New and Noteworthy: Design Thinking in Libraries

Jennifer A. Bartlett

What is design thinking? Some of the world's leading companies, such as Apple, Google, and GE, use a design thinking approach to solving business problems. Universities including Stanford, Harvard, and MIT are offering in-person and virtual classes on design thinking. This very popular professional methodology is much more than "thinking like a designer," which of course can and does have any number of interpretations. Rather, design thinking at its core is a relatively simple way of thinking and working. It's a process in which we try to solve problems by first challenging our common assumptions through understanding our users and what they want and need. Problems are not necessarily what they seem to be at first; alternative solutions may present themselves through an iterative process of discovery and interpretation focused on the user experience.

An early and notable introduction to design thinking in libraries is the 2007 book *Academic Librarianship by Design* by Steven J. Bell and John D. Shank.[1] The authors emphasize development of a "blended librarian" skill set that emphasizes active collaboration with faculty and researchers, a focus on instructional design and technology, and the application of design thinking principles to develop library services (academic library services in particular). In an earlier article in *College & Research Libraries News*,[2] the authors define the blended librarian as "an academic librarian who combines the traditional skill set of librarianship with the information technologist's hardware/software skills, and the instructional or educational designer's ability to apply technology appropriately in the teaching-learning

process" (374). Why move in this direction? In short, libraries of any type that are not responsive to the evolving needs of their users risk obsolescence. Actively engaging faculty and students in discussions about what they want and need from their libraries is not merely an outreach activity; it is a necessary strategy to remain relevant.

To help achieve that goal, Bell and Shank offer design thinking as a way to provide services and instruction by finding out how library users think and what they envision an ideal library experience to be. The ADDIE instructional design model (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation) provides a useful construct for the design thinking process in the book, and the chapter on applying blended librarianship to information literacy is particularly useful. A later chapter devoted to the authors' "Blended Librarians Online Learning Community" has not aged quite as well over the past few years; the current online community appears to be the site of less activity recently.

For those seeking participation in an active community of librarians and information professionals interested in design thinking, IDEO's *Design Thinking for Libraries: A Toolkit for Patron-Centered Design* is an excellent place to start.[3] Started in 1991, IDEO is a design consulting firm with clients worldwide (they also designed Apple's first mouse and the first laptop computer). The challenge for IDEO with a library design thinking project was to "Help librarians adapt to more flexible and future-forward uses of the library." The intention of the resulting *Toolkit* is to provide "reading and workshop materials for library staffers that change the perception of the typical library," and is an attractively designed and well-organized introduction to design thinking with a focus on library programs, services, space, and systems. It focuses primarily on public libraries, but principles and suggestions can be easily applied to any library setting. Leading users through design thinking phases including Getting Started, Inspiration, Ideation, Iteration, and Getting to Scale, it includes numerous examples, diagrams, and illustrations. Each section refers to a related activity in the separate activities workbook. The

Toolkit itself was part of a project funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and involved a partnership with the Chicago Public Library and Denmark's Aarhus Public Libraries. Freely downloadable versions of the full *Toolkit*, *Toolkit at a Glance*, and accompanying *Activities Workbook* are available at the project's website.

In their 2016 *College and Research Libraries News* article, Penn State librarians John J. Meier and Rebecca K. Miller discuss the various methods that design thinking uses to solve complex library problems, in particular rapid prototyping.[4] Rapid prototyping is a process from manufacturing that emphasizes moving quickly from problem to initial design to prototype to testing. The cycle continues until a solution is reached. The methodology can also be applied effectively to library instruction sessions and programs, services, and spaces. In this article, Meier and Miller provide useful general examples of rapid prototyping in a library instruction setting, as well as observations about organizational dynamics and assessment.

While library science programs have not typically included design thinking in the curriculum, a recent book chapter by Syracuse University researcher Rachel I. Clarke and Temple University's Steven Bell (mentioned above) envisions a new library degree, the Master of Library Design, or MLD.[5] In theory, such a degree would integrate traditional library practice with design thinking principles to equip future librarians with the skill set to deal more effectively and quickly with the ever-changing information environment. As Clarke and Bell observe, "Given the rapid growth of complexity in library operations, heightened service expectations of community and the advance of more than a few wicked problems--like the scholarly publishing crisis, the need to diversify library staffing, the defunding of public educational and cultural institutions, the exponential rise of non-library information and research options, and the need to radically transform the meaning and value that communities derive from their libraries--librarians must be equipped with a new set of skills, methods and talents to tackle these and more challenges on the horizon" (2).

Design thinking is certainly not limited to only business, academic, and research settings. Mary Catherine Coleman, a librarian at Chicago's Francis W. Parker School, translates design thinking principles to a school environment with an interesting exercise for her first-graders.[6] She asks her students to go through a simplified design thinking process – understand, observe, define, ideate, prototype, and share – to design a better house for The Three Little Pigs in the classic story. Similarly, Linda W. Braun offers some ideas for involving older youths in the improvement of their own programming in her May 2016 *American Libraries* "Youth Matters" column.[7] By asking for help from their young participants, librarians can help youth develop key skills including problem solving, information literacy, critical thinking, and collaboration. Braun's short piece offers step-by-step suggestions for getting started and links to further resources.

For other relevant resources and a good overview of design thinking in libraries (with a focus on academic environments, but applicable to other types of libraries as well), see the January 2018 "Keeping Up With…Design Thinking" online column.[8] Authored by three members of the steering committee for the California Conference on Library Instruction 2018: "Library Instruction by Design: Using Design Thinking to Meet Evolving Needs," Ryne Leuzinger, Gina Kessler Lee, and Irene Korber, this column not only includes a succinct introduction to design thinking, but also links to useful articles and online course listings.

Jennifer A. Bartlett (jen.bartlett@uky.edu) is the Interim Associate Dean of Teaching, Learning, and Research at the University of Kentucky Libraries.

[1] Steven J. Bell and John D. Shank, *Academic Librarianship by Design: A Blended Librarian's Guide to the Tools and Techniques* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2007). For a shorter introduction to the topic, see Bell's article "Design Thinking," *American Libraries* 39, no. 1/2 (2008): 44-49, available at http://stevenbell.info/pdfs/ALdesignarticle.pdf. See also the Blended Librarian blog at http://blendedlibrarian.learningtimes.net. Bell also participated in a March 2018 San Jose State University Library 2.018 mini-conference, "Design Thinking: How Librarians are Incorporating It into Their Practice," available at http://www.library20.com/page/design-thinking, and offers other design thinking resources at his blog, http://stevenbell.info.

[2] Bell, Steven J., and John Shank. "The Blended Librarian: A Blueprint for Redefining the Teaching and Learning Role of Academic Librarians." *College & Research Libraries News* 65, no. 7 (2004): 372-375. Available at https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.65.7.7297.

[3] IDEO, *Design Thinking for Libraries: A Toolkit for Patron-Centered Design* (Palo Alto: IDEO, 2015), http://designthinkingforlibraries.com.

[4] Meier, John J. and Rebecca K. Miller. "Turning the revolution into an evolution: The case for design thinking and rapid prototyping in libraries." *College & Research Libraries News* 77, no. 6 (2016): 283-286. Available at https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/9506.

[5] Clarke, Rachel I. and Bell, Steven, "Transitioning from the MLS to the MLD: Integrating Design Thinking and Philosophy into Library and Information Science Education" (2018). School of Information Studies: Faculty Scholarship. 174. Available at https://surface.syr.edu/istpub/174. A version of this study has been included in Johnna Percell, Lindsay C. Sarin, Paul T. Jaeger, and John Carlo Bertot (eds.), *Re-envisioning the MLS: Perspectives on the Future of Library and Information Science Education (Advances in Librarianship, Volume 44A),* Emerald Publishing Limited, 195 – 214.

[6] Coleman, Mary Catherine. "Design Thinking and the School Library." *Knowledge Quest* 44, no. 5 (2016): 62-68.

[7] Braun, Linda W. "Using Design Thinking." *American Libraries* 47, no. 6 (2016): 80. Available at https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2016/05/31/using-design-thinking.

[8] "Keeping Up With… Design Thinking." American Library Association, January 16, 2018. Available at http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/design. More information about the California Conference on Library Instruction may be found at http://www.cclibinstruction.org.