Design Thinking for Library Students

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"Things they don't teach you in library school" is a common phrase used by librarians. For me, design thinking is at the top of the list of things I believe should be included in the MLS curriculum. For the past four years, I've tried to change that by giving an interactive guest lecture for new library students on the IU Bloomington campus.

Design thinking is a creative approach to problem-solving. The process encourages organizations to empathize with the people they are designing for in order to create stronger solutions. My lecture is based significantly on resources from the "Design Thinking for Libraries" toolkit, developed by IDEO in partnership with the Aarhus Public Library in Denmark and the Chicago Public Library. I have adapted pieces of the toolkit to get students up and running with design thinking in about two hours.

My interest in design thinking stems from my previous experience at a public library in Florida. In my role as Digital Literacy Librarian, I was the manager of a digital media lab complete with green screen, Mac computers, and other tech gadgets. The majority of our patrons were older adults and while many of them wanted help with technology, few of them were interested in learning to program a Raspberry Pi microcomputer. There was a disconnect between the service we were providing and what our patrons actually wanted. If we had utilized the design thinking process, our lab probably would have aligned more closely with the needs of our community. Consequently, design thinking is something I wish I had learned in library school.

User Tools and Services (once called Reference) is a required course for all MLS students at IUB and an ideal setting to discuss design thinking. In this course, students are tasked with designing a new library service for a fictional library. This project encourages them to consider a wide range of services, from makerspaces and book bikes to homework help for teens. Much like my experience in Florida, I find that students tend to approach their service design assignment by starting with a solution, rather than considering a problem or need first. By working through the design thinking process, students learn to put their patrons first.

Phase One: Inspiration
For the first phase, students are broken into groups and given a scenario that includes a user group and their identified need. For example, the user group might be LGBTQ patrons in an academic library and the problem is that these patrons do not feel welcome in the library. Students work together to reframe their user need in the form of a question, starting with the phrase, "How might we…?" This approach helps frame challenges as opportunities and establishes a reasonable expectation of what can be accomplished. Questions that are too broad may not be actionable, whereas questions that are too narrow prevent creative thinking.

Once they've defined their design challenge, students read a handout about different methods for researching their user population. Methods include user interviews, expert interviews, card sorts, and more. Students identify two methods that would be appropriate for their scenario.

Phase Two: Ideation
In the next phase, students are asked to generate as many ideas as possible to tackle their challenges. They are given 10 minutes to think of 30 different ideas. After 10 minutes, they illustrate 3 of their ideas on the whiteboard. Before moving to the next step, each group shares what they consider to be their worst idea.

The brainstorming phase is meant to help students move beyond their initial ideas and explore different solutions. Thinking of 30 different ideas requires them to consider lots of possibilities, regardless of their practicality. When students share their worst idea, they have an opportunity to celebrate their more unique solutions (and it usually gets a good laugh). *This whiteboard illustration shows a potential new service for the children's area of a public library.*

Phase Three: Iteration
For the final phase, students choose their strongest idea and make a prototype using craft supplies. Prototypes include things like floor plans, promotional materials, or models. The prototyping process makes ideas tangible and creates an opportunity to test an idea and get feedback.
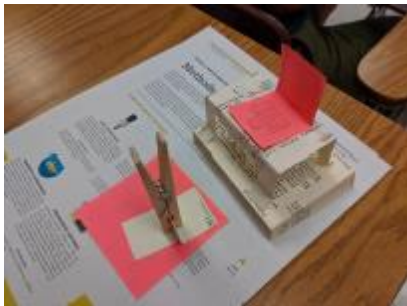
This prototype of an adaptable workstation transforms a local school into a library in the evenings.

Final Thoughts
The main objective of this lecture is to expose library students to the design thinking process. By completing these exercises, students get experience empathizing with their patrons, brainstorming new ideas, and creating a testable prototype. I hope they are able to utilize these skills once they enter the field.