A (Not So) New Career Frontier?

LIBRARIANS AND INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS POSSESS MANY OF THE SKILLS NEEDED TO BECOME CONTENT STRATEGISTS FOR THEIR ORGANIZATIONS, AND SOME MAY ALREADY BE FILLING THAT ROLE.

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Roughly two years ago, I was a year into managing an enterprise-wide taxonomy development effort for the American Planning Association (APA), the professional association for urban planners. Our goal was to better categorize the universe of urban planning content we had created so we could offer a more streamlined and useful search experience for our Web visitors and generate value for our association’s 40,000 members. (I previously wrote an article about developing the taxonomy for the SLA Taxonomy Division’s newsletter; see the Resources list at the end for the citation.)

As the in-house librarian, I was asked to lead the project and lend an information professional’s expertise to the categorization of content. At some point, while looking for project management resources, I stumbled upon this definition of the emerging discipline of content strategy: “Content strategy plans for the creation, publication, and governance of useful, usable content. Necessarily, the content strategist must work to define not only which content will be published, but why we’re publishing it in the first place” (Halvorson 2008).

Intrigued, I followed the trail of online breadcrumbs that led from this article, thinking that the concept of content strategy could help us determine what to publish, how to organize it, and how to push it to our customers (whether through traditional print or newer, Web-based channels). Next, I came upon Erin Kissane’s new book, The Essentials of Content Strategy, at which point I experienced my official content strategy “aha” moment.

“There’s really only one central principle of good content: it should be appropriate for your business, for your users, and for its context,” Kissane wrote. “Appropriate in its method of delivery, in its style and structure, and above all in its substance. Content strategy is the practice of determining what each of those things means for your project—and how to get there from where you are now” (Kissane 2011).

Kissane went on to identify four professions that influence content strategy: editors, curators, marketers, and “(info) scientist[s].” I began to think of my taxonomy project management role in...
this context as I drew on my information science background and consulted my editorial, Web development, and marketing colleagues. Together, we needed to go beyond categorizing the universe of existing planning content and consider the strategy behind content production and how it helped or hindered us in meeting our member service goals.

My role at APA slowly evolved to meet the demands of this project, and I embraced the role of content strategist within the IT and Publications Departments of my organization. In 2012, I was given the title of manager of content strategy. In hindsight, this seems like a logical role for someone trained in an MLS program that emphasizes classification techniques, electronic resources management, and data curation.

Now, as a supervisor of several library interns, I spend a lot of time thinking about the career paths available for MLS graduates. I believe the synergy between content strategy and librarianship is worth investigating, whether you are a newly minted librarian or information professional looking for a career direction or a veteran in search of a vocabulary to communicate the value of what you do for your enterprise.

What follows is advice I’ve gleaned from a series of e-mail and telephone discussions with librarians and other professionals who work as content strategists, as well as lessons learned during my own evolution from a reference librarian in a specialized research environment to an interdisciplinary content strategist embedded within an IT Department.

What’s a Content Strategist?
In addition to drawing on Kissane’s and Halvorson’s definitions, it is useful to think of other metaphors to describe content strategy. Lis Pardi, information architect at Ebsco, says that content strategy is “the skeleton behind content.” To her Web-unsavvy mother, she explains that her role is to make sure that what is written on Ebsco’s Website is up to date and sounds like what the company would say. Most fundamentally, Pardi says, “I make sure that when you click on the Contact button on the Website, there’s a phone number there.”

Lauren Lampasone, reference librarian and digital producer at the New York Public Library, brought up one of S.R. Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Library Science, suggesting that content strategy helps us “save the time of the reader” in a time of abundant information across multiple platforms. (For a more in-depth explanation of Ranganathan’s relevance to content strategy, see Claire Rasmussen’s June 2012 blog post titled “Do It Like a Librarian: Ranganathan for Content Strategists.”)

Of course, other professions have been doing what we now call content strategy for a long time. Print journalists, for example, try to craft engaging stories and write concise yet strong titles, both of which sound like good content strategy principles. The analogy with journalism resonates with Jennifer Anderson, a user experience (UX) designer at NYPL.org, who calls content strategy the part of the Web that the Web forgot. “We forgot to be editorial,” she says.

To curtail content overload and ensure the intended message will be received by the appropriate audience, content strategists often take an editorial role. Kissane (2011) describes it this way: Editors “develop themes and narrative arcs, orchestrate responses to other publications and outside events, maintain a balanced variety of articles or books, evaluate and manage writers and other content creators, and much more.”

Identifying Needed Skills
So, do librarians and information professionals possess the expertise and mindset that are critical to performing content strategy work? In my discussions, three key themes emerged.

A knowledge of classification schemes and an appreciation of metadata. Perhaps not surprisingly, the desire and ability to organize things is common to librarians and content strategists alike. Whether they’re working with AACR2, RDA, Dublin Core, or some other data standard or classification scheme, information professionals have the ability to look at the big picture of a collection or archive and identify like objects. Pardi emphasizes that librarians are “100 percent equipped” to define strategies to guide the kinds of content organizing they already perform.

Librarians and information professionals can organize the Internet (and all of its content) because they are trained to appreciate metadata. As Anderson notes, metadata is the “silver bullet” that makes the Web sustainable and governable. Information professionals are skilled at what she calls this “science class” aspect of content organization.

The ability to articulate and serve the needs of the end user. Information professionals can conduct skillful, strategic reference interviews with stakeholders to discover what users want and need. Rasmussen provided an example of a client telling her, “We want a blog.” Her response was to ask, “What do you need a blog for?” She wondered whether the client’s information needs would be better served by a vehicle other than a blog. The librarian/content strategist must ask questions and suss out the particulars of what people need.

Information professionals as a group tend to be sympathetic to users’ needs and driven to satisfy their queries. Many content strategy projects require translating specialized knowledge into a language the average user can understand. Whether writing user-friendly subject guides or working with Web developers to make content findable in an archive, librarians are trained to mediate between technical and subject matter experts and the end user.

An understanding of the importance of iteration, training and the ongoing governance of complex systems. Creating a content strategy is one thing, but that strategy needs to be implemented, refined, nurtured, and adapted over time to meet the ever-changing needs of an organization. Further, the strategy
and its component parts need to be integrated into the daily life of an enterprise through training and outreach. Information professionals (especially catalogers) are skilled at maintaining authority records and refining subject heading schema and can bring these abilities to bear on content strategy maintenance. Our reference and instruction colleagues possess a wealth of knowledge about training users and acclimatizing them to new systems.

The long-term survival of any content strategy initiative depends on the manager’s or team’s ability to implement a successful governance model. Librarians and information professionals can help give needed “backbone” to strategy by considering what Casey (2013) defines as the four key components of governance.

1. Authority: Who is empowered to make decisions about your Website?

2. Planning: How will you plan for content overhaul efforts—from launch to ongoing maintenance?

3. Tools: What tools (e.g., guidelines, checklists, priorities, and editorial calendars) will you use to make sure that your content is on-strategy and that your content strategy stays relevant?

4. Measurement: How will you determine whether your content is working, and how will you use information about the effectiveness of your content to fix it?

Acquiring These Skills

If you think content strategy might be a good place for you to apply your professional skills, there are many ways you can get started. If you identify with one of Kissane’s four influences, start there and branch out into others areas as needed. According to Kissane’s classification, I am an information scientist and curator by training, but I have learned about editorial and marketing functions from my colleagues so we can work together to keep content strategy initiatives afloat in our organization.

The content strategists I spoke to stressed the importance of informal networking and learning at meet-ups and through social media, as well as more structured learning in the classroom. Their advice included the following:

- Join local content strategy or user experience/user interface meet-ups;
- Attend national conferences like Confab or An Event Apart;
- Follow big-name content strategists and UX people—Margot Bloomstein, Kristina Halvorson, Erin Kissane, Karen McGrane, Rachel Lovinger, Jared Spool, and others—on Twitter;
- Become familiar with HTML and XML so that you can, as Claire Rasmussen suggests, “go into code and not drown”;
- Identify content strategy consultants in your area and reach out for an informational interview;
- Look into coursework in human-computer interaction (HCI) at your local iSchool (if you are still in school, create a course plan that includes traditional LIS coursework like cataloging as well as courses that cover developments in the technical and information specialties);
- Learn the lingo of the business world (such as ROI and KPI) and take a course in business or nonprofit management to understand the framework that executives in the C-suite use to make their decisions;
- Learn a little bit about graphic design so you can talk to those professionals and have some insight into their processes; and
- Take a class or teach yourself about digital copyright and licensing issues so you can keep pace with the ever-changing rules about content and image use in social media.

Sally Kerrigan says many information professionals looking in this direction will find they’ve already taken the initial steps. “I think if you’re interested in pursuing content strategy as a career, there’s a good chance it’s because you’re already doing it, and something written on the subject resonated with you,” she told me. “Don’t just chase after the title; it’s more important to figure out what kind of problems you’d like to solve. For me, that’s usually been problems related to communication and written expression, but someone else might focus on technical constraints or organizational structure. Of course, these things all fit together into a big strategy in the end, but I think most people’s point of entry is something a little more focused, and usually related to the interests they already have.”

RESOURCES


