

## **Editorial: Promoting practitioner-researcher collaboration in library and information science**

<i>Purpose of this paper</i>	To investigate ways of developing positive partnerships between practice-based librarians and those active in library and information (LIS) research.
<i>Design/methodology/approach</i>	An opinion piece reflecting on issues currently discussed in the practitioner and research communities.
<i>Findings</i>	That there are a number of practical strategies that practitioners, researchers and funding bodies can adopt to maximise the potential for mutually beneficial collaboration.
<i>Research limitations/implications</i>	An expression of opinion about the value of partnering in research to the library practitioner community, and about the reasons why partnerships in this area may not occur as frequently or fruitfully as they could.
<i>Practical implications</i>	If taken further, the suggestions made in this editorial would enhance the quality and increase the quantity of practice-based LIS research collaborations.
<i>What is original/value of the paper?</i>	This opinion piece attempts to shed light for researchers on attitudes to research among the practitioner community, creating perspectives which cannot be gained from the standpoint of the research community alone.

**Keywords:** libraries; librarians; research; library and information research.

### **Introduction**

Library and information science research is an empirical form of investigation - but of an applied, practical and (we hope!) useful variety. So if practitioners can't use it, questions need to be asked on a number of levels about how and why we do such research. In particular, for LIS research to flourish, practitioners and researchers need to forge close working ties. In pursuit of such ties, many LIS departments, which teach and research library and information science topics in a largely academic setting, will try to set up fixed term, project-funded research collaborations with working library or information services. These are ideal opportunities to create the best possible context in which to carry out LIS research.

However, it is can be difficult to build successful relationships between the two sides of the LIS research partnership. Each side of this divide may

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seem to have different priorities from the other, or may not understand why the other is motivated to pursue their interests in the particular way that they do. In recognition of this, it is worth looking at some of the issues that inhibit practitioner-researcher collaboration in order to suggest ways of resolving them.

### **Practitioner concerns**

Firstly, any working library that is approached to take part in a research project may need reassurance about how the research project will address issues of performance. No company or institution in the world can say, hand on heart that they are perfect in what they do, nor would any of them claim to be so. Libraries are no different. However, if a library wishes to engage in a dialogue with researchers about matters that may touch on performance levels and service quality, then the researchers in question need to be alive to the need for the highest possible standards of accuracy and care in dealing with these issues.

All libraries accept that applied research has to look at existing practice and finding ways of making it better. And to do that, one first has to identify areas of service delivery capable of improvement. This need not imply that the researcher is inevitably looking for things that are not as good as they should be, but it does require the creation of a clearly and mutually agreed context in which issues of service quality can be addressed openly and correctly.

### **Researcher responses**

There are ways of dealing with these concerns effectively. One strategy is for the research community to pursue research in the real-life library context on the basis of collecting data from a wide number of library participants, with a degree of anonymization and summary in the reporting of the end results. This has to be carefully handled: sometimes facts released in the general, anonymous description of project reports may reveal inappropriate detail about participants.

More bluntly, it is clear that there is no point in publishing a consciously non-specific report about four unnamed medium-sized public libraries in national region 'x', when there is only one national region which has four medium-sized public libraries in it! However, if such data are handled discreetly and intelligently, then this approach can win friends and partners in the practitioner community.

Researchers can also emphasise potential for service enhancement: the library that works well with research partners may be given otherwise unrealised insights into how to improve its service, perhaps by means of an in house version of the research (with parallel but different versions of these data made available for the public domain in aggregated, non-specific terms). Libraries may gain these insights in the course of receiving user feedback, or even user criticism – but surely it is as well to get these insights by means of the research route first?

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For example a series of accessibility audits of various libraries' services for disabled users can show general trends in the quality of service provision, which helps policy-makers assess how effectively libraries are performing on a general level. It tells us much of what we need to know about shortfalls in service provision, or may even be a story of widespread and consistent improvement. However, any libraries audited can take a keen interest in their own confidential results and can act on the basis of the audit's discovery of any potential for service enhancement. This way everyone gains, no-one is disadvantaged.

### **Practitioner obligations?**

It is at this point worth making a statement of belief: practitioners should acknowledge an obligation to help with research in order to create greater general benefits not just to their users, but also to their own profession at large. Some might question whether this obligation exists - but the more we intelligently analyse what we do, the better our services will be. And the more we demonstrate our ability for thoughtful self-criticism and reflective practice, the more credibility our profession will have. In that sense practitioner collaboration with LIS research partners becomes purely a question of enlightened self-interest.

The danger of a lack of commitment to practitioner research may show in a number of ways. Librarians have been known to complain about their image in the public eye, their pay levels relative to other professions and the greater comparative prestige of professions such as the medical profession. However, one factor that may serve to explain such perceived differences is the quality of research pursued by medical professionals and their willingness to engage in the challenges of research-led reflective practice. Subjects such as clinical medicine do have certain innate advantages of course, when it comes to resourcing their research - while it is common to see charity collectors on the streets successfully seeking donations to medical research, one cannot envisage a collector of donations for LIS research having quite the same success!

But putting comparative levels of funding aside, a certain level of dedicated funding for LIS research does exist, and we should be grateful for it and should exploit it. In the end, the better the intellectual quality and range of any professional research, the bigger the impact it has on real-life practice and user services, and the higher the public regard for the profession will be.

### **Practitioner obligations!**

It should also be pointed out that legislators are now giving library and information professionals statutory legal obligations to put data about service provision into the public domain under Freedom of Information legislation. The difficulty for librarians tasked with dealing with such legislation is often not so much a lack of willingness to provide information about how an institution or its library functions, but the difficulty of

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gathering, analysing and packaging such information. Calls for such information may well appear to demand from the provider not just inordinate amounts of time but also a certain level of research competence in order to prepare the data in question. In one sense therefore, LIS research can proactively help collect and prepare data about service provision in a way that will help libraries meet their legal obligation for accountability.

Cultures of public accountability can vary from country to country and jurisdiction to jurisdiction. But there is some anecdotal evidence amongst researchers that librarians in countries with well established legal and/or cultural obligations to provide information on how public money is spent on library services are more willing (or more resigned perhaps!) to release statistical information on their services into the public research domain. Whether such anecdotes are founded on fact is worthy of further investigation (perhaps this is a suitable project for a practitioner-researcher collaborative investigation?). But a culture of openness can only benefit the profession which embraces it.

### **Time-saving versus time-consuming strategies**

Perhaps this last point indicates one overriding factor in considering practitioner reactions to invitations for involvement in research partnerships: the impact on their workload. If libraries feel that research investigations can meet their legal obligation for public accountability, then they may feel that partnering with a research team saves them time and resources - it is an ad hoc form of outsourcing and rather attractive in consequence.

However, some types of research project are far more labour-intensive than others. For example, researchers may feel that all practice-oriented questionnaire-based investigations make pretty much the same sort of demands on practitioners. This is not the case: questionnaire- or interview-based investigations in which practitioners are interviewed make larger in-roads of time into the librarians' working day than surveys or interviews focussed on users. Practitioners also feel that they know what they know about their services - researchers should try and discover what their *users* really want, and then tell the practitioner community about it! Researchers should bear this in mind and may be best advised to select research methods that will get a warm response from practitioners.

Even where users are the focus of research, the impact on the real-life service environment needs to be considered. A research project that wants to test software with library users may involve significant amounts of systems support from the library staff. Researchers may not appreciate the potential disruption and risk in this sort of library-based research project. Testing software may involve loading it into the local IT environment. This means that the software will have to be checked and assessed to see if it is compatible with local systems specifications, guaranteeing that probably untried and untested packages are not going

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to compromise network security or other systems parameters. Thus the opportunity voluntarily to test experimental computer packages in a real-life library context will not immediately delight any hard-pressed systems librarian.

And for practitioners, even assessing and responding to research approaches is time-consuming. Some libraries receive a number of regular approaches for partnerships. Because they will want to respond intelligently and responsibly to these regular approaches, they may have to convene meetings of senior management to assess these approaches in batches, rather like a journal editorial team meets to assess submitted papers, though on a smaller scale. This is a commitment of time and energy taken away from the delivery of frontline library services. Projects looking for practitioner partners should bear in mind that even the commitment of time to *assessing* proposals, let alone taking part in them, is a significant factor.

If a responsible research project knows its proposal will be assessed in this way it may well say to a prospective practitioner partner, 'When you look at our proposal, bear in mind you can have the final say over anything we write!' Offering a veto is a good way of addressing concerns about losing control of confidential information when taking part in the research process (and when a library talks about confidential information, it may well mean confidential user information rather than information about the library itself). But having control over what a research team says and does will mean spending time examining what that research team says and does. Checking drafts of project reports is time-consuming – and you can't use a veto unless you read something first. So the offer of having control over what a project team reports is not always going to win the argument. The researcher is inevitably asking someone to spend time and energy on exercising control in this way.

So the fact that (for example) sharing confidential information is of concern to libraries should not be taken as proof that they are pedantically concerned about client confidentiality or sensitive about exposing themselves to scrutiny – they may simply be unable to resource the checking procedures that a responsible organisation should put in place when such data goes into the public domain via a third party research project.

### **Re-purposing of data**

Thus, a particular concern for practitioners is the fact that the data that is collected in the ordinary course of managing a library is collected for a specific reason – managing and administering a library. This data may be sitting in a library's databases and files, full of research potential. But legal restrictions are such that data gathered for administrative purposes may not be readily re-purposed for research. Research teams should show awareness of this distinction at the start of any partnership approach and should show a willingness to treat all administrative data with due care

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and should even offer to sacrifice the use of it where its repurposing is unacceptable.

However, librarians must play their part, and those who wish to meet their professional obligations to participate in research for the benefit of library users and the profession at large, can build research considerations into their administrative data-gathering processes. Put more simply, if you run a web-based virtual reference service with a legal statement displayed on the home page about how the data gathered by the service is used, why not add a note about acceptable research use of such data? Users can be given a guarantee that any personal data gathered in the course of using the service will be kept confidential but that data may be used for administrative purposes and "for research of benefit to the development of such services in future". This research dimension may never be relevant, but building it into the service from the start does give you added options should you want to explore them (and institutional ethics committees who assess research proposals on the basis of a variety of legal and moral criteria will look favourably on libraries who act in such a way).

### **Research-funding**

Most of the above points are for practitioners and researchers to consider. But one last point is worth directing to the various bodies that fund research projects.

Calls for research proposals often involve building a consortium of partners, both across institutions and also across the practitioner/research divide. Consortia take time to build. When the deadline for submissions to a bid is less than generous, pressure of time puts researchers who seek practitioners for involvement in a bid in a difficult position. Their approaches to potential partners may be less effective than they otherwise could be due to the pressure of tight schedules.

Practitioners (who are under no financial pressure to take part in research bids) may thus reject approaches that, in different circumstances, they would have been happy to commit to, simply because competent and professional research teams are not given generous allocations of time to articulate their interest in collaboration to libraries. The overall quality of research thus suffers. Any body that funds research will want the best value for money – giving ample time between the announcement of a call and the deadline for submissions so that good researcher/practitioner partnerships can be created will help deliver that best value.

### **Conclusion**

There are clearly a number of good reasons for supporting the practitioner-researcher relationship. However, if both sides of this relationship are insufficiently knowledgeable about the concerns of the other, opportunities for collaboration will not be taken up and exploited to the full.

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On the one hand, practitioners need to build a dimension of reflective practice into their administrative processes from the very start. Two such suggestions for doing this are:

- the creation of a regular assessment framework within libraries for evaluating research opportunities or proposals, and
- the integration of permissions for repurposing of administrative data into core procedures.

These are only a starting point, however.

On the other hand, researchers need to anticipate practitioner concerns about confidentiality, data re-repurposing, workload issues, and project control from the very start, and should deliver reassurances about these concerns proactively, to underline their awareness of the impact of practice-based research on working library services.

It is questionable whether any well-developed training framework exists for teaching researchers about these issues at the moment, so there is potential for improvement here. Most textbooks about LIS research techniques score well on the detail of research methodology, but do not give advice on the pragmatics of moving research into the practitioner environment. This is something for the research community to investigate and address practically – in particular, by improving training and awareness-raising for researchers.

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