SETTING THE BAR HIGH WHEN IT COMES TO HIGH-TECH LITERACY IN LIBRARIES

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The goal of this study was to discover the various similarities and differences that exist when it comes to “digital technology literacy and learning” in public and academic libraries across Texas and the United States.

The theme of the paper is to “set the bar high” and raise the standard of learning and adapting to new technologies. Digital literacy has come a long way to evolve, yet has to continually reinvent itself to stay ahead of the curve with the marketplace. The opportunities are immense, the possibilities limitless. What is upping the ante is that we live in a results-oriented, “now” society? Instant gratification has become the norm.

In 2014, setting the bar higher can be seen throughout the library industry. It is a mantra theme, and can be utilized even as a battle cry for librarians and information professionals to adopt in these changing, economically leaner times.

A total of (36) survey respondents (18 from academic libraries, 17 from public libraries and one from a special library) willingly provided input on a 10 question survey, a 40% response rate overall (see https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/YWJX2JP). Over 100 librarians and library clerks in both academic and public libraries were initially e-mailed the survey with its concise instructions.

So after all is said and done, how do your technology skills measure up in the final analysis? We will explore further as we delve into the study.

The first question we asked respondents was “how important technology is to your patrons?” Nearly 64% (23 out of 36) said “very important.” Just over 31% said “important.” Similarly, when asked “how important technology is to you”, just over 83% (30 out of 36) said “very important” and slightly under 14% (5 out of 36) said “important.” Only 1 out of 36 answered “unimportant or very unimportant” for both questions. This is very telling because we know how crucial technology and tech literacy are in the public and academic library sectors of 2014.

When asked what type of technologies utilized to train patrons, the various responses included the following: web conferencing, instant messaging, e-reader devices, computers, scanners, printers, copiers, blogs, wikis, electronic databases,
cloud computing and various apps.

Just one decade ago, there were no e-books in a collection, let alone any Kindles, Nooks, iPads to read them on. It is amazing to see all of the changes thus far in the 21st century.

Take for instance, the Bexar County Digital Public Library in San Antonio, “touted as the nation’s only all-digital public library, are convinced its time has come. The $2.4 million, 4,000-sq.-ft.space, also known as Bibliotech, opened Sept. 14 (2013) and has been likened to an orange-hued Apple Store.” (Time, p. 70)

E-books are now being loaned out by a pilot project of academic libraries named “Occam’s Reader.” Being traditionally a venue of sharing print books and journals through interlibrary loan, academic e-books have not been able to keep up due to vendor’s structured copyright agreements. The project is instituting an innovative software platform that cuts through the red tape with established e-book publisher Springer. A consortium of 33 academic libraries named The Greater Western Library Alliance is responsible for implementing this and its success. (Howard, A11)

Students, typically classified as millennials, are the biggest users of mobile phones and tablets for accessing information. In fact, 40% feel anxious if they couldn’t constantly check their smart phones.

A recent study by eMarketer found the following:
- 92%+ use a mobile phone
- 65%+ use smart phones and mobile web
- 45% use smart phones to access online resources and content
- On an average, the millennials send 50 text messages per day
- An average user spends online 8.2 hours a week on smart phone
Additionally, the Pew Research Internet Project provides some useful insights:
- 60 million Americans say the Internet helped them make big decisions or negotiate their way through major episodes in their lives.
- 55% of all online American youths ages 12-17 use online social networking sites.
- 87% of online users have used the Internet at one point to carry out scientific topic or research.

(Gerding, 15-16)

This brings us to the topic of information overload. When asked if they experience it, along with overabundance of data infrastructure, over half of the respondents affirmatively indicated “yes.”

However, as the world turns increasingly to technology for daily needs, it only makes sense and is critical that adults have sufficient enough digital literacy skills to navigate the online job market, finances, our health care system and more. As librarians, digital literacy for our communities is a responsibility. It is estimated that “some 36 million American adults are in dire need of literacy services and resources - and libraries help fulfill that need.” Why libraries? Because today virtually all public libraries (99.3 percent) provide public access to computers and the Internet, and more than 87 percent of libraries provide formal or informal technology training.” (Syracuse.com)

The survey I conducted on “How High-Tech Is Your Library Or Information Center?” produced the following answers to the question of “How do you or would you best define “digital technology literacy” as an information specialist?”:

-”Ability to ably use present digital technology to serve yours and patron’s needs and ability to intelligently evaluate new digital technology.”

-“The ability to use technology effectively.”

-“The ability to use and train others in a variety of technologies that are available.”
-“Skills which enable you to approach any digital device and use it to apply needed applications to work or daily life.”

-“The ability to understand, access and use digital technology without breaking a sweat.”

-”Teaching the students how to use the online resources provided.”

-”The ability to use hardware and software to consume and create information.”

-”Helping my students to understand that not all ‘information’ is created equal and how to analyze, evaluate and select the best information for their papers and projects.”

-”Able to move freely through the system to obtain the information needed.”

-”Goal: To carefully digest (critically think) about any sort of information that comes to the patron or consumer in a digital format; most often the web.”

-”Being as fluent with our digital technologies as a means of delivering content to users as we are/were with our historical (analog) means of doing so. If we can’t yet achieve that, then the next best we can do is being an effective conduit/portal for our patron’s information needs (be they analog or digital).”

-”The ability to apply technology in a practical manner in both formal and informal settings, plus understand the general theory behind it.”

-”Knowing how to locate, evaluate, and create information using a variety of digital technologies.”

-”An understanding of the available technology, its primary use, and its application to meet specific needs or interests. For the professional, it also means having the capability to utilize specific devices or to have enough technological experience to comfortably explore and learn new technology.”

-”Ability to utilize basic functions of a PC and mobile technologies. Understand basic terminology when asked things like, “click, “double click”, “etc.”

-”Being aware that there are vast amounts of current and upcoming, ever evolving technologies and knowing at least something about as many of these as possible.
Or at least knowing how to research the unfamiliar ones to help with the self education needed to assist patrons and library staff.”

-”Being able to find and critically evaluate information and having the skills to use it correctly.”

-”Having a good understanding of technology and how to use it to improve one’s life, work, and health. Not having fear at trying and experiencing new and changed technologies.”

To set the bar higher, libraries and their technology centers must set up best practices, if not already in place. According to leaders, these include: 1) Streamlined diagnostic through electronic ticketing

2) Fair pricing structure

3) Tech-savvy (work study) students as frontline defense

4) Excellent customer service

5) Subsidized student repair costs

6) Strong partnerships with manufacturers

7) Repair services beyond PCs (smartphones and tablets)

(Lacey, 43-45)

My campus at Western Texas College happens to outsource for IT needs by contracting with a company named Datroo Technologies.

The trend in academic and public libraries continues in 2014 to be openly collaborative and into digital books or bookless. Access has been a huge issue in the past, but not now. However, now pricing plans have been effectively put into place to allow cash-strapped libraries steep discounts or website design, computer programming, and app development courses. “Similar to offerings by Lynda.com,
Treehouse courses are taught via a series of short, professionally produced videos, with student comprehension tested using quizzes or “code challenges” after each segment.”

Fundamental to 21st Century digital literacy and living is the ability to adapt to the new and unexpected. According to The North Texan’s winter 2013 issue, UNT alum now Microsoft director of engineering Larry Sullivan says: “Having the desire to continually want to learn is critical to being successful in a high-tech field because, in our business, things are constantly changing.”

There is the expectation today to connect with others instantaneously. After all, technology has evolved at exponential speed. The cloud has been built. The infrastructure is securely in place. The barriers have been broken down. And productivity is where we as digital natives set the bar high.

How as libraries do we get ahead of the curve technologically in the midst of wide state and federal budget cuts, and stay innovative with our patron base? It may not be easy, but we look for the opportunities to fill in the technological gaps whenever possible for our patrons. We keep exploring. As a library or information center, we risk becoming irrelevant to our patrons if we fall too far behind technically. We also become irrelevant if we do not continually assess and analyze our services. So as the web turns ‘25’ this March 2014, what’s next?

High-tech literacy is an ever-growing field in many ways. Many developments in how the infrastructure is built are looming. Systems are becoming more and more intuitive to the human. Take for instance, Google Glass. It is predicted that by 2020, computers may be intertwined within a person’s body and be able to detect biorhythms enough to change the way our society functions. Man and human will be connected like never before. The ability to control a computer using the power of the mind is closer than one may think.

For any more in-depth information regarding the electronic survey that was disseminated from December 20 to January 31, check out this link:
https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/YWJX2JP
References


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