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Using iPads in the Reading Room

Jim Duran  
Boise State University

Cheryl Oestreicher  
Boise State University

Kent Randell  
Boise State University

Julia Stringfellow  
Boise State University

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In 2010, Boise State University began integrating mobile technology into teaching and learning environments on campus. Albertsons Library Special Collections and Archives (ALSCA) at the university soon followed; as an experiment in November 2012, we gave patrons access to four iPads in our reading room. We asked researchers to use them and share their experiences. Although the iPads were available for only six weeks, we quickly realized the benefits of making iPads a permanent addition to our reading room.

**Immediate Access**

ALSAC has about 7,000 linear feet of manuscript material, available in a reading room with four tables generally limited to one researcher per table. The only public access computer is outside the reading room, but with iPads available, patrons had immediate access to online content. One experienced researcher shared that this was his first time seeing iPads in an archives reading room.

Online content for special collections and archives material includes finding aids through the Northwest Digital Archives (NWDA), photo collections in CONTENTdm, historic university publications in ScholarWorks, and the library catalog and resources. The researchers used the iPads to:

- Look up the author of a book.
- Access photos and the student newspaper for a kinesiology course assignment on the university’s history of athletics, recreation, and student activities.
- Reference a finding aid while taking notes on a laptop.
- Find historic university and Boise photographs during a community workshop.
- Demonstrate resources to a history class while students simultaneously did hands-on research.

**Photo Op**

The iPads not only were used for viewing but also for creating documentation. The iPad’s five-megapixel camera provided an excellent alternative to photocopying. We preloaded each device with a photo app and provided researchers with instructions. Copies produced from the iPads were lower quality than scans produced with our flatbed scanners, which actually was an advantage because researchers were unable to produce publication-ready copies of archival material. Nevertheless, the cameras fulfilled the researchers’ needs. In one case, a patron took photos of negatives on a light table. Using Photoshop, staff was able to invert the photo and create a low-resolution positive copy for his notes.

One major barrier we encountered was providing the copies to the researchers. We found that the easiest way to transfer the photos to researchers’ personal storage was to have researchers email the photos to themselves. This was a tedious task if the patron took many photos, however, and the researchers had to be sure to clear their personal information from the iPad prior to leaving. In the future, we will look into improving the digital photo service by finding easier ways for patrons to transfer images to personal storage or devices. We also would like to find a way to automatically watermark or brand each copy.

Allowing patrons to take photos also created additional tasks for staff members, who had to clear each iPad’s data after use. However, we may discover photos that we wish to save for our own use.

**Benefits for Staff**

We discovered that the iPads also helped staff. ALSCA has a staff of four, and at least one staff member has to remain at the front desk during open times. With the library administration’s approval, we used the FaceTime application to allow the staff member working at the desk to “attend” meetings and presentations. This staff member would start a FaceTime session with a colleague who was at the

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meeting. For a small unit with fixed hours of 
operation, it was helpful to use this tool to 
create flexibility.

We also used the iPad to take pictures 
during presentations. The same was done 
when a group of kindergartners visited to 
look at the archives’ historic maps. For the 
letter, photos were immediately uploaded to 
the library’s Facebook page and were later 
added to a blog post about the visit. Having 
the iPad available meant that no one had to 
say, “I wish I had a camera.”

“There were [outcomes] 
we did not predict, such 
as being able to use [iPads] 
during a community 
workshop or using the 
photo app to turn negatives 
into positive images.”

SAA’s “Best Practices for Working with 
Archives Researchers with Physical 
Disabilities”¹ suggests providing pencil and 
paper to hearing-impaired users. An iPad 
also would facilitate this communication. 
Additionally, visually impaired users could 
benefit from the ability to increase the size 
of text or photos.

Security

A great thing about iPads is their mobility, 
but that’s also their largest security risk. 
We follow standard security procedures 
by prohibiting backpacks, coats, purses, 
and other items in the reading room, but 
there are a few times every semester when 
we have up to thirty students in the space. 
One option we considered was to ask for 
patrons’ IDs before handing over iPads, but 
that made their availability less obvious to 
researchers. We liked featuring them on the 
tables to encourage use (and our interim 
dean commented on how sharp they 
looked). After speaking with library IT staff, 
we considered the option of securing them 
to the table with a cord that allowed for 

mobility on the table itself. We have since 
decided against that option, as it would 
inhibit patrons and staff from taking full 
advantage of the iPad’s mobility.

Plans for the Future

Our goal is to have iPads permanently 
available in our reading room. We plan 
to institute practices and policies to 
accommodate this technology, including:

• Create permanent icons for the 
library homepage, special collections 
website, NWDA, ScholarWorks, and 
CONTENTdm.

• Develop online forms for patron 
registration, photocopy and scan 
requests, book requests, and digital 
camera use policy.

• Permanently install apps for scanning, 
taking photographs, light enhancement, 
and magnifying view.

• Develop procedures for charging and 
updating (i.e., app or iOS updates).

• Possibly install an app to print to 
a network printer.

Further, we are working to develop a better 
process for adding and updating apps. Our 
library IT staff has an iTunes account and 
regularly updates and reimages iPads used 
for circulation and instruction. We could 
participate in these regular updates, but we 
may have additional apps for our researchers 
that would be lost through reimaging 
to general library standards. We could 
maintain our own updates and use personal 
accounts to download free apps, but that 
poses a security issue. After continued 
discussion with library IT staff, we are 
experimenting with having a separate image 
designated for our iPads only with web links 
and certain free apps to benefit our patrons.

The Mobile Way

When the idea to have iPads in the 
reading room was first suggested, we were 
enthusiastic. Certain aspects, such as 
researchers having easy access to finding 
aids, were expected. However, there were 
other uses we did not predict, such as being 
able to use them during a community 
workshop or using the photo app to turn 
negatives into positive images.

Overall, we were very pleased with how 
much the iPads proved to be an asset to 
ALSCA. We look forward to the day when we 
have iPads permanently in the reading room 
and are exploring more ways in which they 
can enhance the research experience.

¹ http://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/
BestPrac-Disabilities_Researchers_0.pdf, accessed 
December 20, 2012.

ALSCA iPads and additional iPads from the library set up for an undergraduate history class. Courtesy of 
Albertsons Library Special Collections and Archives.

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