

The Quarterly Interview: Matthew Olsen

Southeast Missouri State University

-Edited Transcript-

LOEX: *Where do you work? What is your job title and main responsibilities?*

Olsen: I am the Information Literacy Librarian at Kent Library at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau. I provide information literacy instruction in a variety of formats to our students. I also spend time at our reference desk and serve on the usual library and university committees.

Because we are a smaller academic library we all wear several hats, so I am also the head of our Information Services Department. In that capacity I lead a team of five other librarians in providing many of the public services aspects of our library. I have been at Kent Library for four years.

Why did you decide to become a librarian?

I have always found libraries to be inviting places and I have spent a lot of time in them. More importantly, I find librarians to be interesting, intellectually curious people. The idea of working in a good environment with them really appealed to me. Plus, I enjoy working with students and the burgeoning opportunities for teaching as a librarian matched my background and interests. What I didn't know going into librarianship is how in flux the field is; the pace of change can be daunting, but it presents opportunities as well.

What books or articles, outside Steve Jobs, influenced you?

- 1) Palmer, Parker. (1998). *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
 - An insightful and honest discussion of the affective elements of teaching.
- 2) Barr, Robert & Tagg, John. "From Teaching to Learning – A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education." *Change*. November/December 1995. pp. 13-25.
 - A seminal article that helped me become more focused on the learning needs of my students.
- 3) Weissman, Jerry. (2009). *The Power Presenter: Technique, Style, and Strategy from America's Top Speaking Coach*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
 - Great advice on the techniques of presenting: making eye contact, slowing down, etc. Full of examples from great public speakers.

How many instruction sessions do you do at your institution each year? Are they usually one-shots? How often

have you presented at other conferences?

I teach about 80 instruction sessions a year. Most of those sessions are one-shots, but there are exceptions. We have a good relationship with our College of Business, so some of those classes I meet with multiple times.

There's lots to do at Kent Library, so that doesn't leave me as much time for conferences as I would like. I have presented with colleagues at non-library conferences, which is a great experience. It is always interesting to see the expectations and practices in other disciplines. This LOEX presentation was my first at a major library conference.

How did you come up with the topic and the title for your LOEX 2012 session, 'Creating Insanely Great Instruction Sessions: What Librarians can Learn from Steve Jobs?'

For a long time I had been thinking about what a great presenter Steve Jobs was and that educators could learn something from him, but it was reading an interview with Carmine Gallo, author of the book *The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs*, that led me to believe that I was on to something. Gallo's book is quite good, but like all the other presentation books that mention Jobs it focuses on learning from him in a business context. I saw techniques in Jobs that could be applied to the classroom, especially the library classroom where we need to connect with our students quickly and hold their attention as we typically teach them about a service or product.

As for the title, "insanely great" is a phrase often associated with Jobs. It is how he described the original Mac computer and it references his general tendency to use exuberant language. It wasn't until I saw a tweet at the conference that I realized that in claiming I was talking about insanely great instruction sessions that I had set a very high bar for myself.

When did you first see Steve Jobs present? How many times did you have to view his keynotes to come up with the five strategies you recommend librarians use?

Unfortunately I never saw a Steve Jobs' keynote in person, but I have been following them since the days of MacWorld in the early 2000s. At first it was just reading articles or transcripts of the events, then live blogs, and eventually Apple released videos of the keynotes in the form of podcasts. As an aside, I asked early in my presentation how many people in the audience had ever seen a Jobs' keynote. Almost every hand in the audience of over 100 people went up, so I know I am not alone among librarians in my interest.

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To prepare for my presentation, I re-watched all the keynotes that were available and also read a number of books and articles on them. Eventually I focused on a few as key exemplars. MacWorld San Francisco in 2007 is in my opinion his greatest keynote; he introduced the iPhone and he was absolutely on fire through the whole presentation. The 2010 introductions of the iPad and the iPhone 4 are also quite good.

The tricky thing about coming up with five strategies was actually narrowing it down. I had things to say about the variety in his presentations and his avoidance of jargon, but I had to cut that material because of time constraints. I tried to focus on the strategies that I thought would help to solve problems for librarians.

You focused on five strategies that Jobs employed. Were there any techniques that Jobs used that librarians should not emulate / should avoid (e.g., because his audience is different than our audience)?

I wouldn't say that there are any techniques that teaching librarians should avoid, but some aren't really germane to what we do as educators. For example, there has been a lot written about the visuals in Jobs' presentations, in particular his slides. I did mention them in my presentation as an example of his minimalism, but I know in my own teaching I hardly ever use PowerPoint or Keynote.

Another thing is Jobs' language. As I mentioned earlier, he was known for describing things as "amazing," "revolutionary," or even "magical." While the passion that drove that language is something that we should emulate, I don't think there are many times in the classroom when we can talk like that.

Finally, in his presentations he often contrasted Apple products with their competitors as a way of showing how great they were. For example, when he introduced the iPhone he explained how the current 'smart phones' weren't really all that smart. Establishing an antagonist is one way of constructing a narrative in a presentation, but I don't think it is really appropriate in the classroom.

How nervous, if at all, were you to be giving a presentation on how to give a great presentation? Also, did that change anything about how you prepared the session?

I was extremely nervous about giving a presentation on presentations, especially in front of an audience of great teachers. I knew from the outset that I was going to have to bring my 'A' game. One of my major goals was just to stay true to myself and to my own presentation style while doing my best to model the techniques that I was describing. Steve Jobs was one of the greatest public speakers of all-time so for me to think that I could capture that magic in my own presentation would have been incredibly hubristic. I consciously avoided copying any of Jobs' mannerisms or favorite phrases. I also

chose my wardrobe very carefully—absolutely no jeans or black turtlenecks!

How, if at all, did you “test drive” this presentation? For example, did you practice it front of colleagues or present parts of it at other conferences?

One of the things that contributed to the success of Jobs' presentations was his intense preparation. There are numerous stories of his attention to detail; even the most spontaneous seeming event was carefully scripted. I tried to bring that same level of rigor to my own presentation. While the LOEX conference was the first time that I had presented this material publically, I practiced the entire thing literally dozens of times. I also made it a point to practice with the technology, e.g., Keynote software, projector, clicker, that I was going to use during the presentation. In my experience, simply writing notes or mentally running through your points isn't enough. You need to speak out loud and test the flow of your ideas. What makes sense in your head sometimes isn't as clear when it comes out of your mouth.

How did the LOEX conference audience respond to the presentation? Did it go as expected or did something parts go better / worse than you thought?

During my presentation I illustrated my points using just one or two examples from my own teaching and then I provided opportunities for the audience to give their own examples. I was simply blown away by what the audience provided. The Jobs' technique that really seemed to resonate with people was storytelling and the members of the audience shared insightful and often funny stories from their own teaching. I would strongly recommend that anyone presenting at a LOEX conference provide ample opportunity for audience participation.

Otherwise, people really seemed to enjoy the short video clips that I showed throughout the presentation. They worked nicely to break up the presentation and to remind people what made Steve so amazing. If just seeing those clips reinvigorated people about their teaching, then I feel that the presentation would have been a success.

Are there other “insanely great” presenters out there worth emulating (at least in part) besides Steve Jobs?

The TED website (www.ted.com) provides a number of examples of great presentations. I especially like the presentations of NYU professor Clay Shirky. He is very good at using clear examples to illustrate complex points. Professor Hans Rosling is another excellent presenter. He is a master of using visuals to tell a story, which is something that I would like to do more in my own teaching.

Olsen's LOEX 2012 presentation info at <http://bit.ly/X8Lim7>