



GOING NATIVE: EMBRACING ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH METHODS IN LIBRARIES

For many years libraries have chiefly investigated themselves and their users by sending out surveys and collecting quantitative data. Ethnographic research methods offer librarians alternative and far more illuminating ways to measure user experience.

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The last two years of my professional life have been dominated, led and informed by the emergence in librarianship of an invaluable set of research methods that we can adopt to explore the experience of our users. The methods themselves are not new, having been founded nearly a century ago by privileged white men and women as they learned about the cultures and practices of native people on remote Pacific islands – think National Geographic and you're not far off – but their application to our field of work is comparatively recent.

Given the incomparable riches these research methods arguably deliver, it has become something of a mystery to me that they have been so completely hidden from view for the first 20 years of my career. Whatever the reason, it is high time these methods are now embraced by librarians for the possibilities and opportunities they could offer our services.

Sitting at the very core of these methods is ethnography, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'the scientific description of peoples and cultures with their customs, habits, and mutual differences,' a means by which a group of people can be observed in their natural habitat. A huge part of this is simply about watching people, observing what they do and recording their behaviours. Ideally this is conducted from within the community you are studying – so that you are recording as an insider, part of that community – but even when this is not possible, and you observe as an outsider, the results are still valuable. In a library setting we can observe and record how our users behave in our spaces: how they

move through them, what they use in them, where they sit, for how long, whether they work in groups or alone, use their own devices or fixed PCs. Very soon you have a list of seemingly obvious things to record and analyse, and yet this sort of behavioural observation, or mapping, is not an activity in which most of us are engaged or think to do.

However, there is more to ethnographic research than observation. It does also involve talking to the community you are studying, finding out what their routines are, the needs they express, and what they say they do. The point about the latter, which is true of all attitudinal research, is that what people say they do and what they actually do are two very different things!

A few months ago one of my colleagues recorded an audio interview with a student who we'd asked to give us a tour around our library to discover what language she used and what she did in the space. When first asked whether she ever went to the staff desk, she said 'No'; however a little prompting and digging soon revealed the opposite: 'actually I suppose I get help from staff at this desk most days.' Crucially the student was not cajoled to reveal this, just simply asked further questions to uncover more detail. Detail, and masses of it, is what all ethnographers are seeking. Given half the chance they'd follow their subjects home and go through their bins in order to build a fuller picture of their lives and to better understand what makes them tick. Ultimately this affords the ethnographer a complex but holistic view of the people they are studying, information which when

coupled with behavioural data can be used to inform service improvements or devise new products.

It is my view that once you have gone down this road less travelled you won't go back to a library survey again, or at the very least you will never conduct a library survey in isolation again. Why? Because ethnography offers a far more complete picture of our users, warts and all, whereas surveys are riddled with problems. They are boring to fill in and comment boxes are often left empty; they contain leading questions; they tend to be chiefly filled in by pro-library users; and worst of all, self-reporting through them is widely considered to be unreliable. How many of your students tell you via the library survey that they use your PCs to comment on their friends' Facebook photos

or to watch cat videos on YouTube? How many of them are willing to reveal in a survey that your library makes them feel anxious and that they don't use your electronic resources because, unlike Google, they don't understand them? Ethnography gives us an opportunity to discover these things, provided we are open to the opportunity and want to learn the truth.

Aside from sending out surveys, librarians also routinely collect a lot of quantitative data on library use: footfall; database use; and loans. Although this information can be valuable for various purposes, it tells us nothing at all about user experience. We don't know if a user's visit to a library resulted in them receiving the assistance or resources they required. Similarly we can't assume that an article view is a measure of success. We can't know if an article a user finds is relevant to their essay topic or not. Numbers alone are not enough. Through ethnography we can tell the story behind the numbers. I'm not advocating abandoning quantitative data altogether, but instead supplementing it with far more qualitative data that, until now, we have rarely collected.

It is worth mentioning that ethnography can be fun and rewarding too, both for the librarian and



the user, for a number of reasons. Neither we nor the users are very familiar with these methods so there is novelty value to them, moreover most offer elements of creativity and freedom of expression. As these approaches centre on understanding our users more, it is my experience that students greet them enthusiastically as they give them a genuine opportunity to have their voices heard and their point of view understood, outside of the exasperating constraints of a survey. As for librarians, well, ethnography rewards us with a deeper knowledge of our users and their needs than we've ever sought or possessed before, something that surely can only make our user-centric hearts glad!

Quite necessarily, given its interest in detail and

the fullest picture possible, ethnography can be very time-consuming to conduct – the only downside to this kind of research that I can think of – but in my experience this time and effort can only be worthwhile given the unique insights it delivers. Here in Cambridge we have already used ethnography at local and

University-wide levels to: make changes to the layout of physical library space; design a web-based search service that will match user study needs with available study spaces; explore the possibility of legitimising the practice of student sub-lending; and to explore the day-to-day study lives of a large sample of undergraduates and academics. The work has been immensely illuminating and exciting, and yet we feel that we have only really just started our journey of discovery. ●

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