Be a peach

Enhancing your work through training

Pat F. Booth

Training in indexing can be provided for different groups of people and at different levels of complexity: freelance indexers (the beginners, the newly qualified, the experienced), technical writers, and editorial staff in publishing houses. Delivery can take place through attendance-based courses and events, and through distance-learning materials (print and electronic); all forms need to be supplemented by private study.

'Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education.' Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson [1894] Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar* ch. 5. (Quoted in *Familiar quotations*, by John Bartlett, 14th edn, ed. Emily Morison Beck. London: Macmillan, 1968)

Who needs training?

Who needs it? Most of us. A typical working life, we are told, is now more likely to consist of a succession of different kinds of employment (including self-employment) than of a single lifelong occupation or a sequence of jobs with one employer. Training undertaken for the first work activity may be useful in later jobs, but will need to be updated and, if a drastic change of occupation is made (by choice or through necessity), complete retraining is needed.

Freelance indexers – busy finding new customers, juggling several jobs at once, meeting deadlines, and handling all their own business and professional (as well as domestic) matters – may sometimes overlook, or push aside for later (much later) consideration, their need for training. They have to plan their own professional development, decide what training they need, and find out what is available where and in what forms. Otherwise, they may sail along happily for a while, but sooner or later their work will be affected, not only because their subject knowledge is dated, but because they are not observing current standards of indexing practice, or cannot meet the changing requirements of customers.

Employers recognize the benefit of providing training for any employees who have been in their jobs for some time, in order to ensure the maintenance of quality standards, access to fresh knowledge and acquaintance with new technology. The training needs of indexers working on their own within organizations, though, can be neglected by their managements; one person working alone is simply less visible than a whole department and so may not be given the same opportunities.

It is largely the responsibility of individual indexers, therefore, to recognize their own training needs and to identify the levels and forms of study that are likely to match those needs. The determining factors (apart from willingness to spend the necessary time and cover the cost) include: the level of their existing knowledge; the amount and nature of their previous experience; the type of indexing work they envisage, or in which they are already engaged; the accessibility of the training (in terms of location and the form in which it is provided – e.g. printed or online units of instruction, formal lectures, workshops); the aims and objectives of particular training components; the level of practical work involved; the form of assessment (if any); and the qualification or credit (if any) gained through successful completion.

What do we need to know? What do we need to be able to do?

There is no official or standard curriculum for training in indexing, so the content of each module, unit, course, or event is determined by the training provider, who decides – for any group of trainees – what is likely to be relevant. Some indications of what might be expected are given below. Almost all should include some practical work.

Because technical aids – though essential – always take second place to the mental processing undertaken by the indexer, training in the use of specific aids, such as dedicated indexing programs, is often dealt with separately, either by the program suppliers or by combined commercial and professional events.

Beginners

The necessity for initial training for indexing is not always recognized by people considering taking up the occupation. Common reactions are: 'It's just mechanical word-frequency checking and extracting names, isn't it?'; 'Doesn't the dtp [desk-top publishing] program do all the indexing for you, anyway?' and 'Surely anyone with the natural aptitude and a reasonable amount of intelligence and common sense can practise the art (or craft)? What is there to learn?' This last question can indicate the questioner's belief that basic practices and techniques are being 'unnecessarily professionalized', that existing practitioners are ganging together to restrict access to the market, to elevate their status artificially by imposing a system of qualifications and fancy titles ('Licensed

Information Access Enabler' perhaps?), and so to charge higher fees or press for higher salaries. There is no difficulty in contradicting any of these ideas; indexing is about understanding meanings and representing them in a structured fashion so as to convey to others, concisely and conveniently, the content of a document or collection. It is an intellectual activity, supported by mechanical tasks that are aided by suitable software. Anyone who needs convincing about the nature, scope and demands of indexing can be referred to one of the textbooks on the subject (e.g. Booth, 2001; Mulvany, 1994; Wellisch, 1995).

If indexing is necessary for the good of humankind – and it is – then it must be done well, otherwise it is ineffective, misleading and ambiguous, even dangerous. Doing it well requires certain aptitudes as well as general knowledge of the kind possessed by anyone with a good education and an inquiring and retentive mind. To these have to be added a knowledge of indexing techniques and the ability to apply them in different indexing contexts. This is where training (in the sense of systematic instruction and practice, aimed at achieving and maintaining proficiency) comes in.

It is taken for granted that beginners know the order of the alphabet, that they have a high level of literacy and that they have an interest in providing and improving access to documentary content. But they may never have considered in detail what makes a good index and how to achieve it. Training should include a review of:

- the purposes of indexing
- different types of indexes
- the role of the indexer, including the interactions with others involved in the creation, production and use of documents and their indexes

Within this framework, guidance is needed on those most perplexing of the novice's concerns:

- what to index and how to represent the content (topics, subjects, concepts, themes) of passages of text and other documentary items
- what makes a 'good' index

At this stage three important principles are established, as guidelines for all future work:

- indexing is an intellectual process
- indexers look for meanings and represent them (they don't just highlight words)
- the index is aimed at the user

This can lead on to consideration (accompanied by practice) of:

- balanced coverage (easily said, but harder to ensure)
- consistent styles of heading (using suitable word-forms that users are likely to look for)
- direct and inverted entries
- use and misuse of cross-references
- suitable locators that are not only accurate and expressive but easily comprehended
- typographical distinctions or abbreviations to indicate special features such as illustrations or definitions
- helpful cross-references

- succinct and suitably arranged subheadings
- differences between word-by-word and letter-by-letter filing; how to deal with non-alphabetical and non-roman characters and punctuation signs
- layout that makes the index as a whole easy to consult
- introductory statements (explaining anything that the user needs to know in order to be able to use the index, e.g. abbreviations, bold and italic type)

The discovery of what is involved can give the prospective indexer something of a shock – a realization that a considerable amount of learning, effort, attention to detail, and constant practice, are required. A typical reaction is: 'I didn't know there was so much to it.' This revelation is all to the good, because those who are never likely to make it as competent indexers need to realize straight away that:

- indexing is not an activity akin to addressing envelopes
- it is not copying
- it is not picking out everything that starts with a capital letter
- people who cannot spell, or who do not know much about the world outside their immediate environments, or who have difficulty with long words, long sentences and long documents, or who do not want to learn, or who have no patience, or who care little about accuracy and minute detail, should not try to become indexers

Sequential training that is intended to produce indexers with a prescribed level of competence may be divided into units or modules, so that by working through the whole collection, the trainee gains knowledge of the necessary elements and is tested (or can do self-testing) in them. The third edition of the Society of Indexers' open learning units, for example, consists of four printed units:

- A. *Indexers, users and documents:* basic terminology; the function and characteristics of indexes; the functions and mutual relationships among indexers, users and authors; types of documents; how indexes are compiled; how bibliographic references are created. (Many of these are covered in more detail in later units.)
- B. *Choice and form of entries:* selection of concepts for indexing; choice of terminology; form of headings (including names) and locators (page numbers); cross-references.
- C. *Arrangement and presentation of indexes and thesauri:* the principal rules for arrangement of index entries (filing order); multiple sequences; the requirements of more specialized types of indexing; book and journal production; index presentation; thesaurus construction.
- D. *The business of indexing:* establishing and running an indexing business, including starting up, finance, commissions and contracts, customer relations, legal matters, developing the business; the activities and services (to members and publishers) of the Society of Indexers.

Each unit includes a list of recommended reading, and a self-assessed test (with answers) that enables trainees to check whether they are ready to take the formal test paper for the unit.

Newly-qualified indexers

After completing basic training, and perhaps having gained an initial qualification, those intending to launch themselves as freelance indexers can benefit from additional guidance. This could include, for instance:

- business practice: office methods, communications, legal requirements
- getting work: identifying work opportunities, finding customers
- managing the work: time management and scheduling, work records, liaison with clients
- indexing conventions: standard procedures and varying house-styles
- reference materials and sources of information
- technical equipment and services
- professional memberships and involvement

Experienced indexers

The idea of 'once and for all' training and qualifying has been superseded in many occupational fields by that of CPD (continuing professional development). It is not new – additional training has long been provided to employees within their organizations, and individual practitioners have commonly improved and advanced themselves through informal study and by involvement with their professional/ vocational bodies and their fellow workers. The creation of the 'CPD' label is an indication that the occupational associations have recognized the importance – for the achievement and maintenance of high standards – of providing a formal structure within which practitioners can continue to learn, keep their practices under review and have their efforts recognized.

Experienced indexers, fully involved with work, can sometimes be lulled into a false sense of security and forget that they need regularly to review what they are doing and how they are doing it. Particularly if working alone, they are at risk of becoming out of date – not realizing that indexing practices have changed, or that the expectations and requirements of their clients and the users of indexes have altered, that there is some new software that can help them, or that there are new market opportunities for their products and services. They need to ensure that they keep in touch with developments in their chosen subjects so that they can retain familiarity with the concepts and the vocabulary – they cannot otherwise index intelligently.

On top of that, they regularly need to remind and refresh themselves as far as their indexing techniques are concerned. Unlike some other professionals, indexers have no immediate 'quality check'. Feedback (favourable or unfavourable) concerning their work, either from index users or from those who have commissioned the indexes, can take some time to materialize, if it ever does, and even then any criticisms may be vague ('The index is difficult to use' or 'There are some omissions'). It may be the appearance of a new published indexing standard, or an article in the professional literature, or a thread in an Internet discussion, or a chance conversation with another indexer, or a thought-provoking paper at a conference, or an unusual

request from a client, that makes an indexer realize that some fresh input and a review of current methods are needed.

The issue of 'what to index' – mentioned above in relation to beginners – is one that continues to preoccupy indexers throughout their working lives (which can be lengthy). Each indexing job requires judgements about 'significant' content and decisions about the most suitable use of language and form of index entry. Although the fundamentals of good practice and technique are the same for most kinds of indexing, there are differences in the treatment that indexers give to, say, a back-of-the-book index, a ten-year cumulative index to a learned journal and a local history collection of 5000 photographs. For instance, the levels of indexing (how many headings are required and in how much detail), the kinds of heading, and the derivations of the terms to be used (perhaps 'free-style' with cross-references, or taken from a customized thesaurus) can vary considerably.

Training for experienced indexers is likely to take the form of separate events or units that can be fitted into their schedules more easily than can continuous or structured courses. The focus of an event or unit may be, for example:

- styles of entry and presentation of copy: current standards and conventions for headings and locators; 'hierarchical' arrangements; double entry and cross-references; variation in customers' house-styles; forms of delivery for index copy
- business practice: finding new markets; estimates, fees, contracts; copyright and moral rights; getting payment; taxation
- indexing particular kinds of documents, e.g. periodicals: indexable content; levels of indexing; cumulative indexes; complex locators
- indexing for certain groups of users, e.g. children: indexable matter; levels of indexing; types of heading; length of entries; use of cross-references; suitable arrangements; user guidance
- indexing in specific subject fields, e.g. law or medicine: work opportunities; unusual document types; selection and formation of complex headings; specialized terminology; relevance of different subheading arrangements
- preparing an index for submission to an indexing society for official recognition of a high level of competence, observing standards and good practice: what to index; choosing and forming 'good' headings and subheadings; suitable arrangements; consistency in presentation and layout; helping the user; the official route to recognition; self-development

It is within these specialized units and events that alternative procedures can be usefully outlined in relation to real materials and indexes.

Technical writers

Technical authors whose principal job is the writing and designing of documents such as operational manuals (in print and online), but who are also expected (or want) to provide the indexes, can benefit from the same initial

training as people who are intending to become full-time indexers. If they are working within corporate organizations, they are most probably using in-house document-processing systems – perhaps incorporating embedded indexing facilities. In this case training has to take account of the methods used, and may have to cover such subjects as:

- addition of synonymous terms in the index (as double entries or as cross-references) for words that do not actually appear in the text but which may be looked for by the user of the document
- inclusion of full page ranges to represent continuous passages of text (first to last, not just the first page number)
- headings of a kind not so often found in indexes to textbooks (e.g. commands and key functions)
- filing-order decisions relating to headings that are mixtures of alphabetical and numerical characters

Editorial staff

Some people who are not themselves indexers also need to know about certain aspects of the work. The editorial staff of publishing houses, who commission indexes from freelance indexers, receive them and incorporate them into the final published works, are better able to brief the indexers and to discuss the ongoing and finished work if they recognize what the indexer needs to know, what an index is intended to do, and how the work is done. The most relevant topics in training for this group include:

- index types and sequences
- what the indexer does (and does not) do
- kinds and forms of index heading
- filing order
- subheading arrangements
- user guidance (e.g. introductory statements)
- standards and house styles: characteristics of a good index
- briefing the indexer

The aim here is to explain and illustrate, not to develop competence in indexing itself.

How is training delivered?

Training for indexing is available at several levels from a variety of providers, including, for example, professional indexing societies, freelance trainers, training organizations in the communications/publishing industry, and academic institutions. It can be provided in different forms, such as print and electronic media, day courses, and practical workshops. It may be continuous and structured, such as a series of distance-learning (or open-learning) study units in print, on CD-ROM, or online, or a course requiring regular attendance at a training centre. This continuous kind of training is very suitable for beginners, introducing them first to the basics, then leading them (via a series of exercises) through more detailed elaborations of topics and practical tests, with the opportunity to reach a required level of competence, perhaps with a formal qualification.

An important contribution to training is also made by one-off events or units devoted to a particular group (such

as beginners, or trainees part-way through a study course, or newly qualified indexers about to launch themselves into the market, or indexers within a single organization, or experienced indexers wanting to extend their range, or editors responsible for commissioning and handling indexes produced externally), or focused on a particular subject field or type of document. Again, these may be provided at a distance or be attendance-based.

Training does not have to be undertaken in a strictly formal setting, such as a class or course; self-study, at the right level and using suitable materials, can be effective and rewarding. The trainee can spend as much time as wanted on any element, to ensure complete understanding and to do practical work – perhaps also to ring or email a helpline for guidance. There is no doubt, though, that there is great benefit from attending a group event, where a trainer customizes the activities to the needs of the group, where the trainer and the trainees interact throughout and to which everyone brings real examples of the materials concerned for examination and debate. In particular, indexers working on their own (whether as freelances or as lone employees) enjoy the opportunity to discuss shared concerns and to debate alternative ways of resolving an indexing uncertainty. Experienced indexers can join battle on subheading arrangement, formation of headings for abstract concepts, how best to meet the needs of particular groups of users, the differences between indexing of textbooks and indexing of periodical articles from abstracts, and so on. It is at this level that it becomes clear once again that there is often no single 'correct' way of indexing something – there may be several ways, each one valid.

Tutors are usually practising indexers – some freelance, others working in departments that handle information in one form or another, or in academic institutions where information retrieval is the focus of their study. They bring to their instruction their real-life experiences of constructing indexes for a variety of situations. Beginners should not expect their tutors to know everything, though. A tutor is at the same time in a learning situation, and may discover among a group of trainees some new applications of indexing, and may realize that in one particular circumstance a certain 'given' of indexing may not quite apply.

All forms of training should be liberally provided with examples (of documents, of indexes, of index entries – simple and complex) and are most helpful for beginners and those gaining experience if they include a procedure by which the trainee can check progress. Trainees also need to supplement their formal tuition by a good deal of private study. No-one can learn to index well from a single day's (or session's) training; every stage needs practice and can then lead on to the next collection of topics. Self-development (at all levels) can come from:

- reading through, comparing and evaluating published indexes
- compiling an index to an unindexed document
- indexing a document without first looking at its existing index and then comparing the results (perhaps with a colleague)
- reading the professional indexing literature (e.g. *The Indexer* and the various newsletters, occasional papers,

and information sheets issued by the professional societies)

- looking at – and taking part in – the Internet discussion groups on indexing
- attending meetings of local professional indexers' groups
- communicating (by phone or email) with other indexers

There should be no need for anyone – in however remote a geographical or social location – to miss out on training. The variety of providers, levels and forms should ensure that there is something available for everyone.

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