Volunteers in an Adult Literacy Library Program: Digital Literacy Acquisition Case Study

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Program Overview

These findings are from an Institute of Museum and Library Services funded research project that interviewed more than 100 participants within a multi-state Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) Sustainable Broadband Adoption (SBA) project. The BTOP project included six lead partners who developed local networks of community organizations to provide adults with an opportunity to learn to use computers and the Internet.

While these networks created a variety of implementation strategies and ways to serve learners’ needs, they shared these key features:

- curriculum on the Learner Web, an online platform designed specifically for adult learners, which included digital literacy material in English and Spanish
- in-person tutor support
- the opportunity for learners to work at their own pace and identify their own goals

Acknowledgements & Further Information

These research efforts were informed and supported by a National Advisory Committee and a Research Applications Committee made up of professionals who support adult learners. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms for participant protection in accordance with research protocols.

More information about the project, research findings, publications, and project data can be found in PDX Scholar at: http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/digital_literacy_acquisition/

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Introduction

Libraries are vital and important public centers for informal, self-directed learning. They provide communities access to information and offer diverse opportunities to read, learn, connect, and interact. In today’s world, digital literacy skills and Internet access are required to pursue various personal, civic, and educational aims. Due to the importance of computers in all facets of daily life, libraries have been dedicated to becoming the primary access point for individuals to gain safe and free use of computers and the Internet. For many people in our communities, the library is the main access point for computers and the Internet outside of the home.

Approximately two-thirds of libraries in the United States and 70% of those in rural areas reported that they were the only provider of free Internet access in their community (Clark, 2014). In one metropolitan area, for example, nearly two million people accessed public PC and wifi sessions at the library in fiscal year 2013.

In addition to providing access, libraries offer different kinds of learning opportunities for people who are just getting started learning how to use computers. Many offer individualized support and cater to learners who may not feel comfortable learning elsewhere. Additionally, libraries offer classes and other kinds of digital literacy training. This helps meet public library systems’ goals of enriching lives. Access and training also uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and the public’s right to know, as such a large quantity of information is now accessible online.

Developing the skills to access information online and inquire about topics of personal interest is an empowering learning experience. Librarians regularly assist low-skilled adults with computer and Internet-related tasks, both in one-on-one interactions and in the computer skills classes offered in large and small public libraries across the country. The computer and Internet assistance available from librarians is likely “a key reason behind the demand for public computing in libraries, even if computer and Internet access is available at home” (Jaeger, Bertot, Thompson, Katz, & DeCoster, p. 13, 2012).

However, developing digital literacy programs to support local communities takes time, staff, and expertise, and is a potentially challenging endeavor for libraries already stretched thin in terms of resources (ALA, 2011). As such, libraries rely heavily on volunteers to provide needed services to the public.

This case study describes how an adult literacy library program offered learning opportunities for underserved individuals to gain digital literacy skills. We suggest that it is the values of librarianship, which place people first, that make libraries unique institutions for connecting people to the community and to one another. The American Library Association (ALA, 2015) lists a set of principles of librarianship that include, among others, the values of access, diversity, education and lifelong learning, the public good, service, and social responsibility. We suggest these values are especially relevant in respect to the work we describe here.
We offer this case study as a way to think about how libraries, in their role as community anchor institutions, serve to connect people to the community by providing learning opportunities such as digital literacy training. In particular, we explore how one library’s adult literacy program builds on the motivation, engagement, and drive that volunteer tutors bring to digital literacy instruction, to benefit the learners they serve and to address community needs. We first discuss the process of digital literacy acquisition and how this area fits within library priorities. We then describe implementation within the library’s adult literacy program. The description of the program is followed by an explanation of our findings. We specifically address volunteering, from a tutor and learner perspective, as well as community connections.

**Digital Literacy Acquisition and Library Priorities**

We argue that the impact of digital literacy learning is not only profoundly felt by individuals but also benefits the community. As more and more basic social services, community and civic engagement, and workforce development occur online, responsive digital literacy programming is increasingly needed to engage underserved populations in learning activities. Without digital skills and digital access, adults face exclusion and marginalization in activities that define modern work and social life. They are unable to engage in our participatory democracy, and have limited abilities to seek education, engage in health care, find and use online information, find and keep a job, and engage with family, friends and the community. Computer skills forge a path toward participation in different learning opportunities and are vital to civic engagement, personal enrichment, and job related advancement.

Many public libraries not only serve as an access point for computers and the Internet, but also provide a range of digital literacy learning opportunities. One example of essential, foundational, digital literacy training that happens at libraries (or through library outreach programs) involves helping patrons become comfortable enough with computers to take the GED, which in many states is now only possible online.

In addition to teaching basic computer skills, many libraries offer online resources to help patrons become comfortable with the actual testing platform. Library staff are often called upon to help with skills such as attaching a document to an email, filling out an online job application, or finding online resources.

Library learning is often iterative. Patrons who are new to computers often come back over and over again and continue learning incrementally as their comfort and knowledge grows. The learning model of person-to-person support offers a chance for beginners to build skills as they try and try again – until they are comfortable moving on to new skills.

Libraries are familiar with structuring learning around learners’ needs in contrast to other learning settings that may function more like a traditional classroom, following a set curriculum and moving faster than some learners find comfortable. Other learning settings may be more restrictive because of limited resources, capping the number of participants. And still others may offer workshops at peak hours that may not always fit within many learners’ limited free time.
The Literacy for Every Adult Program (LEAP), is a free program sponsored by the Richmond Public Library in which tutors and learners work one-on-one or in small groups to help adults develop the skills and confidence they need to achieve their individual goals. LEAP operates a computer lab on the main floor of the city works building. They provide educational support for learning English and preparing for the GED, as well as other learning opportunities. To support the development of digital literacy skills, LEAP makes computers, structured online learning materials, and tutors available to learners on a drop-in basis (as well as by appointment). In addition, LEAP coordinates and staffs programs in and around the city of Richmond, CA within senior centers, community centers, workforce centers, low-income housing facilities, and other locations. These programs serve adult learners who want to learn digital literacy. They are staffed by volunteers who are trained by the digital literacy program coordinator.

During the time the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) operated (from 2010-2013), one-on-one digital literacy tutoring was also available to identified learners. When we studied the program, LEAP had served 1,933 learners, 47% of whom indicated that Spanish was their preferred language. There were 44 tutors who had logged over 7,919 hours; 4,663 of those hours were volunteered. The program coordinator, who described herself as a “matchmaker,” organized tutors to work with learners according to their strengths (one-on-one or working with larger groups).

Key Features of the Library’s Digital Literacy Acquisition Program

- The library built partnerships with other organizations, and in collaboration with those organizations, successfully implemented digital literacy training
- Programming capitalized on the structured online platform as a ready-made curriculum, but tutors also customized the available resources for learners in their community
- Use of a self-paced learning model provided learners flexibility and allowed for an “open lab” approach rather than a classroom/cohort approach
- Tutors did not need to be computer and Internet experts; learners cited patience and encouragement the most important traits most cited by learners as most important and appreciated tutor traits

The Digital Literacy Acquisition Process as a People-centered Process

An analysis of the inerview data we collected indicates that the program designed and implemented by LEAP was first and foremost a people-centered process. The structure of the program made it possible for tutors and learners to meet consistently over an extended period of time. As a result, learning interactions gave rise to mutual respect. For example, tutors had regular hours during which they were available to the learners, which provided consistency in tutor support across learning experiences. Additionally, one-to-one tutoring sessions encouraged learner-centered approaches that addressed individual learners’ needs. The individual attention volunteers provided encouraged learning and also created an environment where strong personal relationships could grow and flourish. The relationships deepened many learners’ committment to the learning process and helped them navigate through challenges they faced.
These relationships helped sustain learners’ motivation to continue learning, but they also fed tutors’ commitment to volunteerism. Tutors knew and could see they were making a tangible personal connection with those they served.

Jason, a tutor who spent time volunteering one-on-one with learners and offered support in two different labs, described his commitment by saying:

“I enjoy helping people. I don’t really have any incentive other than seeing that they get something out of it.”

Candice, a one-on-one tutor, described her motivation in the following way:

“I liked the idea of having something to do. I’m not working right now [and I can relate to many of the learners who are in the same situation]. Tutoring is giving to the community, but it’s also making friends with the person I tutor. You know, I feel closer to people in the community [by volunteering].”

In addition to tutors being learner-focused, the program coordinator was similarly attuned to the needs of learners. In fact, it was the very diversity of needs that attracted her to the position. She said,

“I liked knowing that I was working with an adult population that was going to be very diverse and whose needs were going to be wide ranging. I knew that we were going to be dealing with a lot of different age groups. In some cases we were going to be dealing with seniors who are just trying to cope with daily life, in some cases we were going to be working with youth who are trying to find work. Just all kinds of different individuals.”

With a keen awareness of the wide ranging needs of learners in mind, the program coordinator made sure matches between tutors and learners were mutually beneficial. She explained,

“You always have to be watching out for not even just personality conflict but lack of connection. That’s part of it, checking in to make sure that things are going well, because if a tutor and a student don’t connect well, neither one is gonna stay with the program.”

These types of comments demonstrate that an important factor in running the digital literacy program was meeting the needs of people rather than being focused on meeting administrative or political mandates.
Sandy, a learner who became a tutor, described her engagement in tutoring as a way of:

“[G]iving to the community. But it’s also making friends with the person that I do tutoring with. You know, I feel closer to people in the community.”

Anna, another tutor who was attending college to major in public administration, described her lasting commitment to public service within the community:

“I’ll be here until I can’t. I have less than a year to transfer to a university, I told Jamie I’ll be here, if I have to be here until the last day. I want to say goodbye to everyone. But if I’m local, once I graduate and I get my diploma, if I could get a job [here], I will.”

Candice, who was a one-to-one tutor, said that she felt connected to her learners and that shared connection helped them work through their learning challenges together. It was their shared willingness to persevere that gave Candice a feeling of success and desire to continue as a volunteer tutor. Specifically, she said:

“I think both Maria and I have been through tough times. We come to this; we’re willing to work through whatever it is. And then we do it. We work through it and we feel good about it. So I feel pretty good about it, too.”

The tutors and the program coordinator noted that the availability of the online learning platform, together with the well-designed curriculum, made the learning activities flow easily. This allowed them to focus on the affective needs of the learner rather than coming up with new content. As data across all sites consistently indicate, it is the relationship between the learner and the tutor that is key to a successful learning experience, and it is this relationship between individuals and the community that keeps the volunteers engaged.

We suggest that libraries are the ideal space to organize programs that are people centered. Libraries not only provide needed services to the community, but also work to build people’s connections to the community. And when people are connected to the community, they are then inspired, in turn, to serve the community in a sustained way.
Many tutors, learners who became tutors, and learners indicated that they became volunteers because they had been helped at one point. Their service was driven by reciprocity, a desire to give back, and also the chance to make a significant difference to others who needed support. They described feeling a connection to the community and noted that their service commitment was an outgrowth of a sense of belonging to a system that facilitated both giving and getting services. Sandy told us she became a tutor because she had gone through the program as a learner first. She now works primarily with seniors and describes tutoring as a “real blessing.”

Gabriela, a Spanish speaking learner who became a tutor, shared Sandy’s perspective. She said she became a tutor because,

“You wanna give it back and it feels very gratifying. You feel happy when you do something for free for others… It’s very gratifying because I’ve been helped many times in many ways… I’ve been in difficulties and with that I feel like I can help somebody else.”

Gabriela also indicated that the connections she had to people within the community motivated her to tutor. They ignited in her a strong desire to do something more with her time. She said:

“I raised my family and was a housewife. My husband did everything, so I never felt the need to do anything, but now he’s not around and now is when I say, ‘Now what?’ So now is the time that I really have the time, and now it’s my turn.”

Additionally, as a Spanish speaking older woman who had spent much of her adult life as a wife and mother, she understood how isolated women in the community could be. When describing her reasons for tutoring, Gabriela said,

“A lot of Spanish speaking ladies [are] at home, [so] that they can be more independent by doing this.”

This connection to different groups within the community was also a motivator for Sandy. She saw tutoring as a way to befriend senior citizens who might otherwise be lacking social connection. She said,

“[I just want] to be giving of myself, to be able to share what I’ve learned and share what they want to learn, and be a friend… To be able to come and sit down and give of yourself to these people, because a lot of them don’t have families… And we’d call and we’d follow up, [and say] ‘Don’t give up. You have to keep trying. We’re here for you’… and so they would come back again.”
Finally, a number of learners who had gone through the program were active volunteers elsewhere within the community. For example, one learner shared that she was an active volunteer with the Rosie the Riveter Center and became involved to in order to stay active, connected, and engaged in the community.

**Learner Volunteers**

Anthony, another learner, shared how volunteering in the community allows him to serve others. He explained, “I'm doing volunteer work about 4 hours a day for senior citizens at the Neighborhood House. They give away tons of food to seniors that's home and can't get out. They pick them up, they take them to doctor's appointments, and we pass out maybe 10,000 pounds of food--staples, fresh stuff, vegetables and fruits. It's excellent, and we have all nationalities coming there. It's in the black neighborhood but you have all nationalities that need this--they wouldn't eat if it wasn't for the senior center. It's a nice program, I'm there 4 hours a day, I keep it alive for them, I vacuum and clean up the whole place.”

Overall, we found that within this library's adult literacy program, both tutors and learners saw their experience as a way to give back to the community either within the context of LEAP or elsewhere. LEAP had impact in the community that expanded beyond helping individuals acquire digital literacy skills.

**Providing Opportunities for Growth and Expanded Perspectives**

Because the library outreach program provided services to all individuals and did not restrict participation based on age or employment status, a wide diversity of ethnicities and races were represented within the population of both learners and tutors.

This diverse population offered opportunities for individual growth and expanded perspectives among the participants. For example, Anna, a tutor, said,

“As a Latino woman I've only been around Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, and Mexicans for my whole life. Working with this program has helped me work with a lot of people…. And I've worked with a lot of different backgrounds, not just Hispanic, and I like it because different people come in with different perspectives, different beliefs, and it just molds you to be a better tutor and to have different tactics in how to teach [people from] different backgrounds.”
Whereas Anna was focused on higher education and using her tutoring experience to build a career of public service, Gabriela, whose husband had recently died, used her learning experience to build the skills and confidence to become an independent business woman. She was studying and hoped to earn her GED and also was working to start an Internet business selling vitamins. As someone who had been dependent on her husband for her whole adult life, she used learning digital literacy and becoming a tutor as a gateway to a new independent life where she was ready to embrace any opportunities that presented themselves. She shared:

“It’s challenging as a tutor and as a learner. It helped build my confidence. And I’m happy for that, too. Cause when you don’t have confidence, it’s like you don’t know how to do nothing well. Now even if I don’t know, I know I’m gonna find a way to learn it, to get there. So my life has changed… At my age, I don’t want to put limitations.”

Additionally, we found that some volunteer tutors eventually moved into paid positions within the digital literacy program where they could extend their service to the community and to learners. These tutors excelled in their tutoring role and were recognized for their service with a temporary paid position. This sort of opportunity provided an exploration into teaching as a career and paved a path for potential future employment with the library.

**Conclusions & Implications**

An examination of the digital literacy program facilitated by LEAP leads us to argue that it is the unique mission of libraries, and their people-centered approach that deepened connection to their community, to develop ways to serve their community, and to grow and expand their perspectives toward civic participation. We suggest that as community anchor institutions free of the more restrictive mandates of workforce development or similar programs, libraries are especially able to connect with a diverse array of individuals who might not otherwise have opportunities to learn digital literacy or to volunteer. This research has further convinced us of the necessity for continued funding of programs such as BTOP within library settings. The impact of such programs goes far beyond the development of individuals’ digital literacy skills and both expands and improves the overall health and well-being of the community.

“We have open hours for the community, and the library staff or One Stop Center can refer any community member over to our program at LEAP to learn about computers. We have multiple ways to accommodate the need through the efforts of volunteers and staff.” ~ Program Director

**Digital Literacy Acquisition Case Studies**

- Corrections and Reentry
- Volunteers in an Adult Literacy Library Program
- Job Seeking Learners

**Digital Literacy Acquisition Policy Brief**

- Community Connections
References


