

4-23-2019

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Recommended Citation

Frost, Carol (2019) "What Collaboration Means to Me: Training the Public on New Technologies," *Collaborative Librarianship*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol11/iss1/2>

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What Collaboration Means to Me

Training the Public on New Technologies

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Abstract

This article explores collaborative technology training in public libraries. The Pew Research report on public libraries finds that libraries should ‘definitely’ offer training on new technology. Although it can be difficult to transform our spaces and programs into hands-on technology learning environments, this article explores several San Francisco Bay Area libraries which are responding to their communities’ needs and developing unique technology programming.

Keywords: public libraries, collaboration, technology

My job is all about collaborating. I represent 220 libraries in one of the largest cooperatives in California, Pacific Library Partnership. As CEO, my role is to identify initiatives that appeal to my constituent libraries and then to find the right combination of competent and talented people to lead the initiative and then to support the project with grants and resources from our State Library and other agencies.

Successful collaboration begins by listening. I make sure to listen to what each library is doing, make sure I understand their priorities, and then I step back to see if I can identify patterns. My goal is to find the win-win, where an initiative can be pursued that will incorporate several ideas and meld them into a larger initiative that benefits more libraries.

And just as I am listening to my library representatives, I see that they are listening to their patrons and customers. Just as I am looking for

the win-win, so are they. They want to find the right combination of services that appeal to their constituents, and then they need to pull together competent and talented people to make it all work.

One of the areas of focus that keeps popping up throughout our cooperative (and beyond) is the need for more exposure to and training in new technologies. According to the Pew Research Center’s survey on public libraries, 80% of respondents say that libraries should definitely offer programming on how to use digital tools, including smartphones and apps, as well as the more traditional computer use, and that the classes should include youth and senior citizens. More than half think libraries should buy 3D printers and digital tools. The survey results also show that we should move out some of our stacks to make more room for other activities. The Pew Report provides a clear roadmap for libraries to embrace that the public’s perception is



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shifting from 'books' to places of learning, that this may mean expanding our scope (and facilities) to include hands-on learning, and that we can play a role in helping our community members to be connected to each other. And, through this, we may be able to listen to and empower new voices and groups.

These are not traditional roles for librarians and library staff. However, libraries around the country are stepping up to address this need and they are doing it by collaborating with members of their communities – those competent and skilled people who have something to contribute.

We are lucky to be located in Silicon Valley where many of our libraries benefit from engineers that volunteer to teach basic coding and Science Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) skills. Many of the Silicon Valley companies are talking with local schools (from elementary to higher education), noting that the traditional school coursework is not preparing enough students to enter into the technological workforce. Filling this void through collaborative efforts to create Maker Spaces for learning STEM have sprung up in libraries and after school programs throughout the San Francisco Bay Area.

In PLP, many of our members have benefitted from Innovation and Technology Opportunity Grants which can be used to rapid prototype innovative ideas and partnerships. Looking back at the grants we have awarded over the last several years, many of them focus on STEM.

Several of our libraries have used grant money to create Community Creativity Centers to experiment with emerging technologies, developed spaces for teens to learn about coding, and curated content for STEM kits which can be taken home and include parent/child activities focused on science concepts including nature, animals, weather, seasons, gravity, solar system,

bugs, senses, water and texture. The kits come with activity sheets as well as tools like gears, pulleys, level, large tweezers, and magnifying glasses. Engineering and math concepts are included based on the age of the child.

The Berkeley Public Library partnered with the University of California Berkeley Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science to develop an "Easy Personal Computer Workshop," with the goal of teaching electronic literacy. Staff, along with volunteers from UC Berkeley, lead patrons in hands-on workshops, teaching students how to assemble a desktop PC from component parts and install the Linux Ubuntu operating system. At the end of the workshop, students understand the functions of the parts of a PC and gain skills and confidence in how PCs work. After the workshop is complete, the PCs are disassembled and stored for the next workshop session. The workshop is intended to be a continuing program that can last as long as the PC kits are properly maintained and functional.

The San Mateo County Libraries were awarded a grant to work with the Exploratorium, a public learning laboratory located in San Francisco that explores the world through science, art and human perception. Through this grant and other funding resources, a custom trailer was built into what they call the "Lookmobile." Built into this are experiences that help people explore and record their personal understanding of place.

The Lookmobile can be driven to libraries, schools and community events. Outside, there are places for the community to sit next to the Lookmobile and create neighborhood maps and draw pictures using the Perspective Window exhibits. Inside the trailer are various tools of observation: a camera obscura and a wall of pinhole cameras that paint the surrounding landscape with light collected through multiple outward facing lenses. On the Fog Tricycle, a person can pedal and generate large amounts of



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chilled, heavy fog, which simulates the fog that rolls over the mountains from the ocean and into San Mateo County. Users can directly manipulate and even immerse themselves in the billowy clouds, which are an excellent example of the large-scale thermal and atmospheric phenomenon.

San Mateo County's vision of the Lookmobile is to ignite growth through transformative experiences, and provide community members an opportunity to create, explore and experience new things in a unique and unexpected way. Community members can build relationships with each other and deepen their understanding and sense of belonging in their own communities at these interactive exhibits.

One of San Mateo County Library's goals is to be a leader in establishing a foundation for early literacy and supporting exploration and growth at every stage of life. The Lookmobile supports this goal through its universal appeal, accessible design, and opportunities for self-directed, inquiry-based exploration into STEAM topics.

A community's needs are not static, and this means libraries must continually listen to their communities and modify their services and programs accordingly. Luckily, libraries have a long-standing tradition of collaborating with partners to develop programming that responds to their community's needs.

Collaboration is a necessary part of public librarianship today. In addition to the traditional work of maintaining healthy collections and supporting early childhood literacy, we also need to keep exposing our youth to new ideas, teaching people to function effectively in this digital world, and providing hands-on, flexible, learning spaces that enable us to connect and collaborate with our community partners.

We can't do it all alone but we can do what needs to be done as long as we keep listen and keep finding new ways to collaborate.

