

A perfect fit! Tailoring IT teaching to your community

By Helen Balfour - Digital Services Librarian, Cambridge Library.

Public libraries today face the challenge of educating and bridging the knowledge gaps of those patrons in their communities who have limited experience with information technology, and few related skills. Connecting people with information, fostering digital skills in the community, and enabling participation in online environments have become core functions of the library. These functions, which are lacking in other public and private spaces, are increasingly relied upon by library users to socialise, develop themselves and conduct their business.

A lack of basic IT skills and familiarities can result in frustration, depression and feelings of helplessness with respect to the use of computers. At Cambridge Library, the Digital Services Team (two library technicians and me) first provided small group classes teaching library clients basic computer skills. On review it became apparent that the students attending had such diverse needs that a group teaching program was no longer the most effective option. To provide a better service to library clients, we developed a specialised IT teaching program in which we tailor one on one classes to each individual's needs.

My paper will outline why these tailored IT teaching classes can be the best option for community libraries, the strategies our team used to research, structure and implement our teaching program, and how the team manages and resources the program on a day-to-day basis. The paper will provide a model, or blueprint for the design and implementation of such a program in other public libraries.

Identifying the need

In late 2012 at Cambridge Library the IT teaching program in place was small classes of five participants who were being taught the same five or six lessons in a repeating cycle. These were focusing on email, keyboard and mouse skills and cyber safety. Having run this program for a few years, I became aware that it was in need of a revamp. I suggested to my team that we use some of the lessons from the 23 Things Program, originally created by Helen Blowers, and used in many libraries around the world. 23 lessons is a significant number for community participants at a public library, so we cut down our initial program to 10 lessons, with a focus on Web 2.0 technologies including social media and tagging, as well as Google applications. The participants were engaged and interested by the material, but we hit one major stumbling block. In a class of five participants, the range of skills can vary to such a degree that the class content may not be appropriate for all participants. Some participants needed almost full attention from the instructor, holding up the class and frustrating the other students. Others were more advanced, and found the content unstimulating. The program wasn't meeting the needs of all our participants. We needed a program to meet the learning needs of the members of our community.

A Learning and Literacy Framework and Research

The Manager of Cambridge Library had the idea of capturing all the work we do for our community in a detailed Learning and Literacy Framework, like the one implemented by Salisbury Library Services. This approach requires library staff to look at all services and develop a rationale for each component, list what is currently provided, and then come up with new components to enhance the services. Outcomes from this process are subsequently reportable to stakeholders—among other things, it would be a way to show our council

exactly what work the library does for the Cambridge community. Cambridge Online was one such component of our offering, and reflecting on the work we were doing, and thinking about what new aspects we could provide was the catalyst for us developing our new program.

To understand your community you need to know its demography. To reach this point, we examined national Census data using the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Census table builder software. This tool enabled us to extract and analyse data: the number of Cambridge residents with internet connected in their homes, the average age of the population, and a socioeconomic profile of our community. We found our community, while rather affluent, had around a fifth of households without an internet connection. This figure highlighted to us a probable deficit of internet literacy and confidence which our library could address. We now knew we had a need in our community for IT teaching, and that we needed to tailor a program to our library's clients' needs. We included a question about IT teaching in our annual library survey. This gave us an idea about what people wanted to learn, but we still needed a way to teach the content to meet the differing skill levels within the community.

Creating the Program

In January 2014 the new IT teaching program was launched. The new program had a complete different focus to previous one, as it was driven by the informational needs of the participants, rather than staff creating a structured program. The classes would be taught one on one with the participant nominating what training they required. The cost would be minimal so all who needed help could afford to attend. To manage the workload, my two library technicians and I set aside two one hour blocks a week to teach these classes at specific times. Participants could book into the class and outline what they'd like help with

during that time. The challenge for my team was preparing for the classes, but this also resulted in a diversification of our skill base. Teaching one on one has many benefits. It provides a weaker student with a safe space in which to express any concerns or confusion without judgement. It allows rapport to build between instructor and student, and with the focus on the student's needs, they learn faster and gain confidence. We surveyed our participants six months into the program and their responses were 100% positive about the program. We received great feedback about our teaching program having helped our participants overcome frustration and despair about using their computers, and some even said that attending our classes changed their lives. Participants told their friends about the classes, as soon we had a two week waiting list to book into a class. We were happy about the success of our program, but we needed to come up with a way to deal with the demand for teaching.

Using Volunteers

To cope with the amount of community members wanting to participate in our program, we further refactored our program to make way for the assistance of volunteers. Under the new structure, a participant had an initial 3 classes with a member of the Digital Team, and if they then required further help, they would be paired up with an IT buddy from our list of volunteers. The classes with the volunteer would follow the same structure—in that they were one on one with the lesson tailored to the participants needs. The volunteer led classes were free, with the focus on helping members of our community come together and help each other learn IT skills. We began using volunteers at the beginning of 2015, and so far it has been a success. Often we find that participants have gained enough confidence to go and learn on their own after our 3 staff led classes. However, some with greater needs require that

extra help from further classes with a volunteer. The needs of our community are always changing, and although the program is currently working well, in the future we will have to visit our demographics again, survey our community again and be aware of the changing needs of the members of the community and strive to meet those needs.

Conclusion

Working in a public library means working with your community. Every community is different and every community changes over time. We found that a program we had initiated in 2012 was no longer suitable in 2014. It falls within a librarian's role to be aware of community needs and to be iteratively improving library programs to meet them. The follow-on effects are overwhelmingly positive, leading to greater library use by the community and helping to justify the funding for further programs and initiatives. Cambridge Library's new IT teaching program has been a success—the result is very happy participants who are empowered by the knowledge they have gained. The positive impact the program has on them, and the impact it has on our community is significant. Researching and analysing your community to guide strategic planning and programs not only results in success for public libraries and benefits the community, but also creates high morale and a sense of achievement and enthusiasm about our work and the role of public libraries.

