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Supporting research by becoming a researcher: how librarians can use their own research experience to benefit library users

Miggie Pickton

Introduction

Academic librarians support researchers every day. Whether it is an undergraduate researching for a dissertation, a research student writing a proposal for a doctoral project, or a senior professor producing an article for a high impact journal, we are regularly invited to support the research process in a multitude of ways.

This article will explore the ways in which engagement in practitioner research can contribute to this service. It will first clarify what is meant by 'research' and highlight some differences between academic and practitioner research, then it will consider some of the ways in which both the act of doing research and the results of that research can enhance our ability to support researchers.

The quotations featured throughout the article are all from research active practitioners working in academic libraries. I am grateful to them for their willingness to share their experiences.

Defining 'research'

"Research can be defined as the attempt to derive generalisable new knowledge by addressing clearly defined questions with systematic and rigorous methods" (Department of Health, 2005, p.3)

"Research is a systematic enquiry which is reported in a form which allows the research methods and the outcomes to be accessible to others" (Allison, 1995, p.6)

These two definitions highlight some of the key elements of research: systematic enquiry, rigorous methods and new knowledge. Other descriptions of research might also include terms such as investigation, experimentation, problem solving, theory generation, synthesis and so forth. Approaches to research are very much discipline and context dependent. The type of practitioner research that librarians and information professionals might undertake may well be different from the academic research which we are called upon to support.

Academic vs practitioner research

The purpose of academic research is usually to generate new insight, theory or knowledge through investigation, experimentation or review. In these fund-strapped times, curiosity driven scholarly research is in decline and research that solves problems and offers benefits to the economy and society predominates.

In the academic library, practitioner research will almost certainly focus on a particular problem or need. Projects may be evaluative or investigative, perhaps generating data for audit or benchmarking. The approach taken will often be pragmatic, particularly with respect to theory and methodology.

This does not mean that practitioner research should lack rigour – far from it. Without a rigorous methodology and verifiable findings, the evidence produced by research can and will be challenged. If the results of a practitioner research

project are to support organisational decision-making, policy and strategy then the procedures underpinning those results must be sound.

Benefits of doing practitioner research

By becoming research active the practitioner researcher gains first hand experience of the research process, increases their familiarity with research tools, builds empathy and credibility with researchers, and can foster profitable collaborative relationships.

Understanding the research process



Figure 1: The research lifecycle

Figure 1 describes the research lifecycle. Librarians who support researchers will quickly find that having direct experience of the different steps in this process will enable them to design and implement timely and appropriate support services. For example, having produced a research proposal of their own, the practitioner researcher has a greater understanding of what needs to go into such a document and how the library can support this. Librarians who have themselves sought opportunities for bidding and identified suitable outlets for dissemination are well placed to develop research support services in these areas.

One academic librarian describes how she was able to bring her own experience to bear on finding and using resources:

[An academic colleague...] *“wanted to run some focus groups in partner colleges and wanted advice. Fortunately, I'd just done some reading on managing focus groups for my own research, so was able to recommend an excellent practical textbook and talk through some logistical issues – [later, I] was able to give her advice from my own current experience on formulating good questions.”* (Researcher 4)

Familiarity with research tools

It often falls to library staff to offer training in reference management software such as EndNote or RefWorks. But how many of us have actually used these tools in earnest? The process of creating, organising, managing and citing bibliographic references for a 'real' research project will provide an insight that cannot be achieved simply by preparing test data for a teaching session.

"They appreciate advice on bibliographies and maintaining these... having done it yourself you understand the importance." (Researcher 1)

Likewise, we are increasingly expected to advise on the use of social networking and communication tools such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu. One practitioner researcher uses her experience of these to great effect in her teaching:

"I show them my own ResearchGate profile and blog. They are able to see the potential impact these can make." (Researcher 2)

Downloads, 'favourites', mentions and 'likes' are the social media equivalent of citation counts and other conventional usage statistics. Demonstrating the impact of our own work through some of these indicators not only gives researchers something to relate to but raises their awareness of us as research active colleagues.

"Having published my own articles and seen them cited I can now use this experience in my teaching." (Researcher 2)

The beneficial effects of increased familiarity with research tools and resources apply across the board: whether writing long documents in Microsoft Word, analysing data using SPSS or managing research data for preservation and re-use – increasing our understanding of the tools researchers use pays dividends in our ability to support them.

Empathy with researchers

One of the services we offer at the University of Northampton is the Northampton Open Journals collection (Pickton, 2013). This facility enables prospective journal editors to create and manage new open access journals. As an ex-journal editor myself, I fully understand the challenges of building and maintaining a scholarly publication. Not only can I speak with authority on this subject, but also I can show empathy with researchers going through this process.

Other practitioner researchers have had similar experiences:

"Knowing that I have had experience of research makes a difference to the kind of questions they ask... more are related to my personal experience" (Researcher 2)

"Understanding their concepts and terminology enable me to engage with them at a deeper level" (Researcher 3)

Credibility among researchers

Being research active gives the librarian a number of opportunities to enhance their credibility among the research community. Winning external funding, having an article accepted for publication, presenting at a national or international conference, and collaborating with partners at other institutions will all earn kudos from other researchers. In the words of our practitioner researchers:

"You come to be seen as an equal partner; not serving, but contributing." (Researcher 6)

"We've come a long way from the perception that I am simply the person that orders books" (Researcher 3)

"I was flattered to find out that the School of Education wanted my work to be included in the REF." (Researcher 2)

"Authority comes because they know you've been there and done it." (Researcher 1)

Building collaborative relationships

Library and academic staff share a similar goal: to support and enhance the student learning experience. Whether working together as co-researchers on a project to achieve this end, or collaborating as researcher and participant, there are many opportunities for developing fruitful relationships.

As co-researchers, the different perspectives and expertise of the academic and practitioner add value to the project. The novice practitioner researcher can benefit especially, with access to advice at all stages of the process and perhaps a willing co-author to generate a publishable paper at the end.

One practitioner explains how he was able to use his research contacts to find participants to test a new online interface:

"As a result of our close working relationship I was able to go to the Faculty and ask for students to test the interface. The result was a joint paper with the academic." (Researcher 6)

Involving academic staff and students as participants demonstrates the library's interest in understanding its user's needs and its commitment to supporting these. The experience of working together can also open the door to future opportunities:

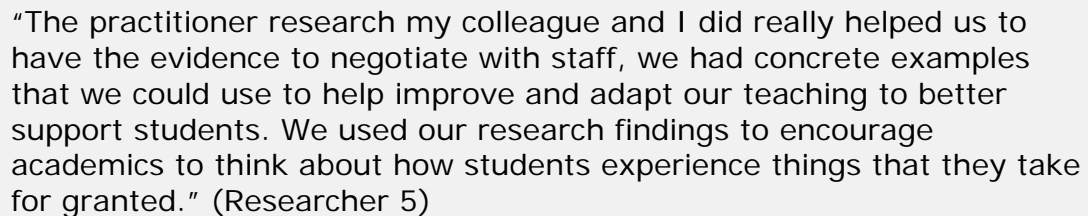
"Not only have I been into colleagues' lectures to plug my project and try to recruit students for surveys and focus groups etc, but having the imprimatur of some research behind me, even a small-scale project, makes it easier to ask colleagues to allow me, say, into their lectures for short chunks of co-teaching " (Researcher 4)

Using research findings to benefit the service

The last few paragraphs have demonstrated the benefits of being research active; but there are also benefits to be gained from the outputs and outcomes of a research project. These arise from what the findings reveal, how they can be used to inform service development and the reputational benefit that can be gained from sharing and disseminating the work.

At the University of Northampton, Library and Learning Services staff are actively encouraged to undertake practitioner research projects to underpin their work. Recent projects have informed the implementation of a new reading list system and the design of training to support this (Siddall and Rose, 2013); refurbishment of the university library (Littlemore *et al.*, 2012); the use of video conferencing for skills tutorials (Rice and O'Hare, 2012); a new research data policy and roadmap for the university (Pickton *et al.*, 2012) and a host of other work.

A colleague sums up her experience:



"The practitioner research my colleague and I did really helped us to have the evidence to negotiate with staff, we had concrete examples that we could use to help improve and adapt our teaching to better support students. We used our research findings to encourage academics to think about how students experience things that they take for granted." (Researcher 5)

Conclusion

Most librarians already have the knowledge and skills to conduct useful research projects. This article has demonstrated that there are many benefits to be gained both from doing the research itself and from using its findings to support service development.

Why don't you give it a try?

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