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Expectation management: Breaking ground for a new e-learning librarian position

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Expectation management: Breaking ground for a new e-learning librarian position

Higher education has moved aggressively into the online course delivery environment over the past five years. What began as a slow trend has exploded into a full-fledged arm of the education industry. It is critical that libraries provide effective support to students in this environment and give them the same opportunity for academic success as their peers who are physically in the classroom.

Instructional programming is one element of this online support. A library's ability to effectively provide this programming rests on the right mix of staffing, skills, and software tools. Many libraries examining their current ability will come up short and need to adjust accordingly. In response, many will consider the creation of a new instructional design librarian position.

For the library discussing the idea of hiring an instructional design librarian for the production of online content, issues related to the person's role within the library and the larger institution may come into play.

Expectations held by staff for an instructional design librarian position can run the gamut in terms of projects, control, boundaries, and their own level of collaboration. What expectations will library staff have regarding the opportunities that come with a new instructional design librarian position? How will these expectations differ?

Discussion surrounding the creation of the new position will likely include the following questions. Who should an instructional design librarian report to, particularly when the role is specifically defined to respond to online learning needs? How should the person's role then differ from instructional designers in non-library units on campus? Should the individual work at the reference desk or participate in classroom teaching? Is an MLS important?

Defining the responsibilities of the position can be problematic due to the evolving understanding of online learning. Job requirements and emphases can change from year to year due to the changing demands of the online learning environment and are difficult to anticipate. The types of learning objects that are appropriate for students continue to evolve and require that librarians continually learn new tools and techniques.

A library can benefit from exploring conflicting expectations and creating a common understanding surrounding these issues. When done prior to writing a job description and advertising, purposeful exploration and alignment of expectations for the new position can permit the best outcome for the library and facilitate its success in the online environment.

This article will describe challenges that libraries need to examine before adding an instructional design librarian to their staff. Grappling with these challenges will empower individuals to better define the librarian's role and provide a solid foundation for successfully supporting students online. The article will also explain the benefits of expectation management and a process for building a set of shared expectations.

Current Conditions

At the moment, few libraries are able to devote a full-time position to the development of online instructional content. Instead, libraries often assign responsibility to current staff members, who carve out time to make small inroads into the new realm of instruction, but lack the ideal mix of traditional and emerging skills needed to produce effective learning objects.

Exactly how quickly is the profession moving to devote full-time positions to the development of online learning objects? The current level of interest in online instructional content production and the

corresponding need for instructional design librarian roles is difficult to ascertain. In addition to gathering anecdotal evidence signaling a trend towards full-time positions, the authors developed a somewhat objective gauge via an informal poll of ILI-L subscribers in March 2008. While far from statistically reliable or comprehensive, responses provided a sense of the direction in which libraries are headed and at what rate. Five questions were posed, primarily with “yes/no” answers.

The results demonstrate the growing focus on online instructional content. Twenty percent of one hundred respondents answered yes to the question: “Do you have a full-time instructional design librarian position?” Another seven percent indicated that they planned to hire an instructional design librarian in the next three to five years. In addition, sixty percent of respondents “plan to create a collection of self-contained, reusable learning objects in the next 3-5 years.” Clearly, even in the absence of full-time positions, libraries are pushing forward with their efforts. One respondent indicated that their instruction coordinator currently does all the work related to e-learning, stating that they have a few learning objects, and that the ILI-L poll could serve as a prompt to “sit down and think about” possible sets of more organized learning objects.

Planning for success in this new environment is essential and must include a discussion of current challenges to allow for the development of a new position in which everyone can put stock.

Addressing Challenges

Designing Effective Content

Instructional design librarian positions devoted to producing online content have emerged as a response to a central challenge: the successful design of online sets of activities and learning objects that are both appealing to students and conducive to learning. The best learning objects incorporate interactivity, an assessment component, and immediate feedback. Librarians are faced with the difficulty of creating content that includes visual and interactive elements that expand the students’ potential for learning. The production of interactive exercises requires a wide range of skills and software knowledge that is not, at the moment, widely held by librarians.

Skill Development

Developing the skills needed to achieve online success can pose a challenge. There are various models under which the skills are acquired. The skills might reside with an instructional design librarian whose *sole* focus is online content. Another model places responsibility on an individual whose position remains largely focused on *other* instruction responsibilities. The added focus often strains this person in terms of time and expertise and any new skill set is hard-won. In other cases, a *group* of librarians shares responsibility for design and production and acquires the related skills as one part of their jobs. A fourth model finds the skill set dispersed among staff both within and *outside* the library, i.e. in campus IT and instructional support centers.

With little or no funding, skills are often developed on site through the trial-and-error process. Few institutions can afford the corporate rate charged for outside training in web development tools, such as Camtasia or Captivate, Flash, Illustrator, or Dreamweaver. Programming skills needed to create experiential activities such as the ability to integrate or write with PHP, XML, HTML, and JavaScript are even more difficult to come by. Add to this the need for library-created content to be compatible with institutional delivery platforms in more centralized campus systems and you have a large uphill climb in developing and bringing together individuals with the skills needed to succeed in the online instruction environment.

Learning Styles

The generation-related learning style differences between most librarians and students can act as a substantial barrier in developing effective online content. The brains of “digital natives,” coined to represent individuals born into the digital age, literally process information differently. One education expert in the area of design and delivery of instruction suggests that most students do not learn in a linear pattern, where

a path is laid out from start to finish. Rather, they learn more dynamically, capturing pieces of information and experiences from diverse sources and making connections between these pieces to form a fabric of knowledge. Using this model, they prefer clues from the learning environment from which to draw their own conclusions.ⁱⁱ Any online content that draws the complete picture is suspect because it completely leaves the student out of the picture.

Given evolving learning styles, librarians need to question conventional approaches to the design and delivery of instructional content. A review of current methods and consideration of possible new approaches can prove valuable in maintaining some relevancy and credibility in the eyes of students. Forward thinking is a hallmark of our profession, but we can do more and we should do it more quickly.

Why meet these challenges?

The work that each librarian performs related to online instructional content is meant to provide meaningful support to students. If students are under-utilizing content or failing to fully grasp concepts, it diminishes the impact we have on students' academic success. To make ourselves truly relevant to students' experience, we need to discuss and address the challenges we currently face. The library will want to take a close look at its needs and develop a strategy to address the potential shortage of skills that limit its ability to engage students in a robust online learning environment, emphasizing experiential and interactive learning opportunities.

Exploring Conflicting Expectations

Libraries considering an instructional design librarian position responsible for the production of online content need to determine whether everyone within the organization who has a stake in the position perceives the position in the same way. With the variety of colors that such a role could take on, coupled with the lack of experience and limited knowledge of what's possible, views may be more dissimilar than similar. Librarians and staff members holding divergent views may find that they can learn from one another, if the group can bring to light the assumptions each person holds.

Do librarians within your organization perceive existing online learning challenges in the same way? How would each person prioritize traditional and emerging responsibilities for a new position? How does each person view their own role in student learning and do they see that role changing over time? To what extent have librarians in your organization become involved in the discussion of current student learning styles and considered its impact on development of instructional content? How does the political environment within your organization and within your institution encourage or discourage an examination of current online learning challenges?

Failure to anticipate possible dissonance surrounding the role of a new librarian on staff is quite likely. An analogy of a family hosting an exchange student is useful to demonstrate the emergence of unforeseen issues. Families typically recognize the rewards of such an experience. However, a host of small problems can crop up that create stumbling blocks along the way.

Recognizing that issues will arise and discussing each family member's role in supporting the student and each other is critical to ensuring a positive experience for everyone involved. A family might sit down together in advance of the decision to host an exchange student to discuss the impact it might have on the family and to align expectations that are realistic and supportive.

The library situation is not unlike the family situation. Hiring an instructional design librarian may seem like a good idea, but there will be unanticipated problems that have a real impact on individuals within the organization. Issues surface with the filling of any position, but the likelihood of issues coming out of left field are much greater with an innovative position than with a more traditional position.

The library situation is further complicated by the fact that libraries consist of multiple groups, each with different sets of needs and priorities. Often members of one group have consensus regarding their needs and priorities. Other groups may also have consensus, but with different sets of needs and priorities. These groups may be blind to the reality of the coexistence of multiple perspectives. It is only from the vantage point of the organizational leader that a view of the entire organization is possible. However, by following the process below, it is possible for the rank and file to first become aware of these multiple needs and priorities and, second, use this knowledge to inform their input into the design of the instructional design position. Success involves moving beyond a one-dimensional approach when constructing the ideal instructional design position.

Creating Shared Expectations

The following process is recommended as a means of opening channels of communication to align expectations and prepare for the successful addition of a new member to your organization.

Identify stakeholders: Identify the individuals within your organization who have a stake in the new position. These might range from instruction librarians and reference providers to web masters and IT librarians or campus IT personnel who support online learning environments and administer web development platforms.

Brainstorm duties: Bring together these stakeholders and brainstorm the various duties that might be included in an instructional design position. Allow the group freedom in their thinking so that a full spectrum of possibilities can be listed for everyone's consideration.

Recognize differences in expectations: Indicate to individuals in the group that the purpose of the activity is not only to create a list of duties, but to uncover possible differences in assumptions and expectations regarding the role of the new position. Allow the group to challenge expectations and voice concerns about various roles that have been suggested. Members of the group will likely share some ideas that were never considered by others prior to the discussion. Equally as valuable is the sharing of perspectives based on each member's role in the library and hierarchical placement on the organizational chart.

Create a set of shared expectations: The pooling of these various perspectives and ideas will create a shared understanding of the opportunities and challenges at hand. Insights often occur during these discussions that can produce common ground out of conflict. This common understanding can allow the group to refocus on a realistic set of expectations that can then inform the final list of duties for the new instructional design librarian position.

Test these shared expectations with others in the organization: Move beyond the initial group to determine the viability of the composed set of duties with a wider audience. Allow input to determine whether further discussion is needed to best align the new position with the needs of the library and campus.

Create a job description and share with a wide audience: At the end of this process, it should be possible to create a job description that reflects and addresses the needs of the library and other campus stakeholders. Share this document with a variety of groups and individuals at appropriate levels of administration to build awareness of and support for the position.

LOEX Session

Our session at the 2008 LOEX conference provided librarians with an opportunity to reflect on their own organization and determine whether there might be conflicting expectations regarding the role of an

instructional design librarian responsible for online content. To facilitate the process, activities based on the constructivist theory of learning were used.

The authors asked participant groups to create a job description and a list of required and desired qualifications for an instructional design librarian responsible for online content, keeping in mind the relevance of interactive learning objects at their institution and any skill sets needed to produce them. Participants then reviewed resumes of four mock candidates with diverse backgrounds to test the perceived importance of specific qualifications and to select the candidate they viewed as the strongest. The authors designed the activity to force participants to reconcile traditional views about qualifications with the reality of the technical skills currently needed in our profession to actively engage students online with experiential learning opportunities. Participants were then asked to apply the process for creating shared expectations found in the previous section.

Summary

Participants were vocal regarding their view of the role of the instructional design librarian.

- Some felt that the position should be modeled after a more traditional instruction role at their own institutions, while others felt that it might be worth taking another look at creating a role focusing more on technical skills. Some participants felt an MLS degree is not necessary if a candidate brings graphic design or other technical skills to the table.
- Size of institution was a factor in terms of consensus building both prior to and after recommending a new position, with greater position analysis and informal stakeholder polling required at larger institutions.
- The transfer of specific responsibilities from the library to campus IT was cited as a barrier to successful collaboration with faculty on online learning projects.
- Participants' level of exposure to online learning principles, direct experience in production of online content, and awareness of campus online course initiatives varied greatly and impacted their views.

As higher education marches forward with online course delivery, it is critical that libraries take an active role in producing effective online content. The online mode of delivery is still in a formative stage and provides an opportunity for experimentation and skill development. Allocation of staff time may be an issue but cannot stand in the way of making progress. The critical challenge will be to fully embrace our new role and acquire the necessary skills to be effective.

ⁱ Prensky, M. (2005). Listen to the Natives. *Educational Leadership*, 63, 8-13.

ⁱⁱ Reynard, R. (2008). 21st Century Teaching and Learning, Part 1. *T.H.E. Journal*. Retrieved 24 April 2008 from <http://www.thejournal.com/articles/22505>.