
Software for Patron Use: Case Studies from Public Libraries

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ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE ADDRESSES issues related to patron-use software in a public library setting. Software selection criteria are presented. Descriptions of categories of patron-use software and services, such as public domain software, bulletin board systems (BBS), and packages for the handicapped, are followed by one or more case studies of their applications. Practical rules of thumb drawn from experience are shared. Sources of information are provided.

INTRODUCTION

The microcomputer age has brought with it a wealth of possibilities and problems. Libraries have not been left out of this quandry. While the most obvious benefit to the profession has been the in-house use of microcomputers to automate specific tasks and systems, especially for very small- and medium-sized libraries, public access microcomputers have also made substantial headway and are exceedingly popular with patrons. In fact, microcomputers in public libraries were initially seen as a patron service. Only recently did they become a substantial aid to public library staff, probably because of the time required to develop adequate software for library work. Software for patron use has existed as early as 1980.

Some justification exists for the public access microcomputer. In the early 1980s, few people owned a microcomputer; there was much greater need and demand for this service in a library. In the early days too, computer literacy was a much more important issue. Everyone wanted to learn about microcomputers, but few people had

any place to use one. Even today some people still lack access to a microcomputer, and many desire to learn about it for the first time. Many children and adults alike are still computer illiterate.

Since libraries began providing microcomputer access in 1977 (Shair, 1977, p. 36), the number has steadily increased. As of 1990, approximately 50 percent of all public libraries provide public access micros. An excellent example of this increase is found in the Chicago Public Library. A survey by Garber in 1989 (Dewey, 1990, p. 4), showed that over one-third of all branch libraries at the Chicago Public Library had public access microcomputers. Just a few years earlier there was only one public access microcomputer.

SELECTION ISSUES

Software Selection Criteria

1. Since library staff have minimal time available to assist the public, software packages should be reasonably easy to understand or user friendly. The less help the patron needs, the fewer the problems for staff.
2. Programs that use color are a good idea, especially for children.
3. Depending upon the nature of the program, such things as capacity and capability should be considered. Word processing programs and database management systems fall into this category.
4. Some programs need to work with other programs, such as a publishing program. They should be able to import or export files to word processors for example.
5. Educational programs should be targeted at specific learning goals, or, in the case of a school, for specific curriculum needs or remediation.
6. Programs should be checked for quality, either through reviews or personal inspection.
7. Consider the noise generated by a software package and its users.
8. Keep in mind that a public library serves many types of people, from the elderly to children. Having a variety of software for people to choose from will accommodate more of these patrons. If there is no interesting software, then no one will use the computer.
9. Listening to patrons' ideas about software can be one of the most useful methods for developing a software collection. They are often well informed because of their discussions with friends, extensive reading in magazines, etc. Also, they may have some notion of what they expect the microcomputer to do without having a specific package in mind. The librarian can then try to find such a package for purchase.

Suggestions for Purchase

1. Libraries should also consider tutorials, which are programs that explain other programs.
2. Programs which mimic some traditional intellectual board games, such as chess, are a good choice for public libraries.
3. Preschool children and their parents are a group served by public libraries. Software exists for learning colors, shapes, and numbers. These can be used by parents and their children.
4. Interactive fiction is a category of software that is similar to a book. Users take the role of a character and try to solve a mystery or puzzle. These programs may be entirely text or have graphics. Since they often promote or require significant amounts of reading, they are usually a good type of program for a public library to make available.

CATEGORIES OF PATRON-USE SOFTWARE AND SERVICES

It is quite easy to separate the types of public access software selection into many specific categories. This was done in a more detailed approach elsewhere (Dewey, 1990, p. 4). For the purposes of this article, however, these are broken down into six major categories: in-library use, circulating software, public domain software and shareware, electronic bulletin boards, handicapped access, and laboratory use. This article will examine each type of software and related service issues. Most categories are followed by an actual case study. As with any aspect of service it is important for a library to assess the needs of the community. In an affluent community, in-library use may be minimally desirable, while circulation of software may be more important. Not all libraries are the same and not all patrons want the same thing.

In-Library Use

In-library public access is the most frequent type of software service established by a public library. Patrons usually have to make an appointment. A selection of software is available to users and/or they may be allowed to bring their own. Software selection for such a service is a big issue. An excellent example of this type of service was provided by the North-Pulaski Neighborhood Library (Chicago Public Library), which maintained a highly publicized Personal Computer Center from 1981 to 1989. It was funded by a grant from the Friends of the Library. Using only an Apple II computer (later replaced with an Apple IIe), in-library access and other services were provided.

The in-library service presented several problems for resolution. Most immediate among these was space. After much consideration,

a closet was cleared out and provided a secluded space. The closet was also the only place that could be locked when not in use and made secure. A selection of public domain and commercial software, mostly educational game software, was obtained. Since few libraries had any experience with this service, knowing how to correctly help patrons with such software was a major concern. An initial effort was made to spend some time tutoring patrons, but this quickly proved to be very difficult. Getting patrons together in groups also proved to be difficult and time consuming. The most efficient route was to simply give each patron a five or ten minute talk about how the computer works and how to insert the diskettes. Patrons then worked through a tutorial disk on how the computer works in greater detail. They were given additional help only as needed ("Help me, I'm stuck!"), and only enough instruction was given to get them unstuck. It was the patron's responsibility to learn how to use the computer. Library staff merely helped out occasionally. This strategy worked very well (Dewey, 1982, p. 880). The library also operated the first public access library bulletin board service (Dewey, 1984, p. 13).

The Maywood (Illinois) Public Library has had a microcomputer service in place for approximately eight years. The main service is in-library use. Originally the computer was housed on the second floor, but staff found it too difficult to administer service since patrons needed to go to one floor to make an appointment and another to use the computer. In addition, the staff on the computer floor were generally too occupied with children's programs to have sufficient time to monitor the machine. The microcomputer was ultimately moved to a lower level of the library where a single staff member took care of the videotape collection, the computer, the fax machine, the copy machine, and similar services. This has worked out extremely well (Dewey, 1990, p. 97). Another form of the in-library center is that targeted at a specific group, such as a career center which makes available college search programs, grammar and spelling tutorials, resume writing programs, and study programs for examinations such as GED and ESL (Dewey, 1990, p. 104).

Circulation of Software

Circulating software outside the library has many pitfalls. The first pitfall occurs with the selection of software. A problem peculiar to circulation and use of software is concern for copyright and licensing agreements. Generally speaking, if the copyright states that the disk is sold to be used on only one CPU (Central Processing Unit), then the program should not be circulated. Otherwise, the disk can generally be treated as a book. Since interpretations of the copyright laws will vary, it is wise to have the library attorney review

such a process and be asked for an opinion regarding state and federal laws.

Software that circulates is also prone to much more damage and loss than other software. Should the library circulate a \$175 package? What happens if it is lost or damaged? What happens if several patrons want the same package?

Public Domain Software and Shareware

The Liverpool (New York) Public Library provides a spectacular example of a circulating software collection in a public library. It has had an innovative and exciting program for many years, with a local area network and an electronic bulletin board. Recently, software was allowed to circulate. Many types of software are circulated, including arcade games. The circulation of software has been the most interesting aspect at Liverpool since it is the largest of its kind to be found. Some 10,000 packages are circulated each year. Software packages which are of short-term interest to parents and children are some of the main purchases. Significant problems have included methods of packaging the software so that it is returned intact. When software is returned, it is inspected visually. Disks are write protected when possible, and an archival copy is made whenever convenient. Only 5 percent of the collection is sitting on the "dead" shelf at any one time waiting for further processing (Dewey, 1990a, p. 29).

One solution to copyright and physical access problems is public domain software and shareware. These types are sometimes mistaken as the same thing, but they are quite different. Public domain software has no copyright and may be freely copied and used by anyone. Shareware, on the other hand, is copyrighted. It may be copied and distributed but should not be used for more than a preview without sending in a registration fee. One purpose of this arrangement is to allow the user time to become acquainted with the software before deciding to purchase. Often a fuller version and other "perks," such as documentation, are supplied when the registration is submitted. Such software, public domain or shareware, can be mass produced by a library to serve as many patrons as desired. Copies can be made on demand from a master set. When a copy is returned, it is simply put back into the "scratch bin" where it can be reformatted for other uses. In this case, there is no need to check the disk for damage.

Electronic Bulletin Board Systems

A BBS is an online database which the library operates on its microcomputer. Only between 50 and 100 libraries have operated an electronic bulletin board system. Such an operation is tricky at best.

It may contain files that publicize library activities, information files, bibliographies, bulletins from callers, electronic mail between users, public domain software, and many other services. Users may dial in from home using their own microcomputers and modems.

The Suburban Library System (Illinois) obtained funding for an electronic bulletin board system for member libraries. The goal was to provide a variety of information to patrons in the areas served by the community libraries. Funded by an LSCA grant, the service made available an online database of basic library information—bibliographies, sources of information, special services, and much more. An electronic mail service, and book and movie reviews were also provided. A number of subboards allowed users to focus in on particular topics for discussion, posting bulletins which were then the subject of debate by other users. One subboard was a “storyboard.” Users could create their own story by drafting a first installment. Subsequent callers would then build on this to enlarge the story. Some stories ended with thirty or forty installments. Getting young people into the habit of writing was considered a good use for the board. The board operated for three years and received over 11,000 phone calls.

In order to provide a BBS service in a public library, staff must be aware of patron-use issues and software selection. Information on the basic operation and use of a BBS, including the search for software, is covered in an excellent book entitled *Using Computer Bulletin Boards* (Hedtke, 1990).

Patrons can locate BBS numbers in a variety of sources including the *National Directory of Bulletin Board Systems Computer Shopper* and CompuServe. The best way to learn about the operation of a BBS is to call local boards and discuss the operation with local system operators (sysops). Another type of software that should be considered for purchase is that for running an electronic bulletin board system. It should be easy for patrons to use and have those features which the library feels are important. Many types of BBS software are now available. A 1200 or 2400 baud modem is also essential for operating a BBS.

Handicapped Access

There has been significant progress in using microcomputer technology to make media available to the handicapped. These include software packages that enlarge type, convert from print to voice, and use sign language on screen.

The Special Needs Center of the Phoenix (Arizona) Public Library serves the needs of handicapped individuals. Federal funding and private gifts of over \$156,000 made the center possible. A host

of hardware and software are available. The variety of microcomputers include IBMs and Apples. Software packages include Raised Dot Computing for large print, braille, and synthetic voice. The InLarge software is available on the Macintosh. This program creates large print computer screen windows. Interpreter (Microtech Consulting) is a sign language program. The lab has many volunteers who train users in the skills needed to operate the machines and use the software. People use the center for school work, and to read newspapers and books in braille or voice, and it generally provides library services to a group which could not formerly benefit. It has been highly successful (Dewey, 1990, p. 49).

Laboratory Use

The Nichols Public Library (Naperville, Illinois) has an excellent public access laboratory (Dewey, 1990, p. 46). It also makes available many business and advanced software programs for these computers. Time must be reserved, and software is cataloged in the library's online catalog. Users under the age of 8 must be accompanied by an adult 18 or older. There are also four microcomputers in the children's department. Together, these provide patrons with approximately 1,800 packages each month. Parents are commonly seen with their children using the micros. The lab has some 100 packages displayed in a glass cabinet. Use of the service increased 25 percent during 1989. The public has been very supportive of these services.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR ESTABLISHING SOFTWARE COLLECTIONS

Most librarians can select software by using standard tools, reading reviews, and becoming experienced in using software. Potential problem areas should be looked at in order to minimize their effects. Principal areas to examine include:

1. Find a suitable location to put the computer, software, and staff.
2. Select a staff member to be in charge of software selection and other microcomputer operations. In order for selection to be done correctly, someone dealing with the computer-using public should be in charge. Input should be invited from both the public and interested staff.
3. Teach staff how to use the microcomputer.
4. Create a system for teaching the public to use both computer and software. Since time is at a premium, this should be done in brief sessions. Most librarians only have time and skills to help the patron get started, not to give lessons in using *dBase* for example.

5. Create a budget for software purchases.
6. Create a software selection policy. Software selection always requires a definition of the needs for it. While it can be done quite successfully without a written policy, such codification will usually prove valuable.
7. Develop a system for organizing the software—the simpler, the better. The system should make it easy to check out and to identify what software is available. Several good methods exist for making access to titles available to patrons (Dewey & Garber, 1984, p. 32).
8. Create necessary rules for regulation and control of operation. Some rules, especially about copyright violation should be posted. Commonly, libraries provide copies of an agreement which users must sign each time they use the software. This spells out their obligations and possible violations of copyright laws.
9. Choose a way to package software. Storage containers should be sturdy enough to easily rest on shelves for storage, to survive rough handling, and, if circulation out of the building is permitted, to be carried around like a book.
10. Make a periodic evaluation of the software collection. Weed out obsolete or nonworking materials. Determine areas of future selection.

SOURCES OF SOFTWARE INFORMATION

Available sources of software information include books, magazines, newsletters, and online. There are almost too many sources. Fortunately, a selector may focus on a few sources that regularly review materials of interest. Some examples of review sources for patron-use software are given below.

Many magazines exist which contain excellent and current software information. *Booklist* (American Library Association) regularly features software of interest to librarians selecting for public access. Other library periodicals do the same. Other professional journals, such as *Computers In Libraries* (Meckler), also occasionally carry reviews of public access software, particularly from a librarian's point of view. An excellent no cost journal is *Apple Computer Users Group Newsletter* (Apple Computer). *Only the Best* is published every year or two. It contains reviews of hundreds of preschool to 12th grade software packages, with ratings by different organizations. *A+* is an Apple magazine which reviews the latest games and educational software. *Ahoy* is an excellent Commodore journal, largely devoted to young people. Reviews and commentary will keep one up to date on materials which young Commodore users will find appealing. There are many fine journals which serve the IBM and IBM clone

user. Similar magazines exist for the Macintosh, the Amiga, and other computers. There are also sources of information about public domain and shareware, including *Shareware Magazine* (PC-SIG). These popular magazines are good for keeping track of materials that are currently being used by patrons.

Software Reviews on File (Facts on File) is a monthly which reprints reviews from other journals. The focus is on public access software. Several reviews are reprinted for each package, making this a good way to get more than one opinion quickly.

Software directories vary in the type of information that they present. Some are collections of reviews, others are merely collections of vendor's comments. Either can be useful although both become dated rather quickly.

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