

Technology Access and Training in Public Libraries: A pilot study of technology assistance to patrons of the Urbana Free Library

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ABSTRACT

In this extended abstract, an ongoing pilot study looking at technology assistance in the Urbana Free Library computing lab is described. The study is student driven and is an example of how a research project can provide quality service to the community in which it functions.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.3.2 [Computers and Education]: Computer and Information Science Education – *literacy*

General Terms

Management, Measurement, Theory.

Keywords

Participatory Action Research, Community Informatics, Technology Education, Information Literacy, Sustainability, Pedagogy

Introduction and Background

In the spring of 2009 two graduate students from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign set out to organize a volunteer technology force at the local public library. A group that now numbers over 30 volunteers was developed with a goal to research the types of support provided to patrons using the public computing lab. The volunteers are now in the process of conducting a pilot study on what types of questions and technology needs are being asked in the library computer lab. More specifically, the research examines the role that public libraries play in providing information literacy training to patrons who use their technology services with an aim to find out what the information literacy needs are that libraries are addressing. The findings from this research will be a starting point from which to explore different models of information literacy training.

There have been a few major research studies on the technology services that libraries provide, notably, Bertot's 2007 study, which sampled 6,979 public libraries in metropolitan, suburban and rural areas around the U.S. The study found that while almost

all libraries provided free Internet access to their communities, and 73% were the only provider of free Internet access in their service areas (77% in rural areas), only 30% provided computer skills and Internet training. While the most commonly reported outcome of the training was "Provides information literacy skills (46%)," it is unclear what the nature of the training (formal group training, informal one-on-one training, or scheduled one-on-one training) is.

The Bertot study gives us a comprehensive picture of the technology-related services that U.S. libraries are providing, and a glimpse into what the outcomes are, but little clue as to what patrons are learning, how that learning is happening between patrons and librarians or the impact this has on the job of the librarian. Bertot suggests future research is needed on expectations of patrons, community and governments, specifically, what users want from their public library's Internet access and training services.

Research Focus

This study aims to find out what technology-related inquiries people are asking the library for help with and how much time it takes to resolve these queries by examining interactions between patrons and volunteers who provide assistance with computer and Internet-related questions at the adult reference desk at The Urbana Free Library (UFL) in Urbana, IL. By collecting data on these interactions, the researcher will identify user needs, learn more about how these needs are affecting the job role of the librarians, and suggest different models for information literacy instruction that will meet the needs of users.

This research will add to a body of knowledge about the kinds of formal and informal training that is happening in public libraries. It will also give a clearer picture about the extent to which public libraries are providing staff time and support for information literacy training. As libraries are often the only provider of free Internet access in a community, this information will be helpful for libraries and local government in terms of planning and staffing for technology-related services. It should be noted that this is a pilot study of just one method of delivering information literacy training. Additional research will be needed to adequately

address the question of which training models will fulfill patron needs.

Site Location

The Urbana Free Library is a public library funded through city taxes. Its policies are determined by a library board appointed by the mayor. Computer lab user cards for logging in are available to any individual, no matter their residence, in addition to “guest passes” for one day use. Patrons are allowed two computer logins a day at 30 minutes per session. However, time extension requests are rarely denied. The lab contains 29 computers broken down into the following categories: 6 non-Internet workstations, 2 express Internet workstations, 19 full-service workstations, and 1 full-service Internet workstation with a large monitor and assistive technology equipment. The lab is available at all times during library hours and is monitored by the adjacent adult reference desk.

Approximately 37,000 people live in Urbana, Illinois. The population is 14% African-American, which is higher than the national percentage (12%). 13% of families and 27% of individuals live below the poverty level (Census, 2000). In addition to a large African-American population and groups below the poverty level, nine months out of the year 40,000 students attend the University of Illinois located in both the cities of Urbana and its adjacent city Champaign (On-Campus Enrollment, 2009). Students are a significant portion of the population during the school year and many of them are patrons of the Urbana Free Library.

The Urbana Free Library was an ideal choice for this study because of an existing relationship between the staff at the library and the primary researcher on this project. The librarians made it known that they are in need of assistance in the computer lab, and that they trust the researcher with the authority to organize volunteers, partly because the researcher is affiliated with the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS). They are also willing to allow the researchers to collect data from interactions with patrons in the lab. Most of all, many of the reference librarians made it clear that there is an urgent need for volunteer assistance as patron demand for technology-related assistance is making it difficult for reference librarians to balance these duties with the more traditional duties of reference, readers’ advisory, collection development and other tasks.

Method

To gather data for this study the majority of volunteers are solicited through the Community Informatics Club, a GSLIS student organization. The volunteers attend an initial training session where they were familiarized with the computer lab, the procedures for working in the lab, and are introduced to the research and data collection in which they play a key function. Since this volunteer group was developed last spring a number of other individuals, mostly graduate students at the University of Illinois, have stepped in to provide support in the lab.

There are three priority volunteer days per week: Tuesdays from 3-7 p.m., Thursdays from 4-8 p.m., and Saturdays from 1-5 p.m. Each volunteer day is broken into two-hour sessions with a one volunteer staffing the station at a time. These times were chosen so that volunteers would be available in the lab during the hours patrons are arriving from school and work in addition to a high-activity time over the weekend. In all, there is at least one volunteer in the lab for 12 hours a week. Additionally, the fall 2009 semester saw an influx of new volunteers and as a result, nearly each week additional shifts are added on in order to accommodate more helpers in the lab.

The method for data collection is a categorized statistics sheet that is filled out by the volunteers. For every interaction the volunteer has with a patron, they mark a tally in the category in which the question most closely relates such as *document creation*, *e-mail assistance*, *operating a computer*, *printing*, etc. The last field is an open-ended space that allows the volunteers to share additional information about the interaction. In this space, volunteers are invited to express difficulties, frustrations, or surprising results from their time with the patron.

Where the Project Stands

The research for this project is currently ongoing and still in the pilot stage. Initially, the purpose of this volunteer group was to primarily conduct the research and come to some end conclusion. However, the volunteers have been so successful in the assistance they provide, and the library so grateful to have the help, that the project has now moved its primary focus away from the data side of the work to a more comprehensive effort to build a sustainable volunteer group that will continue to provide much needed support to patrons in the lab. It is apparent that there is much more to learn here than what the researcher initially set out to accomplish and that what initially began as a research project has now developed into a greater effort with ramifications beyond the walls of the university and into the surrounding community. While still interested in the research, it is important that the volunteer group be further organized into a sustainable and permanent support team for the Urbana Free Library public computing lab.

References

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