When have you experienced empathy in the last seven days? See if you can come up with an example you can share. 😊

Serving Vulnerable Members of the Public at an Academic Library:
Implementing an Empathy-Driven Approach
Introduction

- Service environment at Robarts
- LIRA planning group
- Who are our external users?
- Why do we want them here?
- Service values at our library

Photo by Thomas Kuhna, The Varsity
Ryan Dowd and Empathy-driven service

- Homeless shelter director
- Author: Librarian’s Guide to Homelessness
- Empathy-driven service
  - Empathy vs. Punishment
  - Understanding differences
  - Body language

Photo by Jenny McNeece, Sun-Com
Knowing what’s going on

- Consultations
- Available data pools
- Environmental scan
Consultation with frontline staff at Robarts

Timeline: Early 2019

Purpose: Understanding staff experience; generating ideas for service improvement

Consultation included:

- All permanent public service staff meeting (User Services)
- “I could live with that” Poll (Distributed to User Services staff and security staff)
- Interviews with public service supervisors
- Informal conversations
Case study: Staff consultation

“I would not welcome a change that appeared to be overly-punitive toward LIRA patrons in general…”

(Security patrol)

“If [patrons] are struggling, the library should be a place where you can go to feel welcome.”

(Supervisor)
Consulting with members of the public who use the library

- Supervisors chatting with members of the public
  - Asking for feedback on service experience
  - Asking for input on service design
  - Seeing and being seen
Consultation beyond Robarts

**Timeline:** Late 2018 - present

**Purpose:** Understanding PL experience; generating ideas for service improvement

**Consultation included outreach to:**

- **Public library colleagues**
  - Department and service supervisors from Robarts and Toronto Reference Library
  - Social worker, services supervisors and student interns from TPL and UTL

- **Academic library colleagues**
  - Survey of public computer access across UofT
  - Service supervisors from Robarts and Simon Fraser
Environmental Scan

**Topic:** Understanding LIRA services at Robarts Library
- Conducted by Allison Ridgway, Master of Information student intern

**Scope:** Examining computer services offered to external patrons at Robarts library

**Purpose:** Provide baseline context for future service design

**Methodology:** Interview staff stakeholders; policy review; documented history; analysed patron relations and security data

**Findings:** Clear description of current service; synthesized policies; identified concerns and issues; identified information gaps needing to be addressed
Environmental Scan: What we learned

“If [patrons] are struggling, the library should be a place where you can go to feel welcome.” (Supervisor)
Case Study: Sample data pool

“If [patrons] are struggling, the library should be a place where you can go to feel welcome.”

(Supervisor)
New empathy-driven practices

Two streams:

- Outreach
- Security
New outreach practices

- Re-framing “external users” as valued segment of library community
- iStaff service outreach
- Supervisors outreach
- Communicating, managing, and getting feedback on change
- Community building events
- Cutting through red tape: Stack pass, building relationships
Outreach to members of the public who use the library

General and ongoing:
- Patron relations; Library patrol; Public service staff

Specific to this current initiative:
- Targeted outreach by staff
- Meet & Greet events
- Informal conversations

New communication channels:
- News from Robarts fliers
- Policy change posters
- Posted staff contact info
Case study: Community building event

Timeline: December 2019

Purpose: Understanding user experience; building community

Event overview:
- TPL suggestion
- 5 staff members attended
- Open to all members of the public: 5 attendees
- 2-hour gathering
- Treats and coffee/tea
New security practices

- De-escalation by design
New security practices

- Security practices using empathy – learning first names; customized service

- LIRA service management via access to LIRA backend – fairer way of sharing limited resources
Current and future assessment

Comparing last 12 months of data with previous 12 months

Updating Environmental Scan to reflect knowledge gained

Team reflections: Meet & Greet

Going forward: Comment box at LIRA workstations

Going forward: Regular community building events

Going forward: Leverage data generated through LIRA use
Realities

This takes time. Ongoing and iterative consultation is important.

What limits our staff from being empathy-driven?

Buy-in still needed from some corners.

Recognition that some feel the public library is better suited.

Building new communication skills takes time and practice.
Next Steps...
Thank you!

Questions or Comments?

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Simple frameworks and models

Model for Staff Consultation

- Establish consultation team composed of various impacted employment groups
  - Communicate and advocate for goals
- Bring together key supervisors
  - Communicate and advocate for goals
- Draft consultation plan that:
  - Ensures varied opportunities and channels for staff participation
  - Permits anonymous participation and data privacy
  - Provides access to results
- Conduct consultation
- Assess results; Plan follow-up consultation
Simple frameworks and models

**Framework for Assessment**

- Bring together key staff
- Establish baseline
  - Eg. Environmental scan
- Define assessment goals
- Establish set of assessment tools
  - Patron feedback method
    - Eg. Comment box
  - Staff feedback method
    - Eg. "I can live with that" poll
  - User data analysis
    - Staff shift logs
- Establish assessment frequency
- Conduct assessment and analyze data
- Annual review of baseline
  - Consider alternate data sources
Simple frameworks and models

Model for Staff Training

- Plan initial training that is open to all staff
- Collaborate with supervisors to ensure staff have dedicated time to take part
- Reinforce training with subsequent PD opportunities
  - Eg. Lunch and learn; unit webinars
- Reinforce training through modelled best practices
- Provide opportunities for blended (online/in class) follow-up training
Simple frameworks and models

Framework for Policy Enforcement

- Communicate pending changes early and frequently
- Introduce policies that take the needs of this patron group into account
  - Eg. Reconsidering ID requirements
- Modify existing policies to address the needs of this patron group
- Strive for transparency by ensuring policies available at LIRA stations
- Take time to provide reasons for policy decisions
- Be fair and consistent in enforcement of policies
- Be open to service redesign to reduce conflict