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Teagan Eastman
Utah State University

Amber Willenborg
University of Louisville

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Making a Mark in the First Year: Initiating and Implementing Large-Scale Projects as a New Librarian

Amber Willenborg
Online Learning & Digital Media Librarian
University of Louisville

Teagan Eastman
Online Learning Librarian
Utah State University

Abstract

New librarians are in a position to bring innovative ideas to their organization, but are often unsure of how to go about implementing big projects. This article presents a case study of two online learning librarians in their first year of librarianship, outlining how they initiated and implemented large-scale projects and discussing challenges they faced and lessons they learned.

Article Type: Case study

Introduction

New librarians bring a fresh perspective to the field and have the capacity to share exciting new ideas with their organizations. However, being new to the profession can be daunting for librarians in their first year, and they are often unsure of how to go about initiating large-scale projects. New librarians may feel like they should spend their first year becoming acclimated to their new position or believe that they do not yet have the knowledge or skills to innovate at their library. According to Clark, Vardeman, and Barba's 2014 study on imposter syndrome among college and research librarians, newer librarians experience feelings of anxiety and lack of confidence more often than their experienced colleagues. Although these feelings of inexperience might add to the challenge of initiating and implementing a big project during

the first year, new librarians can use such projects to bring positive changes to their library while also developing confidence in their new position.

This article describes the implementation of two large-scale projects by new librarians at two academic libraries in the United States: The University of Louisville's Research DIY website and Utah State University's online learning workflow. Each librarian initiated the project during their first year of librarianship and offers an overview of background, planning, and project implementation. The writers elaborate on tips for new librarians to build confidence as a leader early in their career, including finding a mentor, building departmental buy-in, adapting to overcome challenges, and staying true to the vision of the project.

Literature Review

Much of the literature on newly hired academic librarians focuses on acclimating new librarians to the world of academic librarianship. Onboarding and training of new librarians is often discussed: Knight (2013) wrote about the importance of rapid onboarding to bring new librarians quickly up-to-speed in their new environment, while Keisling and Laning (2016) and Libson and Welsh (2017) detailed their respective onboarding processes. The literature surrounding new librarians also focuses on mentoring programs. Kenefic and DeVito (2015) described the mutual benefits of a traditional mentoring relationship between a new librarian and an experienced professional, while Fyn (2013) wrote about peer group mentoring relationships as an alternative to traditional mentoring. Goodset & Walsh (2015) discussed tenure-track librarians' anxieties while dealing with both a new environment and the pressure of meeting tenure requirements. The literature contains abundant examples and best practices for making sure new librarians are supported at the beginning of their career.

Studies discussing onboarding and mentoring also often shed light on the experiences and perceptions of new librarians. Through their interviews with new librarians, Libson and Welsh discovered some of the challenges faced by new academic librarians, including lack of communication and socialization among colleagues. Similarly, Keisling and Laning reported that new librarians at their institution placed value on "learning how to get things done, and who could help them be successful" (387) during their first six months. New librarians participating in Goodset and Walsh's mentoring study described benefits like better time management and the ability to communicate with and get advice from other professionals. These studies highlight the value new librarians place on building relationships and developing important work skills in their new positions.

The research on project management in academic libraries is also plentiful, much of it detailing techniques librarians use to successfully manage projects. Recently,

Kachoka and Hoskins (2017) described the use of the Project Management Body of Knowledge to manage a library renovation project; Hackman (2017) presented a case study on the use of John Kotter's eight-stage change process; Yeh and Walter (2016) focused on critical success factors when migrating their integrated library system; and Dulock and Long (2015) conducted a pilot of the Scrum project management framework.

While research on large-scale project management techniques are certainly useful for new librarians, research focused specifically on new librarians implementing such projects in their organizations is lacking. Serrano and Aviles (2016) found that "project management has become part of the everyday work of many academic librarians" but that "this high participation contrasts to the limited training received in their university education" (473). New librarians must often learn to tackle projects and implement change on the job, as in Kozel-Gains' and Stoddart's 2009 case study of newly hired librarians' use of technology to take on the subject liaison responsibilities of their retiring colleagues.

This case study hopes to add to the conversation about how new academic librarians can implement large-scale projects, emphasizing the importance of mentors in helping first-year librarians develop and hone the skills and relationships necessary to implement innovative projects and programs in their libraries. Further, this article strives to begin filling the gap in the scholarly conversation surrounding the challenges new librarians face while implementing large-scale projects at academic libraries and offer tangible takeaways for new librarians initiating such projects.

Research DIY at the University of Louisville

Background

The University of Louisville (UofL) is the second-largest university in the state of Kentucky, serving over 22,000 students and providing a robust online learning program that offers over

one thousand online course sections spanning sixty-five disciplines. The University of Louisville Libraries seek to support online learning for students both on- and off-campus, as evident in their strategic plan: “By the year 2020, library services will be provided at the time, place and point of user need” (University of Louisville Libraries Strategic Plan, 2012-2020, 2012). Working towards this goal, UofL Libraries created the position of Online Learning & Digital Media Librarian in 2016, recognizing the evolving role of technology in education as an opportunity to reach a wider array of students.

Planning

The Online Learning & Digital Media (OLDM) Librarian began working at the University of Louisville in July 2016. As a new librarian in a newly created role, she did not come into the position thinking about starting a large-scale project right away and spent the first few weeks learning new software and experimenting with video and module creation. While she was not thinking about the bigger picture yet, her supervisor, the Information Literacy Coordinator, was already brainstorming large-scale online learning projects. At a check-in meeting during the OLDM Librarian’s first month on the job, the Information Literacy Coordinator brought up a question that had been asked by many faculty members: “Is there anywhere on the website that can show my students how to do research?” Like many libraries, UofL has videos, tutorials, and research guides on various topics spread throughout the library website; what UofL lacked was a page that housed all of these resources in one place. The Information Literacy Coordinator suggested creating a website similar to Portland State’s Library DIY.

The Portland State Library DIY website is a comprehensive collection of help materials covering everything from printing in the library to selecting keywords and using library databases. The code for Library DIY is freely available on GitHub and many libraries have implemented their own version of the site. The OLDM Librarian and her supervisor decided that Library DIY would be used as inspiration, but that they

would create a homegrown website tailored to UofL students’ needs.

Implementation: Phase One

While creating a new resource for the library was a daunting task, the Online Learning & Digital Media Librarian was not facing it alone; she was also the head of the Online Learning Team, made up of members of the Research Assistance and Instruction department who collaborated on online learning initiatives. At their first meeting, the team provided feedback on the Portland State Library DIY site and made decisions for the UofL version of DIY: the site would focus on research rather than general library inquiries and the content of the site would include short how-to videos and infographics.

After that first meeting, the project gained momentum. The OLDM Librarian had a clearer vision of what the completed site would look like and she wanted to prove herself as an effective leader, so she prepared a sample table of contents as well as a sample video and infographic for the next meeting. The content was received positively by the team, and each team member was assigned a piece of content to complete by the next meeting.

One month later, the OLDM Librarian was excited to see all of the new content that the Online Learning Team members had created. She had made a handful of videos and infographics in the meantime, but was surprised to find that the other team members had not created anything. Chalking it up to the busy time of year, she adjourned the meeting until the next month when everyone could bring in their content to share. Another month came and went, and while some team members brought notes or script drafts to the meeting, no one other than the OLDM Librarian had created any content.

Initially, the Online Learning & Digital Media Librarian felt confused and hurt by this outcome. It seemed like the team members did not feel held accountable for their work because she was a new librarian and had no real authority. While this might have been true to some extent, she realized that she was also not being a very

effective leader. She had simply assigned work and expected it to be done with no guidance from her, the person hired to guide the creation of online content. It was also a busy time of year and the team members, most of whom were subject liaisons, had other responsibilities such as teaching classes and conducting research appointments. After discussing the problem with her supervisor, the OLDM Librarian decided to cancel the next month's meeting and instead schedule individual meetings with team members to work together on their content at a time of their choosing.

This decision made all the difference in the success of the Research DIY project. The subject librarians were experts on the content, and the Online Learning & Digital Media Librarian was able to help them envision how to translate their knowledge into a video or infographic. Working together, the team members and OLDM Librarian were able to create content that was both professional-looking and useful to students. By the next Online Learning Team meeting, each team member had content to share.

Implementation: Phase Two

Having buy-in from her department members on the Online Learning Team gave the Online Learning & Digital Media Librarian more confidence to build relationships with other collaborators going forward. It was clear that some content that the team wanted to include in Research DIY would require the expertise of library partners like the Writing Center. The OLDM Librarian reached out to the directors of the Writing Center with information about Research DIY and examples of content from the site, and asked them if they would like to be involved and to what extent. The Writing Center decided on two pieces of content, both infographics, that they would create on their own. The OLDM Librarian was happy to let them create their own content, but it was important that their content matched the vision for the rest of the site. The initial drafts of the Writing Center infographics were text heavy and contained too much information; while she felt a little anxious suggesting that the directors edit their

infographics, the OLDM Librarian set up a meeting to discuss changes to the content. The second drafts were much better, and she ended up slightly tweaking them for the final product. It certainly would have been quicker and easier for the OLDM Librarian to create the content herself with a little input from the Writing Center, but by allowing them to create content themselves, the Writing Center had a greater stake in the project. The collaboration helped the OLDM Librarian establish a better relationship with the Writing Center and together they were able to create an end product that satisfied both parties.

In addition to content-creation partners, the Online Learning Team would need help putting together a website and making that website findable through the UofL Libraries homepage. After the team had figured out how they envisioned the site, the Online Learning & Digital Media Librarian invited the libraries' Web Manager to an Online Learning Team meeting to discuss how the site could be included in the new library homepage, which would be unveiled in August 2017. Because the team was able to articulate exactly what would be on the DIY site and how it was important to the libraries' mission, the Web Manager was happy to work with the team to create the site and include Research DIY prominently on the new homepage.

Reflections

Research DIY went live on August 1st, 2017, but the project is not over. The Online Learning & Digital Media Librarian will need to update content as resources change and add new content based on faculty and student suggestions. The Online Learning Team also has plans to make another site with more in-depth research help for graduate students and faculty. Even though the project is ongoing, the OLDM Librarian feels as though she has already accomplished a lot and is more confident in her position going forward. The biggest challenge throughout this project was building that confidence. As a new librarian, it can be difficult to gain buy-in from colleagues and be seen as a leader due to lack of experience. Having a more seasoned mentor or supervisor with whom to

discuss confidence and leadership challenges is invaluable for new librarians to maintain momentum and keep moving forward on the project. Through the implementation of this project, the OLDM Librarian learned that leading as a new librarian is not about asserting your authority but about working together so that everyone involved can bring their strengths to the project. A leader's job is to keep the project on track and guide everyone toward the same goal.

Online Learning Workflow at Utah State University

Background

As Utah's only land-grant institution, Utah State University (USU) serves over 16,000 students enrolled in programs through USU Online or at one of over 25 regional campuses and centers. The University Libraries system at USU provides quality service to students enrolled in these programs and according to their strategic mission on the USU Libraries website, the library "removes barriers and provides equal access to information regardless of format or location ("Accreditation," 2010)." To this end, the library created the position of Regional Campus and E-Learning Librarian in order to ensure outreach, marketing and services were provided to regional campus and online students and faculty. However, it became apparent that a more focused approach to providing information literacy instruction to distance students was needed. Therefore, in 2016, USU Libraries created and filled the position of the Online Learning (OL) Librarian to ensure library instruction opportunities were being provided to regional campus and online students, as well as to help create, adapt and maintain online resources.

Planning

As a librarian fresh out of an MLIS program and in her first professional job, the Online Learning Librarian was excited about the opportunity to shape this new position. She was fortunate to be

mentored by the Regional Campus and E-Learning Librarian who helped her quickly understand USU's Regional Campus and Online programs, the state of library instruction for online and regional campus courses and establish goals for the first year in her position. In collaboration with her supervisor, the OL Librarian determined the primary objective for the year was to increase instruction to online and regional campus students.

Soon after establishing this goal, her supervisor, the Regional Campus & E-Learning Librarian, provided her with materials from a presentation given by Dominique Turnbow and Amanda Roth at the Library Instruction West Conference held in 2016. Turnbow and Roth created a workflow for the creation of online learning objects at University of California, San Diego that allowed their creation team to incorporate pedagogical design practices, communicate with stakeholders and document their time and processes. The OL Librarian adapted this workflow in order to create a process for collaborating with Subject Librarians (librarians assigned to departments across the university who teach library instruction for that department) to specifically target online and regional campus courses. The online learning workflow provides a design document that requires Subject Librarians (SLs) to collaborate with instructors to identify:

- Delivery method (video, Canvas module, Guide on the Side, etc...)
- Learning outcomes
- Information literacy skills covered
- Assessment
- Timeline

Once SLs identify an online instruction need, the Online Learning Librarian would provide the SL with a timeline for completion, create the object(s) and collaborate with the instructor to have the materials placed in either the course's Canvas (LMS) page or LibGuide. This process allowed SLs to leverage their relationships with instructors in their departments and subject matter expertise while the OL Librarian could focus on best practices in designing online learning and content creation. Throughout the creation of the online learning workflow, the OL

Librarian and her supervisor articulated the importance of this project and gathered feedback and support from the department head and Subject Librarian Advisory Committee. This was an important step in obtaining buy-in.

Implementation: Phase One

The next step was to implement this workflow with the Subject Librarians. The Online Learning librarian presented the workflow at a monthly SL meeting by giving each SL a blank copy of the design document and a sample completed copy. The OL Librarian explained the pedagogical reasoning behind each component of the design document and then walked SLs through an online learning scenario using the example design document.

While not a complete failure, the initial phase of the online learning workflow resulted in only a minimal increase in instruction provided to regional campus and online courses. The majority of the SLs that participated were in the OL Librarian's department, Learning & Engagement Services, and while building these relationships gave her confidence, as a new librarian she struggled to obtain buy-in from SLs across the library unit. At first, this was a hit to her confidence and she began to think she was incapable of managing projects. The OL Librarian took a step back, discussed the challenges with her supervisor and realized she had overlooked some crucial steps in implementation such as failing to articulate the importance of supporting distance education students. Thus the OL Librarian did not receive the necessary buy-in from her fellow SLs to make this project a success. Determining reasons that the first phase of the plan did not succeed helped her grow as a leader and formulate the next phase.

Implementation: Phase Two

An important lesson for first year librarians is learning how to maintain momentum despite setbacks. To overcome the challenges and maintain momentum in the project, the OL Librarian, in collaboration with her supervisor, developed Phase Two which involved the

creation of a Subject Librarian Online Learning Worksheet and an additional presentation at a monthly SL meeting to articulate the importance of supporting distance education students. At this presentation, the Online Learning Librarian showed SLs how to identify online and regional campus courses and encouraged them to focus on an online or regional campus section of a course they already support on USU's main campus. Subject Librarians were provided a worksheet in order to identify a course to integrate with, provided a template email for contacting the instructor to identify a research need, and then asked to return the worksheet to the Online Learning Librarian with one course identified to support for the Spring semester.

Phase Two of implementing the online learning workflow resulted in a 20% increase in instruction provided to online and regional campus classes. It also provided SLs with the knowledge of how to identify online and regional campus courses in the future and gave them a mechanism for initiating contact with these instructors. The most important change made with this phase of implementation was the emphasis on the fact that there is no need to recreate the wheel. Phase Two focused on working with SLs to understand their needs and articulating the benefits that collaborating with the OL Librarian could offer them, such as adapting a face-to-face library instruction session into an online setting. This demonstrates to SLs that online learning can save them time and innovate their instruction practices which helped increase buy-in.

Although Phase Two was successful in increasing instruction opportunities for online and regional campus courses, it was not perfect and the missteps were valuable learning opportunities for the Online Learning Librarian. This phase was implemented at the end of the semester during both SLs' and faculty's busiest time of the year. As it was the OL Librarian's first semester in the position she failed to realize the insanity that ensues at the end of the semester. Additionally, Phase Two required SLs to turn in their worksheet to her without an incentive or mandate to do so; as a new employee, she did not have the necessary social capital or authority

needed to encourage all her colleagues to complete the assignment. Finally, she realized she did not have a firm grasp on the needs of regional campus and online faculty. She assumed that the majority of regional campus and online instructors would have courses with a research component and would immediately jump at the idea of integrating with the library for instruction. Reflecting upon this phase of the project helped the Online Learning Librarian realize that as a new librarian she was eager to make big changes in her library, but these changes required a foundation of relationships within the library and awareness of library and campus needs which take time to build.

Reflections

This project, with its successes and failures, was a formative experience that greatly shaped how the Online Learning Librarian views her position, her understanding of her role in the library and university, and the goals that she set for the next year. The OL Librarian realizes the importance of developing relationships with mentors in the library; these mentors helped set realistic goals, supported implementation, and provided key institutional knowledge. The OL Librarian also realizes that as both she and her position are new, she must build relationships with her colleagues that will allow them to understand her position and skills but also to understand the strengths her colleagues bring to the table in order to effectively collaborate with them in the future. Finally, the OL Librarian recognizes that large-scale projects are ongoing and failures happen, but they are valuable learning experiences. In order to grow as a librarian, it is important to reflect on what went wrong and formulate strategies for overcoming those challenges in the future.

Conclusions & Discussion

New librarians are in a position to bring new and innovative ideas to their organizations. However, newer academic librarians tend to struggle with imposter syndrome, causing them to experience anxiety and lack of confidence (Clark, Vardeman, and Barba, 2014). As evident in these case studies, anxiety and lack of confidence can cause early career librarians to

doubt their ideas and abilities, and make it difficult for them to overcome the challenges inherent in their new positions. Additionally, managing large-scale change is often a process unfamiliar to individuals in their first professional library position as it is not a skill learned in most library and information science degree programs (Serrano and Aviles, 2016). Still, it is possible for new librarians to effect change in their libraries by taking appropriate steps in the planning and implementation of projects. Through these case studies, the authors have curated a set of key takeaways for successfully initiating and implementing a large-scale project as a new librarian:

1. **Find a mentor or other support person to guide your work**, especially at the beginning stages. You might have a great idea but lack the institutional knowledge to make the idea fit well with your organization. Your mentor, supervisor, etc. can help you shape an idea into a project that makes sense for your library's needs. They also have valuable leadership experience that you can tap into.
2. **Build departmental buy-in**. Even though your colleagues want to support you, remember that they have responsibilities of their own; your project will not be the most important thing they have going on. Make sure you can clearly articulate why the project is important and how it will improve your library.
3. **Maintain momentum**. While support from mentors, supervisors, and colleagues is important, remember that it is up to you to push the project forward. You cannot wait around for everyone else to make it happen. Create a timeline, schedule meetings in advance, and set deadlines for yourself and team members.
4. **Mistakes happen, move forward**. Even with scheduled meetings and deadlines, things will go wrong. Do not take "failure" or missteps personally. Adapt to challenges as best as you can and when all else fails, talk to your mentor or supervisor about the best steps to take.

5. **Build relationships with stakeholders outside of your department or library.** Remember that these partners might not understand your vision right away or they might be used to doing things differently. Work *with* outside stakeholders to stay true to your vision of the project while also respecting their needs.
6. **Keep in mind that large-scale projects are ongoing.** Your project might be fully implemented after a year but will require upkeep and updating. Reflect on lessons learned along the way when moving forward.

While these suggestions for implementing projects as a new librarian worked for the authors, this list of key takeaways is not comprehensive; these case studies are limited to just one area of academic librarianship, online learning. Further research is needed to shed light on how first-year librarians across the spectrum of academic librarianship job titles navigate the challenge of implementing large-scale projects.

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