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Using Technology to Increase Community Engagement

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The Galecia Group

Conference presentations are a lot about bragging rights. Libraries do something awesome; they go to conference and brag about their awesomeness. Nothing wrong with that! This is how we learn from each other. As Program Co-Chair for the California Library Association's Annual Conference, I review all the proposed sessions and, as a result, get to see not only what California libraries are doing but also the initiatives of which they are most proud. And what libraries seem to be most proud of these days is work they are doing in partnership with other groups in their community.

Community collaborations and partnerships are making some very interesting things happen inside our libraries, in our communities, and on our library websites. The reason I'm talking about this phenomenon in this column is because so many of these collaborations rely on technology in one way or another.

Many of the sessions can be broadly defined as "makerspaces" in the sense that the library is providing the publicly accessible space to create and make things. For makerspaces to work, you have to have people involved who know how to use the tools and support participants. In most cases, libraries are finding community partners or volunteers to act as the technology experts in these environments and to provide the tools required. Examples of these kinds of initiatives include a robotics lab for kids that don't like math, a fix-it lab where people bring in broken things and find out how to repair them (and learn how lots of things work), a Java coding camp for kids using Minecraft, and a design workshop based on Wikiseat.

Mobile devices are showing up as a key resource for many of these community collaborations. One library is partnering with a university to deliver a program using iPads for people living with memory loss and their caregivers. The program uses AmeriCorps volunteers to pro-

vide social and cognitive engagement through coached iPad activity sessions that have been shown to address memory loss. Tablets are also being used in a program designed to support adults with developmental disabilities. The apps help the library create an inclusive environment for everyone. And mobile devices and children is a hot topic. One library is taking the lead on promoting conversations with families about ways to use media and digital devices in a way that is not just convenient but also healthy for the kids.

There are numerous opportunities, dare I say mandates, for engaging the community with digitization projects that result in online local history projects and digital collections. These projects require the library to provide the digitization technology (scanners, software) and expertise. Community members contribute their knowledge of the community, its history and cultural heritage treasures. Community members can often provide stories related to photos, identify people, identify owners and locations of buildings, and generally enrich the collection with their memories. These collaborations are most successful when the community input is broad-based and easy to use (like the Library of Congress photos posted on Flickr).

Another way technology is supporting collaboration involves, for example, moving from an old school "silo-ed database" about California's Wine Industry to a new approach employing state of the art data harvesting technology. Rather than the lonely cataloger manually entering data into the database, the library is building relationships with members of the wine producing community and creating new ways for them to become active contributors to their shared history.

One of my favorite examples of collaboration is related to news for and about the community. In this initiative, the library has employed news

aggregation tools such as RSS feeds, Twitter and auto-generated online newspaper tools in combination with library-led community curation activities to make the library (and library website) a reliable and respected resource for local news. Related to that project, the library is collaborating with community partners to ensure that their community is accurately represented to the world online using Wikipedia and Historypin and other tools.

It is true that some technologies have had the effect of reducing engagement between people but as these projects show, technology is also being put to collaborative use. As more and more digital natives graduate from library school, I expect the slate of conference programs to be increasingly collaborative and increasingly “technology-based.” The only difference is we won’t be calling it “technology” anymore. It will just be the new normal.