Circulation on the Go –
Implementing Wireless Laptop Circulation in a State University Academic Library

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Abstract

In 2004, Sampson-Livermore Library at The University of North Carolina at Pembroke, began circulating laptops to its patrons. After a small pilot project, full scale implementation occurred and the service proved to be very popular. Policies and procedures were adjusted at several steps along the way to accommodate lessons learned from the circulation desk. Sampson-Livermore Library now circulates laptops, iBooks, portable DVD players, and mp3 players, in addition to peripheral equipment. Circulation of library equipment has skyrocketed, as this has become one of the library's signature services.

Keywords: Circulation, Procedures, Forms, Laptops, DVD Players, mp3 Players

Pilot Project

In 2003, Sampson-Livermore Library began investigating the possibility of circulating wireless laptops to students to use in the library, especially for group work. The University of North Carolina at Pembroke is a rural school with one of the highest diversity rates in the nation, and supports 5,827 full time students and 255 full time faculty. As enrollment at the University increased, the funds became available to launch a pilot project. Four HP laptops were purchased and in spring 2004, the library began to circulate laptops.

The initial loan period for the laptops was two hours and the fines set at $10.00 per hour with a 15 minute grace period. The laptops were cataloged as reserve items and included pop-up messages in the item record to prompt staff to verify parts at check out and check in. The replacement cost for the laptops was $1500.00, and prices for each part were available as well. To check out a laptop, a university-affiliated patron had to have a picture

identification that was, and still is, held for the duration of the period in which the person had the laptop. These were clipped to a slip in which the staff person noted the number of the laptop and the time of check out and check in, so that if any problems were to arise, we would know which patron was responsible. Each laptop was circulated with a carrying bag and headphones were available for check out separately. The patron also had to read and sign the library's two page laptop agreement (Appendix A) at each checkout. We found this to be very time consuming, especially during peak check out periods between classes. We also found that students were the main source of patrons for this new service, with few to none of the University's faculty and staff taking advantage of the opportunity.

The first semester of the pilot project, we had 108 laptop circulations, which we considered very successful. The decision was made to expand the project. For the following year, fifteen new HP laptops would be purchased to add to the four already in circulation. Additionally, in conjunction with the University's Digital Academy, five mac iBooks would be added for use by faculty, staff, and students approved by the Academy to use the equipment. Preparations began for a full scale implementation of this popular service.

Full Speed Ahead

While waiting for the new equipment to arrive, a task force met to discuss the pilot project, and what changes would be necessary based on things that had been learned in the pilot project, and with the idea that we would be circulating almost five times as many computers as in the pilot project. We wanted to be sure to have our ducks in a row before just handing over the new equipment to the circulation staff and letting the patrons have at it. If there is one thing I have learned over the last several years of working in libraries, is that a little planning ahead saves a lot of work in the end, and I wanted to make sure that my staff and I were prepared for the expected onslaught. In our planning several issues were tackled

and resolved as the way was paved for full scale implementation.

Our first item on the agenda was the collaborative effort with the Digital Academy. Not only would we be circulating the five iBooks, but one of the larger study rooms upstairs was converted into a Mac Lab. Both the lab and the iBooks were to be limited to those individuals that had participated in one of the Academy's training sessions and were approved to use this specialized equipment. In order for circulation staff to limit access to the lab and the equipment, we needed a way to identify authorized individuals that was able to be frequently updated by the Digital Academy and that was readily accessible from the circulation desk. It was decided that the Digital Academy would maintain a web page with an alphabetic list of authorized individuals which would be bookmarked at each circulation workstation. When patrons request access to the macs, circulation staff verify their name on the list, but otherwise these circulate just as the other laptops do, albeit with different parts to verify. At a busy circulation desk, keeping things as simple and consistent as possible for staff and patrons is the key to smooth operations.

After realizing how time consuming having to complete the laptop agreement was at a busy circulation desk (that had also just had all the DVDS moved from the stacks to behind the desk), it was decided to move to a once a semester laptop agreement. These were kept on file in the circulation office, and pop-up message placed in each patron record when the form is completed. At the end of each semester the pop-up messages are erased, the forms shredded, and we start the next semester fresh. After the first time they have filled out the full agreement, they need only initial the check out slip clipped to their ID card. Patrons have really have appreciated the saved step.

They also appreciated some of the new features of the new laptops. The new laptops were also HP, but were now $2500.00 and had CD re-write drives, DVD drives, and a number of usb ports for usb drives. As so many people had switched over to usb drives, the new

laptops eliminated floppy drives in favor of the advanced technology. Wireless printing capabilities were added, and the wireless connections were much improved. Each laptop circulated with its own power cord and headphones. A second power cord was purchased for each laptop and kept in the powered storage cart for overnight charging. Each laptop was numbered and labeled for in-house use and programmed with Deep Freeze to keep staff from having to do more maintenance than necessary.

Another step taken to save staff time for circulation staff was to extend the loan period for the laptops from two to three hours. We found that we were doing a lot of renewals for people that just needed the computers for another half hour or forty five minutes. While we still have a number of laptop renewals, this extension has definitely reduced the potential number.

With our plans laid out, implementation proceeded full speed ahead. Laptop checkouts quickly predominated circulation desk functions and statistics skyrocketed.

Fiscal Year	Laptop Circulations	Percent Increase
Spring 2004	108	N/A
2004-2005	805	645%
2005-2006	3921	387%
2006-2007	5682	191%

While the per cent increase in laptop transactions is slowing down as the equipment has become more integrated into circulation functions, the absolute number of transactions continues to grow with the ever increasing popularity of the service.

Though we remain constantly amazed at the number of people that will take the time to have us check out a laptop only to keep it fifteen minutes and return it saying they just had to check their email, apparently unaware that had they just stepped over to the wall terminal they could have been finished in half the time. But – we're happy to count their circulation,

and chalk it up to one of those things we'll just never understand.

Lessons Learned

Some patron and staff behaviors we can understand, and more learn from. Despite the best planning, you never truly know how something will work until you try it, and often you realize quite quickly things you need to adjust.

- *Macros make life easier.* In order to make our switch to a once-a-semester laptop agreement, we added messages to the patron records indicating that they had a form on file. We found that if your patron database is large, you need to be able to do this through a global update as updating individual patron records would be counterintuitive. To globally delete the message we have to search for the exact text of the message, which is supposed to be "Laptop Agreement on File." However, we found that occasionally, the message was not entered with the exact phrase. In order to make sure that this field was consistently populated and not leave a lot of clean up after the global update, we created a macro at each workstation. Now just pressing F12 enters the appropriate text, and end of the semester field deletion is a breeze.

- *Patrons don't read the form.* If staff make occasional errors, patrons are even worse for their inattention to detail. Even though they only have to fill it out once a semester, patrons still don't read the laptop agreement form even though some will stand there and look at it. (Ok, *occasionally* someone will read it – but, truly, that's a rarity.) Patrons never seem to notice the prominent listing of the rental fee for laptops returned overdue, and we have had quite a few get very upset about their fines. They also have missed that they can't take the laptops from the building, and we've even had to chase a few people. They have let their children use them, a clear violation of the agreement that only University affiliates may use them, and they get quite upset if they are denied a renewal, even with other patrons waiting for them. But as with many other things

- *As soon as you get rid of something, patrons want it.* There's a Murphy in every library, and ours is no exception. While you can't please everyone, we do try to fulfill patron requests when we can. When we eliminated floppy drives believing that most of our constituents were using usb drives, we found quite quickly that there were still a lot of floppies out there. So we purchased two external floppy drives that plugged into the usb ports of the laptops, and soon expanded this to five. While they are rarely used anymore, they were used quite extensively in the 2004-05 year and even a good bit the following year. This definitely taught us to stage transitions a bit more slowly.

- *Keep the laptops close to the circulation desk.* This is a lesson we have learned, but are unfortunately limited in our capability to solve. The floor plan of our circulation department is not conducive to the high volume of circulations this service receives. Because it is the only locking room in our suite that all staff have access to, the powered storage cart for the laptops is kept in our storage room with the staff photocopier and Ariel workstation. This room is around the corner from the circulation desk, out of sight of the desk itself. This makes it difficult for staff assigned to the desk to retrieve the laptops. Our solution has been (since we can't cut a giant hole in the wall) to put four or five laptops in bags on a book truck and park it in the large supply closet right behind the desk. Of course, there are times when all the laptops get checked out within half an hour of the library's opening, and all you can do then is hustle. We do have great plans for how we would change this arrangement should we get a new building one day.

- *"I knew something would get broken."* The dire prediction did come true, and things did indeed get broken. Some of the problems were surprising – such as when we

- *Microsoft updates take forever!* Not only did troubleshooting raise issues, but the

  regular updates and machine maintenance itself was a problem we had to tackle.

  Performing Microsoft updates alone takes days, as only a few machines can be done

  each day, as it's hard to get them between patrons checking them out. Luckily for us,

  these updates and other regular maintenance are performed by systems staff, but it is

  definitely one of the factors in our recent decision not to expand the number of laptops

  further, despite heavy demand.

- *Don't forget to renew and check in the peripherals.* When we added headphones to

But, wait! There's More

As if all of the action surrounding the expansion of laptop circulation weren't enough, we also began to circulate other types of multimedia equipment. As we observed usage trends and with the desire to keep up with emerging technology trends to keep the library in step with the academic community, we looked for additional ways in which we could meet the media needs of our patrons.

Beginning in fall 2006, the library added five portable DVD players to its collection, also limited to three hour use inside the building. We purchased these players as a response to the observation that a great number of students were borrowing laptops in order to sit and watch movies on them. As sometimes there were students with academic needs waiting on laptops, which were quite often being used recreationally, we decided to provide some recreational equipment to help to alleviate use of the laptops for movie watching purposes, and making them available for individuals and groups needing to use the laptops other functions. Also, at one fifth of the price of the robust laptops, and requiring less maintenance we hoped to save wear and tear and staff time. We had a separately colored check out slip

for the DVD players, and as with the laptops held the University affiliated patron's ID, but no agreement form was required. However, use of the DVD players was substantially less than we estimated, with only 58 circulations this fiscal year despite substantial marketing. We have realized patrons just prefer the laptops, and while we can inform patrons we have the DVD players, we aren't going to being asking patrons what they want the laptops for in order to prevent them from using them to watch movies. Besides, watching a movie could be educational.

Also educational are books, of course, and with the addition of downloadable audio books to our Net Library collection, we wanted to make sure that all patrons had a way to access this material. Hence the introduction of circulating mp3 players. This was interesting, because unlike the DVD players, which had the same loan rule as the laptops, the mp3 players required us to create additional loan rules. I worked closely with our systems librarian to develop these loan rules, as we wanted the mp3 players to circulate outside of the library for as long as books do, and incur the same type of fines the other equipment does. When you review your loan rules you learn more about your ILS than you ever wanted to know. The mp3 players were then cataloged as reserves, like the rest of our equipment and peripherals, and they went into circulation in fall 2006.   As with anything circulating outside of the library, we did have problems with damage, lost parts, and even one student taking one to his home for Christmas. Overall, it has been successful, and we expanded from our original ten to twenty in spring 2007, though with a change in model from the Zen Nano Plus to the Zen V Plus, which has an internal battery with charging cord rather than requiring AAA batteries. The new model also is sturdier, with less small, flimsy parts and seems to hold up better and cause less problems. Patrons must supply their own ear buds, and for the older model, their own batteries. Though circulations were moderate due to the longer loan period, 73 for the fiscal year, immediately they had long hold lists, as students, staff, and faculty awaited their

use.

Next on our horizon to support the educational and recreational needs of our patrons with technology is the possible introduction of digital video and still cameras in spring 2008. While nothing is certain yet, we already have begun to consider the implications and practicalities, as we realize that this is not a change to be made overnight. And the first problem to solve – where to put them in our already bursting library?

Conclusion

With so many changes in such a short amount of time, planning was the key component in leading us to successful implementation of equipment circulation for our patrons' various media needs. We have refined our procedures through an ongoing evolution as we learned from the practicalities of the circulation desk and the constraints of time and resources, both material and personal, added even more complexity to a department already short on both. Another key is to keep good statistics. When laptop circulation surged, we went beyond monthly circulation counts to circulation statistics by hour of day and day of the week in order to identify peak periods of use. Documentation, communication, and routine maintenance of equipment and database records all played an important role in our success. It is delightful to see all the work that goes into those tasks come to fruition in the students' direct expressions of appreciation for the service we are providing, but especially in those subtle comments heard around campus when they don't realize someone from the library is around. To know that what we are doing makes an impact in our community gives a meaningfulness to this endeavor that sheer numbers alone can't supply or measure. Change is ever on our horizon, but with our past successes to support us, we look forward to continuing to mold our services to the needs of those we are there to serve.

Appendices

- Appendix A – Laptop Agreement Form

- Also available online at http://www.uncp.edu/library/manual/L/L.12.8-Exhibit.doc.
- Appendix B – Laptop Daily Checklist