

# Digital Literacy Takes Center Stage

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## Abstract

*The 2010 release of the National Broadband Plan brought national attention to digital literacy as a keystone for civic engagement, educational success, and economic growth and innovation. This chapter of The Transforming Public Library Technology Infrastructure examines the need for libraries to position themselves as digital literacy experts, support staff competencies to maintain the level of expertise required in the digital landscape, and explore opportunities to expand digital literacy initiatives.*

From their inception, libraries of all kinds have had the development, promotion, and advancement of literacy at the core of their mission. Dramatic shifts in how information is disseminated and communications are enabled via the Internet demand an expanded vision of literacy to ensure all people in the United States, regardless of age, native language, or income, are able to fully participate in the digital age. Libraries, at the root of providing people with access to information in all formats—print, digital, multimedia—must re-evaluate and expand their roles in light of the accelerating trend of digital information. They should be a significant player in the evolving information ecosystem.

## An Emerging Issue

The March 2010 release of the National Broadband Plan (NBP)<sup>1</sup> brought national attention to digital literacy as an essential element in ensuring all people in the United States can benefit from opportunities afforded by broadband access.

While conceding “there is no standard definition”

of the term, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) continues

... digital literacy generally refers to a variety of skills associated with using ICT (information and communication technologies) to find, evaluate, create and communicate information. It is the sum of the technical skills and cognitive skills people employ to use computers to retrieve information, interpret what they find and judge the quality of that information. It also includes the ability to communicate and collaborate using the Internet—through blogs, self-published documents and presentations and collaborative social networking platforms.<sup>2</sup>

This definition effectively encompasses the information literacy skills historically defined by libraries,<sup>3</sup> as well as much of the more broadly expressed standards for the twenty-first century learner.<sup>4</sup>

According to the NBP, about one-third of the population does not have a broadband Internet connection at home. Digital literacy-related issues were identified as key barriers to adoption, in addition to access and cost.<sup>5</sup> Goal three (of six) in the plan addresses this concern directly: “Every American should have affordable access to robust broadband service, *and the means and skills to subscribe* if they so choose”<sup>6</sup> (emphasis added). The plan supports an American Library Association (ALA) principle that physical access to the Internet does not guarantee an individual will be able to access and use online resources. To promote digital literacy skills, the NBP states, “We need to ensure every American has access to relevant, age-appropriate digital literacy education for free, in whatever language they speak, and we need to create a Digital Literacy Corps.”<sup>7</sup>

There is now broad recognition that digital literacy is a keystone for civic engagement, educational success, and economic growth and innovation. This is evidenced at the FCC, at the Department of Commerce through numerous federal Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) awards, by the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in its recent study *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*,<sup>8</sup> and in individual states such as California's Information and Communication Technology Leadership Council Action Plan Report, *Digital Literacy Pathways in California*,<sup>9</sup> and the New York Library Association's *Information Literacy Standards for the Digital Learners of New York*.<sup>10</sup>

The Knight Commission report makes a bold suggestion, "that we take as national policy the strengthening of the capacity of individuals to engage with [that] information. Access is the beginning; education and training, public engagement and government transparency logically follow."<sup>11</sup>

Our nation's school, public, and higher education libraries are an essential part of the solution. ALA reaffirms its position that developing the literacy capacity—including digital literacy—of the public is essential for the current investment in broadband to have any meaningful or sustainable impact. Additionally, ALA recognizes that today's investment in infrastructure is not necessarily the focus of tomorrow's technological advancement. The technological infrastructure—connectivity, hardware, software—is but one piece of the equation and alone is merely the means to an end. Libraries must be part of an evolving national dialogue about how we marry robust access to technology resources with the twenty-first-century literacy skills necessary to ensure digital opportunity for all.

## Digital Literacy in US Public Libraries

While information literacy has been well defined over the past two decades in our school<sup>12</sup> and academic libraries,<sup>13</sup> public libraries are newer to formal instruction in this arena. For many public libraries, teaching basic computers skills—in classes or as needed—has become a requirement as critical interactions with employers and government agencies demand it from those seeking resources and opportunities and as these individuals come to the library to access such resources. With computer skill classes now a regular part of the library landscape, it is time to raise the bar and expand patrons' digital fluency and evaluation skills.

A seminal work in this arena is the 2009 *Museums, Libraries, and 21st Century Skills* report from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS).<sup>14</sup> Through a self-assessment tool, case studies, and

policy analysis, the report establishes the essential role that libraries and museums play in creating an engaged citizenry and competitive workforce. The report highlights the ways in which these institutions support information, communications, and technology literacy; creativity and problem solving; civic literacy; global awareness; and other twenty-first-century skills.

While there are no national data available that definitively tell us the level of engagement that currently exists in public libraries around digital literacy, the *Public Library Funding and Technology Access Study* provides some insight.<sup>15</sup> This year's data tell us that, of responding libraries

- 79 percent provide informal, point-of-use assistance to patrons
- 38 percent offer formal classes
- 30 percent offer online tutorials and training
- 28 percent offer one-on-one assistance by appointment
- 13 percent do not offer any technology training

(Percentages will not equal 100 percent, as the categories are not mutually exclusive. A library may, for instance, offer classes, online tutorials *and* informal assistance.)

Of those libraries that offer classes (38 percent), basic training is the most common:

- 94 percent offer general Internet use (e.g., setting up e-mail; Web browsing).
- 93 percent offer general computers skills training (e.g., using a mouse and keyboard, Internet search skills).
- 82 percent teach online/Web search skills and basic office software.
- 80 percent teach general software use (e.g., word processing, spreadsheets).
- More than half of libraries also teach how to use the library's OPAC and online databases.

Nearly half (48 percent) of all public libraries now provide formal classes on how to access online job-seeking and career-related information, up from 27 percent in 2009.

Urban libraries (59 percent) are far more likely to offer formal classes than their suburban (47 percent) and rural counterparts (25 percent), likely due to the availability of dedicated space (often computer labs) and more specialized staffing. Urban libraries were also the most likely to report they have seen increased use of patron technology classes over the past year—41 percent, compared with 32 percent for suburban libraries and 19 percent for rural libraries.<sup>16</sup> A 2010 study from the University of Washington confirms widespread need for and use of public library

technology training and assistance. Fifty-two million people got help using computers from a librarian or volunteer, and 16 million participated in public library computer classes in 2009.<sup>17</sup>

With funding and support from BTOP, more public libraries are expanding Internet access and digital literacy training. As part of the Broadbandexpress@yourlibrary BTOP grant to the New York State Department of Education, for example, approximately 860 computers will be deployed in thirty libraries and five mobile training centers in forty-one counties across the state.<sup>18</sup>

“E-mobile” training vans with high-speed broadband services are being deployed in rural locations and underserved communities around the state, offering classes ranging from basic word processing to writing a cover letter to understanding social networking sites such as LinkedIn. Most libraries are also partnering with others in the community to develop and deliver digital literacy training. For example, the Clinton-Essex-Franklin Library System partnered with Adirondack Community Action Programs and One-WorkSource on its new Mobile Broadband Library InternetXpress service.<sup>19</sup>

Digital literacy also is a cornerstone of the BTOP-funded Fast Forward New Mexico (FFNM) initiative, which is helping predominantly rural, Hispanic, and Native American communities across the state better prepare for economic and educational opportunities.<sup>20</sup> More than 1,200 people have received Internet skills training to date.<sup>21</sup> FFNM and its partner, the Global Center for Cultural Entrepreneurship, were honored by the Rural Economic Development Forum in May 2011 for their Small Business Success class curriculum.<sup>22</sup>

Underlying all of this, of course, are human resources. Librarians, library staff, or volunteers must be available to help on the fly or by appointment or lead a class. As the gap grows between early adopters of cutting-edge technologies and those at the other end of the spectrum, library staff skills and competencies must continue to evolve and grow to meet our mission of ensuring everyone can access digital opportunity.

One useful set of competencies, another BTOP-funded project, emerged from the Colorado State Library. These competencies outline the skills and knowledge necessary for library staff to be effective technology trainers. The competencies span technology skills to creating an adult learning environment to instructional delivery and design skills.

*Technology Trainer Competencies, Colorado State Library*

<http://coloradovirtuallibrary.org/btop/content/technology-trainer-competencies>

## A Glimpse at the Not-So-Distant Future

Beyond supporting the development of basic and intermediate digital literacy skills that respond to a specific need, there are efforts to capture the next iteration of digital literacy: the ability not only to navigate and evaluate digital tools, but to use those tools to create resonant, meaningful content. In order for libraries to remain a vibrant player, it will be important to be ready to embrace the quickly changing digital landscape. Innovative practices already are underway that immerse young people in multimedia content creation.

YOUmedia is a stellar example of work that engages young adults with information in a creative and dynamic ways through a partnership with the Chicago Public Library and the Digital Youth Network with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The YOUmedia program highlights the type of learning possible when technologies are incorporated effectively in a multimedia approach to the mastery of skills. Participants do not just consume information; they interact with it and create new content that is readily shared. Young adults in the YOUmedia program have access to a variety of multimedia creation tools and software such as flip cameras to create video remix of books, photography-editing software, and a recording studio. Most importantly, the learning that occurs is outside a traditional classroom, underscoring a growing role for the public library.

*YOUmedia*

<http://youmediachicago.org>

The achievements of Chicago’s YOUmedia have been so successful that in the fall of 2010, the MacArthur Foundation and IMLS announced plans to create thirty new learning labs based on the YOUmedia model.<sup>23</sup> These labs will be housed in museums and libraries across the country. This and other future initiatives give libraries an ideal opportunity to experiment with innovative ideas that help patrons develop the real skills that will need to be commonplace if our nation is to remain competitive in the global information economy.

Another likely area for increased attention is digital fluencies in a mobile world, particularly as more and more people reach for their smartphones to access the Web. This trend disproportionately impacts young adults and people of color. A July 2010 Pew poll found that 51 percent of Hispanics and 46 percent of African Americans use their phones to access the Internet, compared with 33 percent of whites.<sup>24</sup> A March 2011 Pew found that nearly half of all American adults (47 percent) report that they get at least

some local news and information on their cellphone or tablet computer.<sup>25</sup> Two international events in October 2011 demonstrate this expanding concern: The First International Conference on Mobile Services, Resources, and Users, to be held in Barcelona, Spain, and MobilityShifts: An International Future of Learning Summit in New York City.

## Next Steps

Collecting existing materials and examples of effective programs is an important first step in digital literacy work, one that crosses many disciplines and organizations. Many individual libraries are responding in an ad hoc manner: as the need arises, librarians develop curricula, design webinars, coordinate with faculty, and reach out to community organizations for specific expertise. There is not, however, a concerted effort or strategy applied across the library profession. The impact and scope of individual efforts are likely limited to a specific population within a specific community. Effective programs that could be replicated or adapted in other communities are not necessarily shared across library type or across the profession as a whole. For example, online learning modules are commonplace in many academic libraries, but practices such as these may not be widely known in other types of libraries, thus creating a loss of opportunity for libraries in different settings to learn from the effective strategies for developing digital literacy skills used by other practitioners.

At the 2011 Midwinter conference, the ALA Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP) established a Digital Literacy Task Force composed of members from across ALA units that have begun to address some of these issues, promote crossdivisional sharing and communication, and create and share resources that will strengthen all libraries' abilities to support digital literacy at all ages and stages. The task force will begin its work with an environmental scan to develop a comprehensive understanding of what types of activities already are in place related to digital literacy, where there might be gaps, and how to prepare the association for the changing landscape of digital literacy. Beyond ALA, the task force seeks to elevate the profile of libraries on a state and national level so that libraries are firmly associated with digital literacy and included in initiatives that support a digitally literate population.

One resource for addressing the need to share resources among—and beyond—libraries is DigitalLiteracy.gov, a new online portal that brings together online learning tools, curriculum, job skills training, and a host of other resources. ALA and the IMLS are working with the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to increase

awareness and inclusion of library resources in the portal. Libraries' contributions to this portal can help other agencies and organizations see the existing commitment and efforts of libraries.

Another collective effort spearheaded by the IMLS is a new Framework for Digitally Inclusive Communities, which has digital literacy as one of its foundational principles.<sup>26</sup> The framework outlines eleven principles core to fulfilling the vision of digital inclusion and recommends local convenings to develop a shared community understanding of digital inclusion and to create and implement an action plan. Libraries can and should play a lead role in any such community efforts.

## Conclusion

For ALA and its members, the heart of digital literacy work is rooted in the library principles of ensuring equity of access to information. In the age of broadband-enabled resources, it is even more apparent that access denied is opportunity denied. As the quantity of online resources continues to grow at unprecedented rates, there is a growing amount of information that is no longer captured in print or offline format. The individual and societal costs of digital exclusion continue to grow. Libraries of all types need to position themselves as the digital literacy experts they are, support staff competencies to maintain the level of expertise required in the digital landscape, and explore opportunities to expand digital literacy projects and initiatives.

## Notes

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