



Laptop Lounging

Creating Comfortable, Well-Equipped Technology Space

► LINDA W. BRAUN

Recently I visited several dozen libraries in New York State to see what was up with their teen services. Not surprisingly, the level of service for teens among these libraries varied, along with the level of technology available to teens. Even those libraries with a fully staffed, separate teen space that covered an impressive square footage didn't provide technology options beyond desktop computers tethered to special furniture.

This experience got me thinking: What would be the perfect technology and technology space for teens in the library? As I reflected, I also asked librarians who work with teens what their dream would be for teen technology in their libraries. We came up with the features that follow.

Wireless Internet access

In my neighborhood, Starbucks, McDonald's, and parks—places heavily used by teens—all have wireless Internet access. Why is wireless important for teen-friendly spaces? Because it means that teens can access Internet content by using the technology that many of them already have. It means that they can use wireless-enabled phones, gaming systems, and other devices to hook into the Net. It means that they don't have to use the library's technology to get what they want when they want it in the library. No more signing up to use the computers. No more time limits. No more dealing with library rules about downloading, viewing, and listening. It's the teen's own hardware and software, so he or she can use it in any way desired. When teens have their own wirelessly connected technology in the library, the space becomes more flexible, turning into an Information Commons for research and socialization.

Laptops

If teens don't have their own laptops to access the Net wirelessly, then they should be able to use the library's laptops. With laptops for teens, the library space opens up in ways that might not have been previously imaginable. For example, if your teen space currently has big desktop computers with large monitors and boxes, they can't be moved to a comfortable location. With laptops, teens can sit where they want and make themselves at home.



Flexible and comfortable furniture

A few months ago, I visited the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center Library in New York City to see what they had done to create a successful technology space. One of my favorite features was the comfortable lounge chairs strategically placed throughout the small facility. What made those chairs particularly appealing was their foldout desks, which meant that library customers could use the chairs in a formal or informal way—with laptops on their laps or on pullout desks.

Collaborative furniture

When asked about her dreams for technology in a library space, Sarah Kline Morgan at the Cheshire Public Library in Connecticut responded, "Have the computers positioned with enough space between to allow for group use." One of my favorite collaborative spaces for technology-based work is at Mt. Holyoke College in their Information Commons. In this space are semi-oval tables with three or four chairs around them. At the straight side of each table is a large-screen monitor. At the rounded end is a keyboard. Several students can sit at the table comfortably, show and discuss their work on the large screen, and move the keyboard around so that no one student must do all the typing. When I brought a group of teens to the Information Commons, they ran to sit at the collaborative workstations—even though they weren't visiting the library to get work done. They wanted to look at the computer screen together, show each other cool stuff, and talk about it. It was a perfect chance for informal collaboration.

Outlets

A library director recently complained to me that her customers came to the library expecting to be able to recharge their devices. I was surprised that she didn't think that recharging was a service that the library should willingly provide to the community. Although wireless means that teens can connect to the Internet without a cable, it doesn't mean that their technology doesn't need to be periodically recharged. Don't be stingy with the electricity or outlets in your teen space. Make sure that teens can plug in all their devices—laptops, cell

phones, and so on. Invest in power strips and extension cords if you must. You might even want to purchase a recharging station with ports for all different types of devices. (Hammacher Schlemmer currently carries such a station for \$24.95—it recharges three devices at once.)

Multimedia software and hardware

All the librarians with whom I discussed technology spaces mentioned the importance of giving teens access to technology for creating multimedia projects, including podcasts, movies, and photo albums. According to Stephanie Iser, a librarian with the Kansas City Public Library, “At least one Macintosh should be purchased for . . . the creation of videos, music, and animation. Although these types of activities can take place on PCs, the Macintosh software is more user-friendly and allows for teens to focus on the media project rather than be bogged down with the details of figuring out a program.” At the Public Library of Charlotte Mecklenberg in North Carolina, teens record audio in the library’s podcasting booth. (See a picture of the booth in *On Air at the Library: Teens Sound Off Through Podcasting* by James Murdock, **VOYA** December 2006, page 403.) Teens in Charlotte Mecklenberg can also create animation in the library’s studio, which is set up for digital moviemaking.

If MACs with the iLife suite of products for creating multimedia are not available for teens in your library, your computers should be loaded with other content-creation software. These products include Photoshop (or Photoshop Elements, the lighter version), an HTML coding tool such as Dreamweaver, an audio-editing product such as Audacity, and a moviemaking tool such as Adobe Premiere Elements. Because content creation is a huge part of teen lives, it’s a necessary part of high-quality service.

Not only should a library provide the hardware and software for teens to create their own content, it should also provide teens with the ability to download photos and other media from their cell phones or other devices to library computers. In that way, teens can use the library’s software to manipulate content created outside the library.

Peripherals: color printers, digital cameras (still and video), and scanners

Most libraries have printers, but are color printers available for teens? Morgan and Iser say that having color printers would be beneficial; Stephanie has heard teens ask for color prints of the documents they need. Although color printers and their ink cost more than black-and-white printing (but not as much as they used to), part of the cost can be defrayed by charging for color prints.

Many teens love to take photos. Having a digital camera (video or still) is key. Images from the camera can be downloaded to library or personal computers and manipulated using the hardware and software provided. At the Public Library of Charlotte Mecklenberg, teens are able to upload photos from the library’s digital camera for use in Web-page-building classes. Don’t forget that you can also offer classes on filmmaking with the library’s digital video camera. Teens love to upload their work to **YouTube**.

At this point, scanners might seem like an old technology, but they shouldn’t be ignored. Perhaps a teen has photo prints from when he or she was younger, and would like to create a photo album online. The library comes to the rescue with the scanner, the computer hardware, and software.

Gaming consoles

Whether it’s Xbox 360, Playstation 2 or 3, the Nintendo Wii, or some other platform, the technology to which teens have access in the library should include a gaming console, along with games and peripherals. Gaming is an important part of many teen lives, enjoyed in groups and individually. It promotes learning, teamwork, critical

thinking, and problem solving—all kinds of growth that the library wants to support.

Large-screen TV

A large-screen TV can be used to show commercial movies as well as to project games and display media projects developed by teens.

Staff who know how to use the technology

It’s not fair to teens or library staff to provide all this great technology without making sure that the staff has an understanding of what it is and how it works. Without this knowledge, both teens and staff will become frustrated. When obtaining technology for teens, keep library staff informed throughout selection, purchasing, and setup processes, about why the library is making the technology available for teens and what it will be. Talk to the teens, asking them to help educate and train staff about the technology. Be sure to be proactive instead of reactive when it comes to this kind of staff development.

Technology just for teens

Face it—sharing is sometimes difficult. When a library doesn’t have enough technology to go around, it can be hard for everyone—teens, adults, and children—to share. Whenever possible, having computers and other devices just for teens makes things easier. Do what you can to obtain teen-only technology for your library.

TAKE THE FIRST STEP

Of course it’s not possible to have the perfect teen space instantly, with the perfect complement of technology. Yet it’s important to start somewhere. Look at these suggestions and think about what you can actually make happen in your library. If cost is a factor, look for funding from outside sources. Don’t just focus on the tried-and-true library grant funders. What businesses or organizations in your community have a technology focus? Perhaps they can help you to get your teen technology up and running.

The first step that you take in providing technology to teens is important. It will show teens, your colleagues, and the community that you respect the role that technology plays in teen lives. Ask the teens in your community what technologies they would like to see in the library. Talk to them about the best way to implement the technology so that it meets their needs as well as the needs of the library. Work with the teens on ground rules, policies, or guidelines that the library must develop for new and existing teen technology. Getting teens involved in the process will improve your chances of success with them and with the community at large. ■

RESOURCES MENTIONED

Adobe Premiere Elements <http://www.adobe.com/products/premiereel>

Audacity <http://audacity.sourceforge.net>

Dreamweaver <http://www.adobe.com/products/dreamweaver>

iLife <http://www.apple.com/ilife>

Recharging Station Hammacher Schlemmer http://www.hammacher.com/publish/72388.asp?promo=ho_communication

*Linda W. Braun is a New York City-based educational technology consultant with LEO: Librarians & Educators Online. She provides training, consulting, and project management for schools, libraries, and other educational institutions. She also teaches for Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science. Her latest book is **Teens, Technology, and Literacy; Or Why Bad Grammar Isn’t Always Bad** (Libraries Unlimited, 2006). Contact her at lbraun@leonline.com.*