Amy Deuink

Charged up

What I learned on a day without power

One morning, the power went out across the whole campus. It was a sunny fall day, so light poured through the open windows and it was comfortable to be inside without air conditioning or heat. It's not important why the power went out or why it was difficult to anticipate when it would be restored. It's more important to share what I learned about what students value about the library by staying in the building that day. As a librarian and an applied anthropologist, I have spent more than 25 years observing students in the library. Talking with, teaching, and watching students at points of need is the best way that I know how to engage in participant observation with students in the library. These are some things I learned about our students that day, but they also lead to a bigger question. With an aging infrastructure throughout much of the US and the extreme weather conditions associated with climate change that can bring disaster, are we as prepared as we could be?

Students want to be in the library

Despite some classes being canceled as the facilities department worked to restore electricity, some students still wanted to be inside the library. Students came to collaborate on projects, read in sunny spots by the windows, or just take quick naps. I was surprised by this. I figured students might see the situation as a "snow day," a free day to turn off the alarm and sleep in or socialize with friends. Instead, some saw it as an opportunity to work on mid-semester projects. I was surprised how long some stayed. Some were there for hours, immersed in course assignments or passing the time between classes. Foot traffic was on par with a typical day. Eventually, the library was given the option of closing, but as long as students wanted to be there, we stayed open.

It was deeply quiet

Without the hum of the fluorescent lights, beeps of the barcode scanners, whirs of the printers, whoosh of the HVAC system, without all the little sounds the machines make . . . it was quiet. Really quiet. It reminded me of a night when you find yourself somewhere truly dark, then look up and suddenly you can see all the stars and find yourself in awe of what you've been missing. You forget you can see the Milky Way, and our place in it. You are reminded we are just a small part of such a big thing but still interconnected. At the library, distractions melted away and it was easier to focus. People slowed down, lowered their expectations under the circumstances, and were grateful for anything we could provide.

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Power of mobile technologies

Anything with a plug was now a brick. VoIP office phones, desktop computers, printers . . . all useless. There was no Wi-Fi. Thankfully, cordless, battery-powered devices offered some connection to campus and the internet. Students used their phones to create Wi-Fi hotspots for their group. Others just worked on their phones. The portable chargers were the most coveted piece of technology in the library.

For a place often associated with books, it's difficult to do the 21st-century version of our jobs without technology and power. As a Gen Xer who grew up with primitive versions of the technology we have today, I had a cache of alternative ways to accomplish some things without a computer. I knew our collection enough to get students to the books they wanted. We manually recorded checkouts. I did readers' advisory for a student who, unburdened by technology, just wanted to pick up a book for fun. Using my phone, I was able to email articles and links to books, answer logistical questions like whether a particular class was cancelled, and use my personal network to get information that was not online. Disconcertingly, my cell phone was the only way to get updates on the power situation—a terrible situation for a building manager.

Reflections

As the sun began to set, the building darkened and began to cool. Eventually, my phone and the portable chargers began to die. I had to alert the remaining students that we needed to close. Some were surprised—they wanted to stay longer.

While I drove home, I reflected on our aging infrastructure and the fragility of the systems we rely upon. Challenging days for our power grid and technology ecosystems may become more common with increases in extreme weather conditions due to climate change, as well as natural events like the volcanic eruption on the island of Tonga that led to a broken undersea cable affecting all communication in the wake of disaster.

I know the future of academic libraries is brighter than this, of course. One "powerless" day reminded me of the things that can make libraries a truly powerful place in the community. I know libraries provide access to group workspaces and all kinds of technology, but what students actually ask us for is a quiet place. A quiet place away from roommates, families, or whatever distractions students may have in their lives. It's worth fighting to protect the places that provide the quiet students want and need as hard as we fight for VR headsets and makerspaces.

At the same time, we need to prepare for potential effects due to our over-reliance on technology. For example, how well does your campus alert plan work when there's no power or internet? Electronic alert systems can stumble when the power fails. Dead zones in buildings and overburdened cell networks slow down the transmission of information. We have sirens for emergencies, but when stakes are lower, UHF walkie-talkies (two-way) or shortwave radios (one-way) have enough range to communicate the issue, level of danger, and plans to resume operations.

As library leaders empowered to create the vision of a 21st-century library, let's use our knowledge, experience, flexible practicality, and modern mobile technologies to remain a safe and helpful harbor when the usual bells and whistles become silenced. ✺