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Book Review: Without A Net: Librarians Bridging the Digital Divide

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Review: *Without a Net: Librarians Bridging the Digital Divide*

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West, Jessamyn C. *Without a Net: Librarians Bridging the Digital Divide*. Santa Barbara, California : Libraries Unlimited, 2011. 258p. ISBN: 978-1-59884-453-5

Addressing digital divide issues provides an important collaborative opportunity for libraries to make a real difference in the lives of their patrons and community. Jessamyn C. West has written a sorely needed primer on the practical issues many libraries may encounter related to the digital divide and their patrons. West describes the digital divide as a complex issue involving social, economic, technological dynamics and sums it up as “the gap between people who can easily use and access technology and those who cannot.”¹ The book approaches this topic from many levels, that of personal experience, practical application, and theoretical understanding, so the reader not only learns the reasons why the digital divide exists but also the nuts-and-bolts of how to approach a basic technology class with patrons. The author’s tone throughout the work is informal, friendly, and in the first-person, which creates a welcoming and safe experience for the reader to reflect on their technology experiences. However, one can envision readers expecting an academic or technical handbook being put-off by the author using terms like “design-y”² and jokingly suggesting “gremlins might cause some computer problems”³ as being too informal. That said, the book still provides a great introduction to digital divide issues and technology training techniques that most any librarian can find useful.

As West notes, the digital divide is a systematic problem and it will require libraries’ collective effort to help address this concern. West points to informal and formal consortia, leveraging Library 2.0, and collaborative learning as successful examples which have empowered libraries to make a difference in the technological lives of their patrons and communities. After reading this book one can envision many other collabo-

rative opportunities to help address the digital divide such as partnering up with local high schools, community centers, senior citizens’ homes, and state-wide library organizations to work on this important issue.

West’s strength is providing insight into the challenges, stumbling blocks, and fears patrons and less technology-savvy librarians might face when interacting with technology and computers. Even if the reader already considers themselves an expert in such things as email, Internet-use, and productivity software such as Word or Excel, there is something definitely to learn about how to best approach those a little less technologically inclined. West includes practical tips and solutions to many of the basic technology questions patrons face, such as how to find information on the Internet or rudimentary hardware problems.

Additional chapter topics include technology pedagogy, basic instruction, and social software use, as well as technology troubleshooting which West calls “the largest gap that persists between people who understand technology and those who do not.”⁴ West also brings to light the need for libraries to undertake better patron feedback and to re-examine library policies which may inhibit technology use as ways to address the digital divide within the library itself. Finally the book provides a useful bibliography of resources in the appendix which will aid librarians in following up on the information in this work.

Without a Net does an outstanding job empowering librarians and patrons with technology knowledge in a friendly manner. It is strongly recommended for newer librarians, less-tech savvy librarians, and those providing basic technology instruction to patrons, as well as those interested in digital divide concerns.

Endnotes

¹ West, J. C. *Without a Net: Librarians Bridging the Digital Divide*. (Santa Barbara, California: Libraries Unlimited, 2011), p. xxiv.

² *Ibid*, p. 24.

³ *Ibid*, p. 204.

⁴ *Ibid*. p. 201.