

"Q & A With Stephen Abram"

YALSA's journal *Young Adult Library Services*.

The issue of YALS focuses on ways to advocate for teens through library services and we think your contribution will really highlight the theme.

YALS 1. What are the essential library services we should be offering to Millennials?

SA Essential is a difficult word. Thinking skills, information literacy training and great collections are essential. However, I suspect that the questions really lead to helping us to understand what technologies actually align with Millennial skills and behaviors and enhance learning and development. So, in that context, essential would include:

1. Offer advanced web access with decent broadband speed. You can't support all learners if your access is worse than most of their peers home systems. Wireless is becoming essential. Rural and remote areas are not exempt from this.
2. Place few limits placed on the browser's functionality. Try to avoid thinking that control trumps exploration.
3. Use instant messaging with fellow students, peers, teachers, librarians, etc. E-mail is so last century. This is a mainstream technology.
4. Blog. Both ways. Leave comments on.
5. Develop learning portals that support classroom activities, curriculum and homework. Partner between public and school libraries. We're in the same business and serve the same users. Serve parents as well as teens for homework helper applications.
6. Ensure that there is community adoption of electronic content sources, best of the web lists, streaming media, online courseware, etc. Then make the world aware of it. Go beyond just marketing article databases.
7. Support community-wide experiments to understand the roles played by new technologies like gaming, iPod, iTunes servers, etc.

YALS 2. What is the best thing we can do to advocate for our teen library customers?

SA Again 'best' is such a situational word. Every child or learner is different and every school and community has different strengths, challenges and initiatives. That said, of course I have an opinion! So here goes:

1. Advocate for light (or even no) filtering. Teens can't learn how to deal with the world of information if they never see examples of the range.

2. Advocate for tools that align with their comfort levels. For example disabling IM on library PC's just makes the library appear dysfunctional or, worse, lame.
3. Advocate for tools that support the full range learning styles and technology that plays it. Our text-based collections are totally necessary but many (maybe most) learners need interactivity, visuals, sound, etc. Public library and school PC's that don't support these formats or restrict their use, are misaligned with the needs of teens.
4. Advocate to teens in their spaces. Learning happens in social environments as much as in formal environments. Some environments straddle both. So, review how you might work with or be present or available in such spaces as MySpace.com, The Facebook or Second Life. As of March 1, MySpace was headed to be the most visited site on the web by ALA 2006 with 2.5 times the traffic of Google.
5. In public libraries reduce friction points that add nothing to the user experience. Do we really need to have so many rules that disrupt our image with teens. Let's advocate for better relationships with this huge market. Consider building a teen advisory council and maybe even have them develop training sessions for your teen facing staff.

YALS 3. In your article, "Born with the Chip," you discuss collaboration as a key characteristic of the way NextGens learn. How can we as librarians capitalize on this trait?

SA Kids are brought up in what is essentially a collaboration-oriented education. They do much of their work in teams. They carry their high comfort levels with collaboration into their social and work lives. Librarians can capitalize on this by offering services through the tools that support teens' collaboration behaviors. That means not only being comfortable with instant messaging clients. You can't just choose one like MSN, AIM or Yahoo! You need to support it all. This can be done using clients like Trillian and GAIM or web based services like Meebo that aggregate the major IM services and clients. Then you're cooking with gas. Those libraries that have adopted full or limited IM reference are seeing the pay-offs. As these grow you can add collaboration services like professional virtual reference that lets you track transcripts and mine the data for insights into user behaviors or simple co-browsing software like Jybe. For educational purposes public libraries can offer information literacy training in MS LiveMeeting or Webex to align with school based programs in Blackboard/WebCT, etc. Lastly, you should review your physical space. Are there too many carrels and too few round tables? Can the tables support group technology? Are there social spaces? Is it built to control sound and limit annoyances for other users? Are they given a respectful distance from others for privacy or are teens treated to a fishbowl environment?

YALS 4. What are the implications of the self-service model for traditional librarian-delivered services?

SA Self-service is a huge opportunity. There is not a librarian or library worker in the world today who will tell you that have enough hours to accomplish everything they need to do. So, given that fact, why would we continue to waste time buried in non value-added tasks when they can be automated to free up our time to do programming that makes an impact? Self checkout, circulation tools on PDA's, RFID, PC booking software, online holds, e-reserves, e-books circulation, etc. all offer the opportunity to serve more patrons at lower costs. Then we can focus on what is actually strategic. What programs engage the kids and bring them into the library? How many messages can we deliver at once? When a library offers a Rock the Stacks local band night after hours, it isn't really just about the teens and music. You engage them in the library, link between teens and the library, improve the relationship with current and future users and even circulate a few items. No one leaves without a transformed opinion. The same things happen when libraries have gaming collections and gaming events. Some of our traditional services are fantastic. Some are musty. Rita Mae Brown wrote that insanity is doing the same things in the same way that we have always done and expecting different results. If we want better results, we have to experiment with some new ideas.

YALS 5. What are some ways the "Librarian 2.0" can facilitate communication between Millennials and reluctant librarians and administrators?

SA Call them on it. Ask if the library is serious in gaining the attention of the largest demographic cohort in history? This generation of Millennials is larger than the Boomers – and it's growing through immigration. All other markets are shrinking. Are libraries ready to leave them behind? What about when they're voting for library budgets? It's just a foolish attitude to take. Society needs them and they're an amazing generation of smart talented kids. So here are a few small techniques that can help n the journey to respecting this major group of users:

- Have a teen advisory board. And, don't just pick friendly, local users. Make it reflect your community of teens. Listen to them. Don't just talk at them. Don't be defensive. Respect their experience.
- Demonstrate that you listen. Take action on what they say about their needs. Be open about changing some of your 'rules'.
- Have annual panels of teen users interact with all staff. I have done this many times and it never ceases to transform opinion. It can work like a minor intervention.
- Play with their tools. Just play. You'll start to understand. Don't kill understanding with policies, committees, and the like before you understand the overall dynamic. Don't study it to death though. That's not your goal either. Lose control for just a little while and start to learn anew.

- Have people on staff be assigned to talk to a half dozen teens in the family or neighborhood. Bring it back to the ranch for brown bags sessions. Ask questions that explore their behaviors rather than judge them.
- Serve as an example and role model – blog, IM, podcast. Model the behaviors and share them. Change will happen.

YALS 6. How can we retain the "magic of librarianship" virtually or through digital devices?

SA A lot of the conversations for the past few years have talked about our 'bricks' and 'clicks' strategies. I have added talking about 'tricks' to this in the past few years. The magic of librarianship cannot be allowed to go away in the virtual world. If the majority of our traffic and services being delivered through a presence now, we have to make sure that the librarian is there too. That means more virtual reference, more IM, more ASK A LIBRARIAN buttons, etc. It's necessary for survival and evolution. It's also about understanding what our 'magic' is. Some librarians spend a great deal of their efforts defining themselves as information professionals, people who deliver information and organize it. I prefer to think that's a means to an end. I like to think librarians are 'question' professionals. We improve the quality of the question and everything else flows from that. Excitingly, we can now start to more deeply understand our role in the experience economy. As we create new and revitalized experiences in our physical and virtual presences, we generate the magic that creates the knowledge-based society. Teens will experience more of this new world than us. It's incumbent on us to lay a great foundation.

Stephen Abram, MLS, is the immediate President of the Canadian Library Association, past president of the Ontario Library Association, and is Vice President of Innovation for SirsiDynix. He would love to hear from you at stephen.abram@sirsidynix.com.

Any mediagraphy for this session should include the *Library Journal* article: *Born With A Chip* by Stephen Abram and Judy Luther

<http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA411572.html?display=searchResults&stt=001&text=born+with+the+chip>

All of my other articles and presentations are hosted at:

Stephen Abram's Articles and Presentations
http://www.sirsi.com/Resources/abram_articles.html

Folks could also be directed to my blog, Stephen's Lighthouse
<http://stephenslighthouse.sirsi.com/>

