

Every Problem is Now A Technology Problem

Navigating the Digital Divide in the COVID Era

<librarian.net/talks/vhc24>



Good evening, I'm Jessamyn West, I'm a technologist with a library background. I work at the Kimball Library in Randolph Vermont helping people with computers. I used to work in this library in Rutland, way back when. I'm going to talk a little bit about the last few years. Woof, hey? This was definitely a few years of learning and opportunities and I say that with the most arched eyebrow possible because I would have preferred maybe to learn a little less given my druthers.

I think many of us were forced out of our comfort zones not only by our jobs but with the entire re-structuring of society's interactive bits as the result of the COVID-19 virus and some people's quickly shifting needs vis a vis the library. And we still have some of the same social split with some people needing international travel advice and others still not being comfortable being unmasked in public. Let's talk about that. This says it's a story about COVID but really it's more of a story about technology.



For me the crux of working in technology generally and at libraries in specific is this idea of "turtles all the way down" which is a nerd saying but it deserves a wider audience. The idea alludes to one description of the world (in Hindu, Chinese and some Indigenous American mythologies) where the world rests on the back of a turtle or sometimes elephants on a turtle. The question is asked what the large turtle is on... another turtle. In fact it's "turtles all the way down"

So in the library, someone comes in with a basic question about their email, but then it turns out that they don't know their password, and so we go to reset it, but THEN it turns out that they don't know their secret question to reset their password, and then the fraud-protection on the email account won't let them take the next step unless they are coming from a familiar IP address (i.e. home and not the library) and so in order to help with their email problem, you have to fix anywhere from 2-10 other tech problems first.

Kind of like that Sagan quote "If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe."

Things I learned

TECH THINGS

Zoom. Zoom administration. Zoom fancy backgrounds. Zoom transcripts. Zoom captions. Every different vaccination website. Twitch (for trivia). Kahoot (for trivia). Making templates on Wikipedia. Editing Wikidata. Ordering online from Thrive Market. Ordering online from Imperfect Foods. Ordering tacos online. Ordering groceries for curbside pickup. Curbside printing pickup. How to use TikTok. &c.&c.

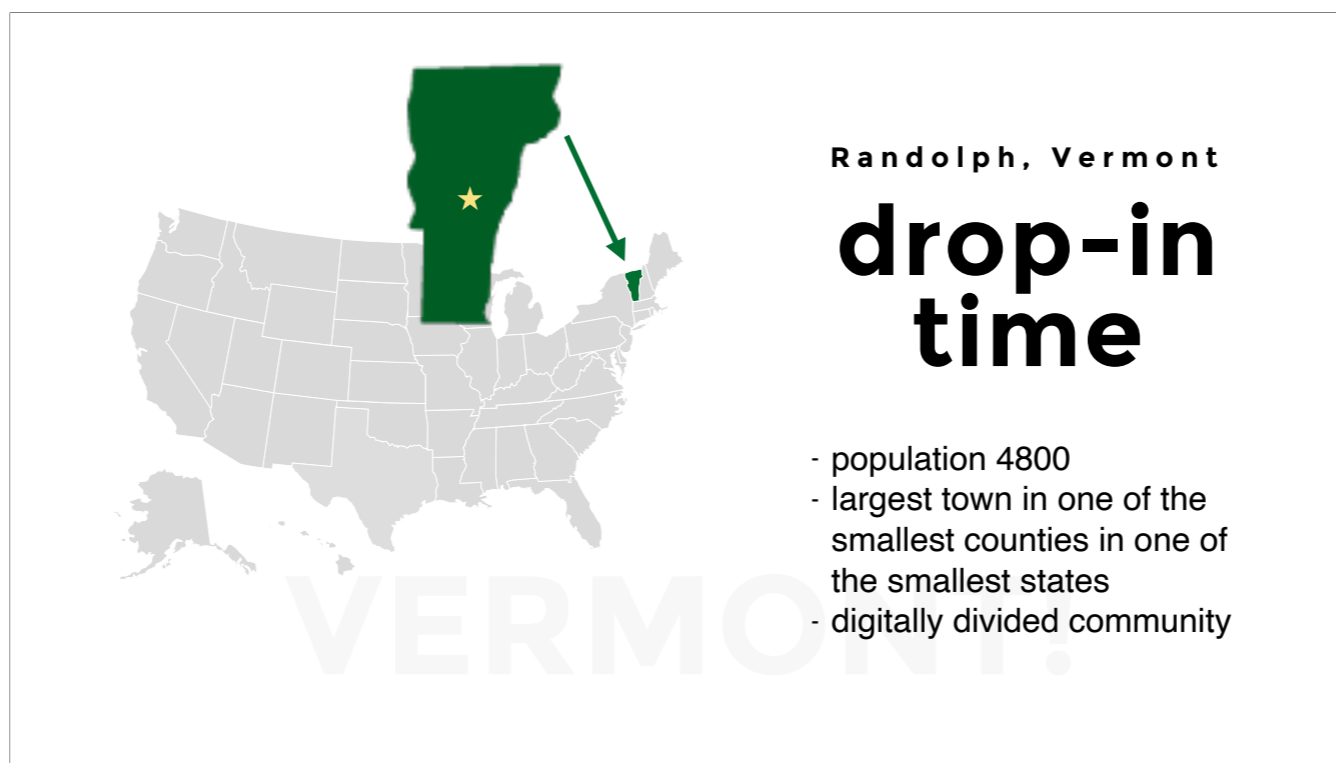
NON-TECH THINGS

Using a mandoline. Cooking a perfect dutch pancake. Playing a LOT of different board games. Eating low fat so my gallbladder stays happy. Identifying countries in Africa I was iffy on. Being an ALA Chapter Councilor. Working with the State Library for the Blind. Darning sweaters. Making matzoh ball soup. Cleaning out a barn. Fan repair. Perfecting applesauce. Four-season outdoor exercise.



COVID made this type of situation worse because digitally divided people had more technology between them and the things and people and stuff that made up their lives. And this affected them, and us at the library. And I should mention at the outset, I like learning things. So being in a situation of enforced learning isn't the worst for me. I also live alone, and mostly work from home, so was able to manage my personal situation decently these past years. My houseplants thrived. It turns out I like traveling less.

Many people did not have my fortune here, or just don't like to learn stuff. Maybe it's difficult for them for various reasons, maybe they've got **a lot of other things going on** and learning can take a back seat for now. So one of my main operating principles with my work has been least-intrusive-but-most-helpful-help. Least intrusive can also be a personal boundary which I'll talk about a little later.



(I know in person people may know this but for the online audience) I live in a small town—which is big for Orange County—in a small state. COVID didn't hit us quite as hard as it did many places. Our governor was a mostly sensible person about it and showed decent leadership, as has our state library and for that I am grateful. However!

For me, besides talking to people like I am now, my job is usually writing and researching digital divide issues and running a little thing I call drop-in time where people come in to the Randolph library on Thursday afternoons and ask me their technology questions. Anything at all, and we try to puzzle it out together. There are often multiple people in at the same time, or were, in the before times, and part of the usefulness of drop-in time was people listening to what other people were having issues with. I like listening to them talk to each other when I'm helping someone else with a thing, I think it's useful.



Randolph, Vermont

drop-in time

- mostly older people
- mostly older technology
- many folks working with multiple challenges



Here's an example of us all gathered around a library table. That's Brian on the outside, he works at the local stove factory and is a serious bird watcher. He's trying to figure out how to get his Bruins tickets on his phone so he can show the people at the gate when he goes to see a game. Whatever solution we give him needs to WORK. That's Eliot, my intern, next to him. Eliot was 15 and also learning some people skills because he's very good with computers already. Martha in the back is working on her anti-marijuana website on her ancient laptop, and Sally on the right is trying to figure out why her calendar won't update on iCloud. We've since gotten rid of that microfilm reader.

Digital intermediation for **everything**

*food... communication... entertainment... school...
work... shopping... EVEN THE LIBRARY*



March 17th 2020 was the first day I remember stuff really closing down though it may have been sooner than that. Our library in town was open by appointment during part of the summer (when Vermont went 99 days without a COVID death) but closed back down again as weather and COVID stats worsened. Opened again July 2021, closed again in November 2021. Stayed closed throughout that entire winter. It was a long winter.

And since we weren't really... ready (can you ever be ready?) there was a lot of scrambling to make sure people had their basic needs met. And, as I said before and I say now: every problem immediately became, at some level, a technology problem. And me, as a local technologist—without a bunch of other mitigating issues like kids at home or a job I needed to go to—became many people's local tech resource. Here are some of the things I did. Oddly, or maybe not, a lot of it isn't really about technology.

1. Get Connected



The first step, as we retooled to meet our new challenges was to make sure people were connected. This could mean a lot of things. For some people it was the basics of literally getting internet into their homes, for others it was finding the people in their support network or bubble who would be able to help them with basic things in a COVID-safe way. Mutual aid networks sprung up in communities, some supported by the local libraries.

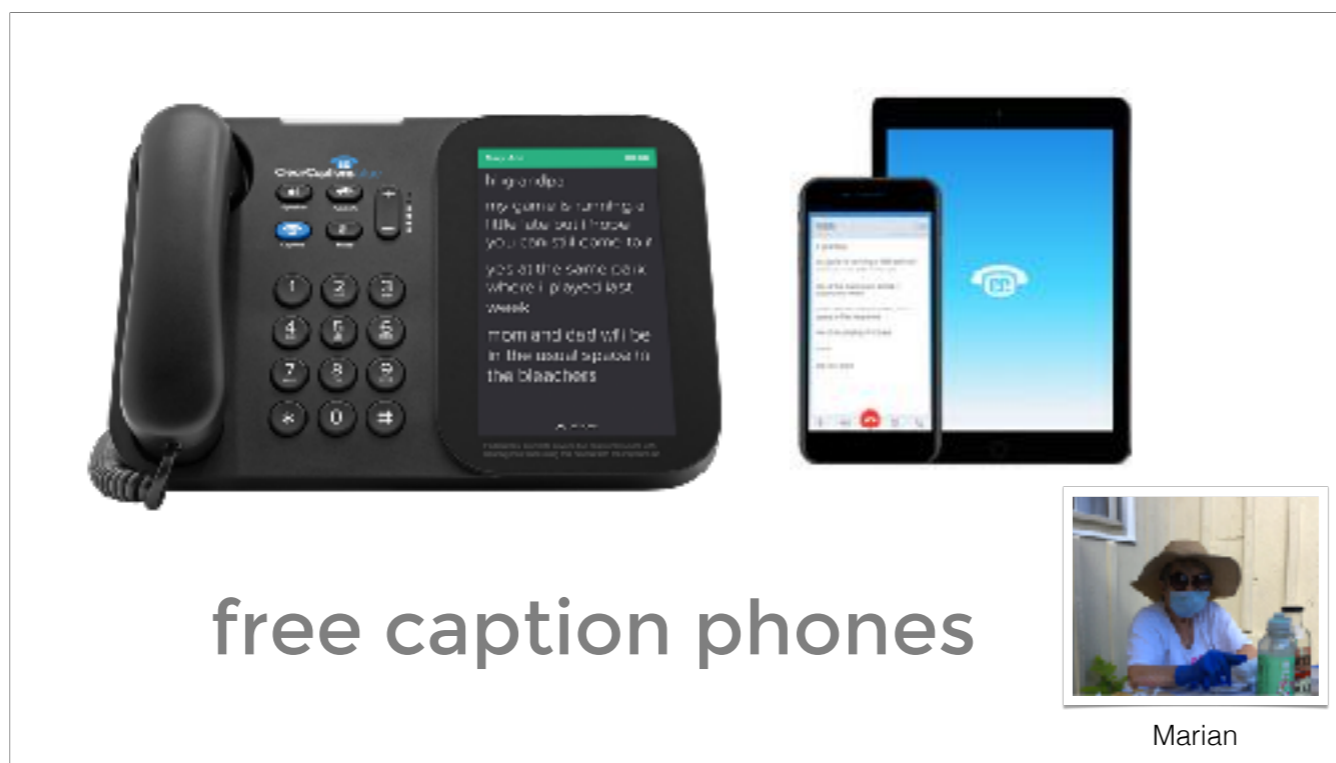
The good news was, after the initial panic, there was also some money for this. I have a friend who lived in a rural location in town where their only option was poor cell service and no broadband but our local fiber internet company got money to build out their network and now he has broadband at home.

Not always digitally...



The digital divide is about connectivity, but in a lot of different ways. One way was just people not having internet available. One part of that was people not being able to afford it. Many tech companies pooh pooh this idea that money is the issue, claiming people just don't want access. Research has shown this isn't true and it's one of the problems that the Emergency Broadband Benefit was designed to address.

Looking into the people, families in particular, who didn't have internet at home and who needed it for online school, identified other problems, like logistical problems (a turtle on top of a turtle). A family lived up a 1/2 mile driveway and someone would need to pay to get internet to the house when it was available at the road. This wasn't just money. This was finding a person to dig a trench, and finding the money to pay THAT person. So we leaned on our networks, making phone calls and organizing. This screenshot is the Randolph Area Mutual Aid Network. It's... not the best website. Part of what I helped do this year was just helping people make their websites look better and work better. This website is still online but it's what we nerds call "abandonware." It's not being updated and in some ways that may be worse than having no website.



And last, phone calling. It wasn't just about computers. I'm one of those GenX people who doesn't like the phone but for many (most) people it became a real lifeline. We had a rural library in Georgia (Vermont) who figured out who their library frequent flyers were and made phone calls "Hey how are things. Did you know the library has...?" Worked great locally, got mixed feedback from social media people in different communities. One of the things they found was that the "frequent fliers" weren't all older people, like they had suspected, and most people were happy for the call and to hear that the library was still there for them.

From an accessibility standpoint, I have a friend, Marian, who is very hard of hearing, and she told me about Caption Phones. And then I could tell other people about them.

VERMONT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

ABLE Library

ABLE Library
AUDIO, BRAILLE, LARGE PRINT, EBOOKS

Home > Search Results > Full Title Display

Old dogs, old friends : : enjoying your older dog

Search result 1 of 2295 from 1985 - 1988

Title: Old dogs, old friends : : enjoying your older dog

Book Number: D0637532

Name: Wilcox, Martin
Nalovica, Chris.

Title Status: Active

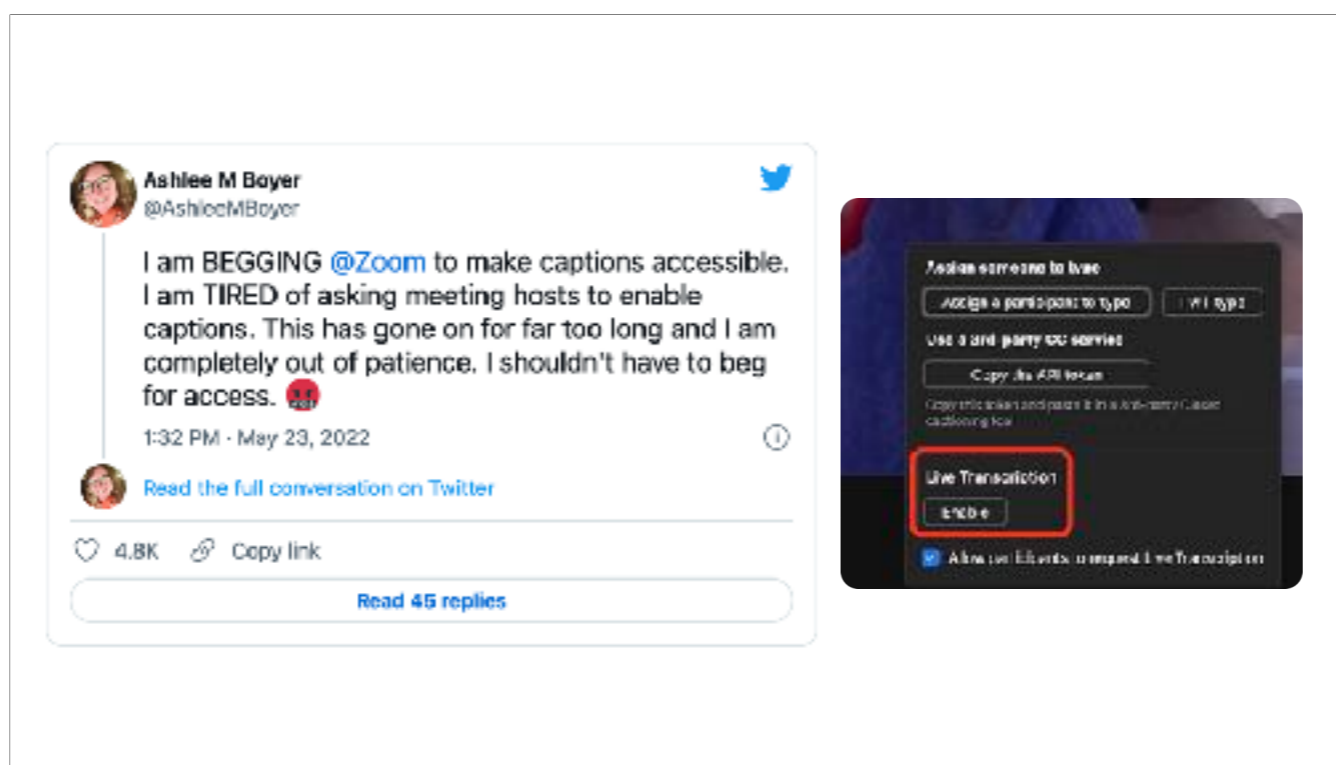
Medium: Digital Book

Download Link: [Downloadable talking book.](#)



ABLE Library

People with access to a phone, even if they weren't great at using online tools, could contact the ABL (Audio, Braille, Large print, Ebooks) Library who could get them books in a lot of different formats. Honestly I wish more people knew about this amazing service. Now that our Vermont state librarian has moved to the National Library for the Blind, maybe they will.



And speaking of ABLE, one of the things that was the fussiest was figuring out accessibility tools on all the various teleconferencing apps. Zoom got sued in December of 2020 and made "live captions" (i.e. those not typed in by a person) available to all, not just paid, accounts but it's still a headache to enable them within an account and they used to have to be turned on for EACH session you want to use them in, AND they don't work in breakout rooms. It's shameful.

You remember Marian, she was attending Zoom book groups but without captions. Library staff had tried to enable them and couldn't figure it out ("We've spent months!") and gave up, She asked me to try. It's worth remembering that library patrons aren't always the only ones digitally divided, staff may be as well.

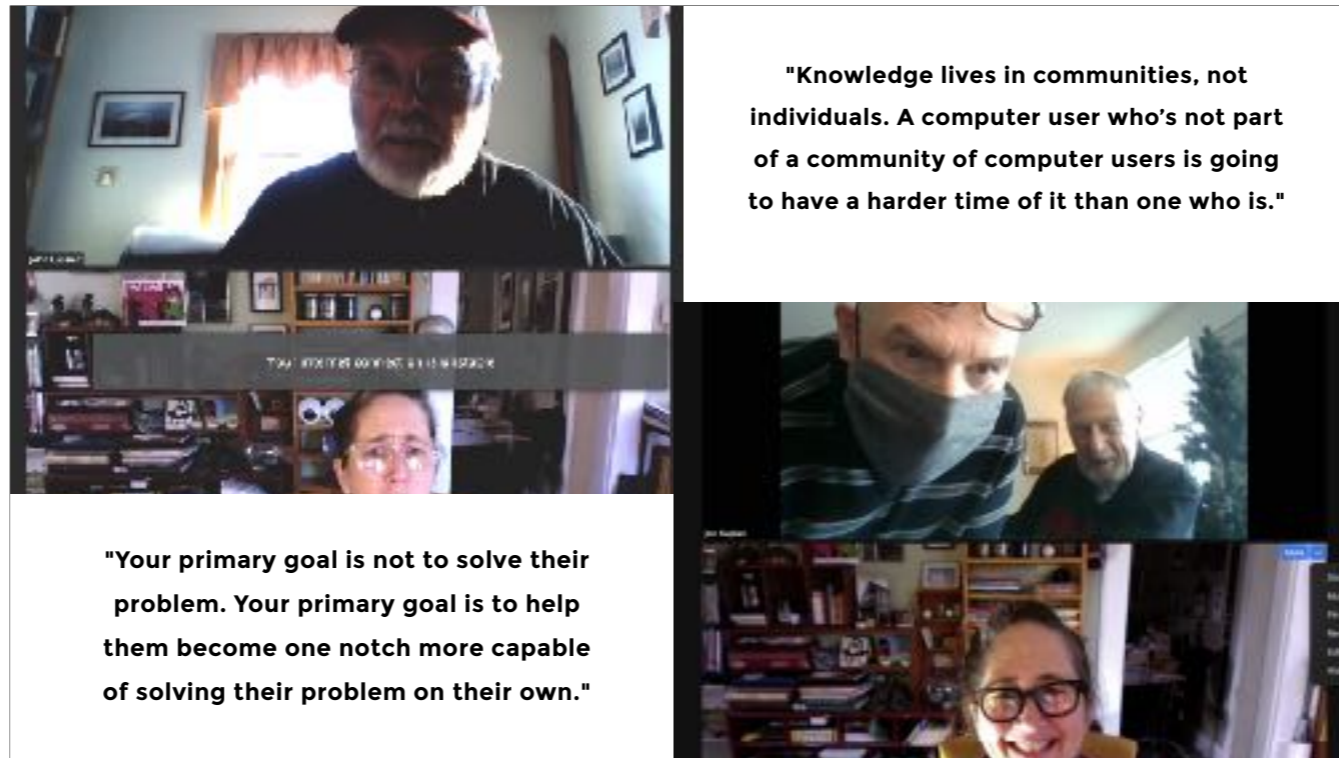
If public libraries are for everyone, if we have accessible bathrooms and elevators/lifts/ramps, we should have this down. I think it's weird, sometimes, that we don't.

"Is this a technology problem or an accessibility issue?"



Above all I'd be asking and re-asking this question. Can someone not use their computer or are they just having trouble with a mouse? Is someone bad at email or do they need the computer's font size enlarged? Are they bad with the iphone or could they use learn to use dictation instead of typing? How many of these supposed technology issues are just people not having the right settings on the technology they currently have?

Because, the two issues are approached in similar ways, but the people or resources you may enlist to help you may be different.



The trend, among all these options was scaffolding. One skill leads you to the next skill. Linking someone to a person with a skill isn't quite as good as teaching them the skill but it helps get you there. One of my foundational documents is a short list by a technologist called Phil Agre called *How to Help Someone Use a Computer*.

Here are two short excerpts from it on the slide. That's me on the left trying to help John fix a corrupt Outlook file while my iffy internet threatens to hang up on me. And on the left it's me and another Jon with his dad Mel who was 95. Mel needed to get something notarized which the laws said I could do over Zoom (not anymore!), but he needed help getting on Zoom to do that. His son came over and we got it all sorted.

John on the left could probably learn some techniques like Googling support files or maybe even calling tech support. Jon on the right was the human connection who could help Mel take the steps he needed to solve his problems which were not technological. Knowing the difference, who can help themselves and who is going to always need some help, is an important part of this work.



2. Learn Tools

Practice, practice, practice...
Break tasks down into manageable parts

I showed you a few of the tools in the last section but here are a few more and you'll notice a lot of them are analog. The most important aspect, for me, was taking things down to the basics. If people are comfortable with email, try to funnel things—a tech support link, a link to a Zoom chat—through that. Some things required in-person attention when our in-person options weren't available. In some cases—people who wanted to get rid of a laptop but needed a hard drive wipe, people who had a new ipad and needed it set up—we'd do drop-off service.

So we still did drop-in time, we just did it virtually. People would call the library, or email me, and we'd start a conversation. So less "Come by the library between 2-4 on Thursday", and more "Tell me what's up and I'll see how I can help" and the tasks became iterative, getting the results from one set of tasks, and rolling them in to the next until we got to where they wanted.

Searching the Internet

While there is no sure-fire way to access the entire Internet, there are many ways to search for or specific parts of it.

How to do a Search

1. you will need the web address (URL) of the search site you want to use. Some popular ones include
 - <http://google.com> and <http://yahoo.com> for general internet searching & also for news, images and shopping
 - <http://www.libraryofcongress.gov> for images and text in the Library of Congress' American Memory Project
 - <http://www.libraryofcongress.gov> for searching selected sites on specific subjects, very handy interfaces
2. Type in the web address in the address bar of your browser and hit the Enter key or your keyboard or click the Go button on the screen.
3. You will go to a page with a search box, enter your search terms and click the search button. You'll see a page of results that match the words you entered.

Search Terms & Tips

- do not use full sentences
- put phrases in quotes "White River" "Uncle Sam" "Yield choice"
- capitalization doesn't usually matter but spelling does

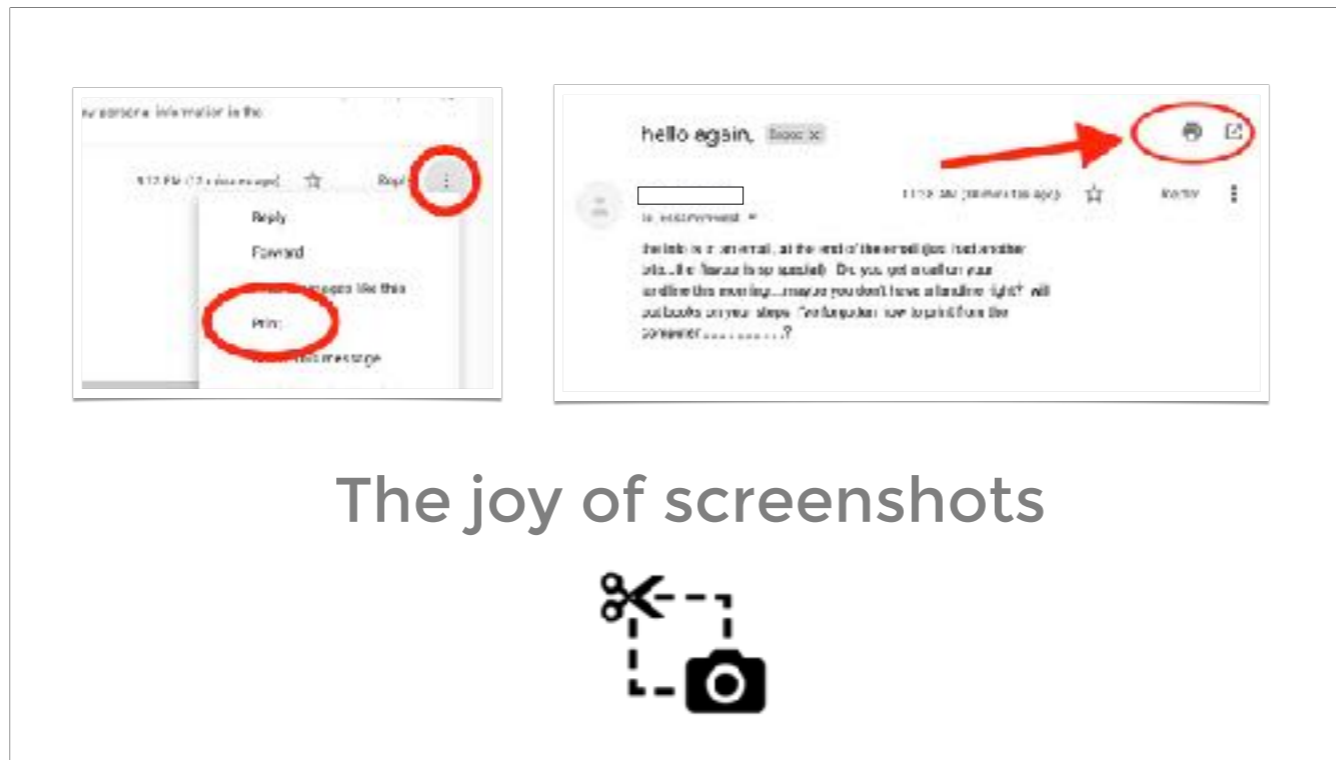
Search Strategy

1. Figure out what you are looking for
2. Describe what you are looking for, terms, sites, place names, proper names
3. Do one search & work with the results
4. Refine your search and try again

The joy of handouts


Recognizing (in 2020 and 2021 in particular) that people, more than usual, had **time**. This meant that in all but the direst emergencies we could do our slow-motion scaffolding and not have to fix things all at once. So we'd send home some instructions, maybe with a handout (print or PDF) and then circle back with them to see how it went. Often novice users would feel bad if the advice we'd given them hadn't worked, so it was a delicate conversation to try to figure out if they were where they wanted to be.

This is Ronni my former landlady also in her nineties looking at a handout I made her, just drew with a pen and paper, that was a diagram of her touchpad showing her where to click and where not to. One of the things I hear often in drop-in time is people regretting that things don't come with manuals anymore. I'd often mention that they still do, but those manuals are now PDFs (one more turtle away) which then starts a new branch of support. People want a list of steps and what they wind up with is a flow chart or a diagram. I sympathize!



For things that had a lot of fiddly setups—users often have a very difficult time when you're telling them to click a thing that isn't apparent on the screen until they've clicked the OTHER thing, who can blame them—I'd often give people a set of screenshots outlining the thing. FIRST click this, THEN look for this other thing and click that. I'd write long emails with the instructions inline. People could keep the information in email (works for some) or print them (works for others).


Or, if they were looking at something on their computer that they didn't understand and couldn't explain I'd have them take a photo with their phone and send it to me. Sometimes people could use Zoom or Skype's screenshare option, or Windows Remote Assistance for Windows users. And I'm not a hotshot in every teleconferencing tool's screensharing options, but I could usually Google (or Duck Duck Go) "How to screenshare with Skype" and get something decently accurate fairly quickly.



"How do I talk to the tech support people?"

Coaching and morale

The joy of calling tech support



And sometimes people would have a situation, maybe with their home internet, maybe with a device, that couldn't be fixed remotely. It was helpful for people to have the problem somewhat limited and understood, but then they'd have to call someone for help, a situation many of them did not feel good about and did NOT want to do. Sometimes drop-in time would highlight the "streetlight effect" where people only search for something where it's easiest to look. I get it, but it was worth gently redirecting.

I'd talk them through how to have that support phone call, maybe be available by text while they were doing it. This is Sharon's phone, something's wrong with the screen. She needed to call someone to see if it was fixable and I talked her through how to describe what she was seeing.

This came up again just a few weeks ago when we had that terrible winter storm. I couldn't get out of the driveway for a day and Irene's email was broken which was leaving her pretty isolated (this was actually due to Comcast/Xfinity's data breach making them make everyone reset their passwords, no love Comcast) and I had to call her and then tell her how to call tech support.

**"You've forgotten
how many things
you once assumed
that the interface
would be able to
do for you."**



"You know, to save stuff..."

Of course patience is part of this. Really honestly believing in your mind that this is work worth doing and that people learn at their own speeds and in their own ways.

One of the things I think I like the most about this work is remembering how many different ways there are to "do computers" and seeing the creative and inventive ways people use them to solve problems once they can get them to follow (some) instructions. I've forgotten what it was like when computers were full of endless possibilities. Not necessarily in a bad way, but I enjoy that energy from people.

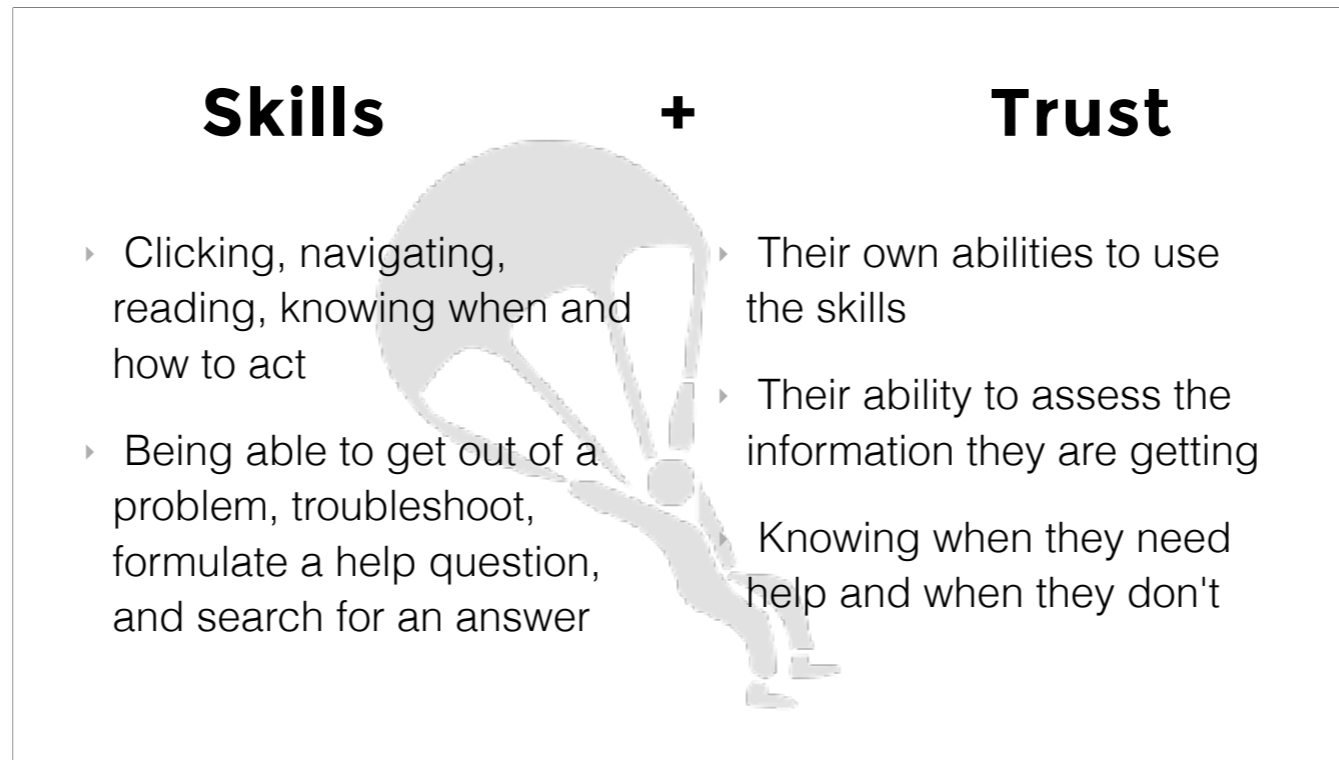
This is a favorite recent example on the right side. I was helping a woman try to figure out where her documents were saving. Microsoft would very badly like her to save stuff in their cloud. She very much did not want that. I showed her how to click the "save" icon in MS Word, you know the floppy disk. "The bank?" she said. "The... what?" "You know, where you SAVE stuff" O_O



3. Build confidence

A lot of my work isn't computer work at all, it's helping people get incrementally better at a task or skill that is challenging for them, managing the psychological aspect of it. I think that can be what differentiates library technologists from the average "person who is good at computers."

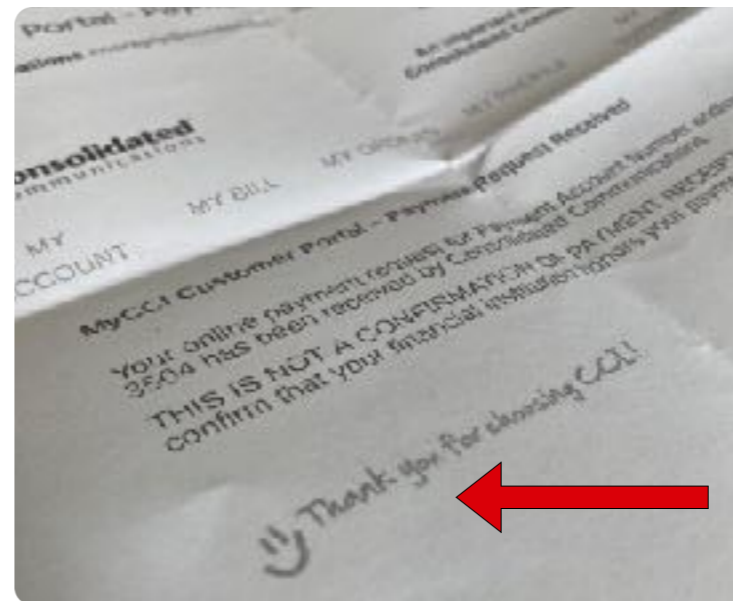
We have **empathy** and we can use that to help people feel better about their interactions, not just learn the rote interactions. And that's what keeps people moving forward.



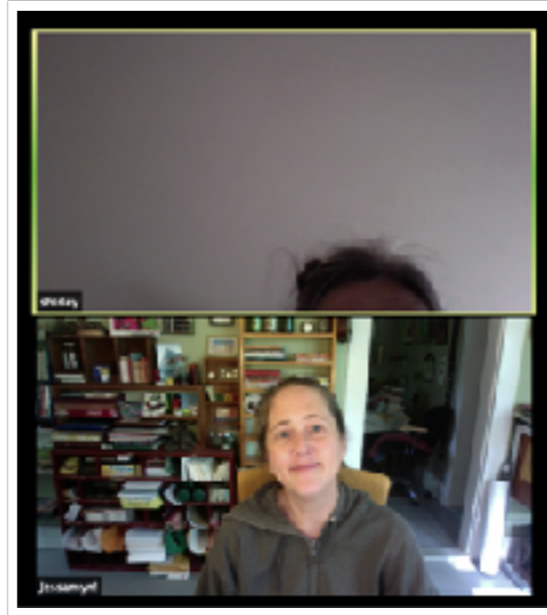
A digital divide concept that I think is helpful is the idea of **digital readiness**. This is a slightly older concept but I think it still applies. People need to not only be able to do the mechanics of technology but they need to learn to do more sophisticated things like troubleshooting and discerning things like what is a scam website and what is a real website. Especially this past year, my word! These things take time and some of it is really a personality thing. But working on confidence can help.

Sometimes it's as much telling people about what they **don't** need to do as what they do in the face of advertisers or their friends telling them otherwise. Do you need to pay for virus protection? No you do not. Do you need to use two factor authentication for your email account (which is a hassle because you don't have a cell phone) No you do not, but it's a good idea when you are able. Do you need to upgrade to a more expensive DSL package because the one you have isn't working? Unlikely. Should a tech support call take two hours? No it should not.

"Is this email legit or is it some kind of phishing scam?"



Here's an example of why this is important. This is an image of a (printed) email that one of my drop-inners got. She had had to make a payment over the phone for an overdue phone bill. She got an email from the telco that looked like this. It had a weird image at the bottom that said "Thanks for choosing CCI" It looked weird to Connie (who is forever getting hollered at by her kids to NOT GET SCAMMED) so she called the telco to ask if their bills had this little image. They said no (they don't know) and connected her to the fraud department who also said no. So Connie, who feels vulnerable and unsure, goes to the bank and talks to THEIR fraud department who suggests closing her account and opening a new one. Which she does with all the hassles that involves, all over a goofy email signature and a bunch of people who didn't know it existed.



- Zoom room practice
- Email practice
- Texting practice
- Ebook practice
- "Get an app" practice
- Password practice

A lot of what I did during the intensive COVID years was help people practice. Practice sending an attachment. Practice sending a text. Practice Skyping. Practice getting on Zoom. This is Shirley who had a violin recital for a family member she did not want to miss but also didn't want to show up not knowing what she was doing. We worked on straightening out her camera, learning to turn it off, then on again. How to mute. How to unmute. Other people maybe wanted to use their phone to do a thing "My friend told me there is a bird call app..." but didn't feel confident with the various app stores on mobile devices and wanted to be told "I think this is the one they mean, do you want to try getting it and let me know if you need help?" and sending a link. I downloaded SO MANY APPS this year just so I could get screenshots to send people so they could get started. Time well spent.



4. Outreach

aka build community...
before you need it.

All of this only works if people know you are there. I made friendly videos for the library newsletter. I posted "how to ask a good question" posts on the local mailing list. I let the mutual aid networks know I was a person who could help. When I was notarizing things for people I asked if they needed help with other things. When I did tech support interactions I let people know I was a notary. My library was not the most tech-savvy before Covid and in some ways it was challenging for them, but in other ways, it worked well with what most of the community needed. I did some "Learn about the internet!" classes for a library in the next town (population 900) in February 2021 and it was their first online programming during the pandemic. And it's been gratifying to see that they have done more virtual programs since.

ONLINE = EVERYWHERE

local=Vermont redefining local

An odd side effect was that while in person visits dropped to low numbers, program attendance for online programs increased measurably. Libraries could "go in together" on a program and make it available to a wider audience. People who wouldn't drive to a program at night could attend from home. We made a statewide calendar to show people what events were available to them.

The image shows a screenshot of a website's event calendar for June 2021. The calendar is a grid with columns for each day of the week (Monday through Sunday) and rows for each week. The title of the calendar is "Events for June 2021". The calendar contains several event listings, some of which are highlighted in red text. The events are organized by date, with some events spanning multiple days. The interface includes a search bar at the top and a navigation menu on the right side.

Libraries also worked together in ways that we really hadn't before which was a next-level technology thing made possible with a shared state association website, a few people who wanted to add events, and a willingness to open up our programming to more than just the people in our own communities. The geographical divisions (which in Vermont can be the difference between getting a library card for free or paying for one) were less important than finding ways to serve our communities and each other.

Vermont Humanities started doing online programming and now hybrid programming is still part of their offerings.

Don't forget...

Good Boundaries

You can't solve every problem

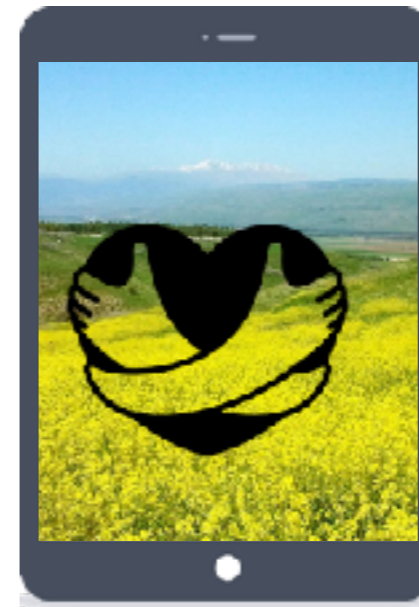


Know when to refer people to other people or organizations that are better-suited for helping them.

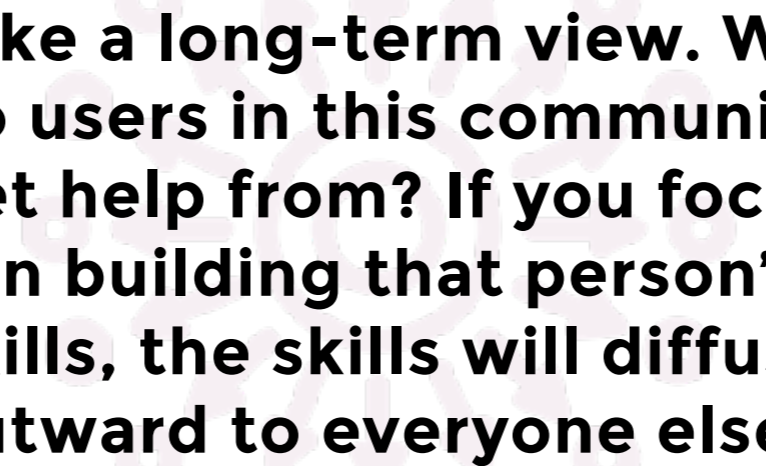
Put on your own oxygen mask first



Self-care is a slightly tired mantra but you can be more helpful to other people if you have some time to refresh, rejuvenate and unwind.



One of the things that made this work the most usefully for ME was having boundaries. No I won't call tech support for you (but I'll coach you how to call). No I won't type that letter for you (but I can teach you to use dictation). No I can't tell you what computer to buy (but I can tell you which ones will meet the specs you need and give you some suggestions for where to buy them at a reasonable price). It can be hard, if you're in a service profession and you're helping people with difficult problems, to not give 110% and then have nothing left for you. Finding a balance is also part of this work.



"Take a long-term view. Who do users in this community get help from? If you focus on building that person's skills, the skills will diffuse outward to everyone else."

And as a final note, I want to mention that learning to be mindful of access issues is an awareness that COVID gave us that we should all hold on to. Most people have been comfortable getting back to pre-COVID routines but many also aren't, or can't. They are also people in our community. We should keep an awareness that these skills we learned, these ways of interacting and being together even when we can't, are part of our forever toolkit now because we still will need them.

This is my last quote from Mr Agre. I think about people like Marian, and Shirley, and Ronni, and Mel, and Brian, and Martha, and Sally, and John and Jon, and Connie and Irene. Each person who comes to drop-in time, or who gets help from the library to get just one step better at using the computer, they help the other people in their communities, maybe not even library people, maybe not even technology people (yet). And every time we say "Yes a thing is possible." or "Hey you can do that!" or "We can fix this." the more we're helping people, all the people, in our community weather not just this particular cataclysm, but potentially others (The work I did during the depths of COVID helped people who just were under a foot of surprise snow in April.), building resilience as we build skills and confidence.

Thank you. Questions?

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