are occupying a relatively small market. The recent downturn of the economy causes different degrees of budget cuts in libraries and results in fewer job opportunities. Fewer staff recruited or retained means a heavier workload for the existing staff. For the LAs, the new user requirements and expectations posts a much higher demand on their qualifications, working abilities as well as responsibilities. Although some of the 'newcomers', who have been recruited under a more competitive job market in recent years, may possess higher qualifications and better computer skills, there are a lot more of the 'old-timers' remaining in the field. As the educational level of the 'old-timers' is relatively low and becoming inadequate to survive and compete in the new information era, it is thus necessary for them to be re-trained and their skills to be upgraded.

In the Library under study, some department heads think that the 'newcomers' are in general outperforming the 'old-timers'. It is also commonly believed that the 'newcomers' are more motivated to learn. Years of services and employment terms could be the factors that affect staff learning. However, no one has systematically identified the similarities and differences between the two groups especially in their learning. A research is therefore needed to help the Library understand the characteristics of LAs and their learning needs and to discover their preferred modes of learning. With the comparison between 'old-timers' and 'newcomers' presented, the Library will be able to have a better knowledge of the similarities and differences of learning needs among staff of different years of service, employment terms and types of services they are involved in. The Library might also be able to review the working culture and how to provide a community of practice for staff to develop.

## Research Method

Selection of Participants

Among the LAs in the Library, there is a combination of experienced and relatively inexperienced staff members. They are distinguished as '*Old-timers'*, who have been with the Library for at least 20 years and have been employed under the regular superannuated term. '*Newcomers'* are those who have been with the Library for five years or less. Most of them have been employed in a fixed term contract. They do not enjoy the same job security and fringe benefits such as number of annual leave days and allowances as the 'old-timers'. Due to the different remuneration employment package, the 'old-timers' and 'newcomers' may have different perceptions of learning needs, motivation, status and identity, learning preferences, and perceived barriers and facilitators to learning.

A briefing session was first conducted to invite all LAs of the Library to participate in the research. Based on the years of service and work areas on the data sheet completed by staff, those who were willing to join were divided into four segregated groups - Public Services 'Old-timers' (PSO); Public Services 'Newcomers' (PSN); Technical Services 'Old-timers' (TSO) and Technical Services 'Newcomers' (TSN). A total of 12 LAs, three from each group, were invited to participate in the intensive individual interview sessions.

Intensive Interview

An unstructured interview approach was adopted with 8 topics pre-set for the interview questions to be based on:

1. perceptions of learning needs;
2. Effective modes of learning preferred
3. Identity and status perceived
4. Motivations to learn
5. Opportunities and practice of interaction and participation in the working environment

6. Current staff learning opportunities and frequency
7. Perceptions of barriers to learning
8. Perceptions of facilitators to learning

To explore each topic, a series of questions were asked to probe for more specific information. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio taped.

Data Collection and Coding

The information obtained from the tape recordings were transcribed and coded. The answers were first listed by topics and then reorganized so that similar viewpoints towards the same question were put together. The responses were finally grouped into themes for analysis.

Unit of Analysis

Situated Learning models have particular concerns centering on four issues. They are: Personal – Identity and Motivation; Social – Interaction and Participation; Practical – Community of Practice; Cultural – Cognitive apprenticeship. These issues are also the concern of Adult Learning Theory and studies on learning environment in general and they were therefore developed to be the categories and themes for the analysis. The units of analysis were listed in Table 1.

**Interpretation of Findings**

Typology of Learners (see Table 2)

According to the different perspectives and motivation of learning, three types of learners have been identified, namely the 'Instrumental Learners' who are interested more in the tangible rewards that come with learning, the 'Compliant Learners' who learn whatever is required in order to perform their duties and the 'Proactive Learners' who are attracted to lifelong learning. The research findings did show that all the 'Instrumental Learners' are the 'old-timers'. Nevertheless, although more 'old-timers' are 'instrumental' and 'compliant' learners; and more 'newcomers' are 'proactive' learners, there are indeed mavericks. In the category of 'Compliant Learners', there are three 'newcomers' and one 'old-timer'. In the category of 'Proactive Learners', there are three newcomers and two 'old-timers'. In other words, some 'newcomers' stood out as being 'compliant' while some 'old-timers' stood out as being 'proactive'. This demonstrates that the typology is not stereotypical. That is, not all old-timers are 'Instrumental Learners' and not all newcomers are 'Proactive Learners' as many library managers would have expected.

Perception of Learning Needs

From the data analysed, it was found that the perception of learning needs was in fact directly related to the types of learning styles. When asked about what knowledge and skills they thought LAs should acquire, the 'Instrumental Learners' suggested some very basic and general skills such as keyboard skills and Chinese character input method. This was understandable as they were the group who did not see much need to learn. Since they were not interested in learning, it was natural that they believed basic skills were adequate for their jobs. This group also assumed their own experience and common sense were enough for their job.

Most Compliant Learners referred to learning largely as work related. They therefore focused more on the practical library-oriented skills such as customer services, how to handle complaints, cataloguing, classification, and so on. Some other 'Compliant Learners' would learn skills they were interested in and which were useful to either their current job or future job opportunities.

For the 'Proactive Learners' who saw learning as a long-term ongoing process, knowledge and skills were not limited to their job environment. They had suggested that they wanted to learn higher level knowledge and skills such as secretarial, managerial, referencing and researching skills. One important point raised by this type of participant was that they thought LAs needed to be multi-skilled and they preferred a workplace that could offer a larger variety of tasks. Some of them had experience in working in the branch libraries and pointed out that because the team of staff of a branch library was usually smaller than that of the main library, each staff member needed to handle a larger range of tasks. This was in fact beneficial to staff learning, not only in terms of the variety of skills learned but also job interest and job satisfaction.

Effective Learning Modes

When the LAs were asked what they thought about the learning activities in the current workplace, their responses were quite similar. They were generally satisfied with the frequency of the staff development programs organized either by in-house professionals or by the central Personnel Office of the University. These activities usually included instructional courses and workshops. However, most of them admitted that if there was no difference between learning and not learning, it would be difficult to expect staff to learn persistently. Therefore, they needed to be offered favourable learning environments where they were encouraged to learn and that they knew there would be some consequences if they did not learn.

It was also revealed from the interviews that to the LAs, the applicability of the content was an important criterion when a learning activity was evaluated. Although there were workshops and other more activity-based training programmes, not all the contents of the courses were relevant to the staff's particular learning needs. One barrier that deserved particular attention was the lack of application and evaluation of what had been learned. Thus, it was not adequate for the institution to just offer learning opportunities. Staff also needed to be given chances to apply what they learned from the development courses.

For the same reason, both the 'old-timers' and 'newcomers' of the Technical Services did not welcome the Library's job sharing arrangement and to take part in working at the service counters. They did not recognize this as a learning opportunity because the knowledge and skills were not applicable to their job duties. As stated in the Adult Learning Theory, the adult would only learn when they found the knowledge or skills useful to their responsibilities. The Library management believed that the requirement of multi-task and multi-skills in the sharing of the counter roster might enhance LAs' motivation to learn. Yet the LAs obviously disagreed. It demonstrated that there was always discrepancy between the organizations goals and staff goals which was an issue that required special attention.

The research has illustrated that even though learning attitudes are quite different, there is however, a common agreement that contextual learning taking place in the real situation is the most effective way of learning. Embedding learning in authentic professional practices is thus essential. It is also understood that the participants welcomed more staff participation chances in group learning projects. It is commonly agreed among the LAs that social group interaction and apprenticeship are useful and helpful in facilitating staff learning.

Learning Needs and Work Background

Some of the 'old-timers' did not see much need to learn. The fact that they were not required to learn by the institution made the 'old-timers' believe their experiences were adequate for their responsibilities. As a matter of fact, they could still carry out their daily duties and thus would only learn when necessary knowledge and skills were required by certain tasks or projects assigned to them.

From the responses of the interviews, it was suggested that more 'newcomers' had a larger variety and higher levels of learning needs than the 'old-timers'. The former did not only learn the library-related knowledge and skills to handle their responsibilities, but they also wanted to learn more general and broader skills for future use. This was because most 'newcomers' were usually not certain whether they would stay in the Library or work in other fields in the future.

Identity

- Organizational Culture and Identity

From the data collected, it showed that most of the LAs had the feeling that their importance was not recognized and that they deserved a higher status than what they were receiving. They therefore needed a higher degree of recognition of their importance. They also wanted to be given more authority in their duties at the operational level. However, the Library is a traditional Chinese organization. Chinese people are more conservative and reserved. They will not indicate explicitly their learning needs or initiate asking for learning resources and support. They are also more class conscious and are not confident enough to voice their needs and how they feel. They are not prepared to talk about their needs and hesitate to express what they genuinely think. They will only keep their feelings and grievances, if any, to themselves. Apart from a relatively few vocal people, many never complain.

- Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Another meaning of identity, according to Lave and Wenger's (1991) definition, is the status of being a 'newcomer' who is on the periphery of the community. Legitimate Peripheral Participation involves "the process by which 'newcomers' become part of a community of practice" (p. 29). Yet not many of the LAs are interested in becoming a full participant. For the Instrumental Learners, they believed they had no future in their career and there would be no further development chances no matter whether they learned or not. Their identity in the sense of self image and position prospects was low and discouraging. However, they in fact possessed valuable experiences since they had gone through the process from being 'newcomers' to their current position so they had the potential to be trained as masters to help develop the 'newcomers'.

Whether the 'newcomers' want to become a part of the community depends largely on how they see the Library as their long-term career. It was demonstrated that the Compliant Learners were conscientious. They had no desire to fully participate in the Library community because of a lack of interest. The Proactive Learners wanted to equip themselves. However, if there was no challenging and prospective job development, they may prefer to learn something outside of the library field and the Library may not be able to retain them. In this case,.

Motivation to Learn

Any learning system which can be made sustainable must be directly related to motivation. Only motivated staff will learn continuously. As Joy-Matthews, Megginson and Surtees (2004) state that, 'without the desire or motivation to learn, failure is predictable' (p.99) Participants' motivation seems to be affected mostly by their perception of what would be achieved by learning and also their career future – a 'future' that staff would look for. What the LAs need most is in fact clear and simple. No staff will be interested or motivated to learn if they believe they have come to a dead end. Sense of importance is also an important factor affecting their motivation to learn. The 'old-timers' are not motivated to learn as they think that their importance has not been recognized and their experiences have not been made good use of. On the other hand, because of their dissatisfaction with the remuneration and gloomy job prospect, the 'newcomers'' motivation to become full members via Legitimate Peripheral Participation has also been adversely affected.

Library leaders may need to first tackle the issue of sense of importance and give staff hope for a better future before staff's motivation to learn can be enhanced. Participants in general believed that 'newcomers' were more willing to be trained yet the majority of the LAs working in the Library were 'old-timers' who did not see the need to learn.

The staffing in the Library had been very stable in the past decade. Many of the LAs had served more than 10 years and a lot of them had been doing the same job ever since they started. These staff members, who had already secured a permanent position, were not enthusiastic about changes or learning opportunities. As there was a very slight chance for further advancement and there was no tangible reward for development, motivation to continue to learn was low. In other words, if there was a chance or something they could look forward to, the 'old-timers' would be more motivated to learn.

As for the 'newcomers', what they treasured more was to be treated fairly, that their contribution would be recognized and there were chances for development. In the eyes of the 'newcomers', as reported in the research, the 'old-timers' were not interested in learning and thus unable to cope with the new environment. Although some 'newcomers' believed the 'old-timers' should learn more, they understood it was difficult to learn with their age and job security. It is interesting to know that while most participants thought the 'old-timers' were not motivated to learn, two 'old-timers' seemed to believe the 'newcomers' were not as motivated to learn as themselves.

In a nutshell, the Instrumental Learners were not interested to learn because they believed they had no future. The Compliant Learners were not interested to learn library skills because they did not find the job interesting enough. The Proactive Learners were willing to learn but might not necessarily learn library related knowledge and skills unless they knew there was something more challenging and inspiring for them. It seemed that the three groups of learners had a common motivator, that is, something they could look for in the future.

Barriers to Learning

The participants had provided a list of barriers that would discourage them from learning. It seemed that the perspectives on barriers were quite individual and varied. Some of the barriers revealed by the participants matched the deterrents surveyed by Shen, Lee and Chan (2002) such as 'lack of time', 'need to take care of family' and 'course not useful'. The barriers were categorized into four types: internal, situational, systems and cultural.

- Internal Barriers

Internal barriers were those related to the individual's personal viewpoints and perspectives. They include: 'do not see the needs', 'age', 'family/children ties', 'no interest', 'no ambition', 'do not want to stay in the career', 'incapable', 'unhappy with the environment', 'low identity and status', 'personal priority' and 'no attraction in the job'.

- Situational Barriers

Situational barriers were those related to work practice and arrangement. What the participants had suggested included: 'time not allowed at work', 'dull tasks with no job variety', 'workload too heavy', 'counter duty/night shift', 'financial – course fees', 'wrong match between job handled and skills learned', 'no chance to practice what has been learned', 'courses not specifically job related', 'no practice at real tasks', 'venue of training too far and not convenient', 'repetitive work makes learning boring', 'knowledge/skills too difficult to learn' and 'no increment awarded (specifically referring to the certificate course which offered one salary increment to graduates years ago but the reward had been cancelled later)'.

- Systems Barriers

Systems barriers related to the structure of the organization. 'Chances of promotion' is one of them. Five participants believed that 'no job prospect' and 'no job certainty' were barriers to their learning. One TSN suggested that if learning did not make any difference to the job prospects, no one would be motivated to learn. It was quite surprising to see that more 'old-timers' than 'newcomers' thought the fact that the job insecurity of contract term employment would discourage staff learning yet only one contract staff mentioned this point.

- Work Culture Barriers

Cultural barriers referred to the norm and atmosphere of the Library. 'Lack of institutional support', 'no peer recognition', 'peer pressure', and 'discouraging attitudes of supervisors' were the four cultural barriers listed by the participants.

Facilitators to Learning

Most participants thought tangible support from the employer such as 'incentives', 'sponsoring time', 'sponsoring course fees', 'stable working hours', 'offering venue', 'offering job security' and 'additional salary increments' would all facilitate them to learn.

There were also other kinds of support the participants would welcome. These included 'more course varieties', 'environment allowing practices', 'internal transfer', 'opportunity to apply what has been learned', 'channel for staff to raise suggestions', 'supervisor and institutional support', 'demonstrating that staff are being valued', 'recognition', 'praise', 'more choices of tasks', 'more training opportunity', and 'fair management'.

One participant revealed that 'job variety' could be a very good facilitator. Based on the participant's experience of working at a branch library, he thought that multi-tasking offering a variety of duties did not only facilitate staff to learn more knowledge and skills but also make the LA's job more interesting. All participants agreed that learning is more effective and efficient when it happened in the real work situation and thought it was worthless to learn any knowledge and skills that were not going to be applied. One participant even thought that the Library should force staff to learn while another thought the organization should play a more active role in encouraging staff to learn.

**Implications and Recommendations**

Needs Assessment

Because there is such a diversity of learners and each of these types of learners holds different attitudes to learning and has different learning needs, we have to understand the characteristics of each type of learner in order to help them learn effectively. The Library is therefore in need of a thorough and fair needs assessment to start with.

Kazanjian (2002) indicates that 'workers are evolving human beings who need continual learning' and 'We must learn to always learn' (P.6). Jarvis (2004) has also cited various research statistics to prove that the human being has a basic need to learn, a need that may be as basic as any of the needs identified by Maslow in his well-known 'hierarchy' of needs (p.34). Before any practical recommendation can be made about how to provide learning opportunities to the participants of this research, we need to first find out what the learning needs of the LAs are. Some of them learn for tangible rewards, others for their own personal interest or self-actualization. Assessing needs and interests is therefore necessary to understand each type of learner, identify the potential of each staff member and what should be done to help them learn.

Needs assessment must be seen as the process of helping adults think through the reasons for their initially expressed needs. It is an essential reference for planning and designing of staff training and development. Ideally, there will be a personalized development plan for each individual. It is also necessary to find out how individual and organizational needs can both be met at the same time. Since it is impossible for all staff to participate in development activities all in one go, need assessment also makes it easier for the managers to set priorities according to the functional or operational needs, and as well as a degree of urgency. Managers can then prepare the calendar of events of who attends what and when.

A standard in guiding the level of skills and knowledge that staff of a particular position should acquire is also important. According to Adult Learning Theory, people are ready to learn when they experience a need to know or to do something in order to perform efficiently. However, because the knowledge and skill requirements of the LAs were not clearly defined in the Library, neither the managers nor staff knew what needed to be learned. It is therefore difficult to tell to what extent the development programs had helped in staff learning.

To improve, the Library managers certainly need to study staff needs systematically through scientific approaches such as survey or interviews; they need to understand the different perceptions and needs of the three types of learners in particular so that they can then plan, design and implement a new staff training and development scheme accordingly. The following recommendations focus on how the Library can take an active role in the personal, practical, social, structural and cultural aspects to help staff learn. In addition, the recommendations will also make reference to Senge's (1991) five disciplines of learning organization. This is because the 'Learning Organization' as described by Senge is a powerful structure facilitating staff's situated learning. The discipline 'Personal Mastery' refers to personal development; 'Team Learning' is connected to social participation and interaction directly; 'Shared Vision' is more about the structure of the organization, 'Mental Models' and 'Systems Thinking' are closely related to cultural issues.

Personal Aspects

In the Library system, although there had been a number of training courses offered by the Library and the central Personnel Office, the courses could hardly cover the LAs' needs because different LAs required different skills to perform their own tasks. Besides, the knowledge and skills the LAs need to learn are usually specific to library-related knowledge and skills and more of a problem-solving nature, involving the flexibility of transferring knowledge from one case to another. Unlike solving a problem in mathematics, there is no formula and no standard answer for the LAs working at the service counters which often require instant thoughts and intuitive responses. Staff certainly cannot learn these kinds of abilities by just listening to instructions in classes. Therefore, many development courses run in the past were not beneficial to the LAs in their actual job duties.

- Cognitive Apprenticeship

To the LAs, partnership, mentoring, scaffolding and collaborative learning may be more useful than standard training and development programmes. Apprenticeship usually involves modelling in situ and scaffolding for learners to get started in an authentic activity. That is, the more experienced members in the Library may teach the less experienced in the real work environment. When an LA is assigned a task, they can be treated as an apprentice to be paired with a professional librarian or an experienced LA for a reasonable length of time. In this case, the apprentice can observe and learn how the more experienced member, as a model, tackles the task in an authentic situation. Because the LAs learn from the 'coach' to deal with real problems, they will build up skills and experience in handling the future problems by themselves.

The benefit of offering apprenticeship can also be two-fold. It is believed that not only can the LAs learn more effectively in such a process, the experienced staff who shared their knowledge and experience will also be able to learn collaboratively. It helps staff especially the 'newcomers' to learn new skills in the real situation. At the same time, it makes good use of the experiences of the 'old-timers' by developing them to be the 'masters'. One of the participants PSO1 revealed that he was very unhappy because his role in the office had become less important since the new supervisor came. His self-esteem had been affected and he had a lot of grievances. If 'old-timers' like PSO1 could be trained to be the masters and help coach the less experienced staff, they would have a higher self-identity.

- Personal Mastery

Senge's (1991) concept of 'Personal mastery' is useful here. Organizations benefit from encouraging their people in the direction of Personal Mastery. In the Library, it is recommended that the management pay attention to the staff's learning potential and help them learn to learn. For each staff member, there should be a clear message, passed through formal and informal channels, of what kind of growth and contributions are expected from them. This guideline can enable the staff to develop a matching personal vision which is not just a work-related performance but also self-development. Individual staff must then be encouraged to see positively the current reality through regular supervision sessions – that is, the gap between their long term vision and current output. Staff members also need to be assured that the gap can be shortened by their on-going learning with organizational support.

<u>Practical Aspect</u>

- Situated Learning and Community of Practice

Adults are practical. They prefer to learn problem-solving knowledge and skills and they need to apply what they have learned in the real situation. The Library line managers may therefore consider integrating formal and informal learning into the working routine.

The concept of 'Communities of practice' is to situate learning in a meaningful context. Communities of Practice are self-organized and selected groups of people who share a common sense of purpose and a desire to learn and know what each other knows (Lave and Wenger 1991). One suggestion is to design a work practice programme, with a cognitive apprenticeship concept incorporated, for staff to develop various skills in various departments. The work assignments can integrate as many learning practices as possible. The LAs will then be able to learn while they work and can apply what they have learned directly to their work. At the same time, staff learning should be recognized formally and a clear message passed on so that staff members understand learning does make a difference in the eyes of the managers.

To enable staff a practical learning environment, the Library may set up a system, which defines what skills are needed for each position and provides guidelines for the proficiency level of each skill. As mentioned earlier, adults are goal oriented learners and appreciate learning programs with clearly defined elements. From the inexperienced 'newcomers' to the more experienced 'old-timers', there should be a mechanism that can guide each of them to develop their proficiency in each skill. That is, staff will know which level they are in and what else they require to learn more to improve further. The managers may also pass on the message via structural activities such as annual appraisal, regular supervision, and formal sharing.

The LAs should also be included in the organization's information flow and policy level decision-making as much as possible to boost motivation and enhance individual self identity. Staff should be given more room and responsibility to participate in policy and decision making. That is, not only the particular tasks they need to handle but also central activities on a higher level. Some of the participants of the research also revealed that they were capable of contributing more at the policy making and

planning level. Involvement in policy-planning and decision-making may also become a good learning opportunity for staff.

- Multi-skilling and Job Rotation

Multi-skilling enhances identity and in turn, motivation to learn. Job rotation allows staff to learn a wider range of knowledge and a broader level of skills. In view of the budget limitations, the library can aim at low-cost or even no-cost options and make fuller use of the existing resources. The library is a workplace with diversified job duties, ranging from counter services that require communication and interpersonal skills to cataloguing that requires specific knowledge and technical skills. A well-planned job rotation or sharing scheme can make work more interesting and stimulating and equip staff with multi-skills.

What Coffield (1998) has commented on job rotation is still valid today – it can 'prevent burn-out, bureaucratic routines and resistance to change'. He thinks that employees will "develop new ideas, will be inspired, improve cross-departmental cooperation and understanding and upgrade their skills and experience internally". He admits that "shifting people around creates problems for hierarchies, competences, salaries, and status but it is worth the trouble as it can improve flexibility and create dynamic interaction within its workforce" (p.15).

From the research, it seems that the two 'newcomers' working at branch libraries were more confident of their status and the knowledge and skills they learned. They reported that it was good to get in touch with a variety of skills. As TSN3 pointed out,

> In branches, there are many varieties of tasks so staff can act as a coordinator of different projects which strengthens the sense of belonging and contribution. There are also opportunities for branch staff to participate in the events organized by the main library which enables good learning experiences. (TSN3)

Multi-skilling and job rotation can be good practice only if adopted in the authentic environment. The re-deployment of LAs to different departments due to operational needs offers the LAs more learning opportunities to acquire and upgrade necessary knowledge and skills. In-house training programmes designed for learning specific tasks are also particularly useful. What the Library needs furthermore is to enhance social interaction among staff, facilitate active participation in activities, strengthen learning resources, support a community of authentic practice, and allow learners to share in the design, process, and evaluation of their learning activities.

- Human Resources Development (HRD)

HRD is a continuing process and it is a lifelong pursuit and thus can be designed to meet both the organizational goals and individual's learning need. As suggested by Joy-Matthews, Megginson and Surtees (2004), HRD 'encapsulates all learning that enables individual and organizational growth (p.7). A successful effective HRD is one that is participated at all levels, personalized; problem oriented and with effective evaluation and follow up measures. HRD, if systematic, planned, organized and scheduled, can be used as the most powerful tool for the library to develop a culture of self-directed learning and promote the concept of lifelong learning among not just the LAs, but all staff in general. Most importantly, the knowledge learned from training can be applied in real life. Standard levels of knowledge and skills of each position should also be made very clear so that staff know what and how much they need to learn to perform and/or advance.

The Library does not have a HRD policy of its own. The Personnel Office of the University organized HRD activities for all levels of staff. Most of them were topic driven such as courses on 'Customer services' and 'Coping with stress'. These courses are usually instructional or workshops with games and

exercises designed for a general audience but not particularly for the library staff. The library managers would be informed when development programs were available and they were free to nominate their subordinates to participate. Apart from the central activities, the Library's computer officer would organize courses for staff on computer software applications occasionally. Staff members who attended courses, whether run by the personnel office or internally, were not required to give formal reports afterwards.

To facilitate more effective and staff-oriented learning system, the library may formulate its own HRD policy that states explicitly the organizational targets and objectives, which must be achievable. Since the Library is operated in an environment of change, the goals should be set to prepare the LAs to meet change constructively and confidently.

The LAs, especially the experienced 'old-timers', should be provided more chances to participate in higher levels of training. To ensure the staff can benefit the most from the training, they may be required to submit a formal report and/or share what they have learned with the other colleagues. This does not only help further develop their communication and presentation skills but also benefits those who cannot participate in the same training.

Appraisal could be made use of in staff learning. In fact, appraisal exercises, if used in the right way, can be an effective and powerful tool for staff learning. However, most of the participants did not find the annual staff appraisal any good for their learning. To improve, the annual staff appraisal should be linked to HRD in a direct and clearly defined way as To (2007) suggested (p.314). Appraisal reports should provide valuable information on what the individual appraisee needs to be improved and how it can be improved as suggested by the appraiser. Moreover, a clear list of what they have learned and applied to the actual job environment should be reported on in order to maximize the impact of the staff learning and development programmes in which the appraisee had participated.

Social Aspects

Adults are autonomous and self-directed. The learning process should involve active participation. Because learning is social in nature and people learn to a large extent from social interaction and socialization, social environment should be given a higher priority.

- Interaction and Participation

From the information gathered in the research interviews, most 'old-timers' and 'newcomers' had expressed their needs to learn together with others. A team work approach should be adopted and strong team learning intentions should thus be encouraged to help staff develop a sense of belonging.

It is true that most of the LAs need to work alone when serving users at the counters and rarely have any chance to learn from fellow colleagues. However, there are also many other relatively inexpensive ways to assist their learning and development. The mentoring programme, peer group coaching (Robb, 2000; Werner and DeSimone, 2006) and study groups (Robb, 2000; Zepeda, 1999) are all worth exploring. Hansman (2001) has drawn a good example of how people, who normally work alone, can still learn from others. As a teacher herself, she has described how she learns from peers through activities in self-organised sharing groups.

This gives a useful reference for the Library. The LAs should be provided with more learning resources and support to form working teams across boundaries to develop social interaction and strengthen inter-branch and inter-department communication. If the LAs can be encouraged to organise their own sharing groups, set their own agendas and establish their own leadership, members will feel more connected and will be able to learn from each other.

- Team Learning

A collaborative event is an example of social activities in which the LAs of different departments can jointly work together and learn from each other. As mentioned by the participants, the Library occasionally held library related events that involved various branches and departments. Staff members come from different branches/departments to work together as a group for the events. These kinds of collaborations are good opportunities to develop teamwork and team spirit.

The Library leaders should promote more cross-divisional and cross-functional units of collaboration and interaction so that staff can learn as a team. The supervisors should encourage staff to take turns to participate in these activities. Of course, not all staff members are interested in group activities such as working at the reception or in the publicity programmes. Some of them may not feel comfortable or confident. Staff with no experience or who have little interest in serving the public are not enthusiastic and may not acknowledge the value for them. The Library therefore needs to have a good understanding of staff needs, interests and abilities before assigning tasks and at the same time, train and develop those who are less competent.

Structural Aspect

Many issues raised by the participants of the research were related to the structure of the Library field in general and the Library they were working in, in particular. The tangible and non-tangible rewards which the LAs regarded as the most important motivator and the wish of a more promising career prospect were directly related to the staffing and organizational structure. Here, it is recommended that the Library may consider restructuring in order to create more opportunities for staff.

- Motivator

It is obvious that the LAs cared very much about their own future development. Most participants of the research, especially the 'Instrumental Learners', claimed that tangible reward was the only motivator for learning. However, there were not enough positions on the ladder for the juniors to move up. The promotional position for the LAs was limited by quota[1]. As reflected by the participants:

> "Some of them ('old-timers') have worked in the library for quite some years and found that there is almost no chance for promotion and so they don't think they need to do further study. If there are more grades in the structure and people can be upgraded gradually, or if a person can see when they work harder, they can go up, they will learn more." (TSN1)

Other participants also revealed their needs of a flattened internal structure in which they can have more opportunities and brighter career prospects. To a loose coupling organization such as the Library, flattened structures and participatory management may enhance staff's awareness of what the organizational goals are and may in turn facilitate the accomplishment of those goals. However, as described by Werner and DeSimone (2006), given the flattening of organizational hierarchies, some plateauing is inevitable, and it is important for organizations to find a way to maintain employees' motivation and effectiveness. Successful plateaued can be achieved by effective job performance and satisfaction (p.495).

To create more positions on the ladder but at the same time maintain a more flattened structure, the Library may need to re-think the structure and create more promotional chances. Instead of a pyramid shape of structure, with ten times more LAII than LAI, it may be a more flexible structure with no restriction in the proportions between the two ranks. The operational tasks can be categorized according to the level of skills required but the major supervisory responsibility can be retained in the hands of the professionals. As long as an LAII has acquired the knowledge and skills needed and performed well,

[1] One LAI among ten LAII.

they will be able to take up the LAI position. Although this means that the Library leader may need to make bold recommendations to the university at a time of a general economic downturn when saving on the staffing budget has become the main objective, this is necessary to enhance staff morale and team spirit.

To boost the morale among the 'newcomers', other than the equal promotional opportunity, their employment term could also be elevated. As a 'newcomer' described,

> "Contract should be renewed for a longer term if they have already worked for a long time, especially if there are established posts. This (short contract) is not good for the staff and not good for the organization." (TSO1)

Apart from tangible rewards, many LAs thought that they deserved higher status and recognition. They needed the feedback and support from the managers on whether their performance was up to standard. They also wanted to be assured that their contract would be renewed as long as they continued to work hard. Many 'old-timers' also needed something to look forward to. That is, they needed to know that there were still chances for them, and they still have a future. This is not necessarily career advancement but enhancement of self esteem, identity, as well as job satisfaction. Developing the 'old-timers' to be the 'masters' of the apprentice 'newcomers' is one practical approach. According to adult learning theory, adults need to connect learning to their life experiences and knowledge. The 'old-timers' themselves can also learn more when sharing their experiences with the 'newcomers'.

- Enhance Professionalism

In the new electronic age when print collection is no longer the center of importance, libraries should be transformed from the traditional collection-oriented functional entity to a people-oriented and access-oriented interface. Many libraries' organizational goals are to provide good quality professional services that match the clients' information needs and expectations, yet the structure is often contradictory to this goal. Libraries often consist of many more non-professional staff than professional staff.

Professionalism is an important issue. Unfortunately in recent years, some academic libraries in Hong Kong, in order to save on their budget, hired library-trained professionals yet still offered them non-professional, clerical titles such as Executive Officers or Project Coordinators. This measure has downgraded the profession. It does not only lead to a decline in the working conditions of the employed, but also creates a very poor image of the profession as it misleads the outsiders to think that a librarian's job can be done by an ordinary administrative support staff member.

It is of course not easy to train the non-professional staff to become professionals but the Library may target upgrading the LAs to the paraprofessional level through formal and informal learning. With more qualified staff working at the front line, it is more likely to heighten the sense of service mindedness among staff and improve service quality. As a leading university library in Hong Kong, the Library can participate in lobbying formal education for the LAs so that they can have a better chance for career development and advancement.

In the long run, the Library can recruit LAs with higher qualification. Many supervisors who are more concerned about the turnover rate tend to recruit staff who can just meet the minimum requirement of the LA position which is high school graduates. However, in view of the fact that many LAs working in university libraries need to serve the teaching scholars of the university directly, their general knowledge and credentials are important.

Another recommendation is to enhance subject-oriented specialism among staff. This is similar to assigning a team of staff to work in a subject branch library. Teaching physics, for example, requires

different information skills and resources to teaching French. It will be beneficial if the Library can provide subject-oriented services. Library staff members will welcome this change as it allows them to develop more specific skills, and to become more closely involved in learning and teaching.

- Shared Vision

Support can be provided to help members of the organization at all levels to see "how the vision relates to their work and how they can help move towards it" (Pieters and Young, 2000). Staff need a simple, easy-to-follow and will-share vision. Apart from an easy-to-understand meaning, staff members also need a vision that is generated from collaborative interest; one that they are happy to share. This is because according to Adult Learning Theory, people learn best when they strive to accomplish things that matter to them. If the vision is something related to staff, it is more likely for them to identify the common purpose.

A good example is found in Pieters and Young's (2000) study, a customer service company has a shared vision of 'high customer focuses'. The vision is simple, clear enough and relevant to the job of all staff. It is therefore not difficult for staff members to share and identify the goals and the necessary attitudes they need – that is, to walk extra miles to make their customers feel valued (p.109). Can this similar vision be adopted in the Library under study? Can the library simply aim 'to become a learning organization'? Since staff will be benefited when they learn with the organization, this vision may be more attractive than vision like 'to be the best library in the region' or 'to be the top X library in the world'.

<u>Cultural Aspect</u>

Why did some of the staff become uninterested to learn? Why are the Compliant Learners no longer interested in their job? How can they be motivated? These questions are related to the culture of the organization and the mental models of staff.

- Mental Models

As Fullerton (2004) described, "'Mental models' are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action. Senge (1991) says, 'These models have effect on our perception and behavior, and have the power to move us forward or hold us back" and he suggests organizational leaders to find out "what stops or discourages people to express themselves and communicate freely." His management principle is 'don't push growth' but 'try to find and remove the factors that limit it'.

The Library management should therefore need to know what hinders people to express themselves and what helps them to communicate more freely. For example, it may be something to do with the Chinese tradition. It was mentioned earlier that in Chinese culture, it is common for staff to not voice their needs and grievances openly. Many Chinese are rank conscious and believe that if they express their dissatisfaction, they are challenging the authority. Yin (2003) when interviewed by the *China value professional social network* also explained the Chinese culture of 'if it does not involve you, it is not your business'. In this case, open minded supervisors are required to encourage staff feedback and create more informal channels such as social activities to collect comments and suggestions.

- Systems Thinking

Senge's 'Systems thinking' discipline is a conceptual framework. It provides ways of understanding practical business issues. 'Systems Thinking' integrates all the other disciplines. To further develop the staff's sense of systems thinking, some good references can be found in the literature. Such as Martin's (1999) 'research teams' and Pieters and Young's (2000) 'sensing meetings'. They demonstrate how smaller groups of staff can be useful. Similarly, the library can establish a research/working group which

consists of front line professionals or line managers across departments. Because they work at the ground level, they should understand better what the needs of the majority are. These members can look at the organization as a unified structure and discuss and identify areas where most staff would welcome changes and generate new ideas on what and how changes can be carried out in aligning with the institutional goals.

## 7. Conclusion

In the new information age and electronic world of the twenty first century, libraries are facing an unprecedented changing environment. For an organization to be able to survive in the ever changing environment, it needs a learning element that will enable it to adapt to any rapid rate of change. The LAs are the key resources of the Library. It is significant for them to learn and develop because they play a crucial role in the library. Dyckman (1992) more than a decade ago claimed that 'Library assistants are already a crucial component of libraries. However, they are often overlooked, underpaid, and unappreciated, and a steady supply of replacements is taken for granted' (p.77). In Hong Kong, the situation may not be in such an extreme state yet because more and more work that was usually a professional librarians' responsibility has been shifted to the LAs, but the learning and development of this group of allied staff deserves more attention.

As mentioned by Cihak and Monroe (2003), liberating library support staff is the simple way to increase overall efficiency, customer service, and customer satisfaction. A liberated staff will cause library processes to improve, customer service to expand, and individual growth and development to soar (p.12). However, it is important to note that the training of paraprofessionals should be kept in pace with the use of paraprofessionals (Mozenter, Sanders and Bellamy, 2003).

In fact, paraprofessional training is necessary not only to upgrade the knowledge and skills of the LAs to share the increasing workloads but also to create a channel for further training and upgrading to a better career prospect. As Cihak and Monroe (2003) have advocated, "Everyone wants to work in an organization that values individual talent. Library leaders can serve as 'talent scouts' by matching individual talent or strength to library opportunities and challenges that need to be met (p.13).

The learning organization is proclaimed to be the most effective organization to cope with changes and innovations. In order to create a more effective, sustainable, staff-oriented learning system to facilitate the professional development of library staff, the situated learning approach is recommended for the Library. It is essential for the Library to make known to staff very clear organizational goals, take into consideration individual learning needs and make use of the authentic environment for staff learning.

**Table 1 – Units of Analysis and Themes**

| *Unit of Analysis* | *Themes* | *Corresponding Interview Question* |
|---|---|---|
| **Personal Issues** | | |
| | Meaning of Learning | Q1a |
| | Perception of Learning Needs | Q1b |
| | Knowledge & Skills Required | Q1c |
| | Preferred Learning Modes | Q2a |
| | Apprenticeship | Q2b |
| | Identity and Status | Q3 |
| | Motivation | Q4a |
| | Motivation – 'Old-timers' vs 'Newcomers' | Q4b |
| | Identity and Motivation | Emerged |
| | | |
| **Social Issues** | | |
| | Interaction and Participation | Q5 |
| | | |
| **Practical Issues** | | |
| | Learning Activities | Q6a |
| | Job Rotation as Learning Opportunities | Emerged |
| | Library as a Community of Practice | Emerged |
| | Perception of Appraisal as Motivator | Emerged |
| | Practice of Job Sharing at Service Counters | Emerged |
| | | |
| **Cultural Issues** | | |
| | Organizational Culture and Learning Environment | Q6b |
| | Learning Atmosphere | Emerged |
| | | |
| **Barriers to Learning** | Barriers<br>• Internal Barriers<br>• Situational Barriers<br>• Systems Barriers<br>• Work Culture Barriers | Q7 |
| | | |
| **Facilitators to Learning** | Facilitators | Q8 |
| | | |

**Table 2 – Interpretation of the Research Findings in terms of Typologies of Learners**

| **Typology** | **Instrumental Learners** | **Compliant Learners** | **Proactive Learners** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Members** | PSO1, PSO2. PSO3 | PSN2, PSN3, TSO2, TSN2 | PSN1, TSO1, TSO3, TSN1 , TSN3 |
| **Motivation to learn** | - Extrinsic<br>- Tangible rewards | - Extrinsic/Intrinsic*<br>- Job requirement<br>- Personal Interests | - Intrinsic<br>- Personal Growth<br>- Self Satisfaction |
| **Perception of Learning Needs** | - Basic and general skills<br>- Own experience and common sense are enough | - Practical library-oriented skills<br>- Non-library skills for self interest | - Higher level library and non-library knowledge and skills |
| **Learn Further** | - Passive | - Job-related - Passive<br>- Personal-interest-related - Active | - Active<br>- Initiate to learn further to upgrade |
| **Effective Learning Mode** | - Situated Learning<br>- Learn in real situation and contextual environment<br>- Social group interaction | | |
| **Identity of Importance** | - More important than it sounds<br>- Deserve a higher status | | |
| **Identity of old-timers** | - Already 'old-timers'<br>- Dead end career with no future | Not keen because of no interest to become 'old-timers' in the Library | Not particularly keen on the identity of 'old-timers' but keen on upgrading self in general |

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