

Technology classes for senior citizens: Creating an environment where senior citizens can develop technology skills to actively participate in a strong society

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Abstract:

An increase in seniors aged 65 and older requesting assistance in using these devices created the opportunity for the library to develop technology classes which started in June 2013. This program represents an innovative service and best practice library program that empowers senior citizens to become active users of new technologies which open up a whole new world of information and opportunity. It is important to provide opportunities for lifelong learning for this age group and to show them how they can use technology to enhance their lives. A mix of small group sessions, one-on-one and drop-in sessions, theme based instruction sheets to take home, exclusive access to specialized magazines, access to devices and continued support from library staff have proved to be best practices for these classes. Each group session is structured around a theme selected from a survey or enquiries received from eLibrary services staff. Social inclusion, meeting new people, using the space in the library, exposure to ebooks and other resources and participating in a group environment are all benefits of this program. The library is actively participating and involved in building a strong society that includes senior citizens who can actively use new technologies, read books and magazines on their tablets, and access information that was previously inaccessible. These classes are one of the library's highest attended adult programs. Libraries have the facility to offer training and have highly skilled staff to help people access and understand information and services to meet their needs. This paper examines this best practice library program in detail, the role of the public library and the importance of literacy and reading.

Keywords: technology, senior citizens, ebooks, training, lifelong learning

Introduction

Statistics worldwide indicate that the number of people over sixty years old will increase in the next few decades. According to Population Database projections, one in ten people are

currently over sixty years old and by 2050, the number will be one in five (HelpAge International, 2004). As a result, the role of libraries and librarians worldwide are changing and have evolved to become facilitators and providers of information and lifelong learning opportunities, with a focus on services and identifying user needs (Krolak, 2005). The increase in people aged over sixty is an indication that libraries need to concentrate on adult learning and programs just as much as they do currently with other library programs. By using staff expertise, technology and the spaces available in the library, libraries have the capacity to provide programs to seniors so they can access information and services in different ways. These skills will promote lifelong learning and provide opportunities to enhance their lives.

Background

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 46% of people over sixty-five used the Internet during 2012-2013 in Australia (ABS, 2013). This age group identified paying bills online and online banking as their most common use of the internet. Statistics in the USA reflects similar results with 53% of Americans aged sixty-five and older using the Internet (Singer & Agosto, 2013). Census statistics also indicate a growth in the sixty-five to seventy-four age group. According to the 2011 census there was a 31% growth for this age group in the City of Swan (Perth, Western Australia) from the previous census in 2006. In the Bullsbrook area (semi rural locale of City of Swan) the increase for this age group is 59% for the same period.

The Swan eLibrary was launched in 2012 with a collection of eBooks, eMagazines and eAudiobooks. This service is becoming very popular amongst tablet users because they have their book or magazine with them wherever they go. Due to a lack of technology expertise and requests from library users on how to use tablets and the eLibrary, Swan Library staff identified the need to provide a service where senior citizens had the opportunity to develop their technology skills. As a result, more and more seniors have shown an interest in finding out what they can do with their tablet devices.

Objectives

To develop this new library program clear objectives were set to provide direction for staff, evaluate the success of the program, and identify challenges and any future changes to the program. The objective for library programs according to the *Australian Standards and Guidelines for Public Libraries* (ALIA, 2012, p. 36) is to 'provide the community with a range of activities related to library services and collections that enrich the lives of community members. Swan Library used this objective as a guideline and benchmark during the development of this program.

The three objectives for the technology classes include the following:

- to provide adult lifelong learning programs for senior citizens;
- to provide clients with the tools to use all the library services, including the eLibrary service; and
- to assist clients to use their tablets for reading, to stay connected and to freely access information that will enrich their lives.

Target audience

The target audience for this adult program is senior citizens aged sixty-five and older. Census statistics indicate there were four hundred and thirty people living in the Bullsbrook demographical area in 2011 in the over sixty-five age group, with five hundred and twenty six

people in the fifty-five to sixty-four age group. In 2011, the over fifty-fives accounted for 22% of the total population living in Bullsbrook.

The program was and continues to be advertised widely in the community to reach the target audience. Advertising includes the local *Place* newsletter, different user groups in the area, posters in the library and on notice boards, the library's website and eNewsletter, and the local newspaper.

Preparation

The new program began in June 2013. The staff needed in-house training on different tablet devices, so the library held *Technology Tea* sessions where staff could bring their own device or borrow one from the library and over a cup of coffee, discussed interesting applications and tips and tricks, as well as exploring the eLibrary service. Staff needed to be prepared to receive enquiries about a number of devices from the beginning of the sessions. Information from the Internet, specialized tablet magazines and prior staff knowledge were used to prepare for these classes. It was also important to decide on a basic curriculum and to determine what staff already knew. This information assisted in preparing for ongoing sessions.

Resources were needed to run these classes and the library purchased three tablets to have available during these sessions and for staff to use at the library. Some clients attended sessions without a device because they want to learn and find out more before purchasing a device. Specialized tablet magazines are now purchased regularly. These are used for preparing the classes and are available on loan for attendees. The seminar room is used for these classes as it is a private room within the main library. It is important to have these classes away from other library users, because some of our attendees do feel vulnerable during these classes. There is a theme or subject for every session and attendees receive an information sheet on that theme to take home. These information sheets include step-by-step details on how to do something on a tablet and they are now available for all staff and library users.

Structure of Technology Classes

There are currently three different classes which are available once a fortnight at the library. These classes changed in March 2015 after feedback from attendees and after library staff evaluated the classes at the end of 2014. Most attendees have either an iPad or an Android device and it was decided to concentrate on these devices.

Class 1: Exploring your tablet – iPads

These sessions are for people using iPads and occur every second Wednesday afternoon for 1.5 hours. Each session has a different theme. Attendees receive the dates and session themes for the entire year at the first session. They know what theme or subject will be next and can prepare or find out more about the theme before the session. An information sheet is available at each session which attendees keep as a reference. Bookings are essential for these sessions as they are capped at eight attendees only. One staff member can easily handle the class and attendees don't feel too overwhelmed due to the size of the group. During each session attendees learn how to do at least one operation on their device, with time for questions at the end of the session. Themes for 2015 included:

- how to send emails;
- how to search using Google;
- how to take and email the photo;
- how to use Facebook;

- maps;
- security settings and how to update software;
- tips and tricks;
- apps to make life easier;
- how to download an eBook;
- how to download an eMagazine; and
- how to access Medicare on your tablet.

Class 2: Exploring your tablet – android devices

These sessions are for people using android devices and are scheduled every second Monday afternoon for 1.5 hours. Session themes are the same as the iPad sessions.

Class 3: Drop-in Session

These sessions are held every second Friday morning for 2 hours. People can come in without a booking to ask questions, with three staff members available to assist. This session also provides other staff members with the opportunity to assist and learn how different devices work. Questions and issues that staff receive during these sessions have included:

- how to set-up an email account on a tablet;
- how to return a completed eBook;
- how to download an app;
- how to change settings on a device; and
- how to connect to the Wi-Fi in the library.

One-on-one Sessions

Special one-on-one sessions are also available for group session attendees who want some extra assistance and time. They can make an appointment that suites both parties and have an individual session that lasts an hour. In 2014, there were twelve one-on-one sessions held. These sessions aren't advertised, but are available to anyone who wants more assistance and needs more time to learn new skills.

Results and Evaluation

After almost two years of successful technology classes there are now a group of senior citizens who have learnt how to use new technology in their daily lives. They actively participate in classes, and are enthusiastic to learn more and to show others what they have achieved. They can communicate on different levels and are able to find and use information to meet their needs. They can access books from the library or from home through the eLibrary and they are actively becoming part of a strong community because they are now able to do the following:

- bridge the intergenerational gap by playing games on their tablets with their grandchildren;
- send and receive emails;
- keep in touch with family who live abroad through social media;
- share their photos and what is happening in their lives with family and friends on social media;
- use their devices when travelling to read ebooks;
- use recipe applications to find and share new recipes with friends; and
- access government information and services online.

Feedback and comments from participants, attendance numbers and the ongoing demand for these technology classes determined the huge success of this adult program. We referred back to our three objectives to evaluate the program and to determine whether the program will continue. Feedback and comments proved that all three objectives were reached and that the program will continue in 2015 and onwards. As long as there is a need for this program it will continue.

Table below indicates the attendance in 2014. An average of six attendees per session is excellent for such a small community and because the program is limited to eight attendees per session.

Month	Attendance	Sessions	Average
February	7	1	7
March	32	4	8
April	38	6	6
May	28	4	7
June	24	4	6
July	17	3	5.5
August	11	2	5.5
September	15	4	4
October	22	6	4
November	22	4	5.5
December	12	1	12
Total	228	39	6

Feedback was very valuable when it came to planning for 2015. Sessions changed and are more structured to meet the needs of the attendees. Here is some of the feedback received in 2014. Some comments are listed below.

- ‘Great session – learnt a lot today – enjoying the Question Day’.
- ‘Well run session’.
- ‘More one-on-one’.
- ‘Very good and clear explanations’.
- ‘Have more classes like this class’.
- ‘Consider extending to 1.5 hours, thank you, very interesting’.
- ‘Great job of educating people about using tablets. Thanks’.

The importance of literacy and reading

Literacy is an essential, foundation skill in the twenty-first century according to the Ontario Community Literacy program (2013). People need literacy skills for home, work and life, and they need a level of literacy to be able to meet the everyday demands of society. When you raise literacy levels, opportunities for lifelong learning are created which lead to personal growth. Low literacy levels amongst senior citizens can also prevent people in this age group from making informed decisions regarding their health and finances.

The Swan Library’s technology classes create opportunities for seniors to learn how to access important information. Some of the attendees even use an application on their device to remind them when to refill their medication prescription, as well as having access to valuable information regarding specific health issues. Other people enjoy participating in conversations about what is happening in the world, by accessing the news on their device.

People need good literacy skills to access and understand information, to decide if the information is what they need and to use this information for personal growth. By teaching seniors how to access important information on tablets, they can access this information from anywhere and have it all at their fingertips. This is particularly important for those seniors who have mobility issues.

One of the State Library of Western Australia's (SLWA) fundamental goals in its mission statement is to champion literacy and learning, and to create opportunities for all Western Australians to strengthen their literacy abilities. The technology classes strengthen our senior citizen's literacy levels by helping to keep their brains active by learning new skills and by staying connected to others in the community. They need good literacy skills to learn these new technology skills.

The role of public libraries

The role of libraries is to create strong communities and societies. Libraries provide services that add value to their communities. They become a trusted hub of community and learning. When you add value, you build a strong community and society (De Rosa, Dempsey & Wilson, 2003). A library should have the capacity and the staff expertise to provide services and programs that are needed by their community to develop a strong community. There should be enough space for programs and activities, and staff should be well trained and able to identify the needs of their community.

The OCLC Environment Scan reports that senior citizens use the library for book sales, taking grandchildren to reading programs and reading newspapers. Libraries have changed and offer so much more than the services mentioned above. Libraries need to inform their senior citizens about the amazing services and programs that are currently available. The Environment Scan also found that senior citizens go online to access email, read newspapers, and obtain information about prescriptions, finance, hobbies, movies, recipes and garage sales. Libraries should use this information to provide opportunities and spaces for senior citizens to go online. Additional training options, similar to technology classes can be implemented to assist those who use laptops and desktop computers at home.

The technology classes at the library create opportunities for social inclusion, meeting new people and using the space in the library, exposure to books and magazines in a digital format, access information previously inaccessible and to participation in a group environment. All these factors contribute to the role the library play in creating a strong community. People returned to the technology classes, session after session to learn more and to enable them to improve their lives. They exhibited increased confidence when they achieve their goals and were prepared to go out into their community to show someone else these new skills.

Challenges for libraries

The economic situation for libraries is different worldwide. Libraries in some countries are well-funded and supported, and provide well established networks extended to all areas of the community (Krolak, 2005). In contrast there are libraries with limited funding, located in areas with non-existent access to services and few resources for clients. Libraries will constantly face challenges and barriers to become strong libraries and to commit to their role in building strong communities and societies.

The following can create challenges for libraries that want to introduce technology classes for senior citizens.

- A lack of funding and resources to introduce new programs in the library.
- A lack of professional staff and professional development opportunities for staff.
- Library buildings that don't have enough space for programs and activities.
- No computers or Internet access for library users.
- Keeping up with rapidly changing technologies.
- Commitment from staff to take on new roles.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the importance of literacy in today's society. Being literate is more than being able to read a book, a recipe or the newspaper. Good literacy skills are essential to learn new skills and to understand and use new technology. The role of the library is to provide information, services and programs to build a strong community with informed citizens who are healthy and actively participating in their community and within their family and friendship circles. Active library users will contribute to the building of stronger societies. The technology classes at Bullsbrook Community Library represent how libraries can be a part of this global initiative.

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