

# Every Problem Is Now a Technology Problem

Navigating the Digital Divide in the COVID Era

*<librarian.net/talks/mhec>*



Good afternoon, I'm Jessamyn West, I'm a technologist with a library background from Vermont. I'm going to talk a little bit about last year. And this year. Woof, hey? This was definitely a year of learning and opportunities and I say that with the most arched eyebrow possible because I would have preferred maybe to learn a little less given my druthers. I think many of us were forced out of our comfort zones not only by our jobs but with the entire re-structuring of society's interactive bits as the result of the COVID-19 virus and some people's quickly shifting needs vis a vis the library. Let's talk about that.

# Things I learned

## TECH THINGS

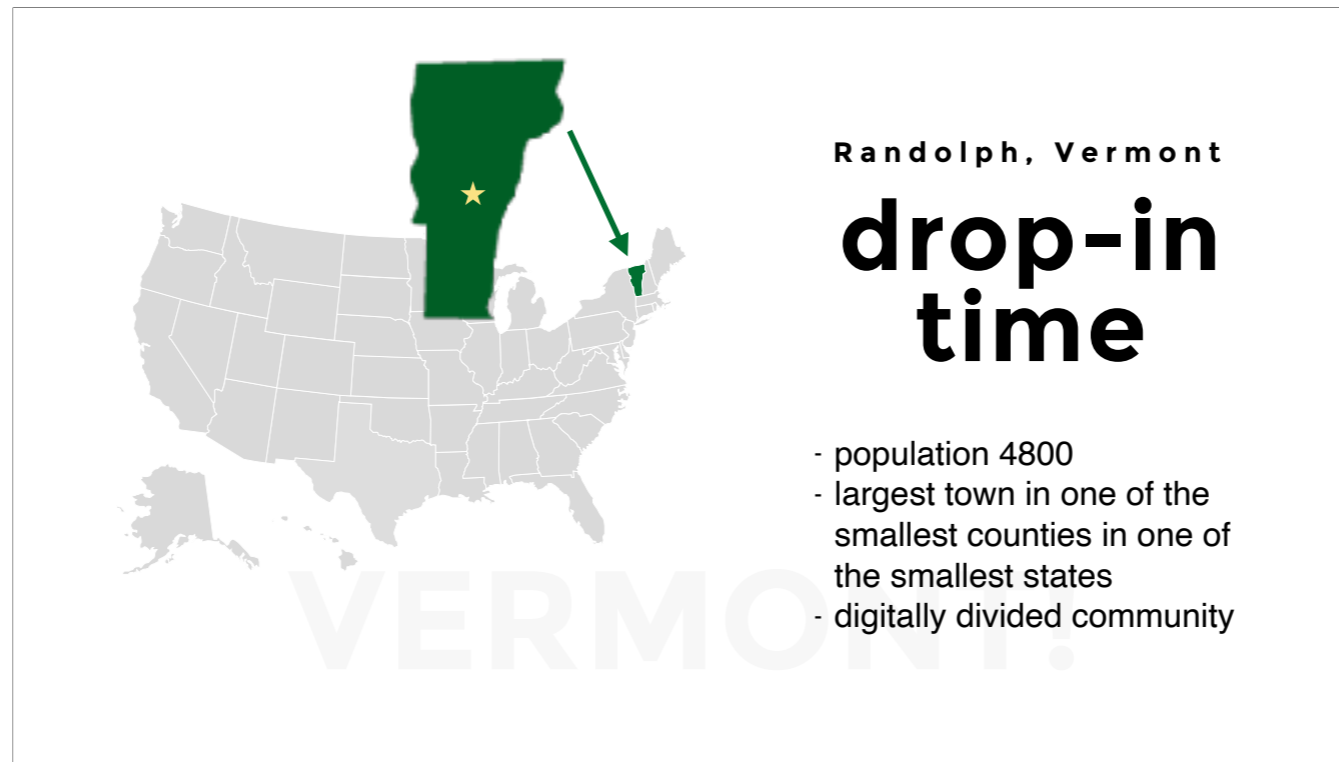
Zoom. Zoom administration. Zoom fancy backgrounds. Zoom transcripts. Zoom captions. Every different vaccination website. Twitch (for trivia). Kahoot (for trivia). Making templates on Wikipedia. Editing Wikidata. Ordering online from Thrive Market. Ordering online from Imperfect Foods. Ordering tacos online. Ordering groceries for curbside pickup. Curbside printing pickup. How to use TikTok. &c.&c.

## NON-TECH THINGS

How to use a mandoline. How to cook a perfect dutch pancake. How to play a LOT of different board games. How to eat low fat so my gallbladder stays happy. Identifying countries in Africa I was iffy on. Being an ALA Chapter Councilor. Working with the State Library for the Blind. Darning sweaters. Matzoh ball soup. How to clean out a barn.



And I should mention at the outset, I like learning things. So being in a situation of enforced learning isn't the worst for me. I also live alone, and mostly work from home, so was able to manage my personal situation decently this past year. Many people did not have my fortune here, or just don't like to learn stuff. Maybe it's difficult for them for various reasons, maybe they've got **a lot of other things going on** and learning can take a back seat for now. So one of my main operating principles with my work has been least-intrusive-but-most-helpful-help. Least intrusive can also be a personal boundary which I'll talk about a little later.



I live in a small town—which is big for our county—in a small state. COVID did not hit us quite as hard as it did many places, and our governor has been mostly a sensible person and shown good leadership, as has our state library and for that I am grateful. However! As for my work, besides talking to people like I am now, my job is usually writing and researching digital divide issues and running a little thing I call drop-in time (I am a clever namer) where people come in to the library in a certain time window and ask me their technology questions. Anything at all, and we try to puzzle it out together. There are often multiple people in at the same time, or were, in the before times, and part of the usefulness of drop-in time was people listening to what other people were doing, or having issues with.

Randolph, Vermont

# drop-in time

- mostly older people
- mostly older technology
- many folks working with multiple challenges



Here's an example of us all gathered around a library table. That's Brian on the outside, he works at the local stove factory and is a serious bird watcher. He's trying to figure out how to get his Bruins tickets on his phone so he can show the people at the gate when he goes to see a game. It needs to WORK. That's Eliot, my intern, next to him. Eliot is 14 and also learning some people skills. Martha in the back is working on her anti-marijuana website on her ancient laptop, and Sally on the right is trying to figure out why her calendar won't update on iCloud.

# Digital intermediation for everything

*food... communication... entertainment... school...*  
*work... shopping... EVEN THE LIBRARY*



March 17th 2020 was the first day I remember stuff really closing down though it may have been sooner than that. Our library in town was open by appointment during part of the summer (when Vermont went 99 days without a COVID death) but closed back down again as weather and COVID stats worsened. Opened again July 1 and is closing again this weekend. And since we weren't really... ready (can you ever be ready?) there was a lot of scrambling to make sure people had their basic needs met. And, as I said before and I say now: every problem immediately became, at some level, a technology problem. And me, as a local technologist—without a bunch of other mitigating issues like kids at home or a job I needed to go to—became many people's local tech resource. Here are some of the things I did. Oddly, or maybe not, a lot of it isn't really about technology.

# 1. Get Connected



So the first step, when retooling to meet our new challenges was to make sure people were connected. This can mean a lot of things. For some people it was the basics of literally getting internet into their homes, for others it was finding the people in their support network or bubble who would be able to help them with basic things in a COVID-safe way. Mutual aid networks sprung up in communities, some supported by the local libraries.

# Not always digitally...

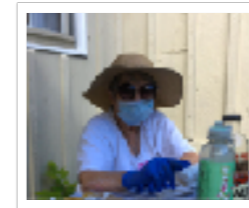


The digital divide is about connectivity, but in a lot of different ways. One way was just people not having internet available. One part of that was people not being able to afford it. Many tech companies pooh pooh this idea that money is the issue, claiming people just don't want access. Research has shown this isn't true and it's one of the problems that the Emergency Broadband Benefit (now possible thanks to a supportive administration) was designed to address.

However looking into the people, families in particular, who didn't have internet at home and who needed it for online school, was that there were also logistical problems. A family lived up a 1/2 mile driveway and someone would need to pay to get internet up it when it was available at the road. This wasn't just money. This was finding a person to dig a trench, and finding the money to pay THAT person. So we leaned on our networks, making phone calls and organizing. This screenshot is the Randolph Area Mutual Aid Network. It's... not the best website. Part of what I helped doing this year was just helping people's websites look better, work better.



## free caption phones



Marian

And last, phone calling. It wasn't just about computers. I'm one of those GenX people who doesn't like the phone but for many (most) people it became a real lifeline. We had a rural library in Georgia (Vermont) who figured out who their frequent flyers were and made phone calls "Hey how are things. Did you know the library has...?" Worked great locally, got mixed feedback from social media people in different communities. And from an accessibility standpoint, I have a friend, Marian, who is very hard of hearing, and she told me about Caption Phones. And then I could tell other people about them.



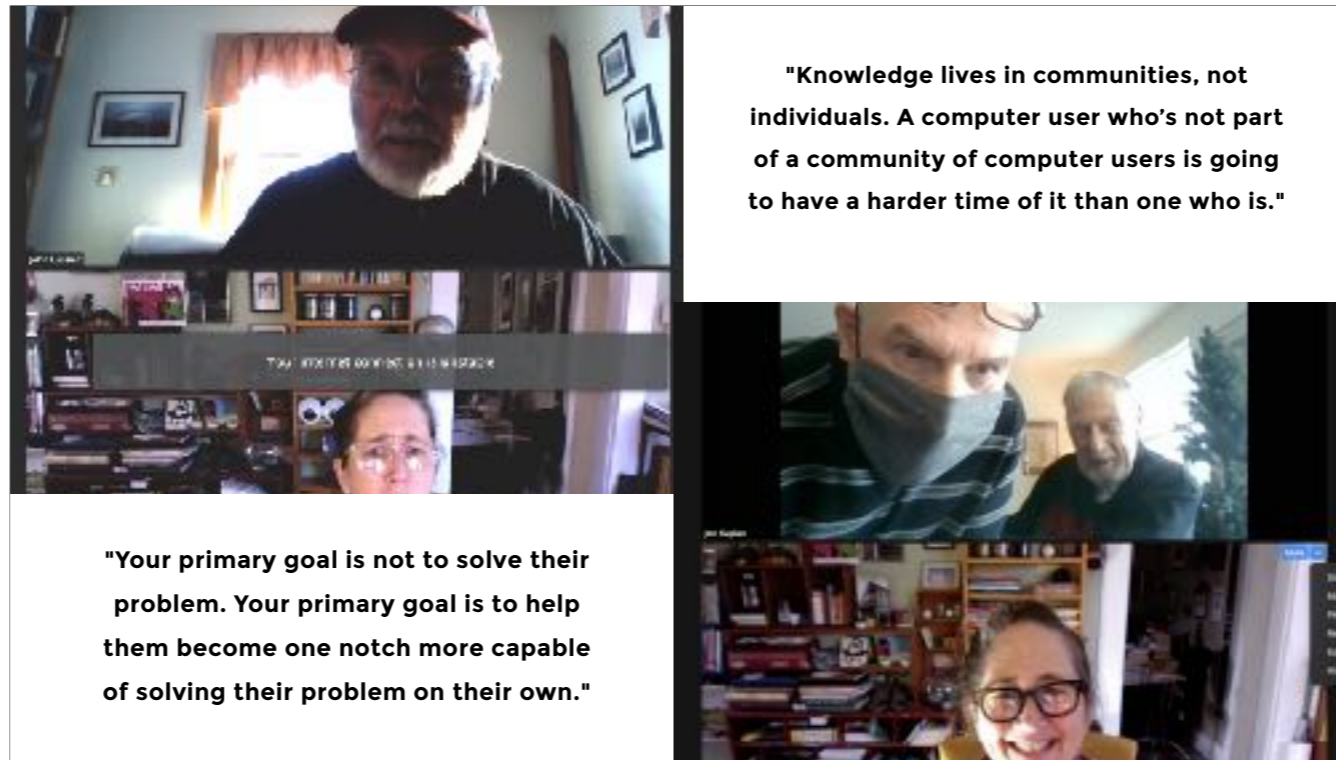
## ABLE Library

And people with access to a phone, even if they weren't great at using online tools, could contact the ABL (Audio, Braille, Large print, Ebooks) Library who could get them books in a lot of different formats. Honestly I wish more people knew about this amazing service. Now that our state librarian has moved to the National Library for the Blind, maybe they will.

**"Is this a technology  
problem or an  
accessibility issue?"**



Above all I'd be asking and re-asking this question. Can someone not use their computer or are they just having trouble with a mouse? Is someone bad at email or do they need the computer's font size enlarged? Are they bad with the iphone or could they use learn to use dictation instead of typing?

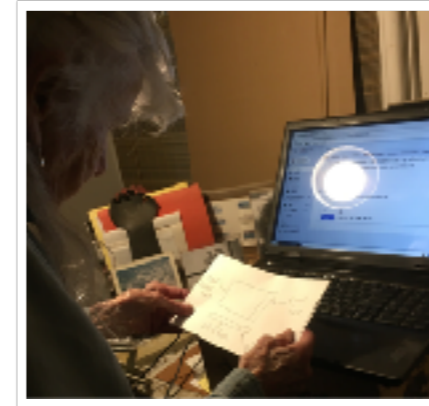
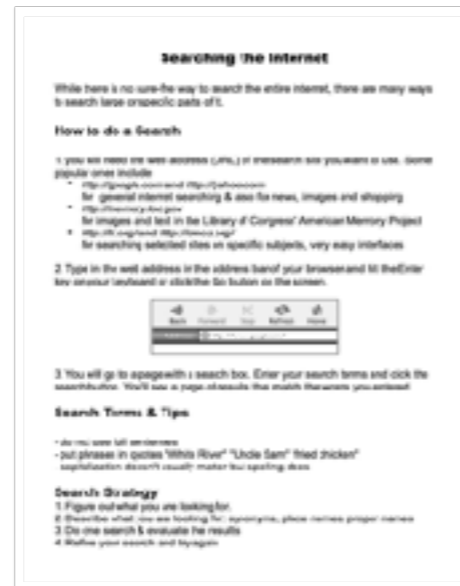


The trend, among all these options was scaffolding. One skill leads you to the next skill. Linking someone to a person with a skill isn't quite as good as teaching them the skill but it helps get you there. One of my foundational documents is a short list by a technologist called Phil Agre called *How to Help Someone Use a Computer*. Here are two short excerpts from it. That's me on the left trying to help John fix a corrupt Outlook file while my iffy internet threatens to hang up on me. And on the left it's me and another Jon with his dad Mel who is 95. Mel needed to get something notarized which the laws said I could do over Zoom now, but he needed help getting on Zoom to do that. His son came over and we got it all sorted.

## 2. Learn Tools

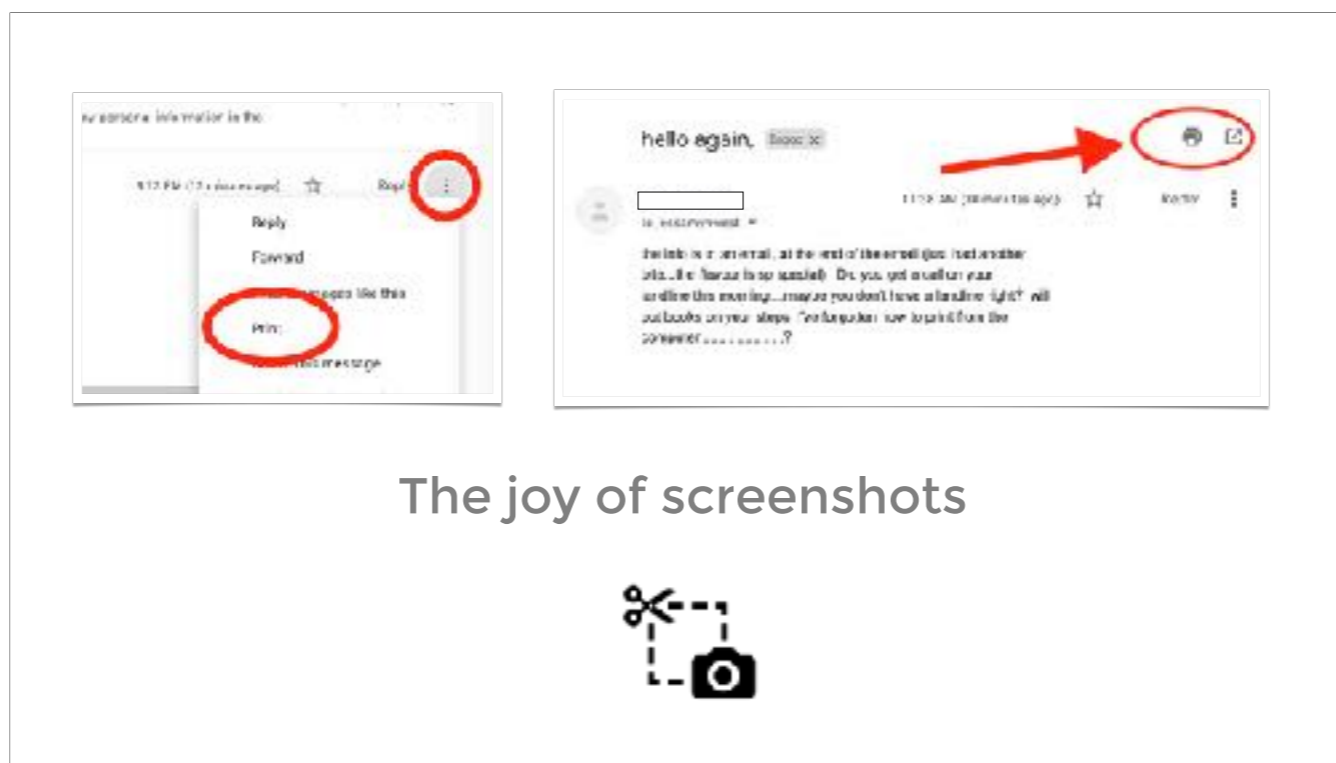
Practice, practice, practice...  
Break tasks down into manageable parts

I showed you a few of the tools in the last section but here are a few more and you'll notice a lot of them are analog. The most important aspect, for me, was taking things down to the basics. If people are comfortable with email, try to funnel things—a tech support link, a link to a Zoom chat—through that. Some things required in-person attention when our in-person options weren't available. In some cases—people who wanted to get rid of a laptop but needed a hard drive wipe, people who had a new ipad and needed it set up—we'd do drop-off service. So we still did drop-in time, we just did it virtually. People would call the library, or email me, and we'd start a conversation. So less "Come by the library between 2-4 on Tuesday", and more "Tell me what's up and I'll see how I can help"



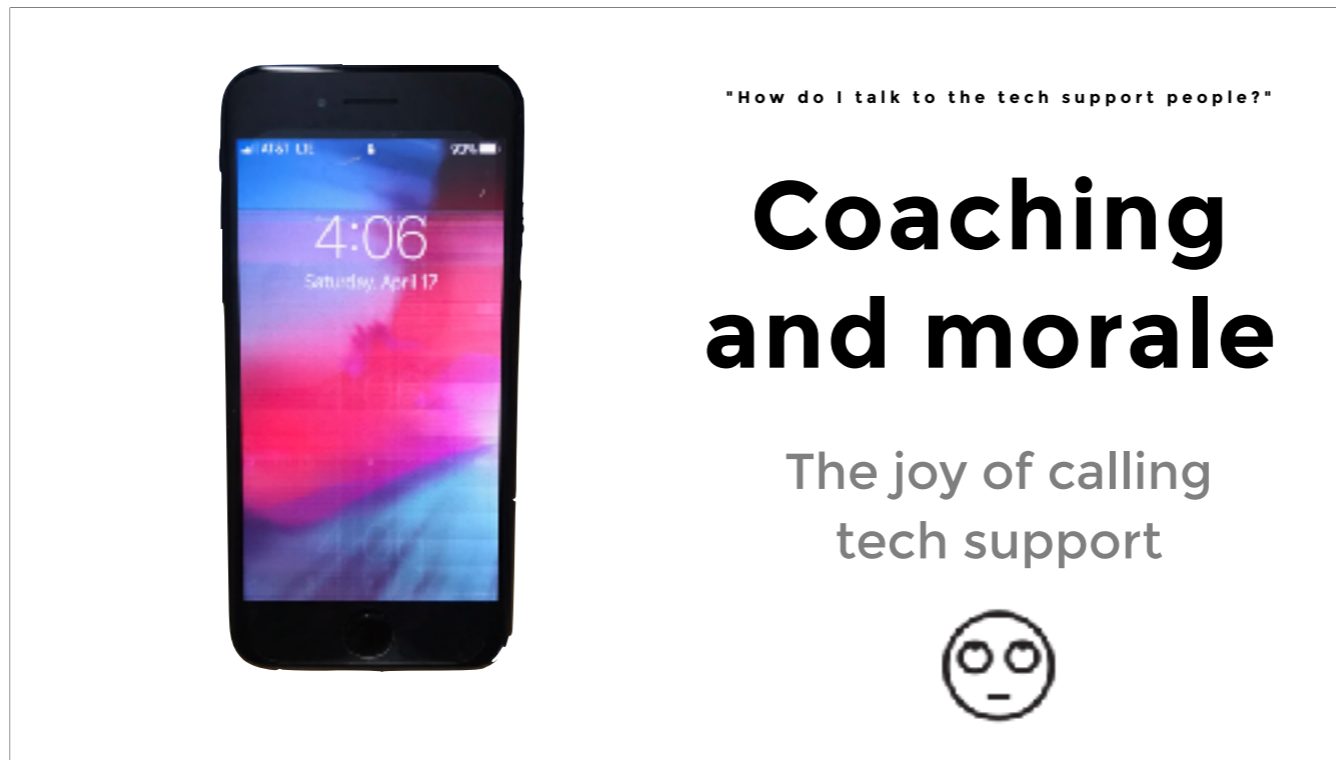
## The joy of handouts

Recognizing that people had **time**, this meant that in all but the direst emergencies we could do our slow-motion scaffolding not have to fix things all at once. So we'd send home some instructions, maybe with a handout (print or PDF) and then circle back with them to see how it went. Often novice users would feel bad if the advice we'd given them hadn't worked, so it was a delicate conversation to try to figure out if they were where they wanted to be. This is Ronni my landlady looking at a handout I made her, just drew with a pen and paper, that was a diagram of her touchpad showing her where to click and where not to.



For things that had a lot of fiddly setups—users often have a very difficult time when you're telling them to click a thing that isn't apparent on the screen until they've clicked the OTHER thing, who can blame them—I'd often give people a set of screenshots outlining the thing. FIRST click this, THEN look for this other thing and click that. I'd write long emails with the instructions inline. People could keep them in email or print them.

Or, if they were looking at something on their computer that they didn't understand I'd have them take a photo with their phone and send it to me. Sometimes people could use Zoom or Skype's screenshare option or Windows Remote Assistance for Windows users.



And sometimes people would have a situation, maybe with their home internet, maybe with a device, that couldn't be fixed remotely. It was helpful for people to have the problem somewhat limited and understood, but then they'd have to call someone for help, a situation many of them did not feel good about and did NOT want to do. I'd talk them through how to have that phone call, maybe be available by text while they were doing it. This is Sharon's phone, something's wrong with the screen. She needed to call someone to see if it was fixable and I talked her through how to describe what she was seeing.

**"You've forgotten  
how many things  
you once assumed  
that the interface  
would be able to  
do for you."**

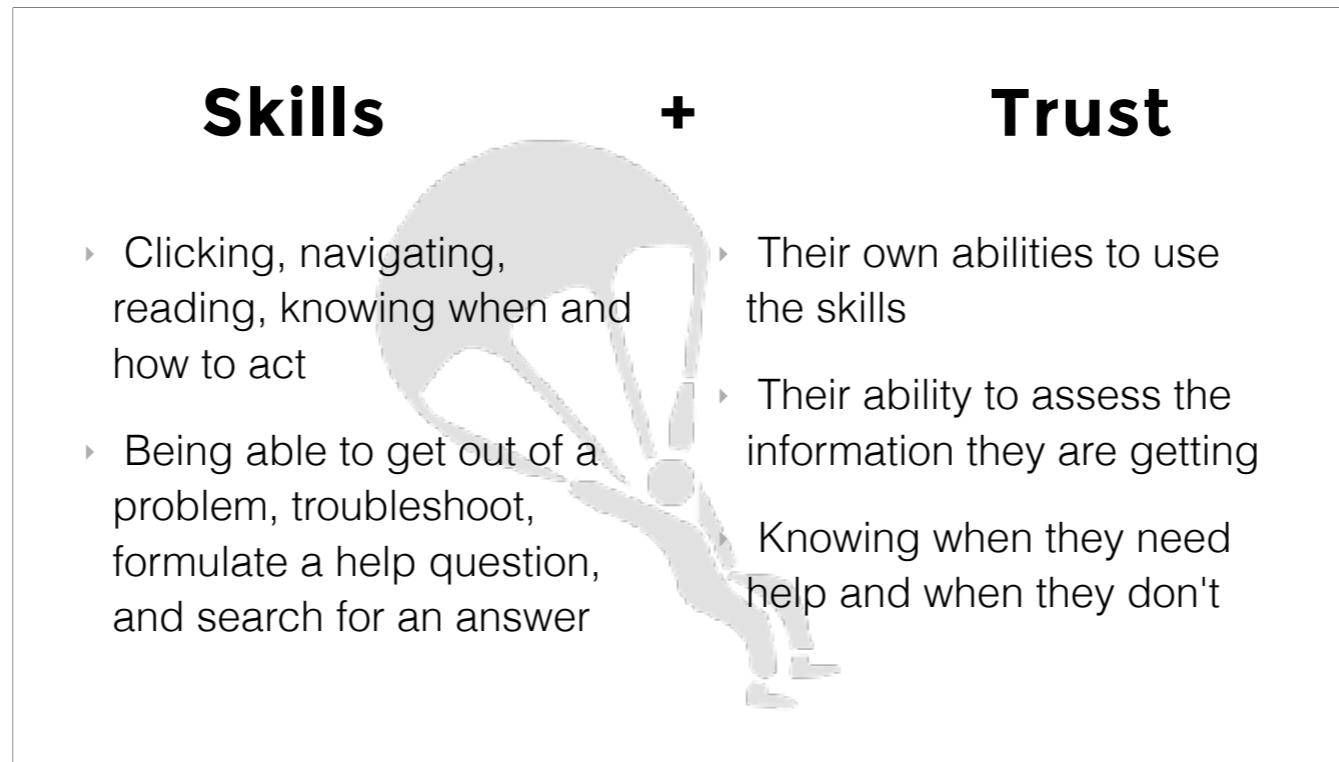


Of course patience is part of this. Really honestly believing in your mind that this is work worth doing and that people learn at their own speeds and in their own ways. One of the things I think I like the most about this work, actually, is remembering how many different ways there are to "do computers" and seeing the creative and inventive ways people use them to solve problems once they can get them to follow (some) instructions. I've forgotten what it was like when computers were full of endless possibilities. Not necessarily in a bad way, but I enjoy that energy from people.



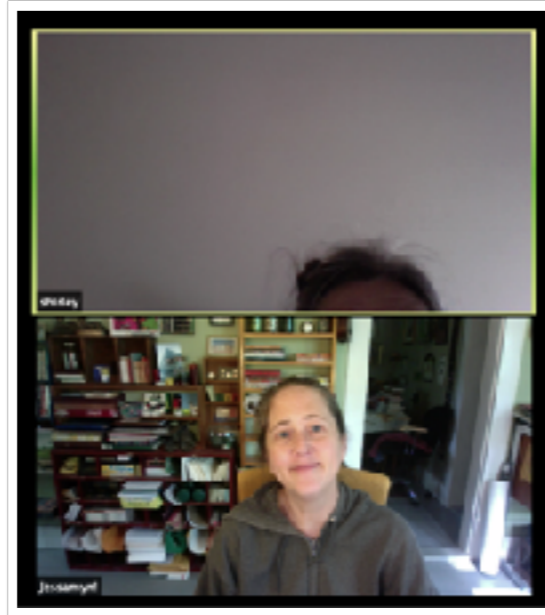
## 3. Build confidence

Because really a lot of my work isn't computer work at all, it's helping people get incrementally better at a task or skill that is challenging for them and the psychological aspect of it I think can be what differentiates library technologists from the average "person who is good at computers." We have **empathy** and we can use that to help people feel better about their interactions, not just learn the interactions themselves. And that's what keeps people moving forward.



Another digital divide concept that I think is helpful is the idea of **digital readiness**. This is a slightly older concept but I think it still applies. People need to not only be able to do the mechanics of technology but they need to learn to do more sophisticated things like troubleshooting and discerning things like what is a scam website and what is a real website. Especially this past year, my word! These things take time and some of it is really a personality thing. But working on confidence can help.

Sometimes it's as much telling people about what they **don't** need to do as what they do in the face of advertisers or their friends telling them otherwise. Do you need to pay for virus protection? No you do not. Do you need to use two factor authentication for your email account (which is a hassle because you don't have a cell phone) No you do not, but it's a good idea when you are able. Do you need to upgrade to a more expensive DSL package because the one you have isn't working? Unlikely.



- Zoom room practice
- Email practice
- Texting practice
- Ebook practice
- "Get an app" practice
- Password practice

So a lot of what I did this year was helped people practice. Practice sending an attachment. Practice sending a text. Practice Skyping. Practice getting on Zoom. This is Shirley who had a violin recital for a family member she did not want to miss but also didn't want to show up not knowing what she was doing. We worked on straightening out her camera, learning to turn it off, then on again. How to mute. How to unmute. Other people maybe wanted to use their phone to do a thing "My friend told me there is a bird call app..." but didn't feel confident with the various app stores on mobile devices and wanted to be told "I think this is the one they mean, do you want to try getting it and let me know if you need help?" and sending a link. I downloaded SO MANY APPS this year just so I could get screenshots to send people so they could get started. Time well spent.

## 4. Outreach

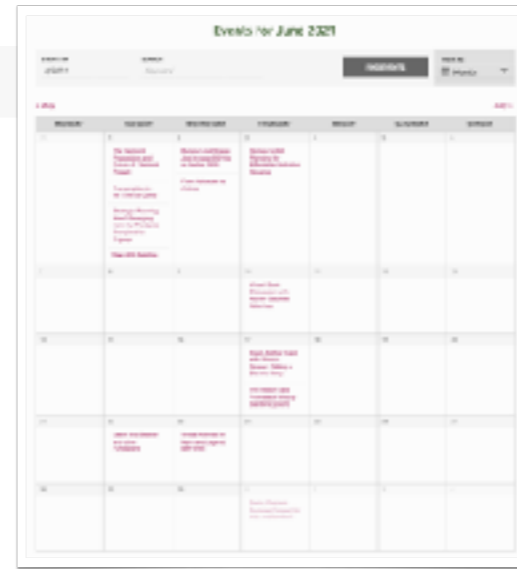
aka build community...  
before you need it.

And all of this stuff only works if people know you are there. I made friendly videos for the library newsletter. I posted "how to ask a good question" posts on the local mailing list. I let the mutual aid networks know I could help. When I was notarizing things for people I asked if they needed help with other things. My library was not the most tech savvy before Covid and in some ways it was challenging for them, but in other ways, it worked well with what most of the community needed. I did some "Learn about the internet!" classes for a library in the next town (population 900) last February (2021!) and it was their first online programming during the pandemic. And it's been gratifying to see them have done more since.

ONLINE = EVERYWHERE

## redefining local

An odd side effect was that while in person visits dropped to low numbers, program attendance for online programs increased measurably. Libraries could "go in together" on a program and make it available to a wider audience. People who wouldn't drive to a program at night could attend from home. We made a statewide calendar to show people what events were available to them.



Libraries also worked together in ways that we really hadn't before which was a next-level technology thing made possible with a shared state association website, a few people who wanted to add events, and a willingness to open up our programming to not just the people in our own communities. The geographical divisions (which in Vermont can be the difference between getting a library card for free or paying for one) were less important than finding ways to serve our communities and each other.

Don't forget...

# Good Boundaries

*You can't solve every problem*



Know when to refer people to other people or organizations that are better-suited for helping them.

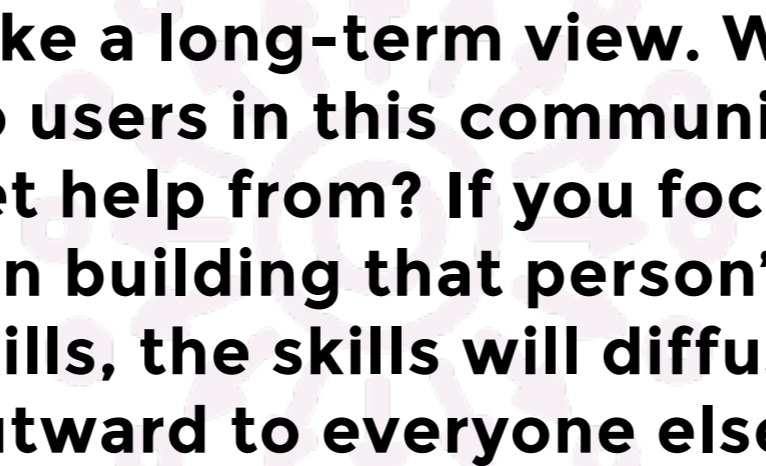
*Put on your own oxygen mask first*



Self-care is a slightly tired mantra but you can be more helpful to other people if you have some time to refresh, rejuvenate and unwind.



One of the things that made this work the most usefully for ME was having boundaries. No I won't call tech support for you (but I'll coach you how to call). No I won't type that letter for you (but I can teach you to use dictation). No I can't tell you what computer to buy (but I can tell you which ones will meet the specs you need and give you some suggestions for where to buy them).



**"Take a long-term view. Who do users in this community get help from? If you focus on building that person's skills, the skills will diffuse outward to everyone else."**

Last quote from Mr Agre. So I think about people like Marian, and Shirley, and Ronni, and Mel, and Brian, and Martha, and Sally, and John. Each person who comes to drop-in time, or who gets help from the library to get just one step better at using the computer, they help the other people in their communities, maybe not even library people, maybe not even technology people (yet). And every time we say "Yes a thing is possible." or "Hey you can do that!" or "We can fix this." the more we're helping people, all the people, in our community weather not just this particular cataclysm, but potentially others, building resilience as we build skills and confidence. That's what I've been doing this year, I'd be really interested to know what you've been doing.

# Thank you. Questions?

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