10 Questions: Debra Kolah

THE FOUNDING CHAIR OF SLA’S NEW USER EXPERIENCE CAUCUS TALKS ABOUT BOOKLESS LIBRARIES, CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS, AND WHY SHE NEEDS A TRIBE.

BY STUART HALES

At its December 2010 meeting, the SLA Board of Directors approved a petition to form a User Experience (UX) Caucus. The study of user experience examines the ways library users experience the library—its physical spaces, services, and digital and physical collections—and looks at how they interact with library staff and departments across the organization. Focus groups, surveys, usability studies, embedded librarianship, and ethnographic studies are some of the tools used to gather data and anecdotal information about the user experience.

The goals of the UX Caucus include—

- Embedding UX within the culture of librarianship;
- Creating amazing experiences for information users within organizations;
- Providing structure, advice and support for usability studies;
- Conducting an annual meeting at the SLA Annual Conference; and
- Creating a dynamic discussion list.

Debra Kolah, user experience librarian at the Fondren Library at Rice University, assembled and presented the petition and agreed to serve as chair of the caucus. Information Outlook interviewed Debra in late March, about 10 weeks before the SLA 2011 Annual Conference.

Q: You’re the founding chair of the SLA User Experience Caucus, and your title at Rice University is user experience librarian. What does the term user experience mean within the context of library and information science?

It’s a relatively new term. It all started at Georgia Tech and at a library in Canada, and now it’s gathering steam.

Here at Fondren, UX is the primary department for considering the ways that a user experiences the library, from both the physical and digital perspectives. My job is to think about how users interact with the library, and we’re conducting research to discover how we can create a more successful experience for all users.

UX combines usability studies—which come out of computer science—with ethnographic studies and focus groups and other types of assessments to learn about how library users work and what they need. Nancy Foster, with her ethnographic studies, has been very influential in this area. I think UX is just a matter of libraries realizing that we need qualitative data to go along...
with our quantitative data if we're going to make data-driven decisions.

Q: How and why did you get interested in user experience?
I'm married to an architect, Darayus Kolah, and that has influenced my general thinking about user-centered, participatory design. But within the library realm, I don't think UX was really on my radar in the beginning. Luckily, my boss, Leah Krevit, who's our assistant university librarian for public services, heard about it and gave it some thought, and one day she asked me if I wanted to try it. I said yes, and that started a wild adventure.

I immediately started thinking about what I needed to do. I was smart enough to e-mail Steven Bell, who writes a blog called Designing Better Libraries, and ask him for some advice. The first thing he recommended I do was start a caucus. I had already had that feeling—that I needed a tribe, a group to think with me about these things. And for me, SLA was the natural place to do this.

Last fall, I was lucky enough to meet our president, Cindy Romaine, at an SLA Texas Chapter meeting. That started the wheels turning. The SLA board was very helpful in getting my petition for the caucus developed and approved. So I've had a lot of support thus far.

I think this is something that will continue to grow within SLA and within the larger library community. We really only started seeing the first user experience job descriptions a couple of years ago, but now we're starting to see more UX titles and more UX work in libraries.

Q: What does the User Experience Caucus hope to accomplish in its first year?
The goal of the caucus is primarily to be a tribe that can share and discuss ideas around UX. Because the range of users served by SLA members is so vast, I think there's a huge opportunity to think about users in all types of organizations, from academic to corporate to government.

Q: I'm intrigued by your use of the term compelling experiences. If I'm a student at the Fondren Library at Rice, what's a compelling experience for me?
A compelling library experience is one that exceeds your personal needs as a user. Maybe you need a quiet space to think and reflect; maybe you need a noisy space to be with others to collaborate. Greg Lambert, a law librarian who writes a great law blog, recently wrote a blog post titled "The Shhh Factor." His thinking was that some library users need a place to go where they can hear someone say "Shhh."

The bottom line is that libraries mean different things to different people, and that's why we need to get out and talk to our users, sometimes in ways that we haven't in the past. We need to use research instruments, occasionally in a more formal way. I really do believe that libraries and librarians are a fundamental part of any institution, and if we get out there and become an ear and gather information, we can drive crucial services that meet the needs of our users and create the ultimate library experience. That experience is going to be different in India than it would be in the United States, but if we learn from each other, maybe we can bring some great experiences from other libraries to our locations.

Q: What have you learned from others that has changed what you do at Fondren to create the ultimate user experience?
We're still very much in an information gathering phase right now; in fact, I'm starting two UX research projects as we speak. These two studies will drive the process of creating a tool or learning space that will address all of the things researchers need to know and do to conduct research efficiently.

One of the projects will be a large ethnographic study to find out how research takes place at Rice. We've code-named this project Research Flow, and it will probably encompass the initial step of gathering information as well as communicating with partners, organizing information, compiling citations—the whole process.

There's also a small-scale study that
we’re using to help determine whether to move to a new discovery tool for our online catalogs and our library databases. We’re interested in finding out how our users feel about using our unified indexes. We have a discovery tool now—do they use it, or do they prefer searching in individual discipline databases?

Last summer, I worked on a multi-institutional project that looked at Sakai, which is a classroom management tool that professors use. That was an exciting project because it studied 10 institutions that use Sakai and developed a meta-analysis of why and how instructors use scholarly resources in preparing and conducting their courses. With 10 institutions using the same research instrument, we were able to gather a lot of information. Of course, each institution will use the project data that best serve its local needs, but I think this sort of large-scale meta-analysis is something we’ll see more of in the future.

In addition to these projects, I’m also starting to design what I call the “K-12 Experience.” We’re getting more and more visitors from local schools, so I’ve been talking to the people on campus who organize these tours and really beginning to think about what the Fondren Library experience looks like to a K-12 educator or student. I want to know how we can deliver a consistently positive experience for everyone involved. If we can create a good experience for these groups, who are at a stage where they’re thinking about the future, we’ll continue to have value as an institution.

Q: While we’re still on the subject of user experience, let’s discuss the merits of bookless libraries. Some libraries are already bookless; others are working toward that goal. What’s your perspective on this?
I think moving past the concept of a library dedicated to stacks is a necessary evolutionary phase in the world of academic libraries. These days, I’m even thinking about—and this is a hard thing for people in academia to think about—bringing our diminishing periodical collections up to the stacks, to be housed near the books that still remain. By doing this, I would essentially create little branch libraries within the stacks. I would also be able to get Wi-Fi access—right now, I can’t get Wi-Fi in my stacks, but if I break up those stacks, I could get Wi-Fi.

But go bookless? I think it will be a long time before we get there. Perhaps for new universities or for libraries that are just forming, a bookless design could succeed.

I remember working for an SLA librarian during my internship while I was in college, and she used to say the only thing she needed to run a library was a telephone. I believe in that model—I think that one special librarian with a telephone can run a whole library. A librarian or information professional is, at heart, the library, whether that person is in the library or not. But if our users need books, we need to have them available.

Q: Bookless libraries are the latest of many trends and developments that have affected librarians and information professionals in recent years. What changes have you seen that may not have seemed important to you at the time but that, looking back, have made a significant difference to your career?
After I finished my internship, I moved directly into public libraries. When I came to Rice in 2001, I brought with me a working knowledge of marketing concepts and skills. At that time, I really didn’t understand—and I don’t think most academic libraries understood at that time—how important marketing is. Since then, there’s been a huge spike in the role of marketing among academic libraries. Public libraries had known about marketing for a long time, but it took awhile for academic libraries to grasp the importance of it.

Also, while I was working in public libraries, I was leasing collections—for example, I was leasing popular fiction. I brought that experience with me to Rice. As e-books become more readily available, I think we’re going to see more and more leasing of content—not just journals, but books and textbooks as well.

Another change dates back to 2004, when I conducted a focus group with a colleague, Lisa Spiro, on a tool called Red Light Green. That same year, I started a relationship with the American Physical Society as a librarian consultant to their Publications Oversight Committee. As part of my consulting
work, I was able to help organize and participate in some focus groups. Focus groups have certainly driven some of the recent research on user experience, but at the time I was consulting with APS, I certainly wasn’t thinking that learning how to run a focus group would prove to be so crucial to my professional development or that, six years down the road, it would be my primary job role.

Q: You’ve served as both a public librarian and an academic librarian. How did you get interested in librarianship, and what twists and turns has your career taken?
I went to library school straight from college, but that’s a little misleading. I started college in 1986 in hotel and restaurant management, with a minor in anthropology. But in 1989 I stopped taking college courses for awhile. I worked in restaurants and as a bartender for the next few years.

By the time I finally went back to college in 1994, I knew I wanted to be a librarian. So when I graduated in 1995, I went immediately into library school at the University of Texas and finished in a year and a half. I was really motivated—I had identified this as my career, and I just immersed myself in the program.

Q: How did you learn about SLA, and what prompted you to join?
I attended my first SLA midwinter meeting in 1995, while I was a graduate student at the University of Texas. My advisor, Julie Hallmark, was the representative for the local SLA chapter, so she was a great window into SLA. Quite honestly, I didn’t know there were any other library associations, because Julie made such a huge fuss about SLA.

I completed a library school internship at SernaTech, which had a couple of strong SLA members on staff, but because I went immediately into public libraries after graduation, I didn’t stay with SLA. When I came to Rice in 2001 to become a science librarian, I practically ran back to SLA, largely because I was going to be supporting physics, math and astronomy. I knew the PAM Division would be helpful to me, and it has been.

Q: In addition to the UX Caucus, what other SLA groups are you involved with, and how have they contributed to your career?
I’ve just been appointed to the Research and Development Committee, and I’m looking forward to serving with the members of that group. I’m currently the co-chair of public relations for the PAM Division, and I have to say that my heart belongs to PAM. I’ve been a PAM member since 2002, when I attended my first SLA Annual Conference. The professionalism and warmth and brilliance of people like Molly White and Carol Hutchins and Dana Roth—I couldn’t do my job without them and their support.

I served for a few years as chair of PAM’s International Relations Committee, and in that capacity, on my own personal time, I traveled to Turkey and India to meet the winners of the PAM International Membership Award. That’s one of the things I like best about SLA and also the PAM Division—we are a global community of supportive members.