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Applying ethnographic methods to library research

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In libraries we are, rather nicely, interested in providing a high quality user experience. We make great efforts to survey our patrons, to find out what they like or don't like about our services, and we endeavour to respond accordingly and modify what we provide to help improve and expand upon what we do or offer. Surveys can tell us a lot about what people think about us. However, they don't always drill deeply enough to tell us what happens in our buildings, or outside of them, why people choose to use or not use our resources.

Ethnographic methods are increasingly being utilised for library purposes and, in the case of academic libraries, at a university-wide level, with excellent results. Ethnography is usually associated with anthropological research and involves a number of methods to gather data that can't always be collected in other ways. Observations, open interviewing, diaries, mapping of movements and relationships; these all feature in ethnographic methods, and can reveal a huge amount about what our patrons actually do inside and outside libraries. We can use them to learn about how people behave in library spaces, how they search both online and physical collections, and how they use resources once they have been selected and refined.

Currently, the US and Canada are the leaders in ethnographic research in both public and academic libraries. The work by [Foster and Gibbons](#) at the University of Rochester studying the process of how students write and research their assignments both on and off campus is of particular significance. The [ERIAL](#) (Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries) project similarly examined the use of academic libraries, but took the method a step further by developing a collaboration between five universities in Illinois (and have created a toolkit in the process). [Donna Lanclos](#) is one of two anthropologists appointed by universities in the US to research how their libraries are used (or not used) and advise on redesign of facilities. Public library research has approached a number of issues from whether misconduct is an issue ([McKechnie et al](#)) to how children's libraries are used ([Becker](#)).

In the UK, we are catching up, primarily in academic libraries. Ethnography has been adopted as a research method by library and information Masters students to investigate usage patterns and preferences (see [Katie Fraser's](#) work on the Theory of Change in learning spaces or [Joanna Bryant's](#) work at Loughborough). London School of Economics has hired an anthropologist to study library use and inform them on redesigning their facilities. Cambridge are working with a user design specialist to help them learn about user experience in their libraries with the intention of improving their spaces and services, and employing user experience librarians.

I'm currently conducting ethnographic based research into user behaviour at a number of academic libraries and I'm definitely discovering things I would never have found out had I designed my method around surveys. Some data mirror what I would have expected to find based on personal experience and previous research, but that means I have hard evidence that confirms that it happens. Some actions have initially surprised me, but are fairly common. I've seen people taking naps in the middle of reading or while watching videos, and even some major snoring. And I've heard people singing as they sit at a computer. Sleep is actually fairly easy to understand, especially in quiet areas, as reading and focussing is hard work, so why not take a little rest? Singing also isn't that difficult to understand, even if it surprised me initially: our library environments encourage some level of home comfort, and many people will forget themselves in the moment of listening to music through their headphones. Why wouldn't they end up singing?

Utilising ethnographic methods isn't the easiest route to take. It can be quite time intensive, depending on the method used, and as a result seen as costly. However it can also be incredibly rewarding, highly illuminating, and ultimately save money that would otherwise have been allocated to expensive changes that don't work. It's definitely an exciting area, so keep your eyes open for more!

I'd recommend reading the [UKAntroLib](#) blog or following [#UKAnthroLib](#) on Twitter for more UK work.