

Student Voices



Should Public Libraries Purchase and Loan Computer Applications?

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The typical public library provides access to one computer application (app)-- *Libby*. Created by Overdrive, the original application used by libraries to deliver ebook and other digital content, *Libby* is more customizable and was designed to make borrowing ebooks and audiobooks more convenient across a number of devices. The app is an excellent addition to an integrated library system, but its purpose as an interface between the user and the digital ebooks and audiobooks owned and loaned by public libraries is not a service provided in its own right.

Many public libraries circulate movies, music, audiobooks, ebooks, and videogames based on the premise that technological innovations that are story-focused or provide information fall under the purview of the public library. While many game apps have no plot and no educational value, some games apps present exceptional stories, and there are informative game apps available. Some of these apps are behind a paywall, and most require delivery via a smartphone or tablet, so there will be some community members who are unable to access the content without borrowing a device as well.

The question then becomes, "Will providing the community informational or story-driven apps be worth the cost to the library?" That, of course, depends on the needs of that

community, the library's collection development policy, and the local budget. Each library or library system needs to decide if apps are a good fit for their library and a worthwhile investment, then determine how they plan to make them accessible

Which Apps Should Libraries Purchase?

Many apps are designed to help people learn new things. One of the most laborious aspects of choosing an app is sifting through all of the available options to find appropriate fits for your community, but if you take the time to look you'll discover some gems.

The American Sign Language Dictionary is an app that uses videos of words or phrases to provide English to ASL translations. While print ASL dictionaries are available, the use of static images to describe hand movements can lead to mistakes, and in some cases small changes in hand motions can alter what's being said. Video illustrations, like the ones on the ASL dictionary app, minimize that risk.

Several companies and organizations have apps that aid in exam preparation for certifications, such as the International Fire Service Training Association (IFSTA),



which has a companion app for *The Essentials of Fire Fighting 6th Edition*. Exam preparation apps would be particularly useful if the library is in an area where many people are pursuing some sort of certification; for those libraries it could be advantageous. In a very different field, apps like the *Handy Art Reference Tool* could be helpful to artistic communities or art students.

Some useful apps are free, and their use is only inhibited by a user's lack of access to a smartphone or tablet. *Duolingo* is a free language-learning app that includes simultaneous audio and visual language practice. It also uses access to the device microphone to test the student's accent, a feature that books and audiobooks cannot replicate. *SoloLearn: Learn to Code* teaches "Python, C++, JavaScript, Java (and) jquery". There are many free practice exam apps available to prepare for the U.S. Citizenship test. One example is *US Citizenship Test 2021 Audio* from Creator Factory LLC, which includes flashcards that can be read aloud and practice tests. Each of the aforementioned apps could be valuable additions to a library's collection depending on the needs of the community. If none of them are a good fit, there may be other apps that are. Like any other form of media, the available options are incredibly varied.

How to Loan an App

If there is an app that would be appealing to the library's community, it is important to establish a mechanism for easy check out. The simplest option would be to purchase tablets or computers available for in-house use, with the apps preinstalled. This is the best fit for community members who do not have internet access, but there are some challenges. If the library chooses to purchase a tablet, the initial cost is high, and most high-quality apps only function on the newest systems, requiring purchase of newer devices every so often. If only one or two tablets are purchased, the number of patrons who can check out the devices will be very limited.

Apps, including an older version of *Duolingo*, can be downloaded onto library desktop computers, but most of these computers will not have as many options as a smartphone or tablet for manipulating the app. In both cases, the apps could only be used inside the library, which limits its usefulness. A possible solution may be allowing patrons to use the app directly on their phone. Apple Arcade recently created a monthly app subscription service that removes the ability to use the app once the subscription is canceled. Using the same setup, libraries could loan apps using *Libby* the way they loan ebooks. There's no way to know until the discussion has been opened if app creators would be able to open the same user agreements that govern authors.

Many libraries will have no reason to provide apps to patrons. Some community members are able to pay for the apps they need. In other libraries none of the apps would be useful enough to justify the cost. Whether or not apps

would be a useful addition to a library's collection is an administrative decision, likely tied to the collections budget; nevertheless, it's past time to open a discussion about the possibility.

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