



Article

Christmas Technologies: Implementing a Technology Instruction Program in a Public Library Setting

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Abstract

The challenges associated with implementing and supporting new technologies in public libraries are numerous and multi-faceted. In a time when trends in computer and mobile technology quickly come and go, providing consistent and quality technical support can be difficult. While librarians have traditionally struggled to keep many patrons up to date in terms of digital literacy, they face an equally tough time attempting to introduce new software, applications, and devices. This paper serves two purposes. The first is to identify and articulate trends in technology training and how this increases the usage of library eBooks and reference services. Secondly, it serves to chronicle the planning and evaluation process of a new technology instruction program and its lasting effects.

In 2010, the Lockport Public Library was one of thirty public libraries in upstate New York to receive federal funding as a provision of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Funding was dispersed in the form of a grant to certain libraries in economically-distressed areas. The goal was to promote digital literacy, and workforce development and preparation, with a focus on assisting vulnerable populations—that is, non-English speakers, the elderly, unemployed/underemployed persons, individuals with disabilities, and those without digital or other literacies.

The Broadband Technologies Opportunity Program (BTOP) is a state-level iteration of the grant which dictates the dispersal of funds, as well as the requirements and metrics each library must fulfill. Beyond these goals, however, the program does leave some room for interpretation. Participating libraries may introduce additional programs and services which support these requirements, provided each library reports its activities and results to the appropriate government office.

The Lockport Library was required to establish a Public Computing Center (PCC)—a computer lab area staffed with qualified computer and workforce development specialists, called PCC Trainers. In May 2011, I was hired as one of three trainers. Our duties involve organizing computer classes, providing point of need (helpdesk) services, developing BTOP-related library workshops and programs, providing one-on-one instruction (by appointment), and implementing the overall requirements of the grant.

Literature Review

For years, free and equal access to information has been a primary tenet of public library service. With the dawn of the digital age, however, patron access to information is largely predicated on digital and information literacy. Therefore, as libraries hope to continue to be the great facilitators of information, they are playing an increasingly active role in advocating digital literacy and technology-related skills. In fact, digital literacy instruction in the public library setting is quickly becoming the norm. A study conducted from 2010 to 2011 by the American Library Association found that nearly 90% of all libraries provide technology instruction to some degree (Schimpf, 2012).

Technology instruction, in large part, has been designed and run with the same principles in mind as other educational library programs of years past. Gerding (2011) maintains basic components of program planning, like mission and purpose statements, needs assessment, goals and objectives, policies, procedures, and evaluation, should be used in every situation, regardless of library and type of material covered. These items, as well as a number of certain lifestyle accommodations, account for the friendly and patron-oriented atmosphere which brings many into the library to begin with. Kelsey, Knapp, and Richards (2012) note the significance of this—many patrons seeking technology instruction come from a wide variety of backgrounds and greatly vary in age. They cite a recent study which identifies 30-49 year olds as the largest percentage of eBooks users, with those between 50 and 64 coming in a close second. The statistic, and others like it, shows the need for flexible instructional programs which

take patron work schedules, lifestyles, abilities, and technological familiarity into account. Recently, libraries have done this by offering a variety of instruction materials including books, blogs, wikis, and online tutorials, in addition to varying programming to include one-on-one sessions, classes, group modules, and open lab time (Gerding, 2011).

One increasingly popular style of instruction is the “technology petting zoo” (Kelsey et al., 2012). While technology training has traditionally focused on PC use, job applications, and accessing government resources, Schimpf (2012) states that technology is now more frequently used for entertainment purposes. Petting zoos and similar programs approach training with this in mind and convey a sense of “playful learning.” Sometimes by purchasing a number of mobile devices and e-readers specifically for this purpose, libraries invite patrons to familiarize themselves and find out which devices suit their needs. For some patrons, these sessions help raise their confidence and comfort level so they may feel better about spending money on a new piece of technology (Kelsey et al., 2012).

For libraries that cannot afford to purchase their own devices, other options are typically available. Kelsey et al., (2012) report that some libraries establish partnerships with local businesses which loan devices, send employees to provide training sessions for patrons, or advise their customers of the services the library provides. Other libraries allow patrons to bring in their own purchases where librarians or paraprofessional staff assist with registration, basic use, etc. In either case, both librarians and patrons appreciate the petting zoo model because of its hands-on nature and ability to accommodate a larger number of patrons than classes alone.

As with many library services, evaluation and benchmarking are important aspects of technology-based instruction. The Edge Benchmarks, for example, is a pilot program which provides the framework for evaluating instructor competencies and measures the library’s impact on the community. As this type of instruction becomes more common, Blowers (2012) maintains this program, and others like it, provides indicators and other means for comparison so libraries may know where they stand. They ensure community needs are heard and met, trainers are adequately skilled and educated, and accommodations are made to include patrons from all backgrounds.

Brainstorming Programs

As the 2011 holiday season approached, the three PCC Trainers began thinking of what kinds of holiday-themed programming we could implement that also fit within the guidelines of the grant. Since many of the BTOP workshops and classes over the summer and fall had involved job hunting, resume writing, and overall workforce development, we wanted to do something a little bit different with a focus more toward technology and the ‘lighter’ side of the holiday season. Until this point, most of our programming required a clearly defined curriculum, or was designed to meet an immediate need, be it in the computer lab or otherwise. We wanted to branch out and create something more participatory and flexible. Still aiming to successfully serve a

community need, we discussed the goals we wanted the program to achieve, which are listed as follows:

- The program should be technology-oriented and teach beyond the immediate needs seen in the computer lab (email, job information, setting up accounts, etc). It should emphasize the use of technology and personal digital devices for enjoyment.
- The program should focus on devices outside the scope of traditional personal computers in order to include emerging and mobile technologies, as well as e-readers, and personal digital devices.
- It should seek to implement new technologies in the community by introducing patrons to new devices and providing relevant support and instruction.
- In addition to our regularly served patrons, the program should encourage participation from those not typically served by the BTOP program.
- The content and material covered in the program should be decided largely by the patrons. It should respond to their needs, rather than a prescribed curriculum.

In short, we wanted an opportunity to rethink the ways in which both the BTOP program and PCC Trainers could serve library users, so these services may reach a broader audience. In our previous experience, we found that digital literacy, as a concept, extends beyond the scope of computers and the Internet, and therefore wanted to illustrate the ways digital technologies could be utilized in everyday life.

After some consideration, we developed a program we called *Christmas Technologies*. Similar to other technology petting zoos, it would be designed as an open forum. It would assist patrons in purchasing their tech gifts by helping them to identify reputable brands, get the best deal, and know which devices would appropriately suit their needs. Additionally, we would assist patrons who received digital devices as gifts by offering immediate instruction and continued support. Ultimately, we decided it would be best to hold the program as two separate sessions. The first would be held before the holidays, in order to assist patrons with their purchases, and the second would be in January, to show them how to use their new gifts.

Christmas Technologies Program: Part 1

Before we implemented the program, we knew we must first identify this year's trends and most popular tech gifts, and prepare accordingly. After some planning, we settled on a list which included digital cameras, GPS devices, smart phones, e-readers, tablet computers, and MP3 players. Initially, we contacted some local stores to see if they would be willing to send a representative to hold some instruction sessions, but many were unable to spare any employees during the busy shopping season. Instead, each of us would take on a few devices to specialize in based on our personal experience and prepare a number of handouts and guides containing FAQs, registration information, helpful tips, and best practices. Without professional assistance or

materials, the guides would be created using our own knowledge and observations as trainers, as well as information found on the websites of popular manufacturers.

In the library's community meeting room, where the program would be held, we set up five laptops with Internet access so patrons could register their devices while they waited. We hoped this would allow us to skip the registration process in our instruction sessions, and at the very least, keep people occupied if they had to wait awhile. After the program, we requested patrons complete a short survey which would serve to provide feedback regarding the quality of our advice and instruction, and also provide a point of reference as to what aspects of the program should be changed before the second session.

Initially, we hoped to hold the program in early December, before the holidays, but the meeting room was booked until after Christmas. Instead, the first session was held on December 28th, from 9:00 a.m. until noon. Each PCC Trainer was set up at his own station, which consisted of a table with six chairs, a laptop for registering products and finding additional information, and the trainer's prepared materials. Patrons were instructed to visit whichever of us specialized in their particular device. The five laptops for registration were set up along one wall of the meeting room, so as to keep patrons from crowding one another.

Though our advertisements stated patrons could come and go as they pleased throughout the program, the majority came within the first half hour. We enlisted the assistance of a library clerk to monitor the door, guide patrons to the appropriate station, and hand numbered cards in the event of a long line. The crowd, however, grew quickly and order was soon abandoned. Before losing count, the clerk had tallied over fifty patrons in attendance within the first hour. We had seen far more patrons than we expected, and in all honesty, more than we could handle given our planning and preparation. We did our best to accommodate everyone, allowing patrons to use the registration laptops for entertainment while they waited for instruction, and even abandoning the forum approach in an attempt to establish a number of impromptu classes for the most popular devices. Despite all of our best efforts, patron frustrations soon became evident. Some began to talk over others; some indicated they would come back at a later time, while others stayed for the entire three hours, perhaps thinking that this was a one-time opportunity. Our attempt at an organized evaluation process failed as well. Most patrons left without completing a survey, and we also failed to match the few surveys we did collect with their corresponding device. Despite the lack of feedback, however, we knew that changes must be made before the second session.

Evaluation and Christmas Technologies 2.0

In the week following the first session, the PCC trainers met to discuss the program and share our thoughts regarding our successes and failures. We ran through our planning process again in order to identify what worked, and what did not. From these discussions came the following conclusions:

- We incorrectly assumed which devices people would be bringing to the program. In fact, the majority of patrons came in with e-readers and tablets. We saw only one iPod, and no cameras or GPS devices.
- Before the program, most patrons had already registered their devices and gained a working knowledge of their operation. They mainly wanted to know how to borrow and download library eBooks.
- In terms of preparation, we had focused on breadth, rather than depth. We were prepared to talk about a wide variety of devices, but not in any great detail.
- We did not realize the Wi-Fi connection is weakest in the community meeting room. It was unable to support the number of patrons attempting to simultaneously connect.
- Many patrons indicated they would have preferred to learn from us in a one-on-one setting. Though we did not anticipate such a large turnout, many patrons were intimidated by the crowd.

In our review, it became apparent that our failure to conduct a pre-program survey caused most of the problems faced in the first session. Though the majority of our services through the BTOP program are implemented largely in response to patron need, we neglected to consider this fact in our planning of this particular program. Therefore, in preparation for the second session, we used our observations from the first as a sort of pre-survey. We were determined to make changes accordingly so our second attempt might be more successful.

Christmas Technologies 2.0 was held on January 23rd, from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Like before, registration was not required and patrons were welcome to come and go as they pleased during the two hours. In addition to holding the second session in the evening, we made a number of other changes with the hope that things would go more smoothly. First, we moved the entire program out of the community meeting room and up to the third floor. We did this primarily to improve Wi-Fi connectivity, but also to eliminate the need for registration laptops. Patrons could simply use the PCs in the adjacent computer lab to register their devices and/or entertain themselves while they waited. Second, we started from scratch by creating materials and reorganizing ourselves to provide assistance primarily with e-readers and tablets. Again, each of the PCC Trainers specialized in a different device, this time according to the process utilized by each device to download library eBooks. We stationed ourselves at three tables—one for all Kindle devices, one for Nooks and other readers requiring Adobe Digital Editions, and one for iPads and other devices that support the Overdrive Media Console. By narrowing our focus, we were able to provide more detailed materials and answer questions regarding more advanced functions.

Although we did not expect as many attendees as the first session, we knew we had to come up with a new way of controlling the crowd. To do this, we scrapped the number system, and in its place organized patrons by device, calling over small groups to sit through a short class. This allowed us to provide more consistent (and better quality)

instruction and also prevented patrons from wandering into the middle of a lesson and getting left behind. To accommodate those who did not want to wait, or preferred one-on-one instruction, a librarian created a sign-up sheet which listed all of our available one-on-one appointment openings for the coming month, and encouraged patrons to sign up if they wished to receive more training. During the program, this sheet was left at the third floor reference desk, where the librarian provided assistance by scheduling patrons and further explaining some of our services.

Results

As a result of the changes, *Christmas Technologies 2.0* went much more smoothly than the first session. As we expected, attendance was lower, presumably because the program was held later in the month, allowing patrons some time to learn their devices on their own. We were confident our new setup would have allowed us to accommodate a volume of patrons close to that of the first session. Moving the program to the third floor, where patrons were free to browse the stacks and use the computer lab, was a major improvement. Because of this relocation, we did not experience the same bottleneck of attendees at the door. It also relieved the sense of urgency and pressure among the patrons which had caused them to interrupt one another during the first session.

Though our survey results indicated a positive response to the program, the one-on-one sessions proved to be a popular alternative. By allowing patrons a wide range of appointments for follow up instruction, we alleviated both patron and staff stress during the program—neither group felt pressure due to the program's time constraints. In fact, the Christmas Technologies program turned out to be a good marketing tool for our one-on-one services as a whole, and we suspected word of the BTOP program was spreading. We saw a dramatic and lasting increase in appointments in the following months. In total, we held 44 sessions in January, 41 in February, and 34 in both March and April, compared to only 16 in November, and 14 in December. The computer and workforce classes have seen more consistent attendance as well. Patron surveys for both services supported our hypothesis—that is, the majority of patrons stated they had heard of our services from a friend or family member.

This positive patron response also increased the staff's awareness of the library's eBook collection. The month following *Christmas Technologies 2.0* was the first time the trainers and librarians needed to provide any degree of detailed eBook/e-reader support. In response to this, the library purchased a number of new eBook titles, dedicated a section of its website to these resources, and began to refine detailed handouts, video tutorials, and other materials for patron use. EBook and e-reader assistance now consistently accounts for a large portion of daily patron requests, and seems to have brought new patrons to the library from surrounding communities.

Conclusions

In sum, we deemed the program a success, in that we achieved the goals we had originally outlined and increased awareness of many other general library services as well. Though many aspects of the program did not go originally as planned, we were able to effectively incorporate emerging and mobile technologies into the library's regularly provided services. More importantly, we successfully reached an entirely new demographic of library patrons, and marketed both the library and the BTOP program in a new light.

Early setbacks were caused, in large part, by our failure to conduct a preliminary analysis of patron needs and desires. Once we shifted focus, we found that patrons were responsive and interested in learning new technologies. In this respect, the second session was effective in creating a patron-driven learning environment—something which will be taken into account for next year's program. The library hopes to hold similar programs in the future, even after the BTOP grant expires. However, the library may have challenges to overcome as the PCC Trainers will no longer be available to conduct the program or provide additional one-on-one instruction for continued support once the grant expires. To make this transition a bit easier, we trainers plan to leave behind updated guides and handouts, as well as other materials like video tutorials, to assist the library staff that continues the program. Other alternatives, like classes taught through the local community college, or partnerships with local business may be a viable substitute as well. Whichever method of instruction is selected, the library will likely seek to continue to implement new technologies and support patrons in their use.

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