Aging at the Library

Helping Older Citizens with Technology & Privacy in the Real World

librarian.net/talks/nhla19

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Hello! Thanks! Slides and notes are here!

I'm a bit of a librarian without a library. I have a library background and training, but I mostly research and write. I've been teaching a local drop-in time at a local vocational high school/tech center since 2005 and more recently also at the local library. It's an open-ended "come with your questions" sort of set-up. Here are some of the people who come to drop in time.

This program started as an outgrowth of the adult education department with me as an AmeriCorps volunteer for three reasons 1. the tech center was a regional school serving eight communities but with the exception of educating their children we didn't do much in the towns that weren't the town the school was in 2. we were finding that people who were taking classes either lacked the basic skills (clicking and double-clicking, knowing basic vocabulary) to be in those classes or else had a single question or issue and yet we didn't have a way to address those things 3. many people were digitally divided and lacked internet (or good internet) at home and so needed a place to use technology and internet maybe with a person who could help them. Here are some other people who come in.

The setup is basic. Free space, with wifi and power outlets and loaner tech plus the ability to bring in coffee or snacks. I have a reluctant intern.

Actually tho'…

- open face of reference
- non-judgmental attitude
- tech agnostic
- problem-solving focus
- no time limit
- friends & neighbors

But I think the reason people come to us is actually a little more complex. Even though libraries are one of the only places people can use a free computer with high speed internet, more and more people are bringing their own devices, and there are a lot of places with free wifi. What we have is a little more unquantifiable.

This is Marian, this Wednesday. I told her I was giving this talk and she rattled off advice for me about what I should say to you. Honestly, I get along with older people often better than people my own age. They're no nonsense, they have nothing to prove, many of their challenges are NOT emotional in nature (not my best skill, listening to why your computer makes you sad or angry) and they understand you can't complain too much about free advice, so they don't. They get along with one another, so are patient when I'm helping someone else. It's a small town so they mostly know each other. I know not every older person is like this, but many are. I should also point out, Drop-In Time is for people of ANY age, but the bulk of the people who come are usually 70+

2 generations

- Don't overgeneralize
- Verify self-reporting
- Understand their support networks
- Set boundaries and expectations
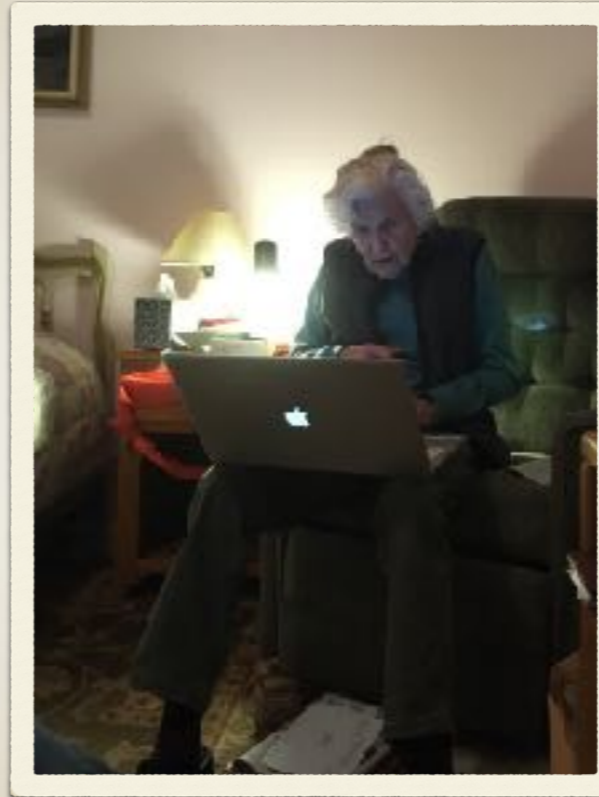
And it's worth also knowing who we don't reach: people at home. This is my landlady who is 94. I met her at Drop-in Time before she was my landlady. She's not as mobile as she used to be and since I live in the back apartment, I mostly give her a hand at home. Her needs are different from Marian's needs. She's a working artist and a recent question involved using her new printer/scanner/photocopier which I discovered she was using to scan her own hair. She has some more serious accessibility challenges, a not-so-great memory, and her digital world is, in many ways, a lifeline to her outside world so it's more important that it be working well, and in a way that won't break in a confusing or troublesome way. When the gmail interface changed she was off her game for weeks. Marian's kids are about my age. Ronni's relatives who are a generation younger are almost in their 70s. It's worth knowing that with people living longer, there are nearly two full generations of "retirees" and those groups may have very different needs and expectations, so it's tough to generalize. So I add a few more tips for the older generation of retirees (see slide)

How to help someone use a computer

First you have to tell yourself some things:

1. Nobody is born knowing this stuff.
2. **You've forgotten what it's like to be a beginner.**
3. If it's not obvious to them, it's not obvious.

One of the texts that I draw on the most frequently in my work is Phil Agre's How To Help Someone Use a Computer (in the links!). It starts out like this: First you have to tell yourself some things: 1. Nobody is born knowing this stuff. 2. You've forgotten what it's like to be a beginner. 3. If it's not obvious to them, it's not obvious.

I've included a few more quotations from Phil as I go and a few from me that are short summaries of things that help me. We'll look at three basic areas of working with older people and technology: Accessibility, Attitude and Troubleshooting and we'll wrap-up talking a bit about privacy even though it's part of all of these areas.

Accessibility

First step is making sure people have access. For a lot of older people easily-surmountable accessibility issues keep them from doing the things they want to do. Only they don't know they're easily surmountable, so they're NOT, to them. Part of what you can do is familiarize yourself with solutions to common accessibility problems—can't read screen, can't hear videos, can't click tiny triangles hiding my information, can't use stupid trackpad, can't use stupid mouse, can't double-click, can't TYPE—to help them solve problems in an appropriate way. And that part is important. Because if I see a thirty year old without physical challenges who is having trouble with typing I'm more likely to suggest a typing tutor. If I see an eighty year old with arthritis, I'm more likely to suggest dictation tools (no one has to buy Dragon by the way, all new computers come with dictation built in, you just need to find it)

> "You've forgotten how many ways you've learned to adapt to bad interfaces."
>
> *–Phil Agre*

The most important part, is to re-see computer interfaces as hurdles to actually doing whatever the THING is. For many older tech users, this is what they are dealing with. If a click is just a little difficult, clicking is a necessary means to an and. But hitting a reCAPTCHA which requires seventeen clicks to "identify the sidewalks" is a punishing deterrent. Sometimes it helps to explain why this thing is happening and other ways of accomplishing the task (audio prompt instead). Don't just explain it and expect people to see it the way you do, as a necessary evil, see it as you and the user joining forces to defeat this meddlesome foe.
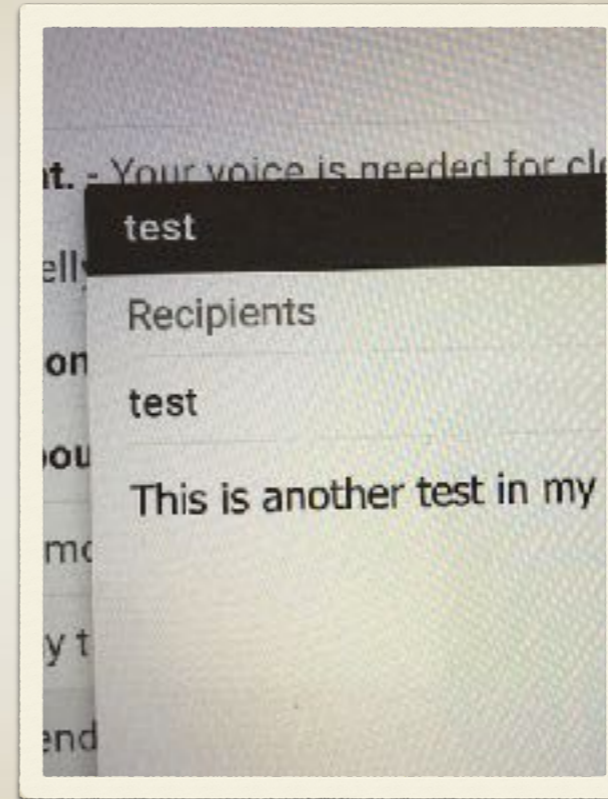
(this is also from Wednesday, it's Judy narrating an email) So these are the sections where it's useful to understand the environment. Most of us know how to make the font larger on a computer or phone, but we don't all know how to turn on dictation (maybe the single must useful piece of enabling technology since eyeglasses). And I don't mean to be flip and say "Hey just google this stuff" (OR DUCKDUCKGO it because I'm a privacy nut) but learning how to "solve for x" where X is what your user needs to be able to do to usefully use their or your computer is the meta skill you're going for here.

Hardware too!

- Jitterbug
- Macs vs. PCs
- Mouse vs trackpads
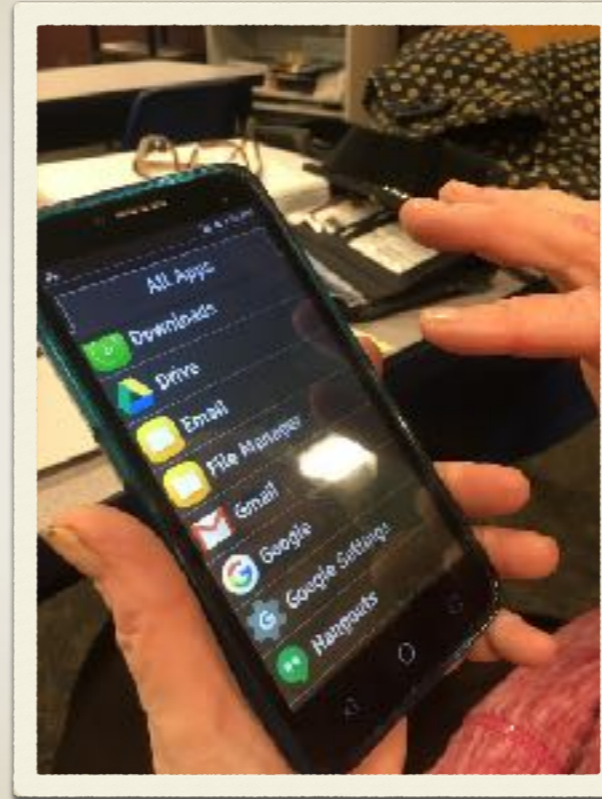
 Another thing about older adults who may not have local family is they'll ask you for shopping tips. Or they'll have a device set up by a family member who isn't local and can support it. This picture is Ynex (93!) whose son got her a Jitterbut smart phone. It's great. Big friendly buttons. A bit rigid but works for her. But we had a hard time figuring out why we couldn't get it working outside of her house and we discovered her son, meaning well, had set bandwidth limits for her when she was off of wifi. Good to know! There's a big Mac/PC debate (etc) In my town the local computer store, trying to support people wanting low cost laptops has started selling $200 Linux laptops. Which is great but the same people who want a $200 computer can't afford to fix them and then want to know why they can't stream movies from amazon prime over firefox for linux (true story)

Accessibility is a process and never really an end result, especially in technology where the field changes a lot. And people change. You may not really think about having a Sensory Story Time at the library until a family with an autistic child (or child with autism) moves into your area, but then you'll wonder why you'd never done it before.

Attitude

"You have the patience of a saint" people often say to me but honestly I don't. I just have a job and it's *only helping people solve their problems* which means it takes as long as it takes and at 5 pm the library closes and I go home. And, most importantly, these people aren't my parents. I often say that the ideal community tech support is we all swap parents with each other, people have a better time supporting someone else's family.

"Attend to the symbolism of the interaction."

–Phil Agre

In many cases the issue isn't the computer or the phone it's the way the person FEELS about the phone or the computer. The widowed spouse who wasn't the one who ran the tech thing. The person who wants to meet people but doesn't understand the tech. The person who is fearful of being scammed and so will never buy anything online and is driving outside in a blizzard to get to the store. Emotions are real and they affect how people do things. This quotation also refers to how you and the person are physically interacting. Don't take their mouse or their laptop (I make an exception for when something needs to be set up one time). Explain what you're doing (don't you like it when the dentist does that? I do). Sit at their level. Don't criticize their choices. My intern is lovely but he has trouble with some of this but has been improving by leaps and bounds.

> "I can mostly help with technical issues,
> emotional issues are not my specialty."
>
> *– Me*

The is one way in which I could stand to improve. I am not particularly good at hearing about issues that are not computer in nature. This is not unusual for "computer people" but I am not your usual computer people. That said, sometimes the personal aspect of the situation is part of the problem. "Oh your KIDS told you that you need a new computer…" "Oh your EX said this was a stupid phone to have…." "Oh your JOB is forcing you to learn this otherwise you are worried you'll be fired…" so I warn people up front in an expectation setting way "Hey it's not you, it's me" and we muddle forward together.

"I don't know but we can find out!"

- Tear down expert mythos
- These are solvable problems
- Build skills AND confidence

Above all, attitude is more of what people will take away than facts most of the time. If a problem is too hard, say so. If you don't know the answer, say so. If they have the wrong tool for the job (politely) say so. The goal is to get people better at solving their own problems, not fixing their computer (in nearly every case). We're building skills a lot more like storytime isn't followed by a reading comprehension quiz. We just want people to be skill building, being social and learning to love reading and stories.

Troubleshooting

The big deal with computers generally is that they involve troubleshooting. There are two things novice and/or digitally divided people are not great at and that's understanding the metaphors inherent in computing (like a file can be in two "places" at once, or there are multiple "windows" that can layer on top of each other in a two dimensional space) and understanding how to "work a problem" and troubleshoot. While no one wants to sit down and hear a ten minute exposition on how to troubleshoot any more than they want to see you extract a hard drive from a computer so they can understand how it works (we used to do that, we don't anymore) it's good to understand basic troubleshooting ideas.

> "A computer is a means to an end. The person you're helping probably cares mostly about the end. This is reasonable."
>
> *–Phil Agre*

Often people aren't entirely sure what the problem is they are trying to solve, they just know they don't like the way a thing is happening or something seems broken. I try to background the computer in these interactions and see what it is they are trying to DO. You know how people say "Librarians like to seek, everyone else likes to find"? Same is true with computers generally. *I* might stare at someone's desktop and think "Wow, no wonder they can't find anything" but I'm actually UNUSUAL in that I dedicate time to organizing my files, most people don't know there ARE files and while we can debate whether that's a good idea, it's true so let's move on.

> "I'm not sure about what happened before you came here but let's try it again and see what we can do."
>
> *– Me*

They are also curious why things happen and while this is 100% normal, it's rarely the actual question. If they can repeat the thing that they're asking about "It makes a noise when I do THIS" great. Otherwise gently working on whatever it is they're looking at now is mostly helpful. And it's challenging. People have issues with their printers which are at home, or their home internet. Sometimes I'll coach them through talking to tech support. I sometimes use the expression
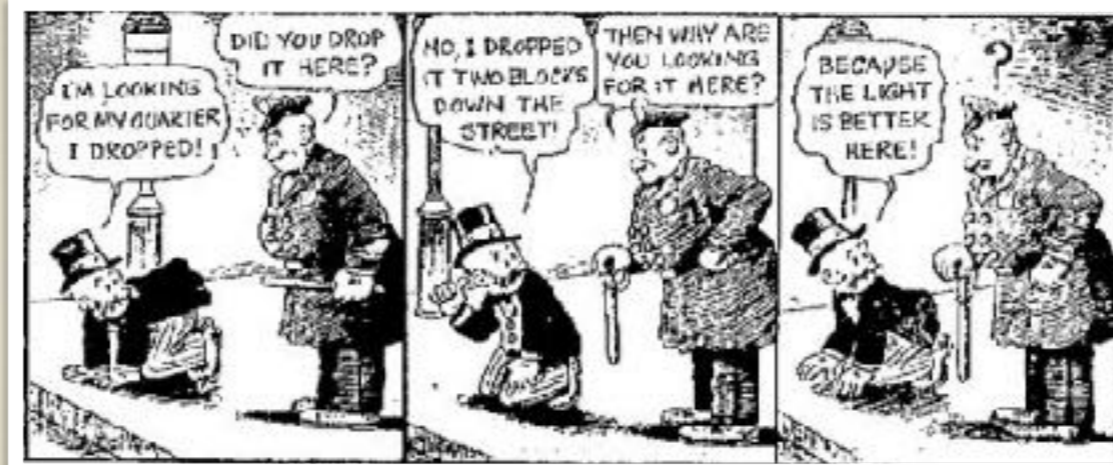
Sometimes it feels better for them to ask me their tech question when they really need to be talking to their family member who set it up, their internet service provider as to why things aren't working, or their phone manufacturer. But I know why they talk to me, and I try to give them concrete steps they can take when they walk out of drop-in time. And that can be a big hurdle, both because you're not in their home but also the idea of a "checklist"

People like checklist, a nice set of steps they can follow. But in the world of technology it's rarely that simple. You need to know what state a computer is in in order to hand someone a checklist. Is the application open? Is the right window in the front? Are they online? Checklists are only good for very simple tasks and only for people who are pretty sure they can get to the beginning of the checklist in the right way.

So it's useful for people to see you work the problem. See you look up answers. Know that if they're having this issue there is a very good chance 100000 other people on the internet have already tried to deal with this issue. And maybe some of them have written up how to solve it. Have them see you looking up answers. And trying things. They don't have to read along with you (often it's better if they don't) but you can stop at points and tell them what you are looking for.

Ask Different
Answers for your Apple questions

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Mac keeps creashing with kernel pani

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For the last week or so my Mac has been randomly kernel pa
not changed, so I have no idea why this started all of a sudde
2017, Four Thunderbolt 3 Ports) running Mojave 10.14.3

The error message/panic report I get is:

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Mon Feb 18 16:58:54 2019

Anonymous UUID:        190C8C23-1428-3DAC-4808-C7D31

Wed Feb 20 07:44:22 2019

*** Panic Report ***
panic(cpu 0 caller 0xffffff800a8da29d): Kernel trap at
CR0: 0x0000000080010033, CR2: 0x00037fb11b783020, CR3:
RAX: 0x0000000000800002, RBX: 0xffffff803b64e088, RCX:
RSP: 0xffffff921d293c28, RBP: 0xffffff921d293ca0, RST:
R8:  0x0000002030020002, R9:  0x0002000030020000, R10:
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"I am looking in a support forum for Mac Users"

Talk up the value of support forums, and maybe suggest a few of them. I have a ready answer to...

"What's a good place to find deals on laptops?"

"What's a good place to find tech support for Macs?"

"What's a good place to find a good deal on a smartphone?"

"Who is the best cellular provider here?"

"Have you used the Jitterbug phones?"

Because realistically, knowing why in my profession is less useful than knowing how to fix it. People often want to know why. But more importantly they want to know "Did I do something wrong?" because a lot of this is attitude. Not all older computer users are anxious or timid about technology but many can be, especially ones who get help at the library. Being supportive is actually part of solving their computer problem. And having concrete feedback "Sounds like that program froze, here's how you can force it to quit" is often better at "Well computers have issues sometimes"

Privacy

I know this can seem bolted on to the end, but privacy is tricky. There are a boatload of best practices many of us ignore and also a lot of people who stay offline entirely because of privacy concerns that may not be accurately risk-assessed (I am telling you this, I would not be telling them this directly). So threading the needle of giving people good information without scaring them away is important. But also helping them make good choices for themselves and not the ones we-the-librarians need or want them to make is crucial. The easiest way to scare someone away from getting the help that they need is by pooh-poohing their concerns.

Solve their problems, not yours

- Discuss "threat models"
- Contextualize best practices
- Save the time of the user

This is Marian again, showing off her password book. People will write passwords down, this is not a best practice but it's SO much better than the alternative. Think about what threats they're really trying to protect themselves from. Having a secure but written down password is much better than telling them they need to remember it and having their password be Fluffy23 (the next one Fluffy24 etc). Ranganathan was always big on saving the time of the user, and sometimes that has to do with saving the user's OWN time in their own processes, not just their interactions with you at the library.

Have a short memory

(for some things)

Another important thing is realizing that in a lot of ways older people are a little more used to people getting into their business (not all certainly) Carroll needed some help logging on to Yahoo Finance which also had all of his investment information on it. This involved helping him with not only passwords but then seeing his whole net worth laid out in front of me. Carroll is a peach and was okay with this (he knew it would ultimately help him solve his problem) but I also assured him I would not remember his password and was not interested in his net worth. And to tell you the truth, I have legit forgotten. So maybe this is just me saying "Having a bad memory is a job skill!" but in some ways it is. I have a whole longer talk I give about privacy for all library users and I'd encourage you to read up on more of it. The links page has some getting started pages including things like using browser plug-ins frequently to block ads and trackers (simpler than you'd think) and using DuckDuckGo for search. They have a very friendly email newsletter that it might be worth subscribing to.

Why is Facebook going public?

They couldn't figure out the privacy settings, either.

 Privacy, ESPECIALLY social media privacy, is a huge issue and it's worth tailoring it to the audience rather than tossing out too many generalized ideas. For older users the differences between the ways of contacting people (a Message or DM versus posting on their wall/timeline/thread) can be helpful. I've often volunteered to be a contact of someone to help them learn to interact on facebook. It has never come back to haunt me. We also do people a kindness when we help them understand etiquette of these interactions. It's certainly okay to use social media however you want to, but it's also helpful for people to understand if the ways they are using the tools is normative or edge case so they can make their own decisions about whether that works for them.

> "Knowledge lives in communities, not individuals. A computer user who's part of a community of computer users will have an easier time than one who isn't."
>
> *–Phil Agre*

Because encouraging connections is important. There are legitimate and valid complaints about Facebook, but many people want to use it. And for older people in particular connections are important. Helping them connect to people can help them with many part of living, particularly in the second generation of retirees. Our towns are rural and our winters are long and connected people are often healthier and live longer and better than people who are isolated or lonely. Getting them in to the library is part of it. Helping them solve their own problems, even if they are not quite sure what they are is also part.

And finally, It's okay to talk about your own life. People sometimes see me as "the person who knows everything" about technology but it's actually a good thing for them to see me looking something up, or admitting that I've got a huge basket of cables at home that I am not sure what to do with. I treat my computer like a complicated wristwatch or calculator, not as a pet or an enemy (or a friend). But it is a thing that can help me learn how to deal with a pet or an enemy or a friend.

Because look, we are a very small part, in most cases, of people's actual lives. But their relationship to technology can expand, in a negative way, to take up too much of their time an attention. Ultimately I think what we're doing is giving people space, on their hard drives or phones but also in their minds, in their lives, to get on with the business of living, whatever it is that might be.

Thank you!
Stay in touch.

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