

More Than Just Working Together: Reflections on UX Work and Collaboration

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It's Not Just You

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Original Project (2019): Participant profile

- 30 participants, 5 countries
 - Canada, Norway, Sweden, UK, US
- Academic libraries
 - 800 – 50,000 students
 - 6 – 460 library staff
- Participant UX experience
 - 6 months – 18 years

Original Project (2019): Themes

- Structure:
 - Have a formal UX Group
 - If not, have an informal group of colleagues help you
 - Involve colleagues
 - Authority to implement change is important
 - Move beyond web UX
- Support:
 - Concrete management support is important

My personal take-aways

- Move beyond web UX
 - Include non-web UX work in my job description
- Create a UX Committee
 - UX Group, involve colleagues
- Have a senior manager oversee the committee
 - Authority to implement, concrete management support

What went wrong?

Original Project (2019): Themes

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 - **Have a formal UX Group**
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 - **Involve colleagues**
 - Authority to implement change is important
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- Support:
 - **Concrete management support is important**

New Project (2022/23): Participant profile

- 16 people from the same 5 countries
- 100% response rate!
- Not a formal research project

My findings resonated

- Working with other people is vital, support from management is vital
- You can't do UX in isolation

“No one person in the library ever has the full picture around an issue. And so the more that you can gather people together to share those perspectives, the fuller picture you’re going to have. And that is really key for the success of any sort of project.”



“[When people are in the room] it’s more of a conversation and people are more open. [When] it’s just a recommendation list people get really hung up on whether that specific recommendation is feasible in their context, not why does the need for that recommendation exist? What’s the problem that’s been identified?”



“Any sort of group work definitely seems to work a lot better and get more staff buy-in and more interest; people want to know what’s happening with the outcomes.”



Other aspects of the article resonated as well

“It was really affirming and helpful to read through those findings and to understand that there are perhaps some external factors that were impacting my ability to be effective; it wasn’t necessarily just me.”



How it started / How it's going

- In 2019 🌟
 - Based on great ad hoc UX work, management wanted to formalize a structure for UX work
 - Foundation for embedding UX in the library
 - Included senior management in the UX group
- In 2022/23 😞
 - Felt they were alone in trying to do UX work
 - Nothing was embedded
 - Having senior management in the group had no effect
 - Discouraged

Support From Management

What does “management support” mean?

- Time?
- Money?
- Incentives for participants?
- Other staff to help with the work?
- Interest in UX?
- Valuing UX?

Management support is collaboration

- Collaboration to give you what you need
- Collaboration to give them what they need
- **Setting expectations**

“[UX is] a bit of a ‘stirring the pot’ kind of role... If you have an organization where they want a smooth pond all the time (to mix metaphors), it can be at cross-purposes.”



“[Management] had an idea of how students did use the library and when what you find doesn’t conform with that idea, then, rather than act on it, it’s kind of sort of hidden away and forgotten about.”



Clear expectations helps align UX with library

But when UX is “valued” but not expected

Create a UX Group or UX position and stop there

“[I feel like] they hired me so they could check a box on a list of priorities: ‘UX – alright, we have a person here: check.’ But then: nothing.”



Use UX research to back up decisions already made

“[Sometimes management will ask] ‘Can you do this piece of research to try to find out how students are doing x, y, and z and why they’re doing x, y, and z?’ And we’ll go off and do it and then we’ll go back with what we’ve found, and it will be very much cherry-picked what they want to implement and what they don’t want to implement.”



Nice words with no action

“It’s much better if people say that they don’t understand or don’t agree or don’t think it’s a good idea because then we can talk about it. We can’t have a discussion if you’re pretending to agree with me.”



More than just “direction”

- Lack of direction has negative impacts on UX workers
 - “If it doesn’t matter what I do, then what I do doesn’t matter”
- Direction without expectation is not much better
 - “If it doesn’t matter whether I’ve done *anything*, then what I do *still* doesn’t matter”

Where it works

“UX is part of the strategy. These are the things the [library] wants to achieve; we want UX research to feed into these changes that we want to make.”



“The Dean has said ‘UX is important... we’re going to make this department, we’re going to give them money and we’re going to listen to them.’”



“Our colleagues can see that okay, we are forming this group to help you do UX work, we have it in the strategic plan, we are communicating around these things—there’s a message that this is a preferred way of developing library services.”



Working with people

“My hope is that I get more people on the staff thinking in UX ways.... Doing UX work in their own areas sort of organically would be my end goal, with me as a resource for ideas or methods or help, collaboration.”



“I wanted them to come along feeling enthused about it and knowing about within their area of expertise, or the area of work that they have, that there’s things that they want to investigate.”



“Making another committee or making another group... is work and everybody’s already on 5 different committees or groups.”



“They were really excited about it [UX] but it quickly died a death. And I think it’s probably more to do with their day-to-day and their workloads.”



**So how *do* we set ourselves up
for success?**

“Recipes don’t work on people; it’s so frustrating! [laughs] Because that’s what I really want. I want this recipe that says do this, this, and that and then it works.”



**People
All
The
Way
Down**

It's Not Just You

It's not just you

- If things are not going well, there are probably lots of other elements at play. It doesn't mean that you are bad at this work.
- If things are going well, there are probably lots of other elements at play. It doesn't mean that you are great at this work.



It's not just you: UX work does not happen in isolation

- You need other people to help
- If it's not working: you're probably not getting the help you need
- If it is working: you're probably getting the help you need



It's not just you: UX cannot be one person's responsibility

- One person cannot improve the UX of the library (no matter what your title is or what your job description says)
- You cannot fix your library by yourself



It's not just you: UX makes us feel a lot of feelings

- UX work is wonderful and exciting and inspiring and FUN
- UX work can also be particularly dispiriting



“It could be great, so it’s that much further to fall.”



It's not just you: UX failure is not personal failure

- Any failure is not your failure alone
- Any success is not your success alone



“I’ve also adopted a mindset that this one thing didn’t work this time but that doesn’t mean it’s not going to work next time. I’m really able to compartmentalize and say ‘oh, we tried this little strategy and it didn’t work for this project, but we can try it again with different people and a different project and a different set of external factors and it could maybe work.’ And that, to me, kind of keeps it fresh.”



Context is everything and it shifts

- There is no structure or set of supports that will set us all up for success.
- What works for someone else might not work for you.
- What works for you this year might not work for you next year.
- Context changes.
- People change.

My new takeaways

Keep trying things

- Take breaks
- Beware of burnout
- But keep trying

Concentrate on what works

“There has to be a prioritization anyway. So that becomes one of the aspects when we do that prioritization: Where can we be successful? Where should we put our time and efforts? To me, it makes more sense to do it where it’s going to be easier.”



Concentrate on what works

- Figure out what makes you happy and do more of that
- Figure out what makes you miserable and do less of that

Celebrate (and track!) every win

- Keep them for yourself
- Share them with your colleagues

“It helps to see someone else be successful. It helps to have a positive example somewhere else... [Colleagues] can see [UX] is a viable way of doing something and achieving something.”



Reach out to other UX folks

- Our jobs don't always give us what we need

“I miss, I can’t even say that I miss it because I’m not sure I’ve ever had really good management, sadly.... There are good managers in the world – you hear about them – and somehow they inspire and push and lift their employees.”



Reach out to other UX folks

- Participate in (or create!) a community
 - Regional examples: Northern England, Netherlands
 - Even a regular meeting with 2-5 people is fantastic
 - Can't find anyone? Email me at Shelley.Gullikson@carleton.ca and I will find people for you!
- Inspire and push and lift each other

Summing up

- Original themes
 - UX work needs to be done with other people
 - UX work needs support from management
- Structure is not sufficient for success
- But there can be structural impediments to success
- What works for someone else may not work in your context

It's not just you

