Blended Librarianship—20 Years Later

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Abstract

In 2004, Steven J. Bell and John Shank introduced the term *blended librarian* to describe an emerging skill set of academic librarians in teaching and learning roles as a combination of "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" (p. 373). Several years later, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) officially recognized instructional design skills as a core proficiency for instructional librarians in the *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators* (ALA, 2008). Yet, alongside the ACRL's shift from information literacy standards to framework came a parallel shift from the proficiencies for instruction librarians to its revision, entitled *Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians* (ALA, 2017). The *Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians* remains intentionally vague, which may make it difficult for library students and practicing professionals to determine exactly what knowledge, skills, and abilities encompass the formal competencies of instructional designers. Drawing on standards from the Association of Educational Communications and Technology (2012), this paper defines the competencies of instructional design and technology and outlines the specific areas of content and pedagogical knowledge that teaching librarians in the instructional designer role will find most relevant.

Blended Librarianship – 20 Years Later

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Introduction

In 2004, Steven J. Bell and John Shank introduced the term *blended librarian* to describe an emerging skill set of academic librarians in teaching and learning roles as a combination of "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" (p. 373). Several years later, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) officially recognized instructional design skills as a core proficiency for instructional librarians in the *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators* (ALA, 2008)*.* Yet, alongside the ACRL's shift from information literacy standards to framework came a parallel shift from the proficiencies for instruction librarians to its revision, entitled *Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians* (ALA, 2017). The *Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians* remains intentionally vague, which may make it difficult for library students and practicing professionals to determine exactly what knowledge, skills, and abilities encompass the formal competencies of instructional designers. Drawing on standards from the Association of Educational Communications and Technology (2012), this paper defines the competencies of instructional design and technology and outlines the specific areas of content and pedagogical knowledge that teaching librarians in the instructional designer role will find most relevant.

A Brief History of Blended Librarianship

The idea of blended librarianship was proposed by Bell and Shank (2004) as a way of redefining academic librarianship that they perceived to be becoming increasingly disassociated from the actual learning process. They noted that this was time of considerable upheaval within academia, that the role of the academic librarian was increasingly ambiguous within the rapidly changing technologies within and outside the library, and that there needed to be a new paradigm for academic librarianship to refocus the profession to meet the newly emerging needs and wants of information users.

They saw academic librarianship as increasingly marginalized by the development of large courseware systems and resulting information silos removed from the library, such as changes in textbook publishing that included accompanying websites to create complete resource solutions that usurp traditional library databases, the rise of ubiquitous search engines, a total reimagining of scholarly publishing with more emphasis on direct communication and the decline of the traditional journal-based collections within academic libraries, the development of individualized information subscription services, book searching through Amazon and Google and the resulting "Googleization" effect of libraries trying to emulate commercial systems, and the integration of database content directly into commercial software.

The idea of blended librarianship was therefore defined by Bell and Shank as "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" (2004, p. 374). They further suggested six principles of blended librarianship that would result in moving academic librarians to the center of the teaching and learning process, rather than their current peripheral role. These six principles were that academic librarians 1) exert leadership on campus as innovators and change agents, 2) develop campus-wide information literacy programs to foster involvement in the teaching and learning process, 3) design instructional and educational programs in the use of library services and the development of information literacy as necessary skills and knowledge for future achievement, 4) collaborate with instructional technologists and instructional designers to ensure appropriate development of programs and services to further the academic library mission, 5) enhance adaptive, creative, proactive and interactive change through communication with instructional design/ technology librarians or instructional designers, and 6) transform relationship to faculty by means of assisting them with the integration of technology and library resources into hybrid or blended courses.

In 2011, Shank and Bell further noted that academic librarians must have a clear understanding and vision of why both the library and academic librarians should exist at all, as the actual methods of accomplishing whatever this vision may be are likely to continue to change frequently and rapidly. This then creates an opportunity for academic librarians to participate in "disruptive innovation" that will redefine how librarians perform their teaching role, and it is for this opportunity that blended librarianship provides the blueprint.

Teaching Librarians and the Instructional Designer Role

Though the term "blended librarianship" never quite took off, the principles of blended librarianship can be seen in the development of competencies for instructional librarians. In 2008, the American Library Association (ALA) published the *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators*. Within that guide, there was a category for instructional design skills:

The effective instruction librarian:

6.1. Collaborates with classroom faculty by defining expectations and desired learning outcomes in order to determine appropriate information literacy proficiencies and resources to be introduced in library instruction.

6.2. Sequences information in a lesson plan to guide the instruction session, course, workshop, or other instructional material.

6.3. Creates learner-centered course content and incorporates activities directly tied to learning outcomes.

6.4. Assists learners to assess their own information needs, differentiate among sources of information, and help them to develop skills to effectively identify, locate, and evaluate sources.

6.5. Scales presentation content to the amount of time and space available.

6.6. Designs instruction to best meet the common learning characteristics of learners, including prior knowledge and experience, motivation to learn, cognitive abilities, and circumstances under which they will be learning.

6.7. Integrates appropriate technology into instruction to support experiential and collaborative learning as well as to improve student receptiveness, comprehension, and retention of information. (ALA, 2008, p. 8)

In 2017, the ALA's *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators* was revised as the *Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians*. In line with the holistic approach of the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*,

the revision adopted conceptual language changes, replacing "proficiencies" with "roles," "instruction librarian" with "teaching librarian," and "skills" with "strengths." Instructional designer became a role of the teaching librarian with following strengths:

- Analyzes the instructional environment, and targets instruction delivery toward appropriate audiences.
- Identifies learning needs of students, and creatively addresses identified needs across multiple contexts drawing on a repertoire of tools, methods, and theories.
- Defines goals and outcomes for learning experiences.
- Creates innovative and appealing lessons with supporting instructional materials aligned with and supporting learning outcomes.
- Assesses the success and impact of learning experiences and makes appropriate adjustments to improve student engagement and learning.
- Stays current with trends and innovations in learning and instructional technologies. (ALA, 2017, Instructional Designer section)

Instructional Designer Competencies

While the *Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians* (ALA, 2017) does offer some perspective on the expected practices of the teaching librarian in an instructional designer role, it is intentionally vague in an attempt to adopt the same holistic approach as the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2015). As a result, it does not detail the foundational knowledge needed to demonstrate instructional designer practices. Instead, one can look to the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT, 2012) to learn more about the competencies of the instructional design profession. Like librarianship, instructional design is a well-established profession; and like librarianship, the terminal degree is at the master's level. Though AECT no longer serves as an accrediting body for graduate programs in instructional design and technology, many graduate programs align their curricula to the AECT Standards or seek an AECT endorsement to ensure that their students are well-prepared for the instructional design profession. It is here where a better understanding of competencies for instructional design can be found. There are five AECT standards. The first three are particularly useful for informing teaching librarians about key competencies relevant to their instructional designer role. These are Content Knowledge, Content Pedagogy, and Learning Environments.

AECT Standard 1: Content Knowledge

The core content knowledge of instructional designers is centered around the ADDIE model of the instructional design process, which takes a systems approach to *A*nalyzing, *D*esigning, *D*eveloping, *I*mplementing, and *E*valuating learning and instruction. Librarians acting in the instructional designer role or otherwise familiar with instructional design have likely heard of ADDIE. Nevertheless, it is important to note that ADDIE is simply a generic conceptual model that many different instructional design models are built upon, including the Dick and Carey, Kemp, and Smith and Ragan models (Birgili, 2019). Table 1 summarizes the activities and tasks that are essential for each stage of the ADDIE process. The foundational knowledge and skills required to effectively implement each phase of the ADDIE process are described in AECT Standard 2: Content Pedagogy.

Table 1

Tasks and Activities for Each Phase of the ADDIE Process

ADDIE Phase	Tasks and Activities

Analysis	• Analyze the characteristics and needs of the learners.
	• Determine learning goals and outcomes of instruction.
	• Identify and sequence the (subtask) learning objectives needed to reach the learning outcomes.
Design	• Identify instructional strategies that will support learning outcomes and learning objectives.
	• Identify appropriate learning tools and technologies.
	• Develop and document the instructional plan.
Development	• Create instructional materials.
	• Integrate technologies into learning environment.
Implementation	• Implement instruction.
	• Conduct usability testing (if necessary).
	• Revise as needed.
Evaluation	• Evaluate the effectiveness of instructional intervention.

AECT Standard 2: Content Pedagogy

A deep understanding of pedagogical content knowledge is essential for the successful implementation of the ADDIE process. Unfortunately, the professional development opportunities for instructional design within the library profession tend to focus largely on introducing the ADDIE model rather than the knowledge needed to implement each phase of it. Pedagogical knowledge informs the methods that instructional designers use to effectively support learning across different educational contexts. It requires more than a high-level understanding of learning theories. Rather, pedagogical content knowledge is the combined knowledge of learning theories, instructional theories, and teaching methods. Table 2 lists core areas of pedagogical knowledge that are valuable for all teaching librarians and especially for those acting in the instructional designer role.

Table 2

Core Areas of Pedagogical Knowledge for Instructional Designers

Learning Theories	Instructional Theories	Teaching Methods
Behaviorism	Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning	Inquiry-Based Learning
Social Cognitive Theory	Gagne's Taxonomy of learning	Problem-Based Learning
Constructivism	Gagne's Nine Events of Instruction	Experiential Learning
Experiential Learning Theory	Merrill's Principles of Instruction	Guided Instruction
Human Motivation Theory	Mayer's Principles of Multimedia Design	Game-Based Learning
Information Processing Theory		

A distinguishing characteristic between learning theories and instructional theories is that instructional theories are useful for directly guiding the instructional design process. For example, Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning is an essential guide for the activities of task analysis and writing learning objectives and outcomes (Newton et al., 2020), while Gagne's Nine Events of Instruction effectively guides the instructional planning process (McNeill & Fitch, 2023). On the other hand, learning theories serve to provide an understanding of how people learn. Knowledge of learning theories is key to making decisions about teaching methods based on learners' needs and characteristics. However, it should be noted that not everyone distinguishes between the two and may instead treat all as learning theories. Learning and instructional theories shape the learning environments that are selected or created during the instructional design process, while teaching methods reflect those learning environments.

AECT Standard 3: Learning Environments

What is an effective learning environment? By drawing on the content knowledge and content pedagogy of AECT Standards 1 and 2, instructional designers can identify and select instructional strategies, tools, and technologies that create the optimal conditions for different types of learning. However, understanding the optimal conditions of learning also requires understanding that learning environments are comprised of more than just physical or virtual spaces. Learning takes place in social and cultural contexts and may also be influenced by institutional practices. Individuals also experience learning through their own social and cultural lenses (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). For teaching librarians in the instructional designer role, the concept of learning environments is multi-systemic. It extends beyond the tutorial and the classroom to the library and even to the lifeworld because information literacy is a lifelong learning skill. This makes AECT Standard 3 significant to teaching librarians—and perhaps more challenging. To address this, two methods are recommended for developing a deeper understanding of learning environments: (1) systems thinking (Somerville et al., 2006) and (2) activity theory (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999). These are more advanced approaches in instructional design but are especially relevant to instructional design librarianship.

Conclusion

Though blended librarianship is a term that never quite took off in academic librarianship, the principles of blended librarianship (Bell & Shank, 2004; Shank & Bell, 2011) are readily apparent in the ALA's (2017) *Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians.* Considering the holistic approach taken by the ACRL's (2015) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* and the challenges that it presents for information literacy teaching and learning, the knowledge and skills of instructional design are as essential as ever for teaching librarians. However, the full development of instructional design skills in the setting of an MLS degree program is not feasible since each profession follows its own set of competencies. Instead, teaching librarians in the instructional designer role may wish to pursue a post-graduate certificate or second master's degree in instructional design and technology.

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