Technology

The Haves, the Have Nots, and the Not Quite Enoughs

Ann K. G. Brown

Ann K. G. Brown is the Research and User Services Librarian and Workshop Coordinator, George Washington University, Libraries and Academic Innovation; email: agbrown@gwu.edu.

Libraries have increasingly embraced technology and are teaching others how to use it. I coordinate our workshop series, which covers everything from dissertation research all the way to coding. Our Python and R workshops are highly regarded across campus and always have more than twenty-five people in attendance—it once had sixty!

As part of these workshops and the consultations they offer, my fellow librarians and software developers Dan Kerchner and Laura Wrubel have noticed a new trend. This summer Ms. Wrubel posted a link to the article "Technology Problems and Student Achievement Gaps: A Validation and Extension of the Technology Maintenance Construct" to Slack with this commentary: "We've seen this as an issue in coding workshops and coding consultations, as students' laptops are too slow, underpowered, or lack enough memory or storage to do what they need to do."[1]

I found this surprising in many ways because our institution expects students have access to robust personal technology—for example, the latest phones, most current MacBook, and occasionally a tablet. But as we've learned with food insecurity, our campus is not immune. And the technological divide has a new gap. It is no longer only the haves and the have nots. We're now seeing the not quite enoughs.

Libraries have felt the pinch of delayed maintenance ever since the advent of computing. It's no longer enough to provide technology to our users; we must also create robust replacement processes, but our ability to do so is hampered by funding. Further complicating this is that electronics now come with a "use-by date." Designing for technological obsolescence is the norm—how are we planning for that?

As I've been thinking about this, I've realized I have none of the answers but all the questions! Should we be including replacement and upkeep in technology grants? And grantors, including this piece in your grants would be beneficial as well.

What partnerships do we see in our communities and institutions? For public libraries, how are we interfacing with state and local governments? At our institution, we were merged with the department that handles all the technology across campus. It brought us to a new mind-set and time frame for replacement, as well as access to newer technologies.

How are we helping our users in the moment? We now provide students with laptops during the coding workshops that have any and all needed software and the capacity for programming.

How will libraries manage this new technology divide of not quite enough?

Reference

1. Amy L. Gonzales, Jessica McCrory Calarco, and Teresa Lynch, "Technology Problems and Student Achievement Gaps: A Validation and Extension of the Technology Maintenance Construct," *Communication Research* (August 2018), https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218796366; Laura Wrubel, "Technology Problems," Slack #general Channel, GW Libraries and Innovation, September 11, 2018.