A View from the Front Lines

Remaining Fearless in the Digital Age

MAGGIE SCHUTZ

The author assists a patron during a program on digitizing photos.

As someone who considers herself far from being a frontrunner in the digital world, I surprised myself last year when I applied for AmeriCorps and became a technology educator with the St. Paul (MN) Public Library.

I didn't even own a smartphone at the time, and yet I was going to instruct patrons on how to use their smart devices. The technology knowledge I did possess was primarily made up of self-taught material and advice I had received from my friends.

When I began teaching basic technology skills to adult library patrons, I quickly discovered that my knowledge was greater than I had previously thought. Tasks I found to be basic, such as conducting a Google search or opening my email, were concepts some patrons struggled to understand.

I didn't stop teaching myself about available computer software or smart devices because I had a functioning knowledge of technology; rather, I kept exploring. One of the most important lessons from that year was that I learned to problem solve and not be afraid of exploring different routes, even if they didn't lead to clear answers.

Yes, I am a millennial, and perhaps being a digital native helped me adapt to technology faster than older generations, but I think one huge barrier to technology use is fear: fear it will harm us, fear it will desensitize us to our physical surroundings, or fear we might even break it. When something is new, foreign, or without a concrete solution, it is sometimes easier to dismiss it rather than educate ourselves about it.

Even as I work with technology at my present position at the Brown County Library, I sometimes freeze when I experience a technology issue that is outside my knowledge bank. I also experience insecurity when I am doing programming with youth I know are more tech savvy than I am. When I ask them for help, however, I am amazed at how readily they problem solve. They are so ready to explore the options before them without inhibition. I am amazed by their fearlessness.

Providing a space for patrons to access technology is only one of the many ways the library serves the community. Technology should not be an elite tool in our lives, and allowing equal education and access opportunities in our libraries will help break down technology barriers. For those who are not as fearless in the digital age, the library is at least a great place to start. &
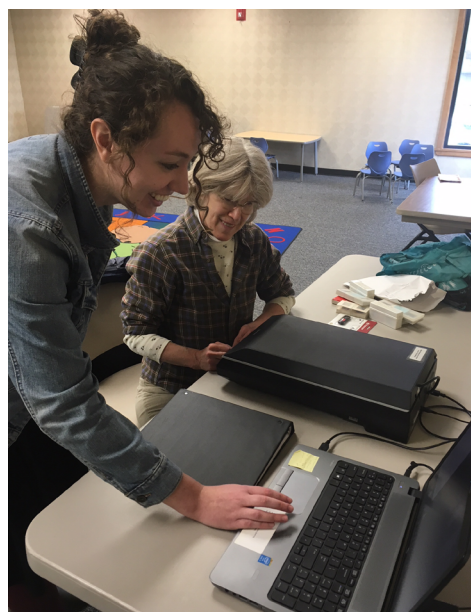
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