The Mansfield protocol for laptop computer circulation

How a library can provide its own technical support

by Monty L. McAdoo and Joan Tease

The circulation of laptop computers within our library presents a number of challenges and opportunities to both students and staff.[1] For students, perhaps the biggest advantage is the nearly 500 network ports, which enable them to connect to the campus network from virtually any seat in the library. For staff, deploying laptop computers allowed us greater flexibility in allocating valuable study and other space, which would otherwise have been dedicated to permanent, standalone computer workstations.

Since becoming available (October 1996), our 50 units have circulated over 30,000 times to a student population of just 2,900. With such usage, the biggest challenge to staff continues to be providing fast yet consistent maintenance and record-keeping. Initially, we had no formalized plan for broken equipment, had not hired additional staff, nor had we created an inventory of spare parts. We naively assumed that it would be relatively problem-free—like circulating books or other items in our collection.

However, almost immediately, we began experiencing the unanticipated. Because there was no perceived "ownership," we noticed users weren't being particularly careful with how they handled the laptops. We also didn't anticipate the volume of use. The resultant damage and user aggravation compelled us to develop a stringent set of procedures for monitoring the wear and tear on our machines. The following information can be used regardless of the model of laptop you decide to employ, and we hope it helps you avoid some of the pitfalls as you venture into this new territory.

Personnel

One of the first issues to emerge was staffing. At first, we only assigned one full-time library media technician to monitor and repair the laptops. But this person was not available during the evening hours nor on weekends. Combined with the sheer volume of usage, it was soon apparent that we needed more help in a hurry.

Rather than hire additional staff persons, we opted to hire students. Although money was certainly a consideration, scheduling flexibility, a relatively large pool to draw upon as needed, and accessibility were even more significant.

In hiring, a conscious effort was made to choose individuals with little or no experience with computers. This has had two advantages. First, these individuals would come in with no expectations. They could be trained to do what we expected them to do.

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Secondly, many of these individuals were professed "technophobes." By giving them experience with computers, we have enabled these individuals to overcome their reluctance and gain confidence. In fact, many have actually asked to be taught more about computers, which, in turn, has helped them become better at anticipating and spotting problems!

Check-in

To decrease turnaround time, we installed additional power outlets and network ports. This enables us to process several units at the same time. We also have a separate work area out of public view where the laptops can be properly examined and maintained. Nonetheless, when a laptop is returned, it still must undergo a standard, five-to-ten minute check-in routine.

Check-in consists of three stages. The primary task is to insure that both the software and hardware are functional. With nearly 50 applications and databases available to choose from, our assistants merely "spot-check" the more commonly used applications. Should a user report a problem with a particular application or experience a hardware/mechanical problem with the unit, these are also checked.

Joyce Thresher, a senior elementary education major, signs out a laptop computer from student worker Jodie Lambert, a sophomore elementary education major.

Once a unit has been checked, it is placed back on the shelf for circulation. But, before doing so, the assistant indicates the date and time on the accompanying circulation card and initials it. In case of a problem, this card can be cross-checked with the information provided in the maintenance logs.

Finally, as time permits, the assistants go through and "clean." This means physically cleaning the touchpad, screen, keyboard, and other parts; but it also refers to removing unnecessary files from the Temp, Windows, and WordPerfect directories, as well as the network cache. Although the intent is to insure adequate memory for smooth operation, it has the added value of helping to identify more potentially serious problems (e.g., missing or corrupt files, viruses).

Logs

Logs are used to record a variety of information about each machine. As we started keeping records, we soon found that it was more helpful to monitor what was wrong rather than indicate what was working properly. This not only saves time, but saves paper. Likewise, a series of well-defined codes for common problems (e.g., "SC" for "slight crack" in the network plug) streamlines workflow considerably.

Our primary log is the one used for check-in. This log is maintained by the student technicians and is used to record information about the condition of the network and power plugs, the power-pack, the network card, the case, and other items specific to each machine. If a problem is noticed, the student fixes it. If the student cannot fix the problem, he or she "tags" the machine—attaches a repair tag that notes the problem, date, and time—and removes it from circulation so that it can be repaired.

We also maintain several other logs. Our circulation system, for example, enables us to maintain a "circulation log," which shows how often each machine actually circulates. A "memory log" monitors the types and sizes of files cleared by date. (We actually used this log to track and ultimately identify a cracker.) A "master log" (maintained by the full-time Media Technician) provides a record of problems with a particular machine, as well as corrective measures taken. It is used to refer back to problems or solutions.

(continued on page 513)

tion styles are faculty (many of whom also set guidelines as editors). Some of them teach students to create bibliographies or require them as assignments. Yet citations are obviously a problem for many faculty, as well. I am responsible for maintaining an online faculty bibliography for my institution. It astounds me how many omissions (coauthors, page numbers, issue references) there are in submitted material. The citations, although obviously meant to be in the same style, may not be consistent over a mere six to eight citations. One faculty member was so fond of abbreviations, he abbreviated the name of his book, as well.

Although as librarians we have no control over what individual faculty choose to do, or what professional associations want to promote, it does seem to me we should stand up for our patrons and lobby for an end to this sort of headache. We can complain to vendors who sell us citations that are not "ready for use" and force us to research the citation itself. We can refuse to use unfriendly citation styles in our own publications. We can encourage use of and training in user-friendly citations in our institutions and in the nonlibrary publications we are familiar with. While some citation use is the result of preference, most is the result of training, habit, or requirements by others.

As I wrote this, I had to help yet another individual figure out some abbreviations. When I told him what I was in the midst of doing, he sighed "It's about time. This is crazy." Making resources easier to find is our business, but sometimes we need to make others aware of how they could help. ■

(Mansfield continued from page 508)

Finally, a "technical support log" details contact with the company regarding a unit or part, including phone calls made or items returned and the company response and repair. This may seem like a lot of unnecessary detail, but the usefulness of such information cannot be overemphasized, particularly in terms of warranty agreements, obtaining parts, etc.

Assessing fees

We decided from the start that damaged laptops would be treated like other library materials and established a fine/fee structure accordingly. However, we also recognized early on that damage was not always the fault of a specific individual, but often accrued from user to user. For example, from the logs we would be aware that the network plug had a slight crack for Users #1–14. We would also know that it finally broke while being used by User #15 and that it was subsequently replaced. If User #16 then returns the laptop and the network plug is broken, we would know that User #16 is responsible. Although we have had charges disputed, the actual damaged piece combined with the detailed record provided by the assistants' log soon remove any doubt as to what happened and when.

Summary

Although maintaining detailed logs may seem to be a very staff- and time-intensive task, the importance of doing so cannot be overemphasized. Whether it's to handle a complaint about a fine that's been assessed, verify warranty eligibility, or determine which machines have had what problems, the logs have more than proved their usefulness. On several occasions, the focus on detail has also enabled the staff to spot problems that might not have been spotted or reported as quickly (e.g., network problems, touchpad driver error).

Equally important is the support staff. Although no previous computer experience is required to be selected to work at checking in a laptop, persistent attention to detail is a must. Without it, the whole procedure falls apart. Training staff to look for specific items, as well as recognize the unusual and how to record/describe it, is essential.

Looking ahead, we're anticipating that many of our existing problems will decrease considerably as incoming students will be given the option of purchasing their own preconfigured laptop computers. However, we also anticipate that this will create its own unique set of challenges. But, given what we've experienced so far, we're confident that we'll be able to effectively meet those challenges when they arise.

Notes

1. For a summary of the (dis)advantages of circulating laptop computers, see our article: "Notebook Computers: To buy or not?" *American Libraries*, September 1997: 84. ■