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Technology in Practice. Providing the Tools

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Providing the Tools

Bringing digital creation technologies to libraries

by Meredith Farkas

In the 1990s, libraries were pioneers in providing access to the internet in their communities. Even today, libraries are the only place some community members can get online. Over the past few years, libraries began positioning themselves as the go-to place for digital creation technologies, providing hardware and software that most people wouldn't have at home. By providing these creative tools to their patrons, libraries fill a valuable niche in the community, a niche consistent with their historical commitment to bridging gaps in technology access.



We can fill a valuable niche that is consistent with our historic commitment to bridging gaps in technology access.

In many places, DIY and its tech-focused outgrowth, maker culture, are strongly embedded in the fabric of the community. Some libraries have sought to support these movements by circulating tools to patrons, and a few are now enabling fabrication work to happen in the library itself. Recently, Fayetteville (N.Y.) Free Library began developing a FabLab where patrons will have access to a 3-D printer that creates computer-designed plastic pieces, along with a router and laser cutter; the equipment will allow patrons to bring their product-design ideas to reality.

Libraries can also inspire patrons with hardware and software that are not quite so bleeding edge. Many

people with an interest in digital media simply can't afford the high-end tools to create a quality product. Professional video and audio recording hardware, mixing boards, and video editing software like Final Cut Pro would enable them to make movies, podcasts, music, book trailers, and so much more. Tools like Adobe In-Design and Photoshop allow patrons

to create professional-looking print publications that are a far cry from the hand-made and photocopied zines of the 1990s. Skokie (Ill.) Public Library has built a digital media lab where anyone can come in and experiment.

A growing number of libraries design such spaces and services specifically for teens. The YOUmedia lab at Chicago Public Library, often cited as a model for the creation of digital library labs, provides teens with digital video and audio production equipment and classes to learn how to use them. Some libraries even lend equipment like video cameras so patrons can record elsewhere and come back to the library to edit and create a final product. Providing such services makes it clear to young people that libraries are about so much more than books.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services is providing funds to support libraries in developing spaces for digital creation and learn-

ing for teens. Where I live, the Multnomah County (Oreg.) Library and Oregon Museum of Science and Industry received a grant to develop a Community Maker Center. Other libraries and museums will be building spaces and providing technologies that enable creative digital media production and expertise-building for young people.

Slides in the attic?

Many people have media at home in formats they can't even play anymore. At the Lexington (Ky.) Public Library, patrons can convert old VHS tapes to DVD and audiocassettes to CD. LPL also offers access to a slide scanner so people can digitize their old slides. Most people won't buy hardware they'll soon have no use for, so providing access to such tools can give old family photos and movies new life.

It's an exciting time to envision what a library should provide and think strategically about what services your patrons will find particularly valuable. Offering access to digital-media technologies that enable patrons to develop creative products provides a valuable service to a large and diverse constituency who, in most cases, could not access it anywhere else. ■

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