The Quarterly Interview: Walt Lessun

Gogebic Community College

-Edited transcript-

LOEX: *Where do you currently work? What is your title? How long have you been in this position?*

Lessun: Gogebic Community College in Ironwood, MI, where I am the Director, Learning Resources and Instructional Technology Centers.   It is one of only 120 community colleges nationwide eligible for an Aspen Institute Prize for Community College Excellence (http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/aspen-prize/eligibleinstitutions)

We're in a pretty remote location up here in the Upper Peninsula; there are five state capitols closer to us than Lansing.

I came to Gogebic as the director in January 2000. At that time I had four people working for me and slowly because of budget shrinkage and cutbacks, we are now down to two: myself and GCC's Assistant Librarian, Kathi Slizewski.

I came out of library school in 1977, and my first library job was at what was then called Ohio State Reformatory in Mansfield, Ohio. I worked there for 4 1/2 years and transferred to another prison in Lancaster Ohio, and then on to yet another prison in Nelsonville, Ohio. I then took a short break from libraries and became an academic administrator in Findlay and when the public services librarian position came up at the University of Findlay, I took that before coming to the U.P.

What do you do during a typical semester?

I do all the resource selection, library instruction, most of the A/V (e.g., a bulb burned out of a projector), represent the library at half of the college's committee meetings (e.g., Institutional Effectiveness, Curriculum), share reference and circ duties, and go to ALA (Kathi goes to the state conference – those are the only conferences we can afford).

In terms of instruction, I do mostly one-shots, such as a two-hour intro to the library for each of the 14 sections of ORI (Orientation), along with 5-10 sessions for classes like English or Chemistry.

We're a small library with minimal staff, so you work with what you have. The reference desk is my desk; we've never had a separate desk. Anytime we're here, that's when the reference desk is open – just ask us.

From where I sit, I have a view of the Circ Desk, which is 10 feet away. It is never staffed, but Kathi (who sits in an office to my right) and I can see it and go out if someone is there. Kathi has bar code reader at her desk now, so in a pinch she can check them out, or if a student is standing in front of the Circ Desk, we can check them out there.

There is a sign at the Circ Desk that says, "No one at the desk? For professional assistance, try the 2nd door on the left; for bureaucratic ineptitude, you can try the Director's office, first door on the left."

You use humor regularly, such as in your many posts on cjc-l. Where did that come from? How has it helped you?

When you work in academic environment, you better have a sense of humor. We use it a lot at Gogebic to break tension – it's a survival mechanism for us.

Humor helps present us as approachable and human. I'm lucky enough to be first generation college-educated, like most of my students, so I know the anxieties the students have and humor breaks that anxiety. It let's them know that I'm appreciative of the students -- "you're paying my salary." Ultimately, the humor is professionally focused - if folks are scared to ask questions or for help, the library is not going to get as much done.

I haven't done any formal training in humor; it just emerged. I do try to improve it; I know to change things up when a joke kind of "echoes" in my ear that I've done this joke 40 times and it's time to get a new joke.

Also, knowing your audience (such as the local customs of the Upper Peninsula) is key in terms of suitability – I'm trying to be funny, not offend people.

Any advantages/disadvantages to your remote location?

To talk about a disadvantage - there are times I wish we were closer to 4-year schools. We are 2.5 hours from Michigan Tech, 3 hours from Northern Michigan University. Even our closest CC school is 2-3 hours away. So there's not as much opportunity for cooperative relationship as I'd like (though there is some; we share a catalog and Voyager server with some "local" schools). But not having something close – so I can say to a patron "we don't have

this, but they do" – is not great for students. The web has made things a little better, but that only goes so far.

Even just being able to commiserate with colleagues -- it's just Kathi and me as the two librarians, so that can be difficult to get support (e.g., explaining to Deans what libraries and librarians are for in this day and age). The administrators think "Oh, he's the library director; he's always complaining about no staff and no money, but he's doing a good enough job." If there were other academic libraries in the area, it would help give deans and students an idea of what a truly good library (in terms of access and resources) might be. This does turn out to be a positive in that we've surveyed students and their expectations are so low, because their high schools are typically poor/rural, and Gogebic is much better than what they've had before, they tend to be satisfied. But I know it could be better and we could really knock their socks off.

In regards to good things about being remote – if I'm frustrated that we lack something, no one knows that its substandard because they don't have anyone to compare you to! Also, the relative isolation is the reason I came up here; I like the wilderness and outdoors for activities such as canoeing.

What organizations are you are involved in?

I'm active in the CJCS section and I'm on all sorts of listservs (ili-l, cjc-l, LOEX E-list) – you have to keep your fingers in all these little pies, because we (the librarians) do it all here.

It is essential to get out of the U.P. (virtually or otherwise) every once in a while and see what is going on, even though it's frustrating because of lot of ideas that are great can't be implemented without time, money or personnel. Now, sometimes we find something that doesn't require that, such as a link to a remarkable site, but for a lot of the stuff, we realize it would be great, but we can't do it.

A big positive is that Gogebic's president supports getting out and going to conferences – he recognizes it is worth it to sending me and Kathi out to see what might be helpful to Gogebic.

Is there a book or article that influenced you the most, particularly your teaching philosophy? Why?

A main influence is George Orwell's *1984*. Beyond its view on authority, I love the awareness of language,

"doublespeak" (e.g., war is peace). Every time I read it, it is better -- I find something I didn't notice before.

In a somewhat similar vein, I also love the works of S.I. Hayakawa in the field of general semantics, a discipline that was invented by Alfred Korzybski. The approach -- "The map is not the territory; the word is not the thing" -- influences my teaching greatly. It recognizes that reality is in a constant state of flux. Yesterday's information, even if it seems identical, can change. You have to be aware of time patterns that exist in information and the way you interpret it.

Parkinson's Law by C. Northcote Parkinson is also useful – written by one of the leading critical thinkers on nature of bureaucracy. For example – the people in the British cabinet will spend hours talking about the price of a pound of coffee because they know how much it costs, but they'll spend three minutes on the cost of a battleship because they have no idea how much it should cost. The law is "Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion," but he really focuses on how bureaucracies expand over time. Parkinson brought a lot of humor to it. It helped me a whole lot in understanding systems – whether it's prisons or academia.

A final influence is the book, *The No A**hole Rule*.

What technology, if any do you use? Any you hate?

I rely heavily on a data projector and laptop. Also, web cams are real important for conversations, particularly because of our remote location.

I wish we'd never bought interactive whiteboards – we have four of them, and they're not being used (except as old fashioned whiteboards) because we've had major issues getting them to work with faculty laptops. So with my limited tech time, and lack of support from the manufacturer with my questions, now only one is being used. This is a consequence of me only being the only one doing tech (part-time) and if there was someone more dedicated with a bigger staff, s/he could wrangle this issue. Instead, if I can't do it in my limited time, only faculty tech lovers (e.g., early adopters and pioneers) really can utilize it.

Another thing I hate is when you buy technology (e.g., we bought great data projectors four years ago) and then technology "advances" and you're left behind because the new model/parts don't work with old parts and Gogebic doesn't have the budget to buy a ton of equipment – we have to do it piecemeal.