



Punching Up: boxing and librarianship – a different UX perspective (UXLibs7 workshop)

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Background

Libraries and librarians come from a range of experiences and work in a variety of environments. Many of these spaces are hybrid or completely online; some librarians work remotely so the chances to connect and engage with colleagues, library users and key decision makers can be challenging.

Librarians tend to be open to new ideas and engage enthusiastically with the dynamics of our profession. That doesn't mean it is easy – but the spirit is willing!

Often, in my opinion, while librarians openly engage with ideas and people, they tend to be quite siloed in their approaches to challenges. We often look to the existing library world for models and structures; I suggest that it would be a good idea to look at other sectors, some that may not seem to be related to libraries at all.

The idea for this workshop came about whilst thinking about ideas of what other sector, or environment that is very strategic, could be a source of ideas for librarians to consult and reference in dealings with challenging experiences. Especially when engaging with senior decision makers, where there is a requirement for negotiation and persuasion skills. The answer for me was the sport of boxing.

Connecting librarians and boxing

So, what do librarians and boxing have in common? How is boxing related to libraries? Well, this workshop was designed to get people thinking about libraries in a different way. To move beyond the usual sideways glance to archives or education, which are closely aligned already, and instead take a rare look at something outside the box... literally!

Boxing is a violent and dangerous sport but its positive aspects are extremely relevant to negotiation and persuasion skills. These aspects were the focus of the

workshop. Often librarians engage with decision makers who really have no idea what they or the libraries do. They don't understand the complexities and challenges involved in the high level of negotiations with print and online suppliers, or the complications of the many integral IT systems. For example, the true 'value' of an academic library is challenging to measure from an accounting/balance sheet perspective, such as when trying to justify support for the costs involved and allocated time required to conduct UX research and to respond to user needs and behaviours gathered through guerrilla interviews, observations or other methods. MacDonald's (2017) study based on interviews with UX librarians, which sought to examine 'UX Librarianship and Building UX Capacity in Libraries,' found a variety of perceived benefits of engagement with UX from the librarian's perspective, the most commonly identified being increased empathy and responsiveness towards library users. This was an unanticipated outcome but the shift in mindset helped staff to challenge their assumptions and was a way to keep the library and library



interactions grounded. To try to quantify this type of intangible yet worthwhile benefit would prove almost impossible to do from a traditional, financial, quantitative perspective.

The key focus for this workshop was the boxing concept of ‘punching up’. In the boxing setting, a boxer is said to be punching up when they fight above their weight class (boxing division).

In boxing, a weight class is a measurement of the weight range for boxers. The lower limit of a weight class is equal to the upper weight limit of the class below it. The top class, with no upper limit, is called heavyweight in professional boxing and super heavyweight in amateur boxing. Boxers are classed into weight categories in order to be on equal footing with their competitors in terms of size, strength and abilities. If a boxer punches up they are fighting someone who is in a stronger position than them. This concept is transferable to library environments. We often have to negotiate and persuade senior managers and finance departments to pay for resources, where we don’t have as much monetary decision-making power, or we have to negotiate with colleagues who have a different understanding of how libraries work. In these environments, librarians are punching up.

Boxing terminology in library settings

The theme song ‘Gonna Fly Now’ from the *Rocky* movies was playing as workshop participants arrived. This helped to set the scene for something quirky and fun!

We then set out the goals for the workshop, which were:

1. To look outside of what are traditional experiences and sectors, and identify new ways to think about leadership, librarianship and UX. For today we are going to be exploring boxing as a reference point.
2. To think about negotiating, challenging and punching up from different perspectives.
3. And most importantly, that we all have some fun!

A short presentation followed, explaining the workshop theme and a review of some boxing terminology. An assumption could not be made that participants knew about boxing or loved it as much as I do! Some examples of terms were:

- **In your corner** – critical in the ring; critical in life and work. Who can I count on for support, guidance and accurate information? When to ask for help. Mentors and mentees are in this realm.

- **Controlling space** – observations of environment and then controlling it. Protection of you – demarcation of interaction. Your corner – your space.
- **On the ropes** – chance to observe, let your opponent show their hand, conserve your energy.
- **Saved by the bell** – timing is everything; setting time limits to interactions can provide you with a way out of difficult situations.

Workshop physical spaces

In order to make the workshop interactive and fun, I used a scaled, flat boxing ring as a representation of the boxing environment.

The purpose of this was to simulate working in a confined, demarcated space and remaining in that space for the period of negotiations or discussions. This metaphor has the potential to inform strategy. Such considerations as:



Boxing mat designed by Deaglan Campbell, Technological University of the Shannon.

- Where will you meet (your workspace or theirs)? It was important to stay in the ring and not venture off – the control of space is a key asset in persuasion.
- The focus of space. From a UX perspective, does place/space matter?
- Balance is key. In boxing, balance will let you take the hardest blows and stay standing – the same with life.
- For how long? Stick to a time limit – this sets an opportunity to take a break, recoup and refocus. Being in a controlled space and set time to be confrontational ensures balance.
- Concentrating the engagement. Stick to the topic in the ring, don't bring in other things – concentration is key.

Each of the participants were given inflatable boxing gloves to use in their negotiations. Real boxing gloves would have been too heavy. Participants were instructed to

lightly jab each other during the match to simulate what happens in the boxing ring when boxers are squaring up to each other. The jab is a reminder to metaphorically say – I am here, I am making a point and this is an indicator of my power.

Workshop scenarios

There were two prepared scenarios for the workshop that required two participants to engage each time. Boxing scenarios were set for 10 minutes each. The goal was to have some resolution, hopefully with each other, under the different perspectives.

The first scenario was between a Dean of Faculty and an Acquisitions librarian over the issue of e-book purchases vs print books. The Dean, having just downloaded a personal book from a website, could not understand why all the required textbooks couldn't be downloaded for students for every class – it was just so simple.

The second scenario was between a Head of Finance and a Library Director about the ongoing cost of online resources. The Head of Finance looking for tangible assets for what was being paid for, and the Library Director trying to explain the digital nature of databases.

The scenario interactions were fun but also informative. The participants were really very good sports.



Lessons learned

The key outputs for the workshops were to have fun and to have an additional set of references when dealing with challenging negotiations and discussions. Just like the boxer who fights someone bigger and stronger but who can win if they apply strategy, if they are patient and observant to recognise their opponent's weaknesses or vulnerabilities, and if they work steadily, there is potential for success.

Every fighter doesn't win every match; it takes time and there are setbacks. If we can learn from these setbacks, examining how to change approaches or to be more observant, this will help. In the scenarios presented, the librarians' 'opponents' weren't being difficult for the sake of it, but rather they could not understand or relate to the library environment. Those are challenges librarians can meet by developing a shared vocabulary and understanding. Negotiation is a skill and you're not losing if the negotiation doesn't go your way – sometimes a loss sets the ground for understanding and reflection, thus helping the librarian come out stronger from their corner. It is vital to understand the importance of time in both boxing and libraries. Boxing matches comprise 15 rounds, each with a set time limit for a reason – namely to have incremental wins, to score points, and to provide a duration of time to observe your opponent and adjust your strategy.

Final round wrap-up

The use of the simulated boxing ring, with a confined space in which the deliberations and discussions took place, was done on purpose. Metaphorically, the containment of the interaction had the potential to simulate the real-world spaces we find ourselves in, where there are limitations on where we can retreat to or have an advantage in a negotiation environment. Your office, their office, on the phone, in person or online. All of these defined spaces can potentially influence us and behaviour.

So, what do librarians naturally have in common with boxers? We are often



A thank you take away for all participants to remind them to always Punch Up (boxing gloves created by Michaela Huelbig).

the underdog in work environments, constantly having to explain what we do, how we do it and justify in many cases our professional existence, or at least the process of researching and designing user experiences. Librarians are natural strategists; we are excellent at identifying patterns and systems, and how things link up and intersect. And, perhaps most importantly, we are good with people, especially when reading others, where we are always looking for opportunities to understand and connect.

Websites of interest

Title Boxing – A Glossary of Boxing Terms: <<https://www.titleboxing.com/pages/boxing-dictionary>>.
Sporting Terms: <<https://www.sportsengine.com/boxing/terms-to-know>>.

Reference

MacDonald, C.M., 2017. “It Takes a Village”: On UX Librarianship and Building UX Capacity in Libraries. *Journal of Library Administration*, 57(2), pp. 194–214.
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