

Make It Work: Using Service Design to Support Collaboration in Challenging Times

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Abstract

Student success units, like Writing Centers, are logical partners for academic libraries. It is not uncommon to find tutoring or academic support services located in library Learning Commons spaces. At Oregon State University, we recently launched a Research and Writing Studio that takes these partnerships to the next level. This column examines the relevance of a service design approach to collaborative space planning. It further examines the challenging process of applying idealized or general models and theories to the reality of our daily work and local contexts.

Keywords

Service design: Rapid prototyping: Learning spaces: Writing Centers: Information Literacy

Introduction

It was the middle of 2016. We had just received an interesting email from Dennis Bennett, the Director of the Writing Center at Oregon State University. The subject line read, *Library – Writing Center Partnership?* This query came to us because we are public services librarians in the Valley Library, a dynamic and busy space at the heart of this medium-sized, land grant university's main campus, and we had worked with the Writing Center many times before. Academic libraries have been working with writing centers for years; there is nothing new about co-located research and writing services (Jackson, 2017). In

fact, at Oregon State the Writing Center already staffed a part-time “satellite” location in the library Learning Commons. However, this email described a partnership that went beyond co-located services: a truly collaborative space with peer tutors trained to treat research and writing as intertwined processes. At any stage — from brainstorming keywords to summarizing research articles to integrating feedback into a final draft — students would be able to get the help they needed at this single service point. We were intrigued, and we sent the question out to reference and instruction librarians to see what they thought. We quickly heard back:

Yes, absolutely, do it.

Definitely worth exploring.

How quickly can we make this happen? Yesterday?

Clearly, the idea had some appeal.

To move from idea to action we used an intentional, but imperfect, process informed by service design theory and rapid prototyping. Methods like these — that are rigorous, user-centered and collaborative — sound so appealing when we encounter them in the literature or at conferences. But when faced with the reality of tight budgets, competing priorities and impossible timelines, they can be really hard to use. When we measure ourselves against the ideals in the models, it often feels like we come up short. It can even be paralyzing; when we realize that we will not be able to do everything we would like to do, we start to think, “maybe we shouldn’t do this at all?” Our story is about resisting these feelings, moving forward, and figuring out how to apply these models to our work, even when our local conditions are less than ideal.

Coming together to build something new

The idea for an integrated research and writing space was not entirely new. In the 2015-2016 school year, the Western Libraries at Western Washington University launched the Hacherl Research and Writing Studio, to “combine the services for research consultation

and writing consultation into one shared program” (Mansfield, 2016). In conversation, Roberta Kjesrud, the Director of Writing at the Hascherl Studio shared the basic principles driving teaching and learning in this space with us. Studio pedagogy represents a move away from consultation-based services that require students to leave their work to get help in a space dedicated to answering questions. While we have attempted to move these dedicated spaces closer to the point of need -- using digital platforms and creating Learning or Information Commons spaces -- traditional reference and writing center services are primarily built on this consultation model. With a studio model, students come instead to a space that is built for writing, or creating. Help is available in the space, but how it is used will vary from session to session, and from student to student.

At Oregon State, student success-focused units like library public services and the Writing Center are all struggling with the ramifications of an intense period of institutional growth that has only recently slowed down. Oregon State’s student population has grown by more than fifty percent under the current university president, who was appointed in 2003 (Theen, 2016). It is probably not surprising that budgets (and staffing levels) have not kept pace with this rate of growth. For both the Writing Center and the library, it has been a struggle just to maintain our existing programs in this context. Figuring out ways to grow our programs in new directions – using methods that are pedagogically sound – has been a real challenge. The studio model has the potential to create a scalable model for growth for both library instruction and Writing Center services, based on a solid commitment to peer-to-peer teaching and learning.

In addition, we had a history of shared pedagogical practice on which to base this collaboration. Librarians and writing faculty at Oregon State have a long history of partnerships that support, and are supported by, shared goals for student learning. We both see research and writing as intertwined, iterative, learning processes and we view our teaching through that lens (Davidson and Crateau, 1998; McMillen, Miyagishima and Maughan, 2002; Deitering and Jameson, 2008). Within the formal curriculum, library and writing faculty already collaborate to develop assignments, courses and assessments and to create professional development opportunities that support our teaching efforts (Rempel

and Deitering, 2017). In short, we had a solid body of work we could use to train studio staff to support research and writing practice.

Service Design

However, we also knew that shared goals, and even shared pedagogy, would not be enough to create a truly integrated service. The Writing Center and the Libraries belong to separate reporting structures within the university. More than that, there are different cultural practices and expectations in our separate units, and we bring different assumptions and experiences to our (shared) work. In the Valley Library, we had some recent and relevant experience merging service desks that highlighted the importance of these cultural factors. In 2015 we merged three different service points – two of which were managed by units located outside the library -- into one. In that case, co-locating services was relatively easy. Developing a shared set of expectations for practice, shared service philosophy, and workflows for delivering those services was not. As we approached the Studio project, we were convinced that we needed to do intentional work in planning stages of this project to bring our units together.

The Head of the Library Experience and Access Department (LEAD) brought a commitment to service design research and practice, which she described as a service design mindset, and she recommended that we use this framework to provide structure to the planning process. This mindset is especially valuable in collaborative projects. First, it starts with the idea that stakeholders, including both users and colleagues, co-create services. This focus on co-creation means that the tools and approaches recommended in the service design literature are designed to support collaboration. Secondly, service design looks at services holistically, and does not detach them from context. Given that we were working from the shared assumption that research and writing are intertwined, complex, contextualized processes – and that we each brought expertise and experience with different parts of those processes – this holistic lens was obviously relevant. Finally, service design uses evidence and data to surface assumptions and to make the intangible experiences of users more tangible. It requires creators to approach the work from a place

of curiosity and open-mindedness. This was clearly useful for us, given that we all have tendencies to assume that “the way we do things” is the right way (Marquez & Downey, 2017).

We decided to start the process by bringing all stakeholders together to work through a half-day workshop that would: introduce the theory and practice of service design; help us establish a shared vocabulary for our work; better understand each others’ needs; and articulate a few common goals. The workshop was facilitated by Annie Downey and Joe Marquez, who had just published a popular book about service design in the academic library context. Downey and Marquez helped us create an ecology map and led us through some additional heuristic exercises to introduce service design theory, methods and tools.

Creating ecology maps helped us to locate intersections between services visually. Each unit diagrammed their current service operations and then we layered them together to find intersections. The maps surfaced commonalities, dependencies and affordances, and also revealed interesting points of difference. This process also provided us with useful ways to think about the user experience in stages, focusing on touch points where users interact directly with services. Taken together, stakeholders, touch points, stages and interactions provided us with a high-level and holistic overview of our goals. In small groups, we continued working through activities designed to help us see services from the users’ perspective(s). In their 2017 book, Marquez and Downey outlined a heuristic framework for understanding library services. This framework includes elements such as *Empower User Autonomy*, *Meeting Current Needs*, and *Clarity of Purpose*. In small groups, we went out into the library to observe different service points through these lenses. It was useful for everyone to hear the different perspectives we brought to these shared observations.

(Very) Rapid Prototyping

After this initial workshop, the implementation team began to meet. Two librarians were asked to step into the project as Project Managers. They established timelines, served as

the primary point of communication between groups, navigated the often byzantine university workflows, scheduled meetings, and preserved the document trail. Two overlapping groups met regularly to insure that lines of communication stayed open, and that decisions were made as needed to facilitate the design process. A small steering committee, including representatives from every stakeholder group, oversaw the whole project and served as liaisons to higher university administration. At the same time, smaller implementation teams moved the project forward. However, there were some factors, outside of our control, that threatened to impede our best-laid plans.

As we mentioned previously, the units coming together to develop this new service point were located in different university units. We knew from our prior experience that it was essential to articulate: 1) the labor, resources, and personnel each unit would commit to the project; 2) the timeline for the project and; 3) a process for supporting future needs, such as development and maintenance. Because we were in different units, we needed an MOU; this document was completed and signed in early 2017. The Writing Center had to vacate their current location in the summer, and we had to be ready to open the new space at the start of Fall term. This tight timeline meant that we simply did not have the time to follow the step-by-step approaches to service design that we found in the literature.

Marquez and Downey, like most people writing about service design, frame the work as a process and use a stage model to describe that process. Their model follows four stages: Pre-work; Observation; Understanding and Thinking; and Implementation (Marquez & Downey, 2015). Luckily, this is not the only stage model we had to draw from. In their 2011 book, Stickdorn and Schneider suggested a useful refinement. This model also has four stages, different but not precluded by Downey and Marquez's: Exploration; Creation; Reflection; and Implementation. Both of these models end with "implementation," but Stickdorn and Schneider's model clarifies that the middle stages, creation and reflection, are generative. In other words, the service designer creates and tests services and spaces *throughout* the process. In the third stage, "reflection," they describe a process of prototyping. This mental shift was essential for us to move forward. Implementing a fully

designed project in Fall 2017 seemed impossible. Implementing an intentionally designed prototype by that deadline seemed hard, but possible.

Rapid prototyping is a process adopted from industrial manufacturing and frequently used in conjunction with design thinking. As Meier and Miller explain, as technology made building things easier, faster and cheaper, it no longer made sense to wait to build things until the design was as perfect as could be. A better process involved building, testing, refining and rebuilding a new product quickly and iteratively. In recent years, this iterative design concept has been applied more broadly to the design of services (2016).

Although we wanted to start with service design processes before thinking about remodeling and furnishing the space, our tight timeline meant that we had to do the opposite. We had a two-month window to make decisions about the shape and layout of the space, to choose furnishings, and to figure out infrastructure needs (like power). The reality of university workflows meant that if orders weren't placed by March, we would miss our Fall deadline. To manage this, we embraced the idea of an iterative prototype. We ordered small sets of different types of furniture, so we could observe how they were used in the space, and we kept the overall design very minimal. This was especially helpful, not only from a logistical standpoint, but also in helping keep us focused on iteration and observation. In fact, we used blue painters' tape at our launch party so that we could test the look and feel of stripes without committing to paint!

Once we had our orders placed and the project was safely on our Facilities Department's calendar, we were able to turn our attention to pedagogy and staffing. This immediately created some frustrations. The Writing Center had an established staffing model, and had even experimented with the studio model in their former space. However, the old Writing Center was significantly smaller, and more private and closed-in, than the new, proposed location. They needed to be open to change, which is always hard. For librarians, the challenges were a little different. We did not have experience staffing a tutoring or writing center, which meant that we had no concrete data to help us predict future needs. At the same time, we did have a long history in the proposed space, and a commitment to the

open, student-driven culture of the library Learning Commons. We needed to navigate this uncertainty together, compromise, and make some predictions, and this that task was made more complicated because we were all drawing on past experiences that were not the same.

To navigate this challenge, we used a method popular with service designers called “journey mapping”. In this exercise, the team visualizes the steps a user will take to perform some task that they authentically need to do. The map tracks the action from start to finish, revealing the stages, stakeholders, and touch points that are involved before the task is completed. Just as important, the journey map layers in the emotional side of the user experience as well. Noting these emotional experiences — positive and negative — reveals the possible “pinch points” or problem areas in a proposed design or existing service.

Ideally, journey mapping is a process that is done with all stakeholders, including users. This, however, was not something we could do in the time that we had available. Accepting this limitation was the most challenging part of this challenging process. Hanging on to the idea that this was a prototype, and that the process would not end when we opened the space, helped. James Desrosier’s 2011 experience using rapid prototyping in curriculum design illustrates why. He suggests that in his context, rapid prototyping meant replacing research (particularly user research) with informed judgment: “Judgment replaced research. Intuition, depth of personal knowledge, and prior firsthand experience were the primary guides of development and decision making” (142). This was not ideal, but it did push us to make our judgment as open-minded and informed as possible, and also set the groundwork for including users in later stages of this iterative process.

The most useful tool in our planning stages was blueprinting. The service blueprint shows both the “onstage” and the “offstage” sides of a service in a visually parallel map. In one row, we mapped out the physical evidence — like a staff person, a sign, or a table and chair — the user would see or interact with during their journey. In a parallel stream we mapped the actual user action: taking a photo of the sign, or choosing a place to sit. Below this row

we created a line of interaction between the user and the front line staff (the “onstage” side of the service). In our case, the onstage row showed a studio staff member greeting the user entering the space. One example in our onstage row showed a studio staff member greeting the user entering the space. The next row shows the library staff “offstage” supporting the user’s actions (e.g. making sure there are interactive signs located on all studio tables for the user to signal their need). Finally, in the last row, we mapped internal interactions, the infrastructure or labor needed to support the user’s actions. Using this blueprinting model, we were able to identify missing pieces and gaps, the discussions we needed to have, and the data we needed to gather to create a prototype staffing model for the new space.

Conclusion

Oregon State’s Undergrad Research and Writing Studio opened in the Fall of 2017, and we have developed plans and protocols to test different staffing models and space configurations as the 2017-2018 school year progresses. We are currently conducting observational studies in the space, examining furniture use and flow, using the Suma Assessment toolkit developed by North Carolina State University (Casden & Davidson, 2013). We are also testing different configurations for positioning staff throughout the space, and we are collecting end-of-session reflections from all of the individuals staffing the space at the end of every shift.

This process has not always been smooth, which is not a surprise, and midway through the prototype year we have a great deal of work left to do. We cannot say that we know now what the future versions of this space will look like. However, we have made progress and, more importantly, started building a community between the Writing Center and library staff. Developing and improving communication channels, figuring out fiscal and administrative workflows, and revising and reshaping the training we provide for peer consultants will be priorities as we move forward.

One of the most challenging things about this process has been managing our own frustrations and emotional reactions to the barriers that inherently arise whenever we try to do something quickly, rigorously, and well in academia. We have had some negative

moments, but opening ourselves up to them has been worth it. We would like to close with some thoughts that may help others trying to balance the timelines, tight budgets, and resource constraints we all face with the desire to use methods we know will make our work better:

- Take the time to find a useful framework, like service design, before you start. Use it to help establish some shared principles before you tackle the hard questions and make the hard choices.
- Recognize that collaboration is difficult, even between groups or units that have a lot in common. Don't leave assumptions unspoken. If possible, bring in someone who isn't a part of any of your stakeholder groups to help you establish a shared framework or mindset.
- Remember that project management will create a lot of potentially invisible labor for personnel. Plan for this, and recognize and reward that work.
- Commit to an iterative process and a culture of experimentation. This can mean being willing to launch something minimally designed or imperfect, and it always means developing a plan for testing what you launch and for making improvements.
- Give yourself credit for the things you do accomplish, even when you had to make compromises or be flexible.

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