

Design Thinking + User Experience = Better-Designed Libraries

LIBRARIANS ARE NOT DESIGNERS, BUT THEY CAN USE CERTAIN DESIGN THINKING PRINCIPLES TO HELP FACILITATE POSITIVE EXPERIENCES FOR THEIR USERS.

BY STEVEN J. BELL, MSLS, EDD

Library user experiences have existed for as long as libraries themselves. How could that not be the case? In their interactions with their immediate environment, humans naturally engage in an experience.

Every time members of your user community connect with the library at any touchpoint—the entryway, the website, the book stacks, the service desk, or the virtual chat function—an experience happens. What matters is the quality of that experience. While it is difficult if not impossible to ensure that each community member has a specific experience (given that humans experience their environments in unique ways), librarians should seek to be intentional about the design of library touchpoints so that they facilitate the best possible experience for all community members—and, at all costs, avoid a poor experience.

Take, for example, the first 25 feet of your library's entrance. What do users see? What do the text, symbols, and colors communicate? Is there a certain smell to it? Because community members are likely to judge the experience instantly, it's critical to make a good first impression.

What can librarians do to improve the odds that community members will have a great library experience—not just at the entrance but at all points beyond, both physical and virtual? That's where design thinking makes the difference. Instead of allowing the user interaction to be a random experience, we depend on designers to bring intentionality to how humans will experience a particular environment.

Although we are not designers by profession, librarians can adopt the design thinking process to become more intentional about the library user experience. While design thinking is hardly a

panacea for all that ails libraries, it does have its place in the librarian's decision-making toolkit alongside other methods for determining how to achieve an optimal library experience. Design thinking is particularly applicable when the exact nature of a challenge and possible solutions are ambiguous.

For library leaders who advocate engaging staff members to develop solutions, design thinking presents an opportunity for team-driven projects that allow for ample latitude in creative problem solving. User experience initiatives that come from the corner office rarely succeed.

This article provides an overview of design thinking as a component of, and contributor to, great library user experiences. When design thinking is used to shape the environment in which users connect with library spaces and personnel, the result is a better library experience—by design.



STEVEN BELL is associate university librarian for research and instructional services at Temple University in Philadelphia. He is a regular contributor to the *Library Journal* and is the co-author of *Academic Librarianship by Design* (American Library Association Editions, 2009). He can be reached at bells@temple.edu.

Problems and Solutions

As a librarian influenced by instructional design and technology, and having also served practitioners as a librarian at a college with a design-centric curriculum, I describe design thinking as a multi-step process to (1) identify the gap between a current state and an ideal state, (2) gain a deep understanding of why that gap exists, and (3) develop a thoughtful solution to remedy that gap.

How designers go about getting from the problem to the solution shapes how design thinking is defined. Whether you use Tim Brown's highly popularized "Inspiration, Ideation, Implementation" model or the more traditional IDEO multi-phase "empathize/analyze/deep dive/prototype/implement/evaluate" approach, thinking like a designer involves following a user-centered process that stresses problem finding as much as, if not more than, problem solving.

For librarians who want to better grasp design thinking, I recommend the 1999 Nightline "Deep Dive" episode. This 22-minute segment follows a team of IDEO designers as they attempt to re-design the common shopping cart. What follows is a journey with the team as they go through the design process step by step. We watch as team members interview the people who make, maintain, and use the carts, seeking to understand them from the viewpoint of the users (empathic design). The team then shares all the information gathered and starts to organize and make sense of it (analysis).

The fun continues with a brainstorming session where any and all ideas are encouraged and criticism is frowned upon (deep dive). Several possible options are turned into working models (prototype), and the team decides to turn the best option or combination of solutions into the deliverable version (implementation). Putting IDEO's wild new cart into the hands of shoppers and supermarket personnel provides feedback that will help improve future iterations of the solution (evaluation).

It may require two or three viewings,

but the Deep Dive video effectively communicates what design thinking encompasses. As IDEO leader David Kelley states, "We're not experts in anything except the design process."

The DT-UX Connection

There's one other takeaway from the shopping cart project, and it's a big one. It's about the shopping experience. The point of the project is to deliver a better cart—one that is safer, makes shopping more efficient, and is less likely to be stolen—but the actual outcome is a better *experience* at the supermarket for everyone who comes into contact with the cart.

The beauty of design challenges is that they can readily involve those staff members who will directly deliver on the user experience.

Our libraries can similarly benefit by applying design thinking to improve the user experience. Whether it's a line that's too long, a service request that requires too many steps, or a process that users are unable to properly navigate, there's a problem that needs discovering in advance of solving it. That's where design thinking can bring a team together to improve the library experience.

Getting started on a project is easier than ever thanks to the Design Thinking for Libraries Toolkit. Prior to the development of this toolkit, a design thinking process could, admittedly, be vague. Where does a team start? By providing more of a step-by-step approach to the design thinking process, this toolkit simplifies creating a design challenge. The challenge defines the nature of the problem and the intended outcome.

After assembling the team, an early task is to identify a "How might we ...?" question that defines the challenge. For example, you might ask, "How might

we simplify the process of submitting an e-mail reference question so that users can accomplish it from nearly anywhere on the website?" This question recognizes that a gap exists between the service in its current state and what would be required to improve the user experience.

By its very nature, design thinking is a team activity. The Design Thinking for Libraries Toolkit supports this by offering a multitude of activities designed with teams in mind. This aligns well with initiatives for improving the library user experience.

Even the best-designed experiences will fail eventually if staff have little

investment in their success. Companies known for high-quality user experiences, such as Southwest and Zappos, demonstrate that engaged staff are critical to keeping customers happy. They excel at finding ways to involve staff in designing great experiences and then empowering them to make it happen. The beauty of design challenges is that they can readily involve those staff members who will directly deliver on the user experience.

Sore Subject with Designers

None of this is to suggest that design thinking is the solution to every or even *any* specific problem facing libraries. As I stated previously, regard design thinking as just one more tool to consider using to identify problems and explore solutions, and just one of several approaches to decision making. Also, keep in mind that learning more about design thinking and applying it to selected situations by no means turns librarians into designers. While

librarians perform many different types of design activities (e.g., designing research assignments, signage, and instructions), we should not pass ourselves off as designers simply because we adopt design thinking for occasional projects.

Librarians who advocate for design thinking as a process for identifying problems and developing solutions are likely to encounter skepticism from their colleagues. Even many professional designers, in fact, regard design thinking as a shallow, faddish, uninformed approach to improving the user experience.

Commit to tackling the simplest of challenges and experiment with design thinking as the process for fixing what's broken.

Most recently, two critiques of design thinking have caused librarians to reflect on their adoption of the principles and process of design. In the presentation “Design Thinking is Bullshit,” designer Natasha Jen tears into design thinking and finds it woefully lacking in the critique (“crit”) process to which designers subject their works. In the essay “Design Thinking is Kind of Like Syphilis—It’s Contagious and Rots Your Brains,” Lee Vinsel offers a far more sarcastic, hostile takedown of design thinking.

Whatever reaction you might have to these and other efforts to delegitimize design thinking, paying attention to (rather than ignoring) them is educational. While it’s somewhat discomfiting to engage with what seems like an attack on an idea that resonates strongly with you, doing so forces you to confront your confirmation biases and question your assumptions about design thinking.

Understanding the critiques against design thinking is excellent preparation

for anticipating the arguments used to question its validity as a process for creating better library user experiences. Making the case for engaging in a design challenge is now easier to support thanks to the Design Thinking Toolkit for Libraries, but it will still take some convincing to encourage co-workers to engage in a process that’s wholly unfamiliar to them.

Fortunately, the opportunities for librarians to learn about design thinking are increasing. In addition to workshops offered by *Library Journal* and Library Juice Academy, online meetings such as the Library 2.018 Design Thinking

Conference are available to introduce the process and provide practical examples of librarians applying design thinking for better user experiences. Encourage your colleagues to expose themselves to the possibilities offered through design thinking.

Design Your Better Library

In his hilariously popular “This is Broken” video, Seth Godin discusses the seven reasons why things fail. It is impossible for librarians to view it and not immediately recognize multiple instances where poor, haphazard design results in services and workflows that may suit library staff, but yield poor user experiences. Use this video as an opportunity to kick-start a design thinking challenge aimed at designing a better library experience. The challenge might be the printer line that always forms at busy times of the day, the unintuitive signage that makes navigating the library confusing, or any other number of library operations that create pain points for community members.

Commit to tackling the simplest of challenges and experiment with design thinking as the process for fixing what’s broken. In time, with staff motivated to take on increasingly complex design challenges, your library might ultimately achieve totality—an environment in which the user experience is frictionless at every possible touch point. Just keep this simple formula in mind: DT + UX = Better Libraries. **SLA**

RESOURCES

“Deep Dive” (Nightline)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Dtrkrz0yoU>

Demystifying Design Thinking (*Library Journal*)

<https://learn.libraryjournal.com/courses/demistifying-design-thinking/>

Design Thinking: How Librarians Are Incorporating It into Their Practice (Library 2.018)

<http://www.library20.com/page/design-thinking>

Design Thinking: Librarians Are Incorporating It into Their Practice (Steven Bell)

<http://dbl.iishost.org/blog/#.W4BmOUxFyM->

Design Thinking for Libraries Toolkit

<http://designthinkingforlibraries.com/>

Design Thinking is Bullshit (Natasha Jen)

<https://vimeo.com/228126880>

Design Thinking is Kind of Like Syphilis—It’s Contagious and Rots Your Brains (Lee Vinsel)

https://medium.com/@sts_news/design-thinking-is-kind-of-like-syphilis-its-contagious-and-rots-your-brains-842ed078af29

Introduction to Design Thinking (Library Juice Academy)

<http://libraryjuiceacademy.com/160-design-thinking.php>

Staying True to the Core: Designing the Future Academic Library Experience (Steven Bell)

https://pwb01mw.press.jhu.edu/journals/portal-libraries_and_the_academy/portal_print/articles/14.3bell.pdf

This is Broken (Seth Godin)

https://www.ted.com/talks/seth_godin_this_is_broken_1/discussion