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# Digital Inclusion, Learning, and Access at the Public Library

Melissa Morrone and Shanelle Witt

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Shanelle Witt unknowingly began her career at Brooklyn Public Library with an after-school position as a volunteer computer coach. Nearly ten years and two positions later, she is now a technology specialist at the Macon branch and has been recognized on the NYC.gov website for her work with the BTOP program and NYC DoITT in collaboration with BPL.

## Abstract

New York City is not an easy place to live. Brooklynites who are just learning about the Internet in 2013—20 years after the development of the World Wide Web—likely have more challenges than simply needing someone to show them how to open up the computer's browser. Brooklyn Public Library has been engaged in a digital inclusion project that brings together issues of ability, access, and learning styles. By giving our patrons skills and confidence to navigate technology both online and off, we are laying the groundwork for them to have a voice in the city.

Keywords: public libraries; Brooklyn Public Library; digital literacy; digital inclusion; Broadband Technology Opportunities Program

## Introduction

It doesn't take much of a leap of imagination to link the public library with the concept of the public sphere. As one of the few non-commercial spaces around, the library is open to people of all ages, classes, and backgrounds. Our collections reflect neighborhoods' linguistic diversity. People work, learn new skills, engage in discussions, and spend their leisure time here. In a sense, the public library is a microcosm of the city. This paper describes the experiences of Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) staff and users as we make our way through the modern technological environment, including by participating in a digital inclusion project that is helping us improve our patrons' access to the public sphere and to the city.

## Digital Literacy and the City

Cities today provide major opportunities for growth, social inclusion, career advancement, and economic development, and Brooklyn is no exception. At the same time, urbanization presents high levels of poverty concentrated in certain areas. There is a noteworthy level of inequality between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” the technologically savvy and the technologically illiterate. Current global trends also create social exclusion, manifesting inequality and creating a greater divide between some sectors of society. Those with technical knowledge are experiencing and benefiting from the technological changes taking place globally, while those without this knowledge struggle or fall by the wayside.

The “digital divide,” the availability of broadband Internet access, and digital literacy are increasingly visible issues in librarianship. The Office for Information Technology Policy of the American Library Association (ALA) has a Digital Literacy Task Force that issued a report earlier this year, indicating one standard for a digitally literate person as someone who “uses these skills to participate actively in civic society and contribute to a vibrant, informed, and engaged community” (2013, p. 2). The Task Force also raises the question of what a “digital literacy” perspective means for the public:

[I]s the digital divide, whereby people are disadvantaged socially and economically because of a lack of access to and ability to use digital technologies, the result primarily of a lack of access to those technologies or of differences in the skills needed to make use of them? Framing the issue in terms of access suggests that government and corporations should address it, while framing it in terms of digital literacy suggests that schools, libraries, and individuals are responsible. (p. 5)

The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (also known as “the stimulus”) allowed the National Telecommunications and Information Administration to release more than \$4 billion to fund Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) initiatives nationwide (American Library Association, 2013, p. 1), including at many public library systems. This program has not only benefitted library users throughout the country, but it has prompted training outlines and other resources to be shared with other library systems to deploy—for example, see Colorado State Library (n.d.); WebJunction Connecticut (n.d.); and Digital Literacy in New York (n.d.). Through BTOP, BPL received grant money to implement new programs and spaces, including laptop loan in eight branches in low-income neighborhoods, an information commons at the Central Library, and a ramping up of public training led by newly hired technology specialists.

## Technology and the Public Library

In today's technological landscape, it certainly feels as if everything is online—although that is, of course, not at all true. But many tools and operations, not to mention a significant portion of modern culture, are online. People have access to fancy mobile phones and other devices, including as gifts from well-meaning loved ones. Job-seekers and workers alike need to have a baseline familiarity with technology. Applications tend to be online, even if the job itself doesn't require use of a computer. And employers flip the switch with respect to computerized skills, in effect telling people who have long worked for them that “you need to know this now, or we'll hire someone else.” In many ways, people are at a genuine disadvantage if they don't have an e-mail account. In the public library, we see an unending procession of patrons come in needing help writing a resume, printing a resume, e-mailing a resume... And all too often they lack basic components for successful completion of these transactions, such as a mental grasp of an e-mail attachment, or possession of a flash drive.

The Web is still relatively young, but it has been around for 20 years or so. If you're just now learning about it, you likely have something else going on. Socioeconomic status for many individuals ultimately determines what type of technology (if any) they will have access to and, just as importantly, how often they get to use it. It also limits opportunities for those people to become more educated about technological advances. For others, finances may not be the primary issue. A growing percentage of our population contains those transitioning from being incarcerated for extended periods of time. For them, the latest technology is whatever was new before they were detained. As of December 2012, 81% of U.S. adults use the Internet (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2013b). Within that high number, there are disparities, some sharp, in terms of race, age, and educational attainment. Data show that only 59% of people who never graduated from high school use the Internet, as compared with 78% who have a high school diploma but no college experience, and 96% who are college graduates or more (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2013a).

And the library itself is a site of technological change. At BPL (as at many library systems), the entire library catalog is online—no more card catalog. Some services are now online as well, such as the ability to place holds and pay fines through the website. Self-check machines are being installed in every location, requiring borrowers to perform their own transactions. The library card itself has acquired the characteristics of a debit card, with a PIN; an associated monetary account; and a swipe strip so patrons can log into the public computers, photocopiers, and kiosks to add more value. The availability of e-books and remotely accessible subscription databases means that some library users who already want to interact with technology don't even have to set foot in the physical library. We also accommodate patrons who bring in their own devices (laptops, tablets, netbooks). Fast and ample

Wi-Fi, along with at least a few outlets for charging laptops and cell phones, are provided in all of our branches.

Library staff are also affected by these changes. All employees must use a computer at some point during their work day (even the maintenance staff, to submit timesheets and work orders), despite differing levels of comfort with technology. Frontline staff are called on less frequently to help with “library”-type reference queries, and there is more troubleshooting and guidance on how to use the various machines. And as staff members, it is our responsibility—including on our own time—to stay abreast of tools that will aid us in better serving our patrons.

### The Library Worker’s Role in Patrons’ Lives

In short, all of these technological advances result in patrons’ needing *less* staff intervention in many ways—they check out their own books, reserve their own computers, print out their own documents, and pay their own fines at a machine. However, the evolving library branch means that tasks that used to be simple to perform now demand a certain level of technological familiarity, and often still require staff assistance. For example, in order to print a document, patrons used to be able to sign a paper sheet, sit down at a computer and do what they needed to, and later ask a librarian to print out their work out for them. Now they must use a library card, remember a PIN, register electronically to get a computer session, use a separate kiosk to put money on their cards, and log into yet another computer to release their print jobs themselves.

Outside of the library’s own machinery, everyday patron problems that often call for staff backing include creating e-mail addresses, paying bills online, saving documents to external storage devices, sending and opening attachments, and creating and updating resumes. Although access is one of our primary focuses, restrictions are necessary to keep things orderly. Time limits allow every person who registers for a computer an equal chance of getting to use one. However, some situations may call for exceptions. For instance, patrons coming in to fill out online job applications will need a significantly longer time than normally allotted. These applications occasionally include a pre-assessment—which alone can take up to 45 minutes to complete—that must be done prior to filling out the actual application.

Community- specific services within the large BPL system are also necessary and require trained and knowledgeable staff. The technology programs and ad hoc one-on-one instruction we conduct in the library are helping to bridge the divide that manifests as further inequality in our society. Indeed, staff should recognize that we have the opportunity to take on a *greater* role in Brooklynites' lives both online and off, both inside and outside of the library. Rather than concern ourselves solely with showing people how to correctly lay down books on the self-check machines, we can use our visibility and goodwill from most residents to teach and empower people

within the city. After all, the transitions into this “digital age” are not always easy or welcomed by the public. In order to assist our patrons in ways that are both more efficient and more empathetic, we must first consider the reasons why they haven’t been using the newer technology. One of the most common yet unspoken issues deals with literacy, and those of us in the public libraries see the ramifications firsthand. We are also in a position to gain the trust of users and be privy to parts of their lives that even those close to them may not be aware of.

Surprisingly, there are many adults who read below a fourth grade level. A 2003 study from the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that 37% of Kings County (Brooklyn) residents lacked “basic prose literacy skills” (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The reason this is unexpectedly common as well as unspoken is because people with these problems tend to have very effective coping mechanisms that hide their shortcomings. Many memorize general words from street signs to food labels. They also have ways to get other people to read things for them without being obvious about it. The most classic example is, “I forgot my glasses.” Without literacy skills, anyone will find it difficult to use computers, smartphones, tablets, or similar devices. Parents who have school-aged children normally have their children show them how to do things on the computer. The problem is that the children will often actually perform the task for their parents, instead of showing them how to do it themselves. The kids get impatient and don’t want to repeat themselves. When the children aren’t around, the parents are back at square one. Some individuals live with physical and mental disabilities that prevent them from being able to use technology in the traditional way. Because of their limitations, many of them assume they cannot use these devices at all. There are also people who have a “don’t know it, don’t want to know it” mentality.

In all cases, we need to be aware of the psychology behind the task at hand and work with the experience level and mindset of the patron. Interactions in these situations put staff in the role of therapists. When patrons encounter challenges, they get overwhelmed with frustration, confusion, and even desperation. Keeping them calm and “talking them down” are routine tasks for us at this point. Considering the turmoil these individuals experience while trying to familiarize themselves with technology, it seems almost questionable as to why they would even bother in the first place. For many people, feeling *included* is one of their prime motivators. Without technological knowledge, someone will inevitably feel left out or clueless in conversations with others. People want to be part of the conversation, not just listeners.

With consideration to all of these factors, staff members must spread awareness about the free access to technology provided by the library. It is essential that we make adaptations on our end in order to make the technological transition for our patrons more fluid. In order to do so, we have to start by changing some misconceptions people have. Many believe that once you get online, someone will immediately be able to steal your identity or cyber-stalk you. Others are less afraid

of what the computers may do to them but more worried that they may damage something due to their lack of knowledge and experience. Teaching digital inclusion topics such as online privacy, safe Web browsing, and the purpose of websites' terms of service can help empower patrons with the knowledge to responsibly, safely, and productively use technology inside and outside of the library. One of our ultimate goals is to lessen patrons' fears of online technology and be realistic about what can come from using it, including benefits such as more access to information, connections with family and friends via e-mail and social media, the ability to take care of a business (or start a new one), homework help resources, job-hunting tools, e-government services, virtual classes, and a host of other valuable life-enhancing functions.

### Teaching and Learning in the Public Library

Unlike our colleagues in BPL's more specialized Literacy department, where people have backgrounds in education, we traditional library staff tend to make all sorts of assumptions about patrons and take interactions with them at surface value. We do not always think about people's different learning styles and abilities—for example, how you can't necessarily simply hand someone a flier and expect him or her to read and understand it, whether it's due to a literacy issue or difficulty with the English language. Yet despite our training in librarianship, as opposed to pedagogy or instructional design, we still play an educational role in our patrons' lives. A literature review of information literacy in public libraries (Harding, 2008) found that less is written about this context, in contrast to scholarship about academic and school libraries. However, the concept of “lifelong learning” has long been associated with public libraries, and that mandate coupled with the availability of computer stations and other technology makes us an important source of information literacy instruction. Jane Harding notes that the abundant one-on-one interactions in this type of venue (at the reference desk, at the public computer banks) “are often cited as the most effective means of information literacy” (p. 4).

With all this in mind, BPL began working in October 2011 with Seeta Peña Gangadharan, a research fellow at the New America Foundation's Open Technology Institute, as part of her study of digital inclusion. Angela Siefer (2012) has recognized that the limitations of equating “digital literacy” with “digital inclusion” include the fact that “we are not discussing the importance of home broadband access, *the reasons folks may not have a computer at home* and how to solve home broadband access” (emphasis added). The terminology of “inclusion” and not “literacy” deliberately situates the communities of inquiry within the greater society in which they live, rather than implying that the connection is merely between a person and the digital materials they're trying to interpret. It also reflects that feeling we sense from our patrons of wanting to be “included” in the conversations and culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century city.

The primary question Gangadharan's research examined was: *How are perceived harms, actual harms, and privacy problems and solutions unfolding in the context of digital inclusion initiatives?* During the course of her fieldwork at BPL, Gangadharan attended staff meetings of a variety of titles, facilitating discussions about patrons' and staff's own attitudes towards online activity and surveillance. We talked about the inappropriate willingness of some people to involve staff in their personal business, the disproportionate paranoia that other people exhibit, Web cookies, data profiling, spam-filled e-mail accounts, and the ongoing struggle to get patrons to log out of accounts.

Another aspect of Gangadharan's project involved the creation of a digital privacy curriculum working group, which has been made up of eight or nine employees representing librarian, branch technology specialist, and Literacy Department titles. This working group, which includes the authors, met with Gangadharan a total of ten times, with the goal of developing training materials for the public on digital privacy and safety topics. We spent a lot of time talking about not only the content but also the format and delivery mechanism for this instruction. We aimed to draw on people's prior knowledge and "go lighter on content and heavier on context—to help learners see how the subject, technique, or resource fits into the knowledge structure they already have so that it becomes more meaningful" (Booth, 2011, p. 57). Through exercises and discussion, we articulated some elements of successful instruction in our library context, particularly when helping new Internet users:

- Teaching should start early and be ongoing
- A repeated engagement with technology is key
- Hands-on learning/learning by doing is best
- Use personal anecdotes and real-life stories
- Incorporate analogies from the physical world that help explain the digital world
- Visual tools are helpful, especially for some learning styles and abilities

Using this framework, our working group created a series of handouts that combine text with a comic strip featuring a single cast of characters acting out topics pertaining to online privacy and safety. These materials are intended both to be given to patrons to read without further staff mediation, and to be distributed as part of a class or one-on-one instruction. Through short scenarios, "Newbie Nat," "Malicious Mel," and "Sensible Sam" make common computer mistakes and teach each other how to stay safe online. Our plan is to adapt these narratives to short

animated videos to post on BPL's YouTube channel, available for independent viewing as well as during library class time.

Essentially, this digital inclusion study has pushed us to think more about the *how* as well as the *what* of our instruction. BPL has offered increasing amounts of public technology training over the years, beginning with a class called "Internet for Families" in 1999. Like many library workers, we have been very procedure-minded in our teaching. However, it's crucial that we move beyond that. A lot of our public training has been focused on the procedural, but digital privacy involves more critical thinking than, for example, a directive to look for 'https' in the browser's address bar. Simple access to technology is no longer enough, if it ever was. Among our goals, too, is for patrons to "leave the nest" and feel comfortable—and competent—navigating online environments on their own. As ALA (2013) concludes in its recent report on public libraries and BTOP:

While emphasis has been on the immediate problem of bringing non-adopters online, increasingly vital social networking platforms and new content creation and production technologies present additional challenges for providers of digital literacy training and support. With more advanced technology will come the need for more advanced teaching and training to move people from literacy to fluency. (p. 32)

## Conclusion

This digital inclusion project can open a number of doors for BPL. The digital privacy curriculum working group intends to use our print and video resources as conduits for partnering with other organizations and community centers in the city that serve Internet users. Training people on digital privacy can help us focus on *why* people are not already capable on these digital platforms. This plan is a challenge for a public library, which is already contending with understaffing, funding cuts, evolving collections and formats, and threats to our "relevance." But it raises the bar for public library instruction. Will we be able to take a good look at that "why" of digital literacy gaps? Will such analysis then lead library staff to advocate for better information literacy instruction in the school system? Will it lead us to work more closely with antipoverty organizations, with organizations that serve immigrants and the mentally ill and other marginalized populations, with workforce development agencies that actually try to raise people up? A class or handout at the library may be informative, but it's only one small part of the city people live in and the challenges and opportunities they face. Information poverty is a social and political, not a technological problem. As Virginia Eubanks (2011) argues:

Building technical capacity and providing vocational or skill-based training is important. But it must be integrated into a total educational process. If this integration is successful, it produces not only skills but also feelings of hope

and competence and an ability to identify problems, articulate solutions, and collaborate with others on goals. The process of mutual education, of sharing knowledge and resources with others, makes it possible to envision a community technology lab as a place for social movement, a site for the development of critical technological citizenship. (p. 114)

In the sense that the “public sphere” includes social media, the blogosphere, podcasts, community organizing via e-mail, comments to online news stories, and other digital realms, public library instruction empowers people on multiple levels. We are giving them knowledge, confidence, and skills that lay the groundwork for them to have a voice in the city.

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