Taking Time for Tech

Offering Support for Students through Technology

TARA SMITH

While libraries have long been known as destinations for learning, research, and study, the methods we use to provide homework support must be continually updated, not only to demonstrate our relevance in a technological era, but also to ensure that the students we serve have access to the most up-to-date information and devices.

When I began as the youth services manager at Cherokee County Public Library (CCPL) in Gaffney, South Carolina—a small system serving a largely low-income, rural population of about 55,000—it was evident we needed to reconsider how our young patrons accessed technology to complete homework assignments, type papers, and work on projects. Students often came to the library without a library card to log on to our computers; many with cards in good standing still lacked the technological skills to find information or funds to print documents.

In 2013, we were fortunate to receive a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, administered by the South Carolina State Library, which provided us with $25,000 to create a Learning Resource Center (LRC) at our main location with dedicated technology for student use. This new homework area helps students develop the information and technology literacy skills they need for school readiness, widespread educational success, and a smooth transition into higher education.

For a community in which few students had come into contact with iPads or iMacs, having a chance to increase skills and comfort level with these devices was in itself an educational experience, but we wanted to enhance that experience by helping our patrons view technology as a viable option for learning and homework completion.

Getting Started

Achieving our goals required far more than just making the iPads and iMacs available; we had to consider how they could best be used to support students' information needs. In addition, many logistical considerations required extensive research into best practices for device configuration and security measures, the creation of detailed use policies, and endless hours evaluating apps and software.

Creating a homework support center within your library raises a unique set of issues and questions you must consider including:

■ How will students access the devices? Will they need a library card to log in, or will their parents sign a release form giving them permission?

Formerly youth services manager at the Cherokee County Public Library in Gaffney, South Carolina, **Tara Smith** *is now a teen librarian at Charlotte Mecklenburg Library in Charlotte, North Carolina, and is a member of the ALSC Children and Technology Committee.*

- How can we ensure the security of the technology? What policies should we have in place in case devices are damaged or stolen?

- How do we guarantee that students' information stays private? What is the best way to regulate how students save their work for future sessions? Will we create a single shared login for apps that require an account, or encourage students to create their own?

- Are we able to offer free printing? If so, how will we limit and track the number of pages printed?

- What forms of support can we offer, and to what degree? Will we have the available staff to help students learn how to use the software? To help them with specific homework questions? To give them individualized research instruction?

- Do staff members have the necessary knowledge, skills, and comfort level with these devices? What plans should we develop for maintenance, updates, purchasing additional apps, and training?

Our Plan

One of our biggest priorities was eliminating the barriers to students' access to technology at the library. Rather than requiring library cards to access the LRC devices, we created a release form that would allow students to log on to the LRC at their parents' discretion; this release form also defined patron liabilities and explained policies and regulations.

Determining which apps, software, and materials to use at the LRC necessitated a massive amount of research, experimentation, and evaluation—a process that should be never-ending when you hope to consistently offer the best and newest resources.

I spent a great deal of time reading reviews of educational apps and trying them out on my own iPad to decide which apps covered the same ground (like the seemingly infinite number that claim to teach early reading skills), which provided the best bang for the buck (because, yes, sometimes it's necessary to pay for quality apps), and which would work best in an environment where devices are shared and available for public use.

We also chose to offer students up to ten pages of free printing per day by adding an AirPrint-enabled printer to the LRC's wireless network. This element alone has drawn in many

students who may not have the ability to create professional-looking papers and presentations otherwise. We hear on a near-daily basis how valuable it is to our patrons, and several students who previously struggled with project completion now proudly report to us that they are receiving top marks for their homework.

Another important component of the planning process is staff buy-in. Every library has staff who are more technologically inclined and those who are more hesitant, so it's vital that you share your excitement with every one of your coworkers, encourage them to play around with the devices and apps, make sure that they feel comfortable helping kids learn the basics, and offer documentation to assist with training and troubleshooting.

Promotion and Outreach

When you are working to help students succeed academically, it is key to collaborate with schools and heavily promote your services to teachers and administrators. After all, what's the point of providing homework support if nobody knows what you have to offer?

We created promotional posters, bookmarks, and other information to distribute in the schools, and sent reminders at the beginning of each school year so that teachers could encourage their students to take advantage of the library's resources. Additionally, we contacted media specialists to offer information literacy outreach sessions where I brought the LRC devices to the school to get students hooked on fun new ways to research, create, and learn. We also developed a web form where teachers can share information about upcoming assignments, so staff members are prepared to share the most relevant resources, databases, and software when students come in to complete the assignment.

Looking Forward

Every school and library approaches technology integration differently, but it is clear that students need our help navigating the abundance of gadgets, apps, websites, and other electronic resources that could enhance their educational experience. CCPL's LRC is only one example of how libraries can use technology to support students, but hopefully it will inspire you to examine your community's needs and identify how your resources can foster learning, collaboration, and creativity. ↰