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iLibraries: Maintaining Relevancy in a Mobile World

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iLibraries:

Maintaining Relevancy in a Mobile World

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Abstract

Though mobile technologies provide many new opportunities to academic libraries, the incorporation of these technologies comes with challenges. Such challenges include technological illiteracy, prohibitive cost, and conflicts with the traditional library environment.

An examination of current literature related to the topic suggests several potential solutions. Such solutions include exploring methods of technological pedagogy, the inclusion of tablets or other mobile devices in the circulating collection, and adjusting or changing traditional library policies.

A larger implication of these measures is the need to maintain the relevance and currency of academic libraries in an increasingly mobile world.

*Keywords:* mobile technologies, technological illiteracy, mobile devices
Introduction

Mobile technologies present a wealth of opportunities for inclusion in academic libraries. Along with these opportunities, however, there are also several challenges. Potential challenges include technological illiteracy, cost, equipment and software maintenance, and conflicts with traditional library policy. Solutions to these challenges comprise of educating library staff through technical blogs, committees or classes, including tablets or other mobile devices in the circulating collection, and adjusting library policies in order to accommodate mobile technology. Such measures and attempts to meet these challenges are significant when considering the larger implication of the academic library’s need to maintain relevance and currency in an increasingly mobile-centric world.

Areas for Mobile Technology Assimilation

There is great potential for use of mobile technologies within an academic library. These technologies can be used in in furthering the overall library presence and experience, in reference work, and in library instruction. Concerning user experience, some OPACs now offer the function of providing a user with options such as exporting call numbers to texts and establishing a due date reminder text system (Dresselhaus and Shrode 2012, 85). Additionally, many academic libraries now offer virtual reference through chat or text. This enables library users to communicate with reference librarians from their mobile devices regardless of whether they are in the midst of the stacks or sitting at home, thereby furthering their library experience and maintaining the library’s connection with users despite distance.

The incorporation of roaming reference in academic libraries is another possibility. Librarians can mobilize reference by utilizing devices such as tablets. This increases the
accessibility of the library to users across campus, and can help further the image of the library to one that is more dynamic, flexible and current (Dresselhaus and Shrode 2012). Additionally, tablets can be incorporated into the traditional reference transaction. The use of tablets in library reference can “facilitate more active learning by allowing students to do the searching and navigating with the iPad rather than passively watching the librarian on the computer” (Maloney and Wells 2012, 13). This allows reference interactions to take on a more instructive and dynamic role, by actively engaging the user in the process of answering his or her reference query. In order to facilitate such a process, librarians should have regular access to tablets in order to help them become more familiar with the technology.

There are also possibilities of utilizing tablets for instructional purposes within more formalized library instruction sessions. With the advent of electronic resources, distance learning and virtual reference, “technological literacy is an essential component of information literacy instruction,” and an increasingly important aspect of technological literacy is knowledge of mobile technology (Canuel, Crichton and Savova 2012, 36). Methods of incorporating mobile technologies in the classroom include the use of tablets or mobile devices during class time for demonstration, and encouraging the use of mobile technologies for learning activities outside of the classroom. This instruction style enables librarians to further their own technological skills, by challenging them to create videos and other technological learning aids for students to use outside of class time. Exploring new technology and experimenting with prototypes is an effective method of learning in itself, enabling librarians to learn the new technologies while teaching (Yelton 2012). It is essential for librarians to stay abreast of new technologies in order to best serve library users, in instruction and other capacities.
Beyond the traditional roles of an academic library, there is also the possibility of furthering outreach through mobile technologies. This can be accomplished through facilitating the creation of local collections by library users. If the library provides the mobile technologies to create digital collections, as well as hosting for such collections, it enables a stronger connection with the community as well as broadening the library’s unique collection. Several libraries across the country have taken up such initiatives, from photography collections that enable walking tours of university campuses to collections that enable a deeper, historical understanding of an entire city. In order to deliver such services, libraries can provide a circulating collection of technology for student, faculty and community use, as well as digital hosting services for user-provided data. Additionally, providing digital content creation workshops can help to further the development of such content while also serving as a marketing strategy to bring users into the library (Yelton 2012).

Also important to consider is the way that the overall presence of a library can be enhanced by mobile technologies. This includes creating mobile-friendly webpages, finding or creating database applications for easier mobile research, and standardizing accessibility to library resources across platforms and devices. Library staff can assess the mobile compatibility of library resources personally, by accessing library webpages using only mobile means. Another suggestion for testing the mobile compatibility of a website is to utilize the World Wide Web Consortium mobileOK Checker (Hanson 2011, 26). This web-based application assesses the mobile friendliness of a webpage.

A library’s mobile accessibility is essential to consider, because of both the affordability of mobile internet access and the overwhelming preference of academic libraries’ traditional undergraduate student demographic. A majority of Americans now prefer texting to phone calls,
with young adults texting the most frequently (Yelton, 20). Additionally, when catering to the young adult demographic of the traditional undergraduate student, it is important to consider resource availability. Because of the magnitude of technological advantages smartphones offer, many young adults with lower incomes now substitute home computers and broadband access with a smart phone and data plan (Yelton 2012, 32). The potential of mobile internet access replacing traditional internet access methods is supported by Pew Internet & American Life Project research, which determined that “by 2020 mobile devices will be the primary means of connecting to the Internet for most users” (Canuel, Crichton and Savova 2012, 36). This is important for academic libraries to consider -- for students without home computer access, mobile reference is a necessity.

**Challenges**

Despite the benefits such technological advances offer patrons, there are some challenges in catering to mobile technologies. Such challenges include implementation difficulties, library policy conflicts, and maintenance. These challenges can be especially daunting when considering the variety of technologies and platforms available, and the onus of librarians maintaining cutting edge technological literacy. The challenges of initiating mobile technologies within an academic library can include technological illiteracy, software or website compatibility, and the difficulty of catering to a wide array of devices.

An important aspect of implementation to consider is the cost -- both monetary and opportunity. With the addition of virtual reference comes an additional staffing need, in order to maintain both the physical and virtual reference spheres. There is also the obvious cost to the library; from the purchase of tablets or e-readers to subscription costs for virtual reference
services. Additionally, the cost of such devices can be prohibitive for some patrons. Such patrons, unfamiliar with cutting edge mobile initiatives, may be deterred from engaging in library campaigns that rely on mobile technology.

Additional concerns regarding the use of mobile technologies in academic libraries involve changes to library policy. With the use of devices intended for communication comes noise, which is not always well accepted by library patrons. Additionally, with small and expensive devices, theft becomes a concern. There is also the apprehension that, if not executed properly, such technologies can be more distracting than beneficial. Accordingly, librarians should be selective about how mobile technologies are incorporated. A tablet “should be introduced into the reference interaction only when the librarian believed its use would augment the user experience and make good use of patron time” (Maloney and Wells 2012, 13). If a patron is short on time or uncomfortable with mobile computing, forcing the use of mobile gadgets can become more of a hindrance than a help. Additionally, libraries offering circulating mobile collections need to create policies for the loss or damage of these items, including rules regarding patron purchases or downloads to the device (Yelton 2012).

Finally, once such mobile technologies are an established part of a library’s service structure, the issue of maintenance arises. With constantly updating software and new releases of mobile devices it is difficult to stay current. In a study based on a group of San Diego reference librarians studying the potential of tablets in academic libraries, “just trying to stay on top of the changing landscape of apps, functions, software and hardware issues … was challenging” (Salem, Cronin and Bliss 2012, 20). The issue of maintenance concerns circulating items, mobile devices used in reference transactions, and maintaining currency with virtual reference software.
Potential Solutions

There are several potential solutions to the challenges of incorporating mobile technologies. There are several methods of increasing staff comfort with new technologies, including online conferences, technology blogs, and peer committees, both within the library and outside of it. Faced with the implementation of iPads as a part of library services, librarians at San Diego State University formed a Library Tablet User Committee with the director of student computing. The purpose of the committee was to further staff development in regards to mobile learning. Gradually, the committee expanded to include all interested parties within the library, facilitating collaboration between departments. The open, casual learning environment allowed members to ask questions in a comfortable setting, which helped to reduce staff discomfort with new technology (Salem, Cronin and Bliss 2012). Additionally, when training library staff in the use of mobile devices, it is helpful to construct a list of “core competencies” to master, so that the training is somewhat standardized (Maloney and Wells 2012, 13).

As is expected of a changing environment, the “implementation of mobile web services creates the need to develop new policies” (Dresselhaus and Shrode 2012, 95). Accordingly, several institutions have altered traditional library policies to accommodate these services. Noise issues can be addressed by the creation of silent study floors, with the expectation that other floors in the library will have a certain amount of noise. In order to help prevent theft, library policy can be amended to allow for shorter checkout times for technological devices. Additional circulation policies must be considered in regards to circulating collections with the potential to download applications and software (Tomlin 2012). Additionally, reminder signage can help patrons to remember not to abandon expensive devices, even for short trips within the library. At
Kennesaw State University’s Horace W. Sturgis Library, small reminder cards are distributed to study areas with abandoned materials, reminding students to be more careful.

Concerning maintenance and the effects on staff workload, there are several potential solutions. The aforementioned methods of technological education also serve to keep librarians informed of updates and changes in devices and software. This is also aided by allowing all librarians the use of tablets, in order to garner familiarity and comfort with updating and maintaining devices. It is not recommended for a single person to be responsible for maintenance, because of both the sheer amount of responsibility that entails and the dependence on an individual it would create for the library (Yelton 2012, 31). Finally, in order to manage the dual fronts of virtual and physical reference, librarian duties can be divided into either sphere, to prevent overwhelming librarians with all reference fronts simultaneously.

A final and important challenge to consider is that of cost, both for the user and the library. While the issue of cost to the student can be combatted by libraries offering circulating collections of mobile devices, the question of cost to the library remains. Mobile devices and subscriptions to services such as virtual reference both present additional expenses. There is potential, however, for libraries to pair traditional funding sources with grants in order to build funds to develop a circulating mobile device collection. Additionally, some libraries utilize revenue collected from fees and fines for the purchase of special collections (Yelton 2012, 23).

**Conclusion**

It is not only beneficial for academic libraries to incorporate mobile technologies, it is essential. With a user base that increasingly prefers access through mobile devices and expects the ability to utilize such technology, it is necessary for libraries in order to maintain relevancy
and connection with their target demographics. Libraries afraid of challenges inherent in adopting new technologies have many avenues of tackling issues such as cost and technological illiteracy. Librarians must take the initiative to learn the ins and outs of current mobile technologies in order to retain relevant and current knowledge of the resources available to their stakeholders.
References


