

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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It's All About the Experience: UX for Academic Libraries

By Steven Bell

No visit to Seattle is complete without a stop at the Pike Place Market. Among the many shops found there, only one is likely to be surrounded by a large crowd of visitors. Tourists have posted hundreds of hours of video highlighting their visit on YouTube. It is perhaps the most famous business of its type, with worldwide recognition. Yet, at its core it conducts the most mundane of business transactions: fishmongering. How then did Pike Place Fish become much more than just a fish market, putting on shows that feature fish tossing, customer engagement and plenty of excitement? What is lesser known about Pike Place Fish is that bankruptcy almost forced it to close. What happened? UX!

UX stands for user experience. Pike Place Fish may best explain what UX is. Purchasing fish is anything but an experience. It's a boring transaction. What happens at Pike Place fish is anything but boring. Fishmongers are throwing sizeable fish through the air. Customers and onlookers are invited to participate. There is laughter and the unexpected happens. None of this occurs randomly. It is the result of an intentional design structured to engage an audience by exceeding their expectations in a way that results in a most memorable day. At its core UX is about two things: users and intent. To improve the quality of the experience they deliver, academic library administrators and staff must put the needs and expectations of the user at the center of decision making, planning and service execution and be intentional in how they plan together to make that happen.

Consider the case of the academic library that decided to launch a new interlibrary loan document

service. In order to use it, students and faculty had to apply for and receive a new account that was different from the one they already used to access the university network. While the new system had exciting features, the user interface was more complex and thus frustrated those trying to use it. Most significantly, while the new system created some efficiency for the library staff, it resulted in longer waits to receive requested articles. Three months later the number of requests dropped by 25 percent. Unfortunately the new system's design was staff centered and resulted in a poor experience for the users, who in turn abandoned the system.

This issue explores the growing interest in user-centered thinking and design that is sweeping higher education and academic libraries. Library deans and academic administrators should consider how UX can add to the value of the academic library, what it takes to design a great library experience that facilitates better community relationships, and whether adding a UX Librarian or creating a UX department is the path to success. Done well, it creates a memorable library experience and loyal users.

Higher Ed Trend

Why should any higher education institution or its academic library care about UX? After all, students and faculty are there to learn, teach, and produce scholarship. They can do those things without having a user experience. The reality is that they are having

Coming Soon —

a user experience every time they step on campus, sit in classrooms, use the website, register for courses, dine in the residential hall or study in the library. What is the experience? Any library dean or academic administrator who has ever encountered a surly retail clerk, had a poor tasting dish served by an indifferent waiter or been kept on hold for hours while waiting for customer service understands what it means to have a terrible user experience. Would you patronize that store or restaurant again? What are you likely to share about the experience with friends? The answers to those questions explain why higher education needs to care about user experience, especially as demographic change shrinks the traditional student population and the competition for the best students intensifies.

Both higher education and their libraries are taking UX more seriously. It is now fairly common to see references in the higher education literature to “student experiences” and to consider students and parents as customers with expectations to be met. As far back as 2009, Robert Sevier, writing in *University Business*, claimed that strategic management of the student experience was critical to attracting and retaining students. Sevier asked “Are colleges and universities successfully managing those experiences, or are they just happening?” He said the answer is found in the idea of experience management, which he defined as “an organizational commitment to identifying and managing, to a specific end, the key touchpoints that define an experience that a customer has with a product or service”.

Unlike other nonprofit industries such as healthcare or government, the idea of a user experience meets with resistance in higher education. Faculty and librarians regard experience design as a business method that treats students as entitled customers rather than learners. In his article “Treating Students Like Customers” David Bejou argues that because there are high stakes in retaining students to graduation and then maintaining their loyalty as alumni, it makes sense to employ customer relationship management techniques

UX is More Than a Trend

Debra Kolah, User Experience Librarian
Rice University Fondren Library

When I graduated from University of Texas in December of 1995, with my MLIS, I had no idea that 20 years later, the focus of my librarianship would be “user experience.” I had written a paper in library school that required I go out and interview physicists and physics graduate students about how they were using the Internet, but that information was never used to improve how the library delivered services to them. The experience of the user was not a consideration for librarianship in terms of how to improve interfaces, or how to decrease frustration, or how to deliver better services.

Fast forward to December 2009. My job title changed to the new position of UX librarian and a sign saying UX Office was put on my door. I have worked over the past few years to develop a UX practice in our library that permeates the building. My goal is that we explore how all library projects can incorporate user research or usability testing.

The library profession has a clear understanding of what work a subject librarian should be doing, but the work of UX is under development. One UX Librarian may only work around the digital—testing users and improving the website or research guides. Another does their UX work at a higher framework level, where user research will guide creating new workflows for services.

Focus groups, surveys, usability studies, embedded librarianship and ethnographic studies are some of the tools used to gather data and anecdotal information about the user experience.

Last summer we renovated our study rooms. Student focus groups guided decisions about furniture and artwork, and the internally-programmed room reservation system was tested, re-tested, and improved. So, from every aspect of the study room experience, the User Experience office helped get student input to improve the experience, and deliver one that met user needs.

The UX Office at Fondren strives to create a holistic, user-centered, innovative approach to service design for virtual and physical spaces, as well as, digital and physical collections. This summer’s big project expanded the thinking of the UX Office. Rice University is considering a new learning management system, and my office is getting to do the usability testing for the project. A university project. Outside the library.

UX in libraries continues to grow past being a trend, and is truly becoming part of what many libraries do on a daily basis. But, there are still many challenges. Do libraries need a UX Librarian or a UX department? Just two weeks ago the UX Office at Fondren expanded with the addition of another librarian. I am envisioning that our work documentation will improve, and we will be able to do more projects! Much of our approach will be entrepreneurial, seeking to be included and utilized on projects. I managed UX alone as a department of one, but it is much more fun and effective with a team!

to turn a college education into lifelong engagement. There is common ground in higher education for achieving efficient administrative practices and quality customer service. No one wants students to have a disjointed, fractured service experience that creates frustration and detracts from learning. That is often the starting point for faculty, librarians and administrators to engage in conversation about designing an experience that delivers good service across all those touchpoints where students and parents engage with the institution as customers.

Design for Totality

Despite a growing acceptance that designing a user-centered experience benefits students and faculty, there is

less agreement on what the experience encompasses, how it is designed, what it ultimately delivers and how it is assessed and refined. In some academic libraries user experience is synonymous with usability, and the focus is on continuous improvement of the library’s digital resources, primarily the website. In other libraries user experience is primarily about assessment and involves the rigorous collection of data and user feedback to improve services. Usability and assessment are both critical to a better library experience, but they may be less holistic paths to achieving it. Totality is a somewhat different approach that seeks to improve the experience at every touchpoint at which community members make a connection with the academic library.

My Life as a UX Librarian: What, Why and How

Ameet Doshi, Director, Service Experience and Program Design
Georgia Institute of Technology Library

I was hired by Georgia Tech Library in 2009 as the head of the user experience (UX) department. At that time Georgia Tech had detected an opportunity for libraries to leverage techniques widely used by web usability designers in Silicon Valley to “get into the shoes” of users. The end goal was to create a great “user experience.”

Many students, faculty colleagues, and even librarians ask me: “what is a user experience librarian?” I usually reply that my core mission is to make every user feel like a VIP on every level of their encounter. Our counterparts in the retail and hospitality industries might call themselves “customer experience” professionals, or even the new manifestation of a CEO: “Chief Experience Officer.” But what lies behind all of this jargon? What pulses at the heart of the desire to thoroughly understand and improve the user experience?

I believe what drives me and most UX librarians is a deep empathy and compassion for the user. UX librarians are obsessed with getting into the minds of students and faculty and feel their pain points (and their successes!) in their encounters with the library - whether via the digital portals or within the physical facility. UX specialists constantly ask: What hurts? Why? How can we improve the situation? Can we test if the solution is working? If it is working, why? If not, why not?

UX roles are still rather amorphous as compared to other more traditional library positions. There are a few broad areas within which many user experience librarians focus their efforts: Assessment (primary focus); Marketing and Communications (secondary); Facilitating Outreach and Partnerships (secondary); R&D / Innovation (tertiary). In our resource-strapped libraries the UX librarian needs to be very strategic with how their time is used and ensure that the research being conducted has a strong likelihood of improving user experiences at scale. So UX work is typically applied research. The UX research arsenal involves surveys, focus groups, managing advisory boards, as well as more non-traditional user research methods such as leveraging mobile apps or time-lapse photography of user spaces.

At Georgia Tech, until recently, a secondary responsibility for UX included collaboration on outreach and public programming initiatives, as well as developing consistent branding and messaging by centralizing Marketing and Communications within the UX unit. This unit includes myself and two full-time staff as direct reports, for marketing, communication, branding, graphics and other skills that support the delivery of our library experience.

All of this is changing, however. I am now transitioning into a new role to take on leadership regarding the service and program design for our library renovation. Our UX work helped to lay the groundwork for a forward-thinking service model and architectural program strategically aligned with user needs. The UX position should be crafted to strategically fit with your user community's needs. Any person in this role, however, should have a deep desire to empathize with, and ultimately affect positive change for, those who rely upon library services.

Totality means having an equally high quality experience across the library. A highly navigable website or smiling, friendly staff at service desks are desirable, but if the stack collections are poorly maintained or the desktop computers fail basic operations those poor experiences quickly supersede the good ones. Library and academic administrators who desire to achieve totality should engage their staff in these four UX staff development activities:

• What's Broken?

Design is a process directed towards the identification of problems for which solutions are developed. Bring staff together to explore the library and see it

as a user would, looking specifically to identify what's broken. Water fountains that barely work, copiers that mangle paper, long waits for assistance. They all detract from UX quality. It may help to conduct a customer journey mapping exercise in which one library operation (e.g., faculty putting books on reserve) is broken down step-by-step. This often identifies where the pain points are, and enables staff to see how the process works from the user perspective. Staff then works collaboratively to design pain points out of the UX.

• User-Centered Design Thinking

User centeredness is a service philosophy in which the needs of users come first. Academic decisions are made

in the context of what works best for the user. Achieving it requires librarians to build relationships with users in order to better recognize what those needs are and how they are manifested in everyday learning, study and research behaviors. Totality advances when staff across the organization connects with users and share that information with colleagues. Adopting a design thinking approach to developing a user experience offers a systematic way of working with community members to see the library experience from their point of view. Design thinking is a multi-stage process involving field study, brainstorming, prototyping, implementation and assessment to arrive at an optimal solution. Designing a user experience often begins with a design thinking approach.

• Experience Statement

To create and implement their user experiences retailers and service industries use experience statements, sometimes referred to as “Way We Serve Statements”. Zappos’ statement is “We deliver happiness”. Starbucks uses “The living room of the community”. Even Pike Place Fish has one: “Treat everyone as if they are world famous”. The experience statement is a written declaration that empowers staff to make it happen. It identifies how community members should be treated and will feel in connection with the organization. It is not a branding or marketing statement intended for the public. Rather, it is an internal statement for staff that guides their delivery of service in a way that allows them to clearly understand and internalize it. This begins with a commitment from the administration and staff to collaborate on determining what is the right experience for the library. For example, an academic library experience statement could read “Partners in success with learners and scholars.” Staff are empowered to do whatever is needed to make students and faculty have a library experience where they are treated and feel like the library is their partner in academic success. When staff use the experience statement correctly, they work as one to deliver that particular sense of treatment at every library touchpoint.

• Service Principles

Getting all staff on the same page to deliver the experience consistently is a challenge. The Ritz-Carlton Hotel famously accomplishes this with their service principles document. It combines three elements of an experience: (1) service credo or motto; (2) steps of service; (3) service basics. The credo is essentially a service philosophy. It is a touchstone for staff to remind them why a service experience is critical to success. Steps of service provide a start-to-finish set of actions to always remember in every service transaction, from eye contact at the greeting to a memorable finishing statement. Service basics are usually ten things that should be driving every interaction, sort of a ten commandments of experience. Putting it all together in a document for staff and integrating it into service training help staff to bring the experience statement to life.

When library and academic administrators engage staff in these four activities, not as a top-down initiative but rather a bottom-up staff engagement approach where they are empowered to design the library user experience, the outcome is much more likely to reflect an experience shaped by totality as opposed to one that is hit-or-miss and more random than intentional.

Additional Reading

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Library as Gate Opener

Academic administrators and faculty may still think of their library as a gatekeeper, an entity that acquires content in all formats and then applies rigorous controls to ensure access to those in need, in a sense deciding who may proceed through the gate to capture books, articles, video and more. Academic librarians do that well, so well in fact that many community members no longer need the physical library.

Library deans and their staff members know that their future is not one of gate keeping, but rather one of gate opening – making sure that the campus library is a systemic experience built around engagement, relationship building and learning.

Students and faculty report fewer direct interactions with librarians, finding instead they eventually access the content they want via some, occasionally circuitous, route. In that gatekeeper scenario, when the focus is on acquiring and accessing content, too little attention is paid

to the experience that students and faculty have in engagement with library staff.

Library deans and their staff members know that their future is not one of gate keeping, but rather one of gate opening – making sure that the campus library is a systemic experience built around engagement, relationship building and learning. Administrators can support this experiential transformation by acknowledging that a "student experience" goes beyond efficient bursar, financial aid and advising transactions. The academic library makes a difference when it is well used and serves as a key contributor to academic and research success. It can be a core part of the student and faculty academic experience. Designing and implementing that experience results from a devoted staff, hard work and time. Above all it requires academic leaders who will shepherd the process and throw their support behind a successful outcome. Doing so means nothing less than transforming the library experience into a memorable, differentiated and engaging interaction that creates loyal community members who want what the academic library offers and generously spread the word about their great library experience.

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