PUTTING THE UX IN EDUCATION

By Aaron Schmidt
& Michael Stephens

User experience (UX) thinking was born at information schools but hasn't found a home in many libraries. Why not? The answer is simple. Many LIS programs haven't integrated UX coursework into their curricula, and libraries suffer as a result.

Granted, a few schools have incorporated UX elements to varying degrees. New York's Pratt Institute SILS program, for example, offers a Cultural Informatics track with coursework devoted to "usability, human computer interaction, cultural heritage description and access and digital archives and libraries in global information environments." Jen Waller, a grad of the iSchool at the University of Washington, reported via Twitter that her program included UX, and it was woven throughout the curriculum, just like the emphasis on professional ethics. (Disclosure: Aaron Schmidt taught one of the two classes she took devoted to UX.)

But students with a keen eye for the larger information landscape have noticed a missing component in most programs. Gemma E.S. Petrie at her site UX & IA (ow.ly/5jfkI) writes, "Good information architecture combats information overload—a well-covered concept in LIS education.... Why hasn't my grad program offered a course on information architecture in more than five years?"

Just as UX deals with all aspects of library service, UX thinking must sprout from many different places in order to become a natural part of library operations: from library administration, front-line staff, veterans, and new hires alike. In fact, its foundation must go even deeper. Planning for the user experience should begin during library school. This is a natural intersection of our two columns, The User Experience and Office Hours.

Melding foundational practice with the growing interest in creating positive emotional interactions with various services prepares future grads to guide libraries into a user-focused future. This may even yield new certificate programs or pathways to

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becoming a UX librarian. LIS schools reviewing curricula may want to shift some of the focus placed on materials and process to user needs, behavior, and creating experience. Coursework might include the following:

- **Interpreting & Employing User Research:** Recent reports from Project Information Literacy, ITHAKA S+R, and OCLC offer bodies of evidence to help librarians and administrators make decisions and plans. Mining Pew Internet and American Life research reports can provide a picture of how we interact with technology and the web. Other foundations and research entities offer glimpses into the mind-set of specific groups, such as YAs, college students, and faculty. Understanding the process of research and decoding user statistics

Aaron Schmidt (librarian@gmail.com) is a principal at the library user experience design consultancy Influx. He is a 2005 LJ Mover & Shaker. He writes at walkingpaper.org. Michael Stephens (mstephens7@mac.com) is Assistant Professor at the School of Library and Information Science, San José State University, CA

prepares a future librarian to do the same for her constituents. Students should not only learn how to use these studies but explore their specific strengths and weaknesses, while also gaining familiarity with user research methods in general (see "The User Experience: Getting To Know Your Patrons," *LJ* 6/1/11, p. 24; ow.ly/5jhsK).

- **Usability Testing:** Every graduating student interested in working on library websites should grasp the benefits of usability testing and the basics of conducting usability tests. Likewise, training in observation and incremental improvement can broadly serve librarians in the design of other services as well, from the placement of a self-check station in high-traffic areas to where librarians and patrons ought to sit in relation to each other during a reference interview.

- **Focus Groups:** A course might also be devoted to designing and running focus groups as a means to understanding the user. It's very easy to sit in a librarian-only meeting and pontificate on what users want/need/should have. But it's another to have users join the meeting and give open, honest feedback. The student panel at the *LJ*/McMaster University Future of the Academic Library Symposium (see "Office Hours: Listening to Student Voices," *LJ* 6/15/11, p. 44; ow.ly/5jiDJ; and "Future of the Academic Library Symposium: Service To Continue but in What Form?"; ow.ly/5jiv2) provided a glimpse into student perceptions of libraries and librarians.

- **Library Buildings:** Designing library buildings has evolved from planning for a certain number of Library of Congress and Dewey ranges to making room for collaboration and creation spaces. This would include courses beyond the LIS curriculum. Business, marketing, psychology, and architecture all have aspects that play into a keen insight of how our buildings should be designed and arranged.

- **Graphic Design for Libraries:** Many librarians end up needing to create the occasional poster or brochure on the job. Graphic design deals with the appropriate arrangement and presentation of information—a topic well within the range of LIS coursework. We don't need to turn every student into a graphic design visionary like Milton Glaser, but we can improve libraries by taking this seriously. (See "The User Experience: Signs of Good Design," *LJ* 2/1/11, p. 17 [ow.ly/5jzm4], for more.)

No more silos

UX thinking doesn't have to be limited to specific courses, however. Core parts of the LIS curriculum can and should change as we review and update classes to reflect the focus on our patrons' experiences. Reference and resource-based study can easily morph when taught through a UX lens. Take collection development, for instance—wouldn't classes about collection development be richer and more productive when combined with thinking about building design and library programming? When LIS classes encourage cross-departmen-

tal collaboration, we'll have new librarians ready to tear down the departmental silos prevalent in many libraries. Weaving a thread of holistic UX thinking throughout all of an LIS program's learning outcomes and coursework—from planning library programs to ILS design—will enhance graduates' skill sets.

The *LJ* Salary Survey offers further evidence that is both illuminating and persuasive ("Stagnant Salaries, Rising Unemployment," *LJ* 10/15/10, Table 6, p. 26; ow.ly/5msA5). Those with UX experience had the highest average and median salaries and the second highest base salary (see excerpt below).

SALARIES OF REPORTING PROFESSIONALS* BY AREA OF JOB ASSIGNMENT

ASSIGNMENT	NO.	% OF TOTAL	LOW SALARY	HIGH SALARY	AVERAGE SALARY	MEDIAN SALARY
Access Services	17	1.00%	$19,000	$84,000	$42,182	$40,000
Technical Services	34	2.12	24,000	51,000	35,301	34,000
Usability/User Experiences	22	1.37	47,500	95,000	66,346	65,000
Youth Services	71	4.43	20,800	61,400	37,525	38,000

*This table represents placements of any type reported by job assignment but only salaries reported as full-time.
SOURCE: Excerpted from *LJ*'s Placements & Salaries 2010

While these figures include people working outside of libraries, they signal that these are extremely valuable skills for those entering the workforce; all LIS programs should introduce their students to them. Meanwhile, many students come to LIS drawn to its service and people facets. UX skills extend these concepts in new ways—ways we believe strengthen the connection between library services and the individual.

Delving deeper

Our columns don't just meet at the junction of UX and LIS coursework. In the debut column of The User Experience (*LJ* 1/10, p. 28; ow.ly/5jAvW), the core value of empathy took center stage: "You need to listen to and observe your community in order to develop an empathetic focus on people." Designing the user experience via empathic listening and observation is best done with a focus on the heart, as described in "Office Hours: Heretical Thoughts" (*LJ* 12/10, p. 72; ow.ly/5jABj). Understanding, kindness, and warmth are key ingredients as well.

These elements do not necessarily translate well to curriculum and pedagogy. We can teach LIS students to consider the details of all aspects of library service. We can teach students to think about the real needs of their communities before zeroing in on library-focused assumptions. We can demonstrate how libraries have the ability to transform people's lives. But how do we teach LIS students to engage with patrons in a deeply personal way? How do we teach LIS students to care?

These behaviors should be modeled on the job, to be sure. More effective than just expecting grads to have these important attributes, however, is the combination of skill designation with smart hiring practices. Hiring for people's attitudes and their desire to make your library the best place it can be is crucial to planning for engaging service.

Just as UX can be further integrated into the library world by being incorporated into LIS curriculum, libraries creating UX librarian positions must work closely with LIS programs to ensure that coursework is well aligned with expectations. Only by breaking down the barriers between LIS curricula and the library world will we create the user-focused library. ∎