Tips for Great CAR Training

Take the temperature of the group
Assess their skills and reporting experience. You can do this informally in the lab. If you have an opportunity to identify skill levels ahead of time, all the better. Send out skills surveys by email or meet with them one-on-one, if possible. After you have this information, you can teach to their level.

Think small
Don't cram too many folks into one room. Eight to 10 people is the most any one person should teach. If you need to have a bigger class, have a coach in the room with you. Otherwise, you'll spend too much time with the slower learners and frustrate those who are really getting it.

Use real-world data
Trainees should relate to some of the training data that they may acquire themselves and use for stories. Accumulate as many real-world examples and as much real-world data as you possibly can. Show current CAR stories.

Set rules up front
Because hands-on sessions mean sitting at a computer, they may be tempted to check email or take a cell phone call. Enforce the rules and don't catch up folks who were too busy checking email and didn't hear what you said.

Interact
Let them know that you expect questions and they're not to wait for a Q&A session. And meet questions with questions. It's easy to hop in and answer a student's questions directly, and sometimes it's even appropriate. Get them to discuss possible story ideas or data they might acquire.

Promote the buddy system
Sometimes it's impractical to monitor everyone's progress in class, so encourage your students to "buddy up" and keep each other on track. This will not only help to keep your lesson plan moving along, it will also encourage students to learn by coaching each other.

Build on what they learn
Just because you've finished one skill doesn't mean it's covered. Often using CAR to find good stories means using a myriad of skills. So create exercises that keep them practicing what they're learned along the way. Eventually, reporters and students will see how techniques work together.

Promote understanding, not just clicking
Don't just show them how to click. Show them, journalistically, why they need to do something. Impress upon trainees that if they only memorize what buttons to push, they are going to be in trouble. They have to understand the concepts first, then get down to mastering the machinery that puts those concepts into action.

Keep the point-and-click simple

Microsoft Excel often has six ways to do any one task. Don’t show them all. They'll figure that out later. Show them one, MAYBE two ways. When students chime in to tell you "better" ways to do things, praise them for their knowledge and gently explain why you teach one way.

No magic wands
Avoid overselling the ease of some of this stuff. We come with canned examples that can be worked through in an hour. Then they're surprised when they have to clean up data, or when they find that it doesn't go by the book.

Encourage mistakes
(In the classroom anyway.) Think about how you learned to do computer-assisted reporting. Most of us learned by trial and error. That’s how students learn too, by lots of practice and working through roadblocks.

Don’t do it for them
You may be tempted to project what you’re doing on a big screen. But trainees likely will just follow what you do by pointing and clicking and not figuring it out on their own. So use the screen for some of it, but not all of it. And if they’re struggling with the mouse, don’t take control from them.

Take it slowly
Give your trainees time to repeat specific skills and to have them soak in. Don’t introduce too many things all at once because they're going to hit brain-overload. So take your time, but don’t drag so much folks get bored.

Quality, not quantity
Don’t try to jam everything into one class. It's better to teach them good basics than a bunch of stuff they won't retain. JL

Give ‘em a break
Don’t forget to take breaks. They’re learning concepts and a computer program at the same time. It’s complex learning and the brain overloads quickly. They need to get away from it every so often.

Practice makes perfect
We too often teach a skill and move on. It needs to be reinforced. And it’s a great way to end a day after their brains are stuffed with new ideas and skills, allowing them to review the day’s lessons again on their own. Let them tell you what to do. After you've taught basic techniques, show students a set of data or have them look at it on their own or with their buddies. Then ask them to tell you what's interesting about it or what questions they might ask of it.

Be sensitive to cultural differences for international training
Learn about local practices before you go. Use data from the country you’re teaching in. You’ll be amazed how much data is on the Web from national statistics agencies, etc., and there’s always international data from international organizations, such as the WHO.

Ask for feedback
That’s how you’ll improve the training for the next group. Do this after every session. You can prepare a one-page evaluation form to hand out and track the responses in a simple spreadsheet.

Have lots of tip sheets and practice data
They need to have exercises they can take back for practicing and for reference later on. Some of the best NICAR handouts are the ones that detail basic "spreadsheet-ology" or "database-ology," the ones that quickly show how to do percent change or calculate a rate.

Use the IRE Website.
Working journalists, educators and students will find valuable resources for practicing, generating story ideas, teaching and course work. The educators section has links to syllabi, training materials and data. Reporters, students and educators who are IRE members can benefit from reading the tip sheets and story reprints in the Resource Center. And the Training page has practice exercises for members. Use the NICAR Database Library site. The site is practically a tutorial in itself.

Make it fun
Use data that have some clever discoveries and use your own festive personality. Make them want to learn – journalists are a little like first-graders in that way.

Thanks to all previous NICAR training for contributions to this handout.