

# Are High-Impact Practices Library Programs the Next Disruptive Innovation for Instruction Programs?

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## Abstract

As the landscape within higher education continues to shift and learning success initiatives become more distributed and complex, many library instruction programs are faced with difficult choices. In order to remain sustainable while also providing stable services to faculty and students, some libraries have adopted the theory of disruptive innovation to guide their instruction program strategy. This article briefly introduces the theory of disruptive innovation and questions whether high-impact library instruction practices (HIPs) have the potential to be a disruptive innovation.

**Keywords:** *new librarianship, library instruction, disruptive innovation, high-impact educational practices, academic libraries*



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## Introduction

As the landscape of higher education continues to shift and the learning ecosystem becomes more distributed and complex, many library instruction programs have found themselves in a conundrum. How do instruction librarians prove value in their work when much of their teaching is a snapshot? How do we continue to deliver engaging learning experiences that align with rapid institutional changes? How can we address the massive paradigm shifts influencing our work and how do we communicate those changes to non-library users?

In an early 2011 article, it was suggested that we are living in a new paradigm called the “Big Shift” (Shank & Bell, 2011). In the Big Shift, the time between stabilization and disruptive changes brought about by innovation are virtually nonexistent. Eight years later, the Big Shift seems to be the cultural norm at most institutions. This paradigm forces libraries to make deliberate choices regarding their primary identity and why they do the things they do, or risk irrelevance (Shank & Bell, 2011).

Building off the work of George Kuh (2008) (published by the Association of American Colleges & Universities) on high-impact educational practices (HIPs), there is an opportunity for instruction programs to consider their engagement model. Are there ways to evolve our instruction programs around HIPs in order to increase our reach while simultaneously creating lasting and scalable models for instructing the masses? While Disruptive Innovation theory is far from new, it is prudent to consider whether there are unexplored avenues for scaling and sustaining our service models through a disruptive innovation model.

### What is Disruptive Innovation?

In the early 21st century, disruptive innovation was first introduced through the work of Clayton M. Christensen, a Harvard professor who studied innovation and its impact on businesses.

Since that time, this theory has been applied successfully to many different sectors, including libraries (Christensen Institute). Due to its rise in popularity, disruptive innovation has sometimes been misused or misunderstood, leading to criticism and debate about the effectiveness of the theory (Harvard Business Review, 2015). Still, there are many institutions continuing experimentation with disruptive innovation.

There are two main identifiers of a disruptive innovation: (1) that the innovation itself is not solely made possible by new technologies; (2) the innovation makes the product or service accessible to the masses, as opposed to making the product better or more efficient. By definition, disruptive innovation is formed within the early stages of “a niche market that may appear unattractive or inconsequential ... but eventually the new product or idea completely redefines the industry” (Christensen Institute).

### **What are the Characteristics of a Disruptive Innovation?**

As described by Christensen, disruptive innovations have the following traits:

- *Evolutionary characteristics*

Disruptive innovation refers to a product or service that has evolutionary characteristics. Over time as the service grows and becomes disruptive, it begins to infiltrate an entire market, or in the case of library instruction, the college or university itself. In this context, for library instruction to be considered a disruptive innovation, we must begin to prototype new ways of reaching larger audiences. We must pioneer approaches that may initially seem radical, and non-scalable, with the goal of finding solutions that are sustainable and transformative. We also must recognize that evolutionary change will take time and will be a continuous process.

- *Niche markets*

Disruptive innovations often do not resemble their counterparts. Tested within a select a niche population, disruptive innovations prototype and iterate with to create a viable, stable product or service that will then appeal to the masses. By testing their ideas within a smaller and possibly more receptive market, disruptive innovators can then move to more risky and profitable areas for expansion.

- *Often not successful*

Many disruptive innovations turn out to be unsuccessful. Since they begin in niche markets, usually as a prototype, there is often a chance that it won't work at scale. This is why it is important to ensure you silo the implementation of disruptive innovations from your core products or services.

- *Distracting*

Oftentimes disruptive innovations distract leaders and divide their attention. Christensen's research suggests that keeping the disruptive innovation separate from the core part of your service model is essential to success ([www.christenseninstitute.org](http://www.christenseninstitute.org)).

### **Could We Advance High-Impact Library Instruction Through Disruptive Innovation?**

Arguably, library instruction may fit the characterizations of a disruptive innovation in that many faculties already view it as a niche area within the teaching and learning arena. Library instruction itself has followed an evolutionary path within this niche, gaining a foothold during the rise of the personal computer and later during the one-shot era where librarians partnered with faculty in English departments, writing centers, and first year composition programs to teach information literacy to writing or research-intensive majors. Over many decades, instruction librarians have built a reputation as information literacy and technology experts.

With nearly a century behind us, we are moving into a time where the evolution of library instruction is again at its cusp. In examining Virginia Tech as a case study, we find that the Libraries there are no different. While the foundational library instruction still tends to focus on one or two-shot instructional workshops, the Libraries have also started to see small evolutionary shifts in demand. With a revised general education curriculum, a new University vision centered on experiential learning, and wide scale adoption of HIPs across campus, the Libraries have seen a trend towards emerging needs of faculty that require a creative, holistic approach to instruction. In response to this need, the Libraries have recently created a High Impact Practices Librarian program (HIP Program) to prototype library instruction within the experiential learning framework at the University. This model positions librarians within specified HIPs such as service learning or undergraduate research as opposed to liaisons within colleges or specific disciplines. In disruptive innovation theory, this new instruction program could be considered a *disruptive innovation* in that it was designed to serve a niche, to evolve over time, and to test a theory that may or may not succeed.

The Libraries were also charged with administering a campus-wide ePortfolio program and finding partnerships across campus for implementation. The ePortfolio program was an evolution of a previous iteration of ePortfolio implementation that was housed in the campus information technology division. This newly revamped program, now housed in the Libraries, was designed to be a student-centered, flexible way for students to showcase both curricular and co-curricular work while gaining valuable digital and information literacy skills through the process of creating, reflecting, curating and sharing their best works. Given that the program would be student-centered, the Libraries selected a Next-Generation ePortfolio system that incorporated social media integrations and badging.

Since the ePortfolio program is embedded within the HIP Program and includes a new type of ePortfolio technology, it could be considered a *disruptive technology*.

Lastly, leadership made the conscious decision to silo the new HIP Program away from its foundational and liaison instruction programs in order to prototype the HIP engagement model. In this way, Virginia Tech continues to offer faculty a robust menu of instructional options through foundational and liaison service models, including a large number of foundational workshops for freshman and transfer students. Within disruptive innovation theory, our foundational and liaison programs is what we would call our *sustaining innovation*, or the instructional model that we have perfected to the point where faculty understand what we do and see value in its application.

Establishing the new HIP Program is a calculated risk. To date, it has worked well in the initial sample, but it will take years to expand fully and to truly test it at scale. By piloting the HIP program as a distinctive venture, this enables identified librarians to experiment with new models, while allowing the rest of the team to focus on foundational and liaison instruction without distraction. The strategy is two-fold: if the disruptive innovation takes years or finds the need to change direction frequently, it will not disturb the foundational services and offerings that faculty expect. It also allows time for proof of concept and for building buy-in among faculty on campus, including other instruction librarians.

### **Conclusion**

What would it look like for the library to permeate a campus, even a large campus of 40,000 or more learners? What would it look like to embed digital and information literacies across a wide spectrum of experiences, with the goal of personal interactions with every learner at least once prior to graduation? It may sound disruptive or even impossible, but the end result would be profound. In the case of Virginia Tech, leading the ePortfolio program will provide a unique look into the success of the

HIP Librarian program and into the libraries' role in learner success. While in the past library instruction metrics were quantified by seats filled or quiz scores, the ePortfolio initiative will provide a deep dive into the stories and metrics tied to how library instruction impacts the lives of learners across their learning journey. By testing the disruptive innovation model, library instruction leaders will be able to experiment with new models within specific campus cultures that will hopefully lead to scalable and sustainable engagement models into the future.

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