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Ngaire I R Smith

University of Georgia, ngairesmith@missouristate.edu

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Teaching computer skills to senior citizens: A library assistant's learning experience

I recently had the opportunity to volunteer at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at the University of Georgia, teaching Introduction to the Internet. I had just finished my MLIS at Valdosta State University and was looking for a new challenge, and teaching senior citizens how to use the Internet seemed like a good way to get outside my comfort zone. Little did I know that it would become a real learning experience for me.

For public librarians, working with senior citizens is likely a matter of course. But as a reference assistant at a research library, I have limited interaction with patrons outside the university community. Although I frequently help senior citizens who are researching family history and want to search Georgia newspapers for obituaries, these patrons often live in another part of Georgia or out of state. Most of these requests arrive via phone or email, and patrons usually receive their materials, such as microfilm reels of newspaper, through interlibrary loan. Consequently, the vast majority of my face-to-face patron contact occurs with faculty and students on campus.

So I definitely was interested in the challenge, which seemed like an excellent way to fine tune my instructional techniques. Adding to the challenge was the fact that almost all my instruction experience had been with undergraduate students and high school students visiting the library, so I had little knowledge of, or experience with, designing lessons for older learners. I knew that I would be given four 90-minute sessions to help my students get comfortable with the Web, but I was unsure how much to cover and how much they already knew.

I asked some colleagues who had experience working with senior citizens for some tips. "Go basic," one declared. She explained, "Take a skill and simplify it about twenty times. Then figure out a way to make it into an activity so that your learners can follow along with you." I panicked, realizing that my lesson plans were far too complicated. I had to revise them and figure out how to step my students through skills that are taken for granted by those of us more familiar with computers and the Internet.

Before I finalized my lesson plans, I searched the literature and learned that adult and senior learners often feel intimidated by technology. For example, Gust (2006) pointed out that "many adults and senior learners return to the...classroom with more anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and less self-confidence in use of computer technology and searching the internet than traditional students" (p. 557). This may be more true now than ever, as the first generations of millennial students, who are familiar not only with desktop computers, but also with smart phones, iPads, and MacBooks, reach college age. For senior citizens, many of whom left their jobs before computers entered the workplace, the digital divide may be widening. This is unfortunate, because, as Morris, Goodman and Brading (2007) explained, online applications can "facilitate the learning and socializing of this age group and can help older adults to preserve their independence" (p. 43).

In order to understand more about my audience and figure out how I could best help them to learn Web skills, I decided that my first activity would be finding out what my students needed from the class. It turned out that most of them shared similar expectations. Though all owned home computers and all but one of them used email, most of them told me that they wanted to learn other skills, such as how to shop online, open and save pictures of grandchildren, and

read online newspapers. However, few of them felt brave enough to experiment on their own. They wanted me to guide them.

Mirroring what I read, members of my OLLI class admitted that they felt intimidated during our first lesson. One student told me, “I retired before they even had computers at my job. This is all new to me!” I planned to spend the rest of our first session going over Web basics – how to write an address in the address bar, how to search, how to click on a link to go to a webpage. In the course description I wrote for the OLLI catalog, I stipulated that enrollees in the class needed to have basic familiarity with computers, so I assumed that my students would be easily able to follow along with the activities I had planned. However, I soon found that what I thought were basic Web skills were far too complex.

It became apparent that many of my students needed help with skills that are second nature to most of us. I had to remind them, for example, that they could not use “enter” to move to the next line on a Web page or form, as they would with the “return” key on a typewriter. Many of them found it difficult to remember to click in a box so that they could enter text, and the difference between the address bar and a search box flummoxed them. For many of the class members, merely being able to see the screen was an obstacle. Showing them how to enlarge the text on the screen using “control ++” and not the mouse helped those students who had arthritic or unsteady hands.

By the end of the first session, I finally understood why a class of mostly 80 year olds was so intimidated. Using a keyboard and a mouse and sitting in front of a computer was not intuitive to them. They lacked the computer skills that make using the Internet profitable but did not realize it. In my second class, therefore, I set about trying to remedy this by going over basic computer skills, such as moving the mouse around the page and clicking on links. We practiced these skills by going to sites such as Epicurious.com, a site dedicated to recipes, cooking, and dining, and signing up for free accounts that would allow the students to log in from home and find recipes. I found that my students did best when I allowed ample time for each activity and encouraged them to ask questions whenever they felt unsure. By the end of the second session, I could see my students’ progress. They managed to sign up for accounts with Epicurious and a couple of them even found and saved recipes that they liked. I was encouraged and I could see that my students were too.

My plan for our third session included an in-depth review of the skills covered in the previous class, including more practice with Web forms. If we had time, I planned to give an overview of online shopping. I wanted to show my students how to sign up for Gmail accounts, but we did not get far with this activity because of another roadblock that we had little success overcoming. The security words that often appear in Web forms to prevent online “bots” from signing up as people also, unfortunately, managed to prevent real people from signing up. For my students, these words, with their blurry text and wobbly letters, were next to impossible to read. Even I couldn’t decipher all of them. These security words are prime examples of what Carracher (2011) called “technologies... [that] are not developed with older people in mind” (para. 4).

My plan to get my students to sign up for Gmail was dead in the water. I had to improvise. Instead of signing up for Gmail, we spent the rest of the class going over features, such as security certificates, that would assure students of security when making purchases online. This also gave my students a chance to practice with Web forms again, since in order to buy online, most sites require the creation of an account. After class, I stayed behind and helped the one student who did not have email sign up for a Gmail account. She was so excited that she immediately sent an email to her daughter in Arizona.

Our fourth and last session gave us the chance to revisit subjects covered in the previous classes. I answered numerous questions and we covered some fun topics that students had indicated an interest in, including accessing online newspapers such as the *Athens Banner Herald* and *New York Times*, and opening photos sent as email attachments. This gave me the chance to use photos of my three year old nephew as examples, which elicited lots of “oohs” and “ahs.” Although we did not accomplish all that I planned for in our first three lessons, I could see that my students felt more comfortable with the Web and less intimidated, so I felt that I made a difference. My class threw a small party to celebrate our progress, so we ended the course on a high note.

Before leaving, I reminded my students that in order to keep their skills fresh, they needed to practice as often as possible. I encouraged them to attend other courses that would allow them to use their new skills, and I was excited to hear that several of my students had signed up for Introduction to Facebook, also offered by the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, which suggested that they felt less intimidated and had gained the confidence to keep learning.

But I believe that I learned the most from this class. I realized that simple tasks that could make life easier and more fun, such as reading the newspaper online, buying a book from Amazon.com, and keeping up with distant family members, were out of reach for many senior citizens unless people like me – a library assistant - could find ways to help them overcome their anxiety and intimidation. I also realized that many senior citizens need help not just with the Web but also with basic computer skills, without which they cannot hope to make use of all that the Web has to offer. Librarians and other information professionals must learn about the age divide that prevents older senior citizens from making use of the Web and develop teaching methods that enable them to flourish in the Information Age.

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