San Francisco Public Library Needs Assessment: Report on Findings

**San Francisco Public Library
WebJunction**

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Executive Summary

The recent increase demand for library services and simultaneous decrease in funding brought on by the recession have highlighted a need for innovative, low-cost, high-impact information services such as online patron instruction. In December 2009, WebJunction and the San Francisco Public Library began a project to examine the potential for online patron instruction in public libraries, part of which includes a pilot online tutorial project based at the San Francisco Public Library. This report details the results of a needs assessment of San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) users.

The intent of the needs assessment was to provide information to guide SFPL in the immediate creation of an online instruction pilot project, and to provide additional recommendations for ongoing instruction efforts, both online and traditional. This report describes the process and results of the needs assessment. It includes an overview of the needs identified among SFPL users, recommendations for the tailoring of the online instruction pilot project to meet those needs, and additional recommendations for SFPL's user instruction efforts.

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Methodology

The needs assessment employed multiple methods of analysis including: an overview of existing literature and data collected by SFPL, an online survey of patrons offered in English, a written survey for patrons offered in English as well as Spanish and Chinese, a series of staff focus groups, and observation. The needs assessment sought to understand user needs generally, needs that develop within the context of the library, and the potential for using online instruction to address these needs.

Patron needs

Patron needs vary extensively, but several themes emerged regarding the content needs and skills needs.

Content areas most often cited by patrons and by library staff, in order of frequency, included: employment issues (job seeking, resume writing, and completion of online job applications); social service and government needs (access to outside resources such as ESL classes, immigration appointments, youth programs, food assistance, tax help, legal information); educational needs (homework help, research needs, information on schools and colleges); business needs (directories, research, small business development); and other issues including personal enrichment, recreation, and home and garden.

Skills-based needs were mentioned significantly more often than content-specific needs. These centered on two specific areas:

- **General computer skills,** including basics such as accessing and navigating the Internet, using e-mail, typing skills; and intermediate skills like uploading and downloading files, scanning, social networking and using other Internet-based tools.

- **Library usage skills** including knowledge of library services, materials, and programs; use of library technology, including basic skills such as using the catalog to search and placing holds, printing at the library, and using the self check-out machines; and more intermediate skills, including advanced catalog searches, use of databases and using assistive technology settings.

Recommendations for pilot

Focus on intermediate users: About 80% of respondents to the patron survey are comfortable using computers; this holds true for the 40% of patron respondents who reported that they are likely or extremely likely to use online tutorials or instructional videos produced by the library.

Content
- Library skills, including database and catalog searching, was the most requested content area. When asked to select topics for potential online instruction, 64.6% of those likely to use online instruction selected "Finding useful articles or information through databases," and 36.5% selected "Using the library catalog."

- Employment skills was the next most frequently requested topic with 45% of respondents who are likely to use online instruction selecting this topic. Further, respondents who are likely to use online instruction are also more likely to be unemployed and looking for work. This topic also has appeal beyond SFPL, so any tools created using this topic might be shared with other library systems.

Usability and other factors

In addition to content, focus groups were asked to consider other factors that could influence the success of an online instruction project:

- **Instructional tools should be easy to access from the SFPL homepage.** If they are hidden, patrons will not find them and staff will be less likely to highlight them.

- **Tools should be available from catalog computers.** Patrons are less likely to use tutorials if they require logging onto a computer, or if tutorials consume their allotted hour of Internet terminal time.

- **Include both sound and text.** The tool should be visual and include text so that headphones are not necessary, but, depending on the topic, they should also have an option for sound so that low-vision or low-literate patrons can access them.

- **Create tutorials in multiple languages.** Nearly 20% of the patrons who indicated they are likely to use online training speak a language other than English at home. This is an underserved population for whom basic library information can be conveyed through online tutorials. This recommendation may not be practical for the initial pilot, but should be considered for future tools.

Recommendations for instruction in general

The following general principles were derived primarily through staff focus groups and observation, with some insights provided by patron surveys.

- **Don't do it alone.** Create tools where appropriate, but direct patrons to existing quality online instruction through the SFPL Web site. The current eLibrary section could be the right home for a librarian-selected, frequently updated index of links to external online instruction sites. In addition, share the new tools with other systems. Using the citizenship collaboration tutorial as a model, discuss plans with peer libraries and consider partnering on tools.

- **Market what you have!** Patron comments indicate a lack of knowledge about online tools such as databases, eBooks and existing online training. To ensure new tutorials or videos are used, and to maximize usage of current offerings, put additional energy into informing patrons of the wealth of online tools offered by the library.

- **Don't create online training tools in a vacuum.** When topics are identified (i.e., job search), create a variety of tools to support classroom training, such as self-paced online tutorials, self-paced "pathfinders" or resource lists for use in one-on-one instruction or as takeaways.

- **Don't forget about traditional classroom and one-on-one training.** Bring SFPL instruction leaders together to discuss curriculum design and principles, and provide best practices and other tools to staff. Share curricula across branches and departments to minimize the current duplication of resources. Allot time for staff to support employment needs in a one-to-one setting, and expand classroom training to include additional research, database and library usage skills training.

Acknowledgments

Introduction

In spring 2009, WebJunction and San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) partnered on a proposal to the Institute of Museum and Library Services that sought to explore the potential for online patron instruction in public libraries. In light of the sharp increase in library usage since 2006, and the simultaneous drop in funding, the two entities recognized the need for libraries to offer information services that are both effective and cost saving. Online patron instruction can meet this goal, and tutorials or other training modules can potentially be shared between libraries, maximizing the reach and efficiency of any given project.

The resulting successful proposal is national in scope. It includes an examination of the state of patron instruction in public libraries across the United States and efforts to inspire cross system resource sharing. The bulk of the proposal however, details a pilot project designed to examine how one particular system might plan for and implement a successful online patron instruction project. SFPL will act as the sample case. To maximize the success of the pilot online instruction module, the study called for an extensive needs assessment with the goal of identifying the needs and interests of San Francisco library users that can best be met through use of online instruction. The resulting multimethod needs assessment was conducted during the winter of 2010.

This report describes the process and results of the needs assessment. It includes an overview of the needs identified among SFPL users, recommendations for the tailoring of the online instruction pilot project to meet those needs, and additional recommendations for SFPL's user instruction efforts.

Further, the methodology of this needs assessment is to form a model for other public libraries that seek to better understand their communities and their potential for online instruction.

Methodology

To best identify the needs facing San Francisco Public Library users that might be addressed by online patron instruction, this project created a methodology that utilizes multiple methods of data collection including focus groups, online and paper patron surveys, observation and existing data on SFPL's Web site usage.

Review of existing data

SFPL staff provided the following documents to provide initial information on their patrons' usage of their online resources and previously document patron needs:

- Public Computing Issues Task Force (PCITF) Report from the Chairs

- Public Computing Issues Task Force (PCITF) Final Recommendations and Actions 12/23/2008

- SFPL Staff Training Survey 2006–2007 and summary

- Recent responses to the last question on the evaluation, "Please suggest topics for future classes," Johanna Goldschmid, SFPL, January 2010.

Patron survey

A 25-question patron survey was distributed to patrons during several weeks in January and early February. This survey was provided in paper form, in English, Chinese and Spanish. Librarians encouraged patrons to complete the survey, resulting in 309 paper surveys and another 219 online surveys. Survey questions included demographic information, information on user needs, library usage, perceptions of the library and likelihood that the respondent would use online instruction tools.

Frontline staff focus groups

Three staff focus groups were held in early February. Each focus group included a range of staff positions including librarians, library assistants, trainers, pages and others. Focus groups occurred at the Main, Mission and Chinatown libraries. Focus group questions were designed to evoke discussion on user needs, library responses to those needs, staff perceptions of the library's role, and staff feelings about the potential opportunities and challenges associated with online patron instruction.

Observation

A range of observational techniques were employed throughout this process. The researcher visited libraries, engaged in informal conversations with staff and patrons, and attended a meeting of the Service Innovations Team to hear from and share initial impressions with SFPL staff members who have a particular interest in the issue of online training and expanding services.

Limitations of the data

There are several limitations the reader should consider when reading the results of this assessment:

Patron survey. Online patron survey respondents were self-selecting. As the data indicates, most patrons who completed the survey online are already competent computer users. The study attempted to offset this bias by asking library staff to encourage users of all backgrounds and skill levels to complete the paper survey; however, there is no way to know that this goal was achieved.

Of the 490 respondents to the patron survey, the 20–59 age group was more heavily represented than the general population according to the census, and thus the needs of children and the elderly are underrepresented in this sample.

Focus group. There was an interest on the part of SFPL and the researchers to understand the needs of those with limited English proficiency in order to determine the need and appropriateness of offering online instruction in languages other than English. To that end, two of the three focus groups were conducted with two high-use branches located in lower-income neighborhoods with high immigrant populations. Though this was by design, the data may reflect a bias toward the needs of low-income communities as opposed to users of branches in more affluent neighborhoods.

Existing data. While some data was provided by SFPL that provided insights into previous patron use of online resources, the availability of useful information was limited.

Findings

Characteristics of patron survey respondents

The survey respondents represent a range of community members. They do not mimic the city's demographic makeup, but rather provide a snapshot of experiences of library users for whom online instruction might be useful.

Most survey respondents, 95.3%, are members of the library, while 4.7% are not members.

While 20.1% are primary caretakers of children ages 18 and under and 6.9% are children themselves, nearly four out of five respondents, or 79.1%, are not parent caretakers.

Like the city in general, the survey respondents were a well-educated group with 87.3% having completed at least some college.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate in the San Francisco

What is your highest level of education?
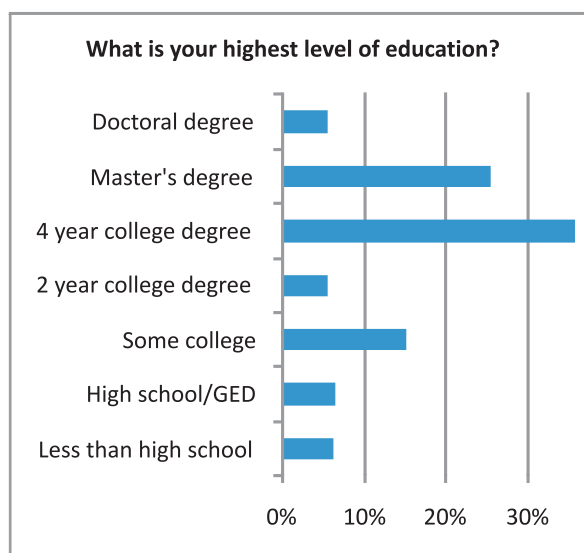
Bay Area was 10.2% in December of 2009. Among survey respondents, only 7.2% self-identified as unemployed, but 13.6% said that they are looking for work. While most of those who are looking for work identify as unemployed, 2.2% identify as employed or self-employed, and the remainder are students, homemakers or retired.

Patron needs—themes identified in focus groups

Early in February 2010, three focus groups were conducted with SFPL staff. Participants represented a range of staff positions, departments and locations. Focus group facilitators asked the group to identify user needs based on common questions and the needs that they observe among their users.

General computer skills

While focus group participants acknowledged that a large portion of SFPL users are comfortable with basic computing, a need for continued training was identified over and over, both to address those patrons who are not comfortable, and to expand the skills of those who are. Specific areas of training included both basic and intermediate skills.

Commonly mentioned basic skills included accessing and navigating the Internet, using e-mail, and developing typing or keyboarding skills. Also mentioned were filling out online forms and word processing.

Intermediate skills cited included uploading and downloading files, scanning photographs and documents, and using GoogleDocs and other Internet-based tools.

User needs as documented by SFPL staff focus groups

General computer skills
- **Basic:** Internet, e-mail, typing, word processing, filling out online forms
- **Intermediate:** uploading and downloading files, scanning photographs and documents, using online tools like GoogleDocs, and social networking

Library skills
- General knowledge about services, programs, collections, space
- Use of printers and self-checkout
- Connecting to library wireless
- Searching/placing holds in catalog
- Advanced catalog skills (e.g., finding books in Chinese or a TV series; personal account information)
- Database searching

Employment
- Searching for jobs online
- Resume writing and interviewing
- Completing online job applications

Other
- **Social Services:** citizenship, housing, immigration appointments, tax information, government information, ESL classes and materials
- **Business and consumer:** small business work, real estate, directories
- **Education and research needs:** locating schools, colleges, determining courses offered, finishing homework
- **Personal/recreational:** personal

Library services

Each focus group spent considerable time identifying library materials, resources and services that prompt frequent questions or confusion by users. These include virtual services and resources as well as physical services.

Some staff, especially those at the Downtown library, felt that a general knowledge of library services, policies, events and programs, and collections were needed. They felt that navigation skills and information about services could be improved.

Basic library computer functions were mentioned often. Processes included using library printers, checking out materials using the self-checkout machines, and connecting to the library's wireless Internet connection. Use of the catalog for searching and placing holds, setting assistive technology settings such as text enlargement, and advanced search skills such as finding Chinese language materials or DVDs of a particular TV series were other tasks that staff frequently are asked to demonstrate or perform on patrons' behalf. Database usage was another oft mentioned area of need, including general knowledge of their availability and the skills required to successfully search for information or articles.

Employment needs

Workforce-related services were the most frequent content-specific need identified. Job searching, resume writing and completion of online job applications were some of the most frequently identified patron needs.

Social services

Access to social service, government and educational information was also perceived to be a great need. Staff referred to citizenship information and the need to make immigration appointments online for patrons, frequent questions about local services such as English-language classes, children's programs, homeless shelter information and other resources.
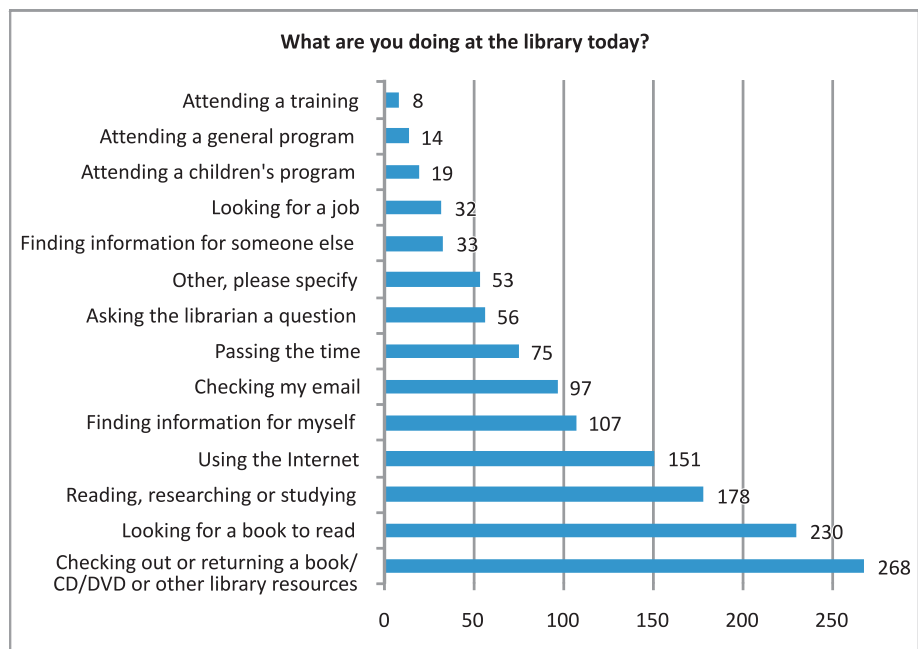
Other

Other frequently mentioned content-specific needs included educational, personal interests and home and gardening needs. Educational needs included homework help and research, accessing information on schools and colleges, and supporting early childhood educators with child development information.

Patron needs—themes identified by library users

Patron surveys sought to identify needs by asking current library users for the reasons that they use the library, and the issues they are concerned about.

Reason for using library

When asked, "What are you doing at the library today?" the most common reason selected by survey respondents was "Checking out or returning a book/CD/ DVD or other library resource." The second and third most cited reasons were, "Looking for a book to read," and

What are you doing at the library today?

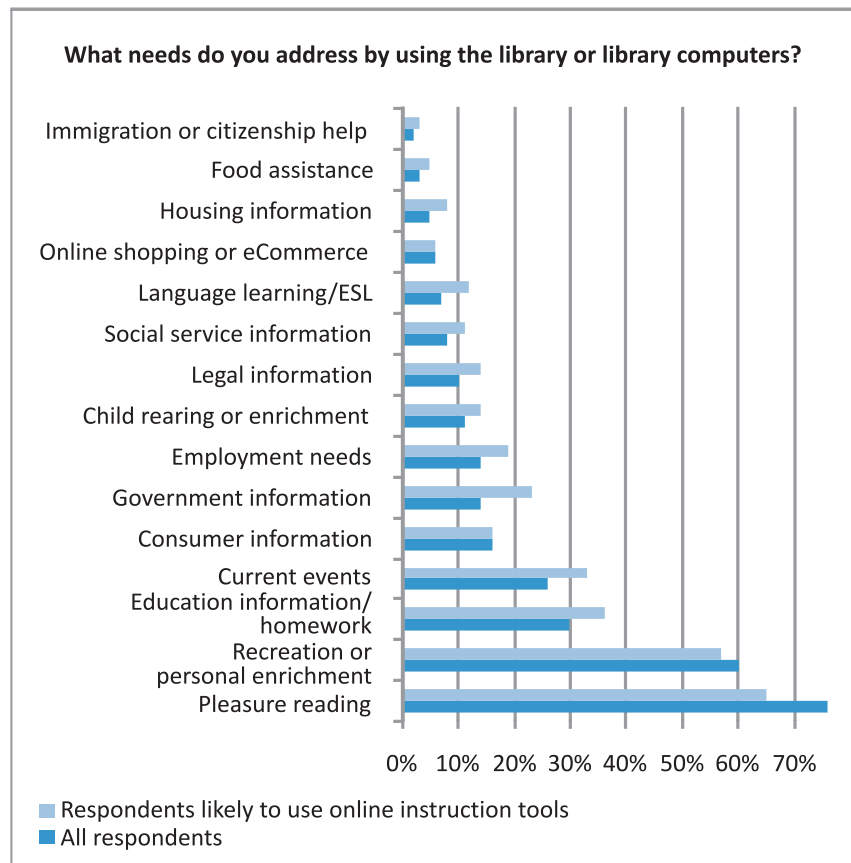| Activity	Value
Attending a training	8
Attending a general program	14
Attending a children's program	19
Looking for a job	32
Finding information for someone else	33
Other, please specify	53
Asking the librarian a question	56
Passing the time	75
Checking my email	97
Finding information for myself	107
Using the Internet	151
Reading, researching or studying	178
Looking for a book to read	230
Checking out or returning a book/ CD/DVD or other library resources	268

"Reading, researching or studying." These each describe some of the most traditional reasons to use a library, suggesting that SFPL is doing a good job at providing the basic services that interest most users. About one-third of patrons were using the Internet during their visit to the library, and 20% were checking e-mail. Twenty-two percent were looking for information for themselves, and another 7% were looking for information for someone else.

While the above question got at the purpose of a visit, the following question sought to understand the content of any information or recreational needs that patrons address at the library.

Not surprisingly, pleasure reading and personal enrichment were most frequently cited, with educational information and homework next. Digging deeper though, it is evident that a significant portion of the sample is also using the library for needs related to employment (14.%), child rearing or enrichment (10.8%), government information (14.3%), current events (26.4%), and consumer information (15.9%).

Though a relatively small percentage of respondents are using the library for programs or instruction, respondents perceive the library to be a transformational place. Over 90% of survey respondents indicated that they agree or strongly agree with the following statement: "The public library can be a transformational place for library users," and even higher percentages believed the library would likely help them meet their immediate goals, and even assist in overcoming problems in general.

What needs do you address by using the library or library computers?

- Immigration or citizenship help
- Food assistance
- Housing information
- Online shopping or eCommerce
- Language learning/ESL
- Social service information
- Legal information
- Child rearing or enrichment
- Employment needs
- Government information
- Consumer information
- Current events
- Education information/ homework
- Recreation or personal enrichment
- Pleasure reading

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70%

- ▇ Respondents likely to use online instruction tools
- ▇ All respondents

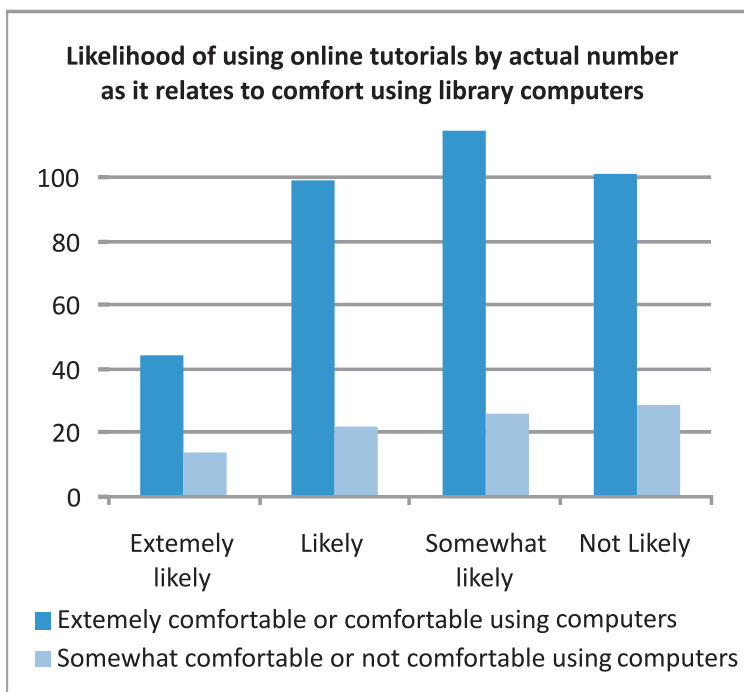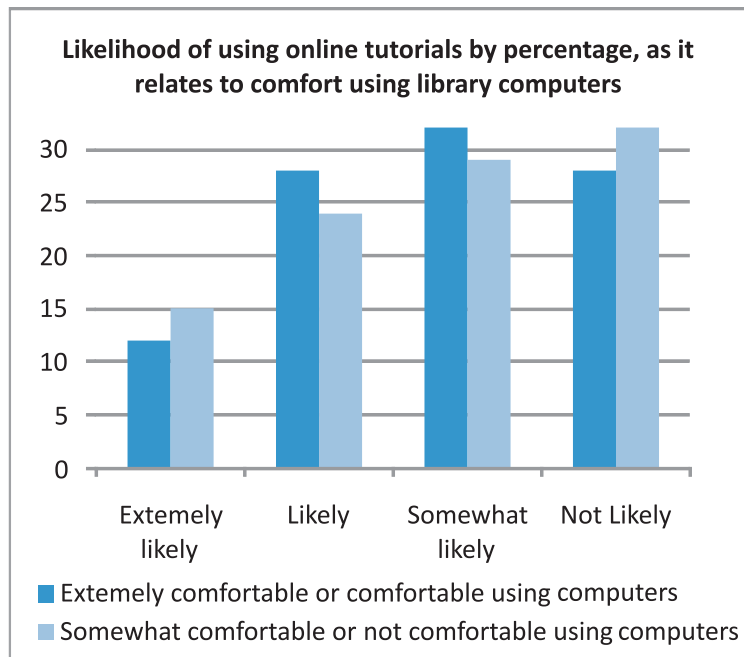| Survey Question	Extremely likely	Likely	Somewhat likely	Not likely
How likely do you think it is that the library will help you achieve your goal today?	61.4%	30.6%	7.0%	1.1%
In general, how likely do you think it is that the library can assist you answering questions or addressing needs?	51.8%	41.4%	7.0%	0.4%
In general, how likely do you think it is that the library can assist you in overcoming problems?	30.9%	40.2%	21.6%	7.3%

Analysis

General computer skills

About 80% of patrons indicated that they are comfortable or extremely comfortable using computers, but comfort with computers doesn't change the likelihood of using online instruction. Of users who are comfortable or extremely comfortable using computers, about 40% are likely or extremely like to try an online tutorial.

Of those who are not comfortable or just somewhat comfortable, 39% are likely or extremely likely to use online tutorials. Despite that, use of online tutorials and videos has been fairly low, with 57% and 50% of respondents indicating they have never used an online tutorial or video, respectively.

Demographics of respondents likely to use online instruction

That population of respondents who indicated they are likely to use online instruction tools is similar demographically to the larger pool of respondents with a few exceptions. The pool is slightly less likely to be parents or guardians of small children, and slightly more likely to speak a language other than English at home. They are also slightly less likely to be employed.
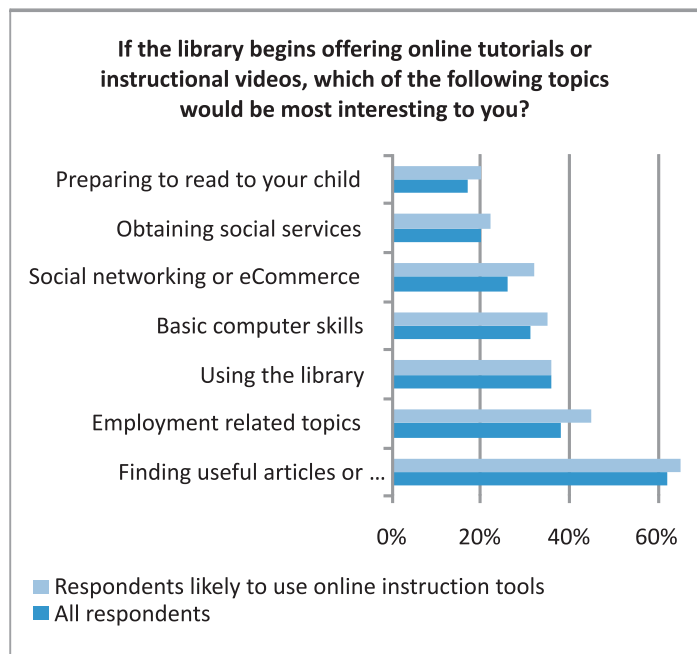
Likelihood of using online tutorials by percentage, as it relates to comfort using library computers

- Extemely comfortable or comfortable using computers
- Somewhat comfortable or not comfortable using computers

Likelihood of using online tutorials by actual number as it relates to comfort using library computers

- Extemely comfortable or comfortable using computers
- Somewhat comfortable or not comfortable using computers

What language do you speak at home	Respondents likely to use online tutorial or video if created	All respondents
English	86.0%	90.2%
Cantonese	20.2%	15.9%
Mandarin	6.7%	5.3%
Spanish	8.3%	7.3%
Russian	1.6%	1.4%
Vietnamese	2.6%	1.6%

Content areas

Those who are likely to use online instruction tools are more likely than their peers to seek out information on employment, social services, education and other content areas. However, their primary interests were very similar to those of the larger respondent pool, favoring library tools, basic computing skills and employment-related instruction over any other content or skill area, and indicating that their primary reason for using the library is for pleasure reading, personal enrichment and recreation.

This is in keeping with the focus group feedback. Staff identified library skills, general computing skills and employment-related issues as the needs of patrons that they most frequently confront.

This same trend held true when patrons were asked to select topics for potential online instruction. To this question, 64.6% of those likely to use online instruction selected "Finding useful articles or information through databases," 45% selected "Employment related topics," 36.5% selected "Using the library catalog," and 35.4% selected "Basic computing skills."

What needs do you address by using the library or library computers?

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- Food assistance
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- Social service information
- Legal information
- Child rearing or enrichment
- Employment needs
- Government information
- Consumer information
- Current events
- Education information/homework
- Recreation or personal enrichment
- Pleasure reading

■ Respondents likely to use online instruction tools
■ All respondents

If the library begins offering online tutorials or instructional videos, which of the following topics would be most interesting to you?

- Preparing to read to your child
- Obtaining social services
- Social networking or eCommerce
- Basic computer skills
- Using the library
- Employment related topics
- Finding useful articles or …

■ Respondents likely to use online instruction tools
■ All respondents

Recommendations for pilot

The following recommendations should be used in constructing SFPL's pilot online instruction tool, as well as future tools. These recommendations focus on content and usability.

Focus on intermediate users

About 80% of respondents to the patron survey are comfortable using computers. This holds true for the 40% of patron respondents who reported that they are likely or extremely likely to use online tutorials or instructional videos produced by the library. Tools can be created to serve a range of skill levels, but if they err on the side of being too slow or simplistic, they might lose a significant number of potential users due to pace.

Create content around library or employment skills

Users expressed interested in a wide range of content, much of which was reiterated by staff. The most often cited topics are listed below, but eventually SFPL may want to consider the possibilities of online instruction in many topics and areas of skills development.

- **Library skills including database and catalog searching** were the most requested content area. When asked to select topics for potential online instruction, 64.6% of those likely to use online instruction selected "Finding useful articles or information through databases," and 36.5% selected "Using the library catalog."

- **Employment skills** were the next most frequently requested topic with 45% of respondents who are likely to use online instruction selecting this topic. Further, respondents who are likely to use online instruction are also more likely to be unemployed and looking for work. This topic also has appeal beyond SFPL, so any tools created using this topic might be shared with other library systems.

Remove barriers to access

In addition to content, focus groups were asked to consider other factors that could influence the success of an online instruction project:

- **Instructional tools should be easy to access from the SFPL homepage.** If they are hidden, patrons will not find them and staff will be less likely to highlight them.

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General recommendations for instruction at SFPL

The following general principles were derived primarily through staff focus groups and observation, with some insights provided by patron surveys.

- **Don't do it alone:** Create tools where appropriate, but direct patrons to existing quality online instruction through the SFPL Web site. The current eLibrary section could be the right home for a librarian-selected, frequently updated index of links to external online instruction sites. In addition, share the new tools with other systems. Using the citizenship collaboration tutorial as a model, discuss plans with peer libraries and consider partnering on tools.

- **Market what you have!** Patron comments indicate a lack of knowledge about online tools such as databases, eBooks and existing online training. To ensure new tutorials or videos are used, and to maximize usage of current offerings, put additional energy into informing patrons of the wealth of online tools offered by the library.

- **Do not create online training tools in a vacuum:** When topics are identified (i.e., job search), create a variety of tools to support classroom training, self-paced online tutorials, self-paced "pathfinders" or resource lists for use in one-on-one instruction or as takeaways.

- **Don't forget about traditional classroom and one-on-one training:** Bring SFPL instruction leaders together to discuss curriculum design and principles, provide best practices and other tools to staff. Share curricula across branches and departments to minimize the current duplication of resources. Allot time for staff to support employment needs in one-to-one setting, and expand classroom training to include additional research, database and library usage skills training.

Notes