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McMinnville Public Library Takes a Stand Against Internet Illiteracy

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The Class and Lessons Learned

Four years ago, the McMinnville Public Library was offering free Internet classes on two computers taught by a volunteer. Too-large class sizes and too-few computers were the biggest problem. People who knew each other were asked to share computers in order to increase the number of people taught. When the dust settled after our library's renovation, we began offering classes again twice weekly. With an LSTA grant, our technology wall grew from two Internet computers to eight, allowing us to have larger classes.

We advertised our classes in the library and in our local newspaper's events calendar. The response was overwhelming. For that first year, people often had to wait a month to take a class. During that time, we taught a Saturday morning class before we opened. A second class was moved from Friday morning to an evening and then to Thursday afternoon.

The majority of our students are senior citizens. In many cases, they had inherited a hand-me-down computer from their children, who had also installed it, and their goal was to learn how to operate it. We reiterate that these classes are not beginning computer classes. People need to know how to work a mouse and a keyboard. Sometimes they ignore this and we spend two hours teaching them how to work a mouse and two hours teaching an Internet class—the same two hours! I've learned to be flexible in addition to remaining patient.

In the beginning, when I started teaching the Internet class, I felt it was important to explain a lot. I spent the first part of the class showing them all the features of the browser. Based on the class evaluations, people felt it was too much for a two-hour class. So, I scaled back the class. I taught Internet basics:

- What a link is and how it works.

- How to tell if the Internet is "working."

- How to maneuver with the scroll bars.

- How to get to an Internet address (I never just call it a URL).

- What 'favorites' are, and how to add and delete them.

I still showed them how to enlarge the text on a Web page (they love this feature); I also stopped teaching Boolean—the word alone intimidates people. And, I added an Internet game so people could practice and play on the Internet. We still don't cover e-mail.

Our classes are hands-on computer classes, which is why we require people to sign up. Teaching Internet is its own language full of words that are meaningless unless they're put to use on the computer. Many students love the small class sizes (maximum of eight) and personal attention. I can walk behind them and see that everyone understands and is on the same page. Some students commented that they couldn't keep up with the instructor when taught in a classroom full of computers with the instructor's screen projected on the wall. With our set up, I keep up with my class, and no one is left behind.

Class Evaluations and Our Response

We've really worked to be responsive to comments received in our evaluations. Naturally, we can't please everyone. We have tried to respond to two of the most common requests, e-mail training and more classes. Rather than covering e-mail in our classes and risking the classes becoming "too much" again, we now offer 30-minute e-mail tutorials by appointment. My technology assistant and I make these appointments. Most of them are with our class participants and referrals from the reference desk. We've found this approach beneficial because some people don't have an e-mail accounts and others do. So we really offer two tutorials—one that signs people up for an account with a general overview of their "mailbox" and how to compose a message, and one that teaches other features such as attachments and folders.

Our evaluations also indicated that people wanted more classes. I did not want to add an intermediate-level class because I felt people came away from the introductory class with the basics they needed to be successful on the Internet with a bit more practice. So we decided to add subject-based intermediate classes for an hour and a half. I only teach for 45 minutes and then let the class play around with some of the sites on the class Web page. In 2000, we offered intermediate classes on genealogy research, online travel, and cultural treasures. This year we are offering genealogy research and online travel again with the addition of online job search, northwest gardening online and online shopping. I also did a 3-week "Learn HTML" class, teaching people how to create their own Web page. We'll have to offer it again this year since the waiting list alone is enough for a second class. To publicize these new classes, we sent out postcards that advertised them to our past class members and our Friends of the Library membership at the beginning of the year.

Adding Spanish and Family Classes

Last year, my library director gave me the assignment of adding Internet classes in Spanish and a family Internet class. This proved challenging because I would have to train other library staff rather than teach them myself. We restructured the class in Spanish to include e-mail instead of a game because e-mail is a great way to connect them with friends and family back home. Selected Spanish-speaking library staff members were trained on the Internet in English. They figured out what vocabulary terms they would use for their classes. Thank goodness "click" in Spanish is the same as in English. They "shadowed" me in my English classes and I gave them an outline to work with. We still have to translate class handouts, but the classes began in November.

Our first class was overflowing, so we used all eight computers during the next sessions. My technology assistant and I are available to help answer questions the trainers cannot answer. Most of the students are young people, looking to improve their job skills. Often, the people registered for our Spanish Internet classes bring others, or people join in when they see friends in the class. This would be highly unusual for our classes in English. Word is spreading and the need for these classes is growing. Two times a month is quickly becoming inadequate, so I will be training a Spanish-speaking volunteer to give e-mail tutorials in Spanish on a drop-in basis once a week.

We are looking forward to our family Internet classes and involving our Children's staff. In these classes, each family registered will use one or two computers. We'll cover some examples of family Internet rules, along with contracts for both children and parents. These will include the usual "don't give your information out to strangers or agree to meet anyone in person without the parents knowledge," and will advise families to put the computer in a family area and use it together. We'll use family-friendly and kid search engines as well as playing a game together. This class will be offered three times a year unless demand increases.

Struggles and the Future

We still struggle with class times. Except for the Saturday morning time slot, the rest of our class times involve closing general use of part of or our entire technology wall. Even with forewarning, not everyone is pleased with this arrangement. We've had the continual problem of no-shows—people who sign up, are reminded with a telephone call the day before class, but who still don't come. It's hard to have to turn people away and then have a computer sit idle. Demand for our introductory class has decreased, so we can offer more intermediate classes without feeling that we are keeping someone from getting into an introductory one.

We are continually asked for computer comfort or trouble shooting classes. Teaching computer literacy and Internet literacy fit a library's mission. But where do we draw that line? My time is limited and I cannot go to people's homes. We have acquired a computer from the Chemeketa Community College Skills Center that has hardware and software tutorials. Some of them are in Spanish. We refer people to our local skills center, which offers a 4-week computer comfort class for $15.

We are now considering transforming our class evaluation questionnaire into a Web form; if a class can fill it out, then they've learned something in two hours. For our classes in Spanish, we are looking at a slimmer evaluation, either handed out in class or e-mailed to class participants. E-mailing the evaluations will help us compile a database of e-mail addresses useful for promoting our services to our Spanish-speaking population.

Overall, we are serving our community through teaching. People continue to need help. For example, once the students literally picked up their mice, pointed them at the screen and started clicking away. Clearly they'd watched too much Star Trek! Another Saturday morning, my library director arrived to find my class doubled up in my office, in my supervisor's office and at the reference desk. Our server was down and our city's Information Services people don't sleep with their beepers! In the end, I have been dubbed the "Handout Queen" in my library, producing a multitude of instruction sheets on a regular basis! Who said paper was going out of style? **Q**

Intermediate Class Webpages:

Genealogy Research
http://www.ci.mcminnville.or.us/service/
library/genclass.html

Travel Online
http://www.ci.mcminnville.or.us/service/
library/travclass.html

Cultural Treasures
http://www.ci.mcminnville.or.us/service/
library/treasure.html

Learn HTML
http://www.ci.mcminnville.or.us/service/
library/htmlclass.html

Online Shopping
http://www.ci.mcminnville.or.us/service/
library/shopclass.html

Family Internet Class
http://www.ci.mcminnville.or.us/service/
library/familyclass.html

Northwest Gardening Online
http://www.ci.mcminnville.or.us/service/
library/gardenclass.html

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