"That's 'E' for 'Everyone'": The Future of E-Learning in Public Libraries

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E-learning refers to a range of solutions to promote learning using information technology. In practical terms, it has been relegated to courses online, most often in an academic or professional setting and usually with the help of a Learning Management System (LMS) such as WebCT or the newcomer Moodle. Some Universities have broadened the scope of their e-learning services to include the wider online community. For instance, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) created the MIT *OpenCourseWare* , where course materials can be found online and for free to anyone who visits the site.

In theory, the idea of Free Public Library fits nicely into the e-learning paradigm, particularly "open" learning formats with free resources and digital libraries to support them. The New York Public Library's wide collection of digital resources includes an online course called *Prospecting for Business Information* (http://www.nypl.org/research/sibl/pbi2/home.html), for instance. But "online course" has not really caught on as effective service in the public paradigm.   While it may be difficult for library professionals who have spent a good amount of their lives taking courses to realize this, the broader public is more than happy to be finished with their schooling and be in a place where they can earn their own pay and learn at their own pace. In general terms, online courses do not sound fun to "Josephine (Joe) Public Library".   They sound like obligations or New Year's resolutions to go alongside "lose weight" or "spend less." Worse, they reinforce stereotypes about the public library as an "ought to" place, rather than a "place to be." That means that to "Joe (Josephine) Public Librarian", e-learning sounds like a flop before it even takes shape in an organization.

Yet, we do know that information technology has a lot to offer the average life-long learner. For one, e-learning provides the opportunity for self-paced learning, which is of great advantage to busy parents, people working long hours, or even those who simply desire to learn at a slower pace than that of your average university course.   E-learning is not restricted to higher learning either.   Presentations abound on topics ranging from physical fitness and gardening, to travel and meditation. People with literacy needs can use online technology to learn in privacy, without the stigma that comes with low-literacy ability.   The combination of information technology and learning is a "no-brainer" in some respects and a tremendous opportunity if done effectively.

E-learning holds potential for public libraries, but for it to flourish, a wide range of things need to come along with it. Here are a few:

Partnerships

Unlike library-provided "courses," course programs offered in partnership with universities make sense most of the time in public libraries.   Self-paced courses offered online with the guidance of university professors in topics relevant to the broader community may also make sense. This is because people trust universities to provide quality courses, and universities often appreciate having the use of public library spaces for their students.   Other partnerships are possible as well.   Most public libraries offer wireless Internet access, which can be a great support for online tests, courses, essay writing and so on.   With a vision that often relates to self-directed and/or paced learning, public libraries are more likely to require partners to develop e-learning services for their clients.

Learning Networks

Of serious concern to most librarians is the way the World Wide Web is changing.   Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, wikis and social tagging are changing the way people approach learning in an online medium. One key change in the Web 2.0 paradigm is the gaining of knowledge through communities of practice. For instance, as an E-learning Manager engrossed by the Web 2.0 phenomenon, I have a list of names that I can

call on via Internet Messaging when I have a technology-related question. Culturally we have our own language consisting of truncations (like blog) and three-letter acronyms (like RSS) that others outside our community tend not to use. There are other communities as well: online practical jokers playing tricks for "lulz" (out-loud laughs), online Gamers "pwning" (owning, as in "defeating") each other through direct IP connections, and knitting fanatics "knitting one and purling two" to design weird and interesting monsters with yarn. Google search is not going to bring learners to the positive experience of learning in a wide community. Public libraries, on the other hand, ought to try. Unfortunately, while public librarians and library staff are still expert at using basic reference skills to maximize results from keyword searches, I do not feel they yet have the knowledge infrastructure to introduce the online learner to his or her desired community of practice.   Approaching reference (for instance) using "who" as a starting point will be a necessary skill in the not-too-distant future. While libraries have always made efforts to connect people to community services, new approaches will need to be developed over time to ensure that they meet customer expectations.

Access to Good-Quality and Up-to-Date Hardware and Software

The current public library experience with public use computers is that there is never enough to meet the demand. At the Halifax Public Libraries, we have experimented with laptop labs to increase our ability to include technology in literacy sessions, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, youth engagement strategies, and basic computer training. Video cameras, external hard drives and other multimedia tools are additional clear "desirables" in e-learning strategies as we near the days when video-blogging and podcasting are regular services offered in public libraries. "Put it online" is never enough for e-learning; you still need hardware to support those online services from the service development and customer access point of views.

A Culture Comfortable With Innovation and Change

Web 2.0 technologies are popular first and foremost because they are user-friendly.   They do, however, require a different manner of thinking than technologies like email with which most people are familiar.   And sometimes, Web 1.0 works just fine for what public libraries want to do.

In the e-learning world, change is a constant and learning in this realm cannot be relegated to the "techies" anymore.   Public libraries need to be learning organizations, and a learning organization is one where all staff learn together, share information, and collaborate effectively across departmental lines. This can happen in part through training sessions, but such learning can also occur by simply ensuring that the necessary technology is available to staff to experiment with, discuss and employ for their professional development.

Empathetic Staff

Technology still scares people who are not familiar with it.   E-learning will undoubtedly have the same effect.   If public libraries do not have technology managers who understand what it is like for an octogenarian to enter a 15-digit barcode into an online interface with a laptop computer, they will never completely be able to embrace e-learning.   Front-line staff also require a special knack for making people feel at ease when an Internet browser starts asking confusing questions about Internet security, cookies, protocols, errors and anything else that our computers ask us to respond "OK" to.   Among the key skills for librarians in an e-learning environment is the ability to make people feel good not only about learning, but also about the format in which they do the learning..

E-learning from the public library perspective clearly differs from the current view.   While public libraries certainly see the value of online learning techniques to their customers and clients, the traditional "course offering" through a LMS or other website type is not the appropriate format, except perhaps in a clear partnership with an organization such as a university to provide the content.   A better approach for public libraries is to focus on such things as community engagement, information and computer literacy and informal learning strategies to bring value to citizens while at the same time helping to foster a society that loves learning, information and reading at its own pace and in its own direction. After all, the public library does belong to "the people" – therefore, e-learning should

do what "the people" want e-learning to do.