

Computing for Seniors at the Brownsburg Public Library

by

Kristina Daily-Brothers

Adult Services Coordinator

Brownsburg Public Library, Brownsburg, Indiana

Think of how often an interaction between an older library patron and a computer results in the comment "I hate these things," or "I wish I knew how to use computers." At the Brownsburg Public Library, we are providing computer literacy classes for this particular segment of our clientele, and we're hearing more positive comments!

Inspiration and Getting Started

In June 1996, I attended a workshop on programming at the American Library Association Annual Conference in New York. A librarian from the Arlington Heights Public Library (Arlington Heights, IL) discussed the wide variety of library programs about computers that they offered patrons. I began to think about new and interesting programs we could offer to our patrons at the Brownsburg Public Library to promote computer literacy.

To test the waters and see if programs of this nature would be of interest to our patrons, I created a few lesson plans and publicized a new series of programs, "Computing for Seniors" in the library's fall newsletter. The first class was held in September 1996, and its goal was to provide individualized computer instruction to seniors who are interested in adapting to computer technology.

We are fortunate in the Brownsburg community to have seniors who are either very computer literate or are very interested in learning about computers. In observing seniors in other computer classes, I realized that most seniors learn to use computers at a different rate than other adults, mainly because personal computers were not a part of their learning or career experiences. Like any age group, seniors can also become easily intimidated in a class full of people and are reluctant to ask questions. Too often, we all, seniors included, mistakenly assume that everyone else must know more about computing than we do, especially if they are younger or appear to be more experienced, so we don't ask what we think may be a "stupid ques-

tion." The Computing for Seniors class removes this impediment to learning. Individuals of similar age usually have similar questions and experiences with computers. The class also goes a long way to make the participants feel more comfortable about asking whatever questions they may have.

The book *Young @ Heart: Computing for Seniors* by Mary Furlong and Stefan B. Lipson (McGraw-Hill, 1996) provided me with a name for the program. It was also a valuable source for lesson ideas and a contact to "Seniornet," an organization that provides in-depth computer instruction for seniors. (Seniornet's website is <http://www.seniornet.org>).

What We Do

The Computing for Seniors class is limited to ten participants per session, and always meets the last Wednesday of every month at 10:00 a.m. Class size is kept small to encourage the free flow of questions and comments as class progresses. It also ensures that everyone's individual situation and questions are addressed. Class structure is casual. I always bring at least one computer into the room to demonstrate the different tips and techniques that we discuss. For example, when the Windows Operating Systems was the topic, I used two computers to show the differences between Windows 3.1 and Windows 95. The lecture portion of the class lasts no more than thirty minutes. This allows plenty of time for questions, yet keeps the entire class session within a one-hour period.

It is important that this class reflects the needs and interests of participants. To achieve this objective, participants select the topic we will discuss the following month. Given the influx of new members, we have repeated previous topics. Surprisingly, this has not been a problem. Although we may have discussed a particular topic just a few months ago, everyone shows up and appreciates the refresher.

Each participant is given a course packet of handouts at each session so that they will have information to refer to when they try the lessons at home. Course packets include a glossary of terms for that month's particular topic, step-by-step guides on the topic, tips and techniques for successful computer use, and an evaluation form. Comments from evaluation forms are important because they let me know if the class is meeting the needs and expectations of the participants. The evaluations also provide possible topic suggestions for future classes. Class topics have included computer basics, the Windows Operating Systems, the Internet, financial software packages, and word processing. We repeated the computer basics and Windows Operating Systems classes for the benefit of new class members.

The Future

I will continue to host Computing for Seniors classes as long as interested seniors attend and suggest topics for future sessions. My intent is that Computing for Seniors becomes a computer forum and support group for seniors interested in learning how to effectively use the computer as an electronic tool.

As I mentioned earlier, we have a number of seniors in the Brownsburg community that possess extensive computer skills. I would like these individuals to conduct some class sessions to share their experiences and expertise, and to show class members that other seniors have successfully mastered computers.

We hope to acquire funding to purchase a projection device that will make the computer demonstrations easier to view. I would like to take this idea even further and offer more hands on work in each class session.

We have laid the foundation to provide Brownsburg area seniors with the opportunity to become computer literate. The class has also provided an appropriate starting point to create special computer classes for other groups.

Computers for Seniors has succeeded beyond my wildest expectations. A regular group of eight to ten participants attends every session. These seniors are eager and enthusiastic students. They seem so appreciative that someone is willing to take the time to work with them and treat their questions with respect. After the first session, the participants seemed comfortable about asking questions and sharing their frustrating and fun experiences.

The instructor's patience and ability to explain how to accomplish computer tasks in clear and precise terms are necessities for classes of this nature. I must admit that this is my favorite program. I look forward to the sessions each month because I learn so much from them. It is also a joy to work with a group that truly enjoys the topics and interactions with other class members. I encourage other libraries to start their own Computing for Seniors group. It can be a rewarding experience and provide a unique service to your community.