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Erin Wahl

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Shifting Instruction for Sustainability: Lessons from COVID

Erin Wahl
New Mexico State University, USA

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic irrevocably changed the ways that libraries function. Libraries had to shift and our skills as librarians and educators were put to the test in new ways. As the Instruction Coordinator at New Mexico State University Library during the pandemic, I saw an opportunity emerge to do something I had wanted to for a while: shift instruction to be more mindful of concepts of sustainability and utilize the tools of our library and campus community to their greatest effect. This article details the shift in considering library instruction through sustainability and resilience by detailing the main challenges the New Mexico State University Library faced during the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, sustainability, resilience, instruction, pandemic, change, discomfort

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated sweeping and immediate changes to libraries globally as everyone rushed to shut down for the safety of their communities, but still offer services. The field of library and information science was suddenly asking big questions in a new light, amongst them being:

- What are the most important things we do?
- What does our community need right now?
- How do we continue offering services given all of these new challenges?

In order to be able to answer these questions for a world altered by the pandemic, and to continue to be able to adapt to future challenges, more libraries should be considering these questions in terms of sustainability. Sustainability is typically applied in terms of its environmental meaning, resulting in green libraries, recycling programs, community gardens, or programs on environmental subjects. However, sustainability is much more than the environmental side of its definition, and more widely applicable to libraries than some may realize. As Henk (2014) observes:

“transitioning to sustainability requires more than just measuring and reducing environmental impact. That tactic has been tried without success for many years. The time has come to try a new approach—recommitting to our fundamental values and reviewing our operations to ensure that they match those values” (p. 8).

Thinking about sustainability coupled with resilience not only allows us to meet shifting challenges such as the recent pandemic, but also requires that we consider maintenance and evolution of library instruction in the long-term. Libraries will experience change as a natural part of being within an ecosystem, but how libraries and library instruction confront the constancy of change in a sustainable manner allows us to develop institutions that are truly resilient and able to quickly shift gears when circumstances require.

DEFINING SUSTAINABILITY

In order to talk about how to shift library instruction with sustainability in mind, the term sustainability itself needs to be defined. One of the established standard definitions of sustainability comes from the World Commission on Environment and Development's report, typically known as *Our Common Future*, which establishes the three Es of sustainability as: economy, equity, and environment (1987). Sustainability too often falls into a buzzword category. It is often used but not understood; shiny and modern but meaningless. Sustainability generally enters library literature in the form of physical spaces, programming, digital efforts, and processes, but often these definitions are not as concrete and rarely attempt to connect to the rest of the library overall, much less the community the library belongs to. Often this literature sticks to a case-by-case basis approach and becomes a checkmark that is completed and moved on from, rather than a continuing, evolving endeavor that is central to the mission of the library. In his book, Edwards more succinctly defines the three Es made standard following the release of that report as "preservation and management of ecology/environment (the First E) to include on an equal basis issues related to economy/employment (the Second E) and equity/equality (the Third E)", the broader focus of which "offers the possibility of a much broader coalition for positive change both within and among societies" (Edwards, 2005, p. 21). Edwards subsequently offers the addition of a fourth E: education which "is the catalyst for helping everyone understand the dynamic nature of the interrelationship of the Three Es" (2005, p. 23). Sustainability may begin, for many, with environmental efforts, but the interconnected nature of these Es quickly catapults the critical librarian into a broader, interconnected picture of sustainability in the world and the library, imagining how the Es could be harnessed to create a truly resilient library.

Libraries should be considered as ecosystems that are connected with other existing ecosystems. Ecosystems rarely exist in a vacuum, but rather interlink and intertwine much like a library exists within its community and the parts of a library (such as instruction) exist within that organizational structure. It is this existence as part of an ecosystem that makes developing a sustainable resilient library imperative to the continued success of our organizations and the communities we work with. In order to create something truly lasting, sustainability of an ecosystem needs to be coupled with resilience. According to Webb:

"The concept of resilience, as applied to an ecosystem, is loosely defined as the ability of the system to maintain its function when faced with novel disturbance. The concept is related to stability, but with its focus on maintenance of function and novel disturbance, resilience uniquely encompasses aspects of society's reliance on ecosystem services and increasing anthropogenic change. [...] Focusing on how basic ecological characteristics and

processes respond to novel disturbance will contribute to understanding how society might develop sustainably” (2007).

Sustainability and resilience do not need to exist in opposition to each other. Rather, they are both necessary to achieving a library that can move with change and serve its community well. Librarians would do well to revise their institutions and positions from a sustainability standpoint. A library that uses the sustainability definition that includes environment, economy, equity, and education, with a mind towards institutional, community, and global resilience, is a library that is well equipped to battle disturbances to its “normal” activities. Pandemics and misinformation and civil unrest may shift to become opportunities for growth of communities and the ability to make a significant positive change, not moments of panic. This echoes the introduction to the book *Libraries & sustainability: Programs and practices for community impact*, in which Aldrich shares the hope that she and her coauthors had in editing the volume:

“that what you read in this book is not just interesting to you, not just food for thought, but content that helps you actively reimagine your role in the library profession to one as an ardent advocate interested in joining us in the work to not only help libraries step into the necessary role as leaders on the topic of sustainability, but to transform the world in a way that combats climate change and builds community resilience” (Tanner, Ho, Antonelli, and Aldrich, 2021, p. xii).

Munro (2011), adapting from Walker and Salt’s (2006) *Resilience Thinking*, lists the characteristics of a resilient library as: diversity, variability, modularity, acknowledgement of slow variables, tight feedbacks, social capital, innovation, ecosystem services, redundancies, and generalists. One of the major points of Munro’s article is that librarians must become comfortable with the uncomfortable environment, with the constant shifting and changing that comes with being part of an ecosystem, and evolve to answer this constant change, developing resilience for our institutions.

THE SUSTAINABILITY AND LIBRARY CONNECTION

Sustainability and resilience are natural partners to libraries, which are also concerned with a continued, evolving connection with our communities. When library instruction was forced to move from wholly in-person to virtual, that was a major shift in the environment in which instruction was being delivered that required a new approach. Although connected, in-person and virtual instruction provide their own specific set of challenges. As Henk (2014) observes, “transitioning to sustainability requires more than just measuring and reducing environmental impact. That tactic has been tried without success for many years. The time has come to try a new approach—recommitting to our fundamental values and reviewing our operations to ensure that they match those values” (p. 8). A part of applying sustainability and building resilience is to choose how we tackle a problem in a wise and maintainable manner and create that comfort with discomfort. In their chapter “Greening the Mothership”, Kane and Sklar capture the difficulties and unique opportunities that come with making the library more sustainable, saying that:

“each institution has its own particular quirks, between organizational structure, staffing, funding, and space availability, and a successful program will take those local limitations

into account. Likewise, a successful program will build on local strengths, needs, and interests, whether it is the role the library plays in campus life or natural institutional partnerships” (2013, p. 221).

A handful of challenges accompanied this effort to think sustainably about the library instruction program during the pandemic, but there were many more opportunities for growth. The rest of this article will explore how I tackled this shift through a breakdown of the challenges and how the solutions contribute to the resilience of the library ecosystem and the instruction program overall.

NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY

The New Mexico State University Library is located in the city of Las Cruces in southern New Mexico, United States, around 60 miles from the border with Mexico and the city of Ciudad Juarez. As a land grant university and Hispanic-Serving Institution, New Mexico State University (NMSU) has a complex history fraught with trauma, and a responsibility to move forward serving the communities of New Mexico with intention. It is the home of the state’s cooperative extension offices, serving 33 counties and boasting research and science centers that support the activities of New Mexico’s population. In the Spring of 2022, NMSU boasted an enrollment of 19,581 students across all its campuses and community colleges statewide. Of those students, 12,712 are located at the main campus in Las Cruces, New Mexico, the population which the NMSU Library on main campus directly serves and educates (New Mexico State University, 2022). The NMSU Library Reference and Research Services Department teaches one-shot instruction, online modules, as well as for-credit courses in library skills, information literacy, and other topics.

ECONOMIC ISSUES AND SUPPLY CHAINS

Libraries are no stranger to economic challenges, although the pandemic exacerbated the financial stress of many libraries. Library instruction at New Mexico State University had several challenges as COVID spread and it became apparent that the US was also headed for a shutdown of some sort. The instruction coordinator performed an informal technology survey of library reference faculty and staff who teach which showed that no one had an ideal setup for working from home, and some had no reliable capability to work from home at all. The library’s solution: for each employee to take their desktop computer home with them, was not useful for virtual, real time library instruction. The reference staff’s desktop computers did not have the capabilities required to deliver online instruction, having no cameras or microphones built in or accompanying them. There was no influx of money early on in the pandemic to purchase the technology the reference staff needed to do this work from home. Added onto this lack was the sudden interruption of global supply chains, and the rush to purchase these needed devices for telework that led to shortages in stock and, in some cases, an increase in product prices as demand out-paced supply.

Unfortunately, government assistance was not so forthcoming in the early days of the pandemic as everyone scrambled to respond to a chaotic situation, and as a result most of the instruction work fell to the several people who did have appropriate Wi-Fi connections and home computer setups. Some librarians and staff members ended up spending a lot of their own personal

money to make sure they could continue to work from home during the early days of the pandemic. Though relying on these few individuals was not the most equitable, sustainable solution, since library instruction requests decreased at New Mexico State University throughout the pandemic, it ended up being more achievable than was initially expected.

Considering sustainability through economy, the fact that many librarians had to spend personal money just to keep working, and equity, the fact that much of the work fell to a few people, a recommendation was made to the department head and library administration to consider replacing reference librarians' desktop computers with video and audio capable laptop computers sometime in the future. Not only would this ensure appropriate tools for future librarians in case of another shutdown, but it would also impact the resilience of the instruction program. Librarians equipped with laptops are not tied to the traditional library computer lab, and would be able to travel around the university campus and into the surrounding community for library instruction and outreach opportunities. This mobility could increase the reference department's outreach capabilities and could positively affect the university and surrounding communities' perception of the usefulness of the library overall.

REACHING OUR AUDIENCE

Probably one of the most obvious issues of the switch to virtual is how we were going to engage with our audience when we were not in the building. This is where the majority of our efforts to think sustainably about the resilience of library instruction were focused. The main virtual spaces of the New Mexico State University library: website, social media, LibGuides (and other Springshare tools), Zoom, and the university's learning management system, Canvas, were our tools. Specifically, library instruction had direct access to LibGuides, Zoom, and Canvas to work with.

New Mexico State University currently uses the Canvas learning management system, which has an open access repository called Canvas Commons that includes resources (assignments, modules, quizzes, etc.) that have been created by users (typically professors/teachers, etc.) and shared for anyone in the university or wider Canvas-user community to use. Although we pivoted to Zoom instruction to immediately serve the campus community during the initial lockdown period of COVID, it was not a reliable sustainable model for long-term engagement with students. Previously Zoom had been used only periodically for situations like meetings, so there was a lack of knowledge in the library about how to use it. Everyone needed to become "experts" very quickly. Early in the pandemic, there was no way to predict if instruction requests would increase, decrease, or stay the same, in addition to the realities of an already short-staffed department, it made sense to think proactively about approaches to virtual instruction. Since there was no comparable crisis situation on which to base our actions off of, we determined to think proactively as we also reacted to the immediate needs of our campus users. Prior to the start of the fall semester, a library orientation module that contained all of the skills librarians would typically cover during a basic instruction session was quickly put together and published to Canvas Commons. Having just gone through the process of certifying the library's online course through Quality Matters, which New Mexico State University uses to ensure quality of online courses, the QM-approved template developed by New Mexico State University's Academic Technology office was used for the modules so that they would also meet Quality Matters standards, and their

structure would be recognizable by students (Wahl and Schaub, 2021, p. 8), This shift was done in hopes of imparting a higher level of comfort with the modules for students.

Each module is meant to take around an hour to complete, roughly the time of a full class period. Each includes student learning outcomes, video instruction (of no more than 20 minutes), links to the library website, YouTube pages, and LibGuides, links to outside tutorials, resources, original educational content, and two optional assignments. All modules are dropped into Canvas Commons with a standardized name (all modules must begin with the words “NMSU Library”) to make them easier to find and labeled as public domain, communicating to faculty users that they may import the modules into their courses and alter them if they wish. The module assignments were created so that they can be easily scaffolded into the lead-up to a larger assignment, and faculty members can choose to assign to their students if they would like and even tailor them to the specific assignment more closely if they wish. Faculty can “favorite” the modules, and Canvas will notify them whenever the module is updated with new content.

The initial module was tested by asking the instructors of the 100-level English writing course to use the module exclusively in their classes that fall. It was revised later that semester using feedback and an orientation module geared towards graduate students was created in the spring 2021 semester. From the lessons of those two initial modules, I am writing a module manual to guide future module production in a programmatic way and ensure those same standards of quality online education and accessibility are met. Additionally, the module manual distinguishes the purpose of library modules as opposed to LibGuides and our YouTube videos, so as to make it clearer when a task is better for a module or for a LibGuide or YouTube video. Modules are revisited at least once a year to check for any needed updates, or whenever important information changes. Moving forward, the library instruction program will create a program of modules that can be easily integrated into faculty’s courses.

As the pandemic took a firm hold, librarians at New Mexico State University started to investigate what tools we already had access to but might not be utilizing fully. After a conversation with a colleague at the regional community college, we realized we had a version of Springshare that included integration options into learning management systems such as Canvas, but we had not set up or utilized this. Known in the Springshare world as LibApps Manual and LibApps Automagic, the next semester was spent researching, learning, and preparing to integrate these two tools into the Canvas system. LibApps Manual was turned on in April 2021 and LibApps Automagic was turned on in November 2021. After an initial testing phase for both tools, they were introduced to the campus community. Both have immediately impacted the way faculty and students interact with Springshare tools such as LibGuides (for research guides), LibCal (for booking study rooms once the library had opened again), A-Z Database lists and links, and other resources.

Another way we attempted to reach our audience was by revising our public-facing web page for library instruction. The idea was to shift the narrative and empower faculty to embed library resources into their classes without having to contact us for every single thing. Quick how-to screenshots show faculty how to drop library modules and resources into their Canvas courses quickly, and without the aid of a librarian. A page dedicated to faculty shows a menu-like table with all of the possible options for instruction and course assistance. Faculty who do not find

something intriguing in this menu are encouraged to reach out to the instruction team to have a larger discussion about their needs.

It was necessary for our efforts to reach our audience to be infused with concepts of sustainability, as such we hoped to increase easy access to library instruction and resources and increase equity for students and faculty. The realities of the pandemic made it essential to the success of the program overall. Prior to the pandemic, no instruction was done online and there was a lot of reluctance to making that shift and what it would look like. By crafting modules built for best practices in online education and accessibility and enabling new tools and providing clear instructions for utilizing those tools for faculty that did not require a librarian's direct help we made it easier for students and faculty to access these tools and instruction without our direct assistance, whenever was most convenient. Making the module assignments customizable by faculty meant that they did not have to do much extra work to alter the modules to be seamlessly included in their courses. Throughout the pandemic, instruction numbers at New Mexico State University have fluctuated and decreased overall, and though we are now fully back in the building since fall of 2021, requests are still not up to their typical levels. We have shifted most of our basic instruction to the online modules entirely, freeing up librarian time for the pandemic's shifting priorities, different kinds of collaborations and initiatives in instruction, and for teaching more higher-level skills when in person or on Zoom. Even now that we are back in the building, several instructors are having a lot of success using the modules as an initial requirement before in-person library instruction, finding that they can cover more advanced strategies and topics when they do not have to spend valuable class time on basics. By auditing and using the tools we already had at our disposal rather than spending time or money on developing or purchasing new ones, we prioritized use of the library's economic resources, and switching to online modules for the more basic library instruction made sure to consider the equity of the library employees by making sure no one was required to take on too much. Changing the face of our instruction page was important to making the instruction program more resilient by starting to change the understanding and narrative around what library instruction can be in a university class.

TIME AND STAFFING

The library at New Mexico State University, like many, is short-staffed and has been that way for a long time due to a variety of circumstances. As the pandemic wore on, approaching different workloads considering these gaps and how to keep everyone's workload manageable and avoid burnout while still making progress, can go a long way towards continuing good relationships within the library and on university campuses. During the pandemic, the reference department lost a librarian whose contract period was up, further complicating the already problematic staffing issues in the department. At the New Mexico State University Library, library instruction is done by librarians in the Reference and Research Services Department. However, we are obviously not the only librarians, or experts in library services, in the library. In developing the initiatives outlined earlier, care was taken to make sure that not only were we allowing librarians and staff experts in various areas to showcase their skills, but also considering the increased workload from the pandemic and not asking them to do too much. For example, needing a good video of how to request materials through Interlibrary Loan, several people in that department were approached about creating one, only to find that their workload was currently too heavy. There was, however,

interest in contributing a video in the future. In this way, we were able to create space to honor the expertise of the staff in the interlibrary loan department, and also honor their time.

During the pandemic our schedules shifted time-wise and priority-wise, and now that we are back on campus they have shifted again. Most libraries have been inexorably altered by the pandemic and it is likely that most of us will not be working in the same way as we did pre-COVID. One way libraries can be more sustainable in regards to instruction is to take an inventory of the expertise that lives in their buildings in not only librarians but also staff. This manages equity in that it allows librarians and staff to showcase their expertise, and in some cases may allow a librarian or staff member an opportunity to grow their skills by contributing something that is outside their normal daily work. Additionally, by honoring the workload and time of librarians and staff members, we are trying to make sure that no one's job is too overwhelming with tasks that they feel burnt out on, or that they are being asked to do too much outside their job description or contract dates.

COMMUNICATION

Communication pre-pandemic and post-pandemic are not the same. We may be back in the buildings, but in-person casual conversations and brainstorming sessions that led to good ideas and information exchanges are not returning as quickly, as each person weighs the risk of interaction for themselves. We are all judging just what is important enough to discuss in a different way. Communicating how instruction was meeting the challenges of the pandemic was and still is, an uphill battle. There are a limited number of ways to share information through the institution, and some of these are, according to informal feedback from faculty in many different offices of the university, largely ignored by most faculty. After determining that "Hotline" the university's daily rundown of things going on around campus proved largely ineffective at getting out messages regarding library instruction, a new plan began to be developed in preparation for spring 2022 that included a more robust use of library social media and announcements via the dashboard on the Canvas learning management system.

Applying sustainability to communication was arguably one of the hardest facets of this work. It has been identified as a campus-wide problem in previous university climate reports (Human Resource Services, 2019). In the end, our hands were tied to whatever was available throughout campus. The challenge of an ecosystem in crisis, such as academia during the pandemic, is that it can be stretched thin in many places. One could say that we made use of what was already available in our environment. Communication on the New Mexico State University campus was one of these places. Although opportunities to communicate on campus are still not ideal, the university has made a commitment to make this aspect better campus wide, and through COVID initiated bi-weekly town hall style meetings, a reboot of a faculty listserv, and additional bulletins targeted to online learning and other topics from certain university offices.

CONCLUSION

Though the challenges the library instruction program faced made the switchover difficult, progress is being made every semester and word is spreading that we have been implementing the new tools. This initial attempt to shift the instruction program towards a sustainability and

resilience mindset was a small step in the right direction. A common takeaway in literature about sustainability in libraries is that often the shift comes in small increments as it can be difficult to get the buy-in from colleagues necessary to make broader changes (Jankowska, 2013; Tanner, Ho, Antonelli, and Aldrich, 2021). The changes made to the instruction program at New Mexico State University Library eased some of our pain points in instruction during the pandemic. The instruction program considered how the definition of sustainability (environment, equity, economy, and education) could be applied with a mind towards future resilience in library instruction. Most considered of these concepts were equity, economy, and education (and arguably environment in the instance of university-wide communication), as it fit the most pressing current issues the library was dealing with during the pandemic. All of these were simple to initiate, though some were more time-consuming to complete, and all will be simple to maintain over time now that the expectation and structure has been created. One of the most invigorating aspects of beginning the shift to thinking about library instruction in terms of sustainability is the natural turn towards considering more and more aspects of work (and life!) in these terms. This kind of commitment and reflection is a great motivator towards crafting resilient libraries as well. Once one has made this shift there is a greater motivation to maintain the system and move forward with more implementation. This is one of the keys to resilience; to maintain the systems and the motivation that initiated the changes, so they do not become checkmarks on a list, but an ongoing effort. The NMSU Library instruction program hopes to make sustainability an ongoing effort.

Further plans for marketing this progress to the campus community is a goal in 2022. Although we are back in the library buildings, things are still not back to pre-pandemic normal. Instruction requests are slowly creeping up, and module downloads remain steady and slowly increasing. But this slow ascent to normal may not be a bad thing. Rather, it should be considered a breathing space to reimagine what our library instruction could look like in the days of post-pandemic-panic. Now that we have a standard structure for things like library modules, it will be easier to bring other existing and new structures into a similar model. Included in that are ways forward for instruction at New Mexico State University Library that focus on sustainability and resilience and communicating the value of library instruction to the campus community.

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About the author

Erin Wahl is an assistant professor at the reference and research services of the New Mexico State University Library.