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Basic research methods for librarians (4th ed.)

Ronald R. Powell & Lynn Silipigni Connaway, Libraries Unlimited, 2004, x + 347 pages, ISBN 1-59158-112-5, £28.99
(paperback)

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Research conducted in the LIS domain has historically received bad press and can often make for some pretty grim reading. Research has been described as “non-cumulative, fragmentary, generally weak and relentlessly oriented to immediate practice” (p.1). Quite simply, research within the LIS discipline is still – relative to other disciplines - quite infantile and has yet to develop the goals, objectives and distinctive methodologies that could be said to characterise sociology, economics or linguistics, for example. Much of this retarded development could be said to lie squarely at the doorstep of academic institutions. As the authors of *Basic research methods for librarians* note, LIS education at undergraduate and postgraduate levels instils in students the sure foundation of professional training, but often entirely evades the relevance of academic techniques. Few students therefore leave university or college LIS courses having acquired the skills or knowledge necessary to rigorously pursue investigative research or to interpret results within a practitioner environment. Whilst Powell and Connaway are keen to remind us that the quality of recent library research shows improvements with regard to its methodological rigor, sophistication and analysis, there still exists a much needed requirement to raise the bar and to further develop the benchmark against which LIS research is currently measured.

Extra guidance and instruction are thus order of the day. And it is certainly convenient that such guidance can now come in the form of a specialist LIS research handbook. (I use the word ‘now’ rather erroneously since this is the fourth edition of *Basic research methods for librarians*). *Basic research methods for librarians* purports to be the essential handbook for the research active librarian or information professional and aims to orient interested readers as to the basic principles of research, research method, and the verities of results evaluation. But it is also designed to guide those disoriented graduates that can often be found rambling aimlessly through the ‘research jungle’; those simply intimidated by the number of potential research instruments or bamboozled by the statistics.

As the title suggest, *Basic research methods for librarians* deals almost exclusively with ‘basic research methods’ and espouses a much needed ethos that library research should be as sound as any other scientific research. As such, the book is arranged – broadly speaking – as if the reader were conducting research his / herself. Aside from chapter 1, which examines research in librarianship for the purposes of scene setting, the early chapters encompass research study development (planning the research, the role of theory, formulating hypotheses, etc.) and selecting the research method (applied,

qualitative, etc.). Subsequent chapters then provide accessible expositions of survey research, sampling methods, data collection techniques, experimental research, and data analysis and statistics. Although devoted to basic research, useful chapters on qualitative research methods and historical research are also provided for comprehensiveness.

Ronald R. Powell is professor of Library and Information Science at Wayne State University and Lynn Silipigni Connaway is a Consulting Research Scientist at the OCLC Office of Research, and their collective research expertise shines brightly throughout. This is particularly true of chapters 10 and 11 which provide extensive guidance on writing research proposals and writing research reports, respectively. Such insightful direction is nicely topped up with two useful appendices on the domain assumptions within LIS and on publishing research in LIS journals. The 'little' things also make *Basic research methods for librarians* an excellent compendium. An impressively broad array of references punctuates each chapter and points readers to a veritable well of information. The writing style adopted by the authors also strikes the perfect balance: no-nonsense, but not devoid of passion; understandable, but not patronising.

It is certainly true that the realm of library research has hitherto been dark, grey and desperately bleak. However, *Basic research methods for librarians* offers our discipline hope and salvation. Such a text will, with any luck, engender research acumen, both among student readers and within library schools – all of which will make the future a lot brighter. Indeed, short of LIS research education coming in pill form for easy digestion, the practitioner and the student can rest assured that *Basic research methods for librarians*, although requiring some digestion, will at least not inflict heartburn upon the reader.