

“Where Is Your Quiet Area?”

Helping Patrons Unplug from a Plugged-In World

In addition to using library technology offerings such as Wi-Fi hotspots and virtual-reality headsets, teens are learning to knit, college students are working on puzzles, and groups of adults are quietly coloring. Why are people drawn to these “unplugged” activities? Research has shown that calming activities such as coloring reduce anxiety (Noor et al., 2017). Librarians who host teen knitting groups see improved self-esteem in the teens, in addition to “natural opportunities for peer-to-peer learning” (Behrens, 2015, p. 38). The personal reward of completing a project can also give teens the confidence to try something new later on (Rodenbaugh et al., 2014).

In some cases, these programs also benefit people beyond the patrons who participated. After a rock-painting craft program at the Crystal Lake Public Library, staff learned that one participant enjoyed it so much that she painted more rocks at home, added inspirational messages, and left them around town for others to find. In 2018, teens at the Rochester Public Library District turned plastic bags into sleeping mats for the homeless (Browning, 2018). The Gail Borden Public Library District also hosts a philanthropic knitting program for teens called “Knitting for a Cause.”

UNPLUGGED STUDENTS

Relaxing activities aren’t limited to public libraries. Students are overwhelmed, so in spaces traditionally used for study and research, academic libraries have coloring pages and board games to help students relax. The Melick Library at Eureka College has coloring supplies, chess boards, and jigsaw puzzles for students. “It’s been nice to see students come to the library specifically to interact with the puzzles and unwind,” said Public & Access Services Librarian Kelly Fisher. The McHenry County College Library has Legos, coloring pages, and a puzzle for its students, initially as stress-relief activities during midterms. The students enjoyed these things so much that staff now leave them out permanently. These resources are accessible to libraries of all sizes and budgets. Board games and puzzles can be found at thrift stores and dollar stores. Free printable coloring pages are available on websites such as Crayola’s, at crayola.com/featured/free-coloring-pages.

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Students at the McHenry County College Library take a break from classes by coloring and playing with Legos. (Photo credit: Kim Tipton)



Rocio Matthews prepares for a cooking demonstration of Colombian recipes at the Chillicothe Public Library’s Cooking Around the World series. (Photo credit: Catherine Barnett, Chillicothe Public Library)



UNPLUGGED CONVERSATIONS

Libraries like to create programs to introduce their communities to new people and ideas, an approach the Chillicothe Public Library took. Its “Cooking Around the World” series is presented by people with heritage from a featured region. The speaker demonstrates dish preparation and highlights the culinary aspect of their particular culture. “People enjoy the time to sit and talk,” said Programming Librarian Catherine Barnett. The audience is primarily adults, but many families often attend, said Barnett, who values the multigenerational aspect of the program. The Crystal Lake Public Library also wanted to provide a space for people to sit and talk, especially about current events in a “safe and fair environment,” said Marcia Tillman, Library Technical Assistant and coordinator of its Koffee Klatch series. Tillman has heard from patrons that they appreciate the safe space to have these big conversations. A moderator leads the group, and the Library provides magazines, newspapers, and books to encourage conversation.

UNPLUGGED AND OFFLINE

Unplugged doesn’t necessarily mean quiet! This past January, 51 teens willingly disconnected from their personal devices for a few hours and took part in the Galesburg Public Library’s After Hours Nerf Lock-In. When asked why he thought the program was so popular, Reference and Young Adult Librarian John Driscoll said, “It gets tweens and teens running around playing, which is always fun, and getting to do it in a setting where that’s normally not allowed makes it even more exciting.” To make the program inclusive to anyone who wanted to participate, according to Driscoll, the Library designed some of the challenges for holding a defensive position, instead of physically running around in an area.

UNPLUGGED PARTNERSHIPS

For one of its Nerf programs, the Galesburg Public Library partnered with a local Live Action Role Play (LARP) group. “They loved working with the teens,” said Driscoll. “Our teens loved seeing the costumes and participating in the LARP group’s story.” Driscoll noted that an added benefit of partnering with an outside group was being able to share the planning responsibilities. The Jerseyville Public Library partnered with its Parks and Recreation Department to present StoryWalk. While hiking or fishing, visitors enjoy experiencing a picture book along

a paved quarter-mile path around a nearby lake. Book pages are separated, laminated, and placed consecutively around the path, according to Beth Smilack, the library’s social media specialist. It often combines the story with a community event. One picture book about construction sites inspired the library to invite businesses with big trucks. “We even had a helicopter—that was a big hit!” said Smilack. The Du Quoin Public library partnered with its own patrons to provide a long-running recipe exchange. The Library sets out a box for patrons to leave copies of recipes, then staff collect the recipes and make photocopies on demand for patrons. Passive programs such as this are a good solution for libraries with limited staff and resources. This also makes the activity more accessible since busy patrons can drop off a recipe rather than attend a scheduled program.

UNPLUGGED SPACES: RESPONDING TO PATRON NEEDS

Even with a blend of active learning and unplugged programs, librarians are still asked one common question: “Do you have a quiet area?” A Pew Research study found that 61% of Americans think libraries should have defined spaces for specific activities. According to the study, “The value of having separate spaces for different activities (especially for noise reduction) was mentioned very often in our focus groups, both by patrons and library staff members” (“Should Libraries Shush?”, 2013). The Helen Plum Library recognized the value of providing separate spaces for separate activities. According to Support Services and Communications Director Sue Wilsey, its adult and youth services departments are located next to each other with nothing separating the space. As active programs and noise levels increased in the youth department, staff wanted to maintain some quiet for their adult patrons, but staff had to sacrifice meeting and program space to do so.

Prairie State College responded to its students’ requests for quiet by converting a group study room into a dedicated quiet space, said Carolyn Ciesla, Dean of Learning Resources and Assessment. Ciesla said she often sees students with their heads down, suggesting that the students need a quiet place to rest in addition to study. When two rooms became available at the University of Illinois Undergraduate Library, “We thought of the rooms as respite or sensory safe spaces,” said JJ Pionke, applied health sciences librarian and library disability expert. Walls were painted light blue and the library added comfortable seating and an Amazon Echo for sound and meditation apps.

UNPLUGGED SOLUTIONS

Providing a quiet space in your library doesn't have to mean a major renovation. Solutions are available for a variety of layouts and budgets. The Main Library at the University at Albany (Albany, NY) was a gathering place for students on campus and often called "the noisy library" (Stanwicks, 2016, p.1). Students often requested a quieter place to study and some asked why the library was so noisy in the first place. In response, the library worked with its student advisory board to study how patrons regularly used the spaces. The library ultimately established three noise-level zones: collaborative, quiet, and silent. The library matched furnishings to the zone, with group tables in collaborative zones and independent study carrels in quiet zones. The University of Limerick (Ireland) created similar zones in response to student complaints about noise and follow-up studies showed that "zoning had the biggest impact on noise levels and complaints" (McCaffrey & Breen, 2016).

To arrange similar zones at your library, consider the following:

- Involve your community to determine how it would like to use the space.
- Use existing furniture to create physical barriers to define quiet zones.
- Match furniture to the zone. (For example, invite groups with large tables or encourage individual study with private study carrels.)
- Separate quiet zones from noisier parts of the building, such as the computer lab or the main doors.
- Add soft materials (such as area rugs or upholstered furniture) to a space to absorb sound.
- Relocate service points away from quiet zones.

If your budget allows, consider investing in acoustic wall paneling, which one can purchase from home improvement stores. A less expensive option for sound management is to add white noise machines to drown out surrounding noise, a solution that the Z. Smith Reynolds Library at Wake Forest University (Winston-Salem, NC) implemented. Six white-noise machines successfully mitigated the sound problems that a large room caused due to tiled floors and a ceiling that echoed.

In an increasingly plugged-in world, patrons still look to the library as a place to unplug. The next time someone asks, "Where is your quiet area?", consider how you can help them find some quiet with unplugged activities or a dedicated quiet space.



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