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Article

Embedded, Participatory Research: Creating a Grounded Theory with Teenagers

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Abstract

Objective – This project, based on a study of the impact of art programs in public libraries on the teenaged participants, sought to show how library practitioners can perform embedded, participatory research by adding participants to their research team. Embedded participatory techniques, when paired with grounded theory methods, build testable theories from the ground up, based on the real experiences of those involved, including the librarian. This method offers practical solutions for other librarians while furthering a theoretical research agenda.

Methods – This example of embedded, participatory techniques used grounded theory methods based on the experiences of teens who participated in art programs at a public library. Fourteen teens participated in interviews, and six of them assisted in coding, analyzing, and abstracting the data, and validating the resulting theory.

Results – Employing the teenagers within the research team resulted in a teen-validated theory. The embedded techniques of the practitioner-researcher resulted in a theory that can be applied to practice.

Conclusions – This research framework develops the body of literature based on real-world contexts and supports hands-on practitioners. It also provides evidence-based

theory for funding agencies and assessment. In addition, practitioner-based research that incorporates teens as research partners activates teens' voices. It gives them a venue to speak for themselves with support from an interested and often advocacy-minded adult.

Introduction

Recently I studied how art programs in public libraries affect teens, using a metric of civic engagement. I was curious to learn how teenagers describe the impacts of the manga-drawing, poetry-writing, and craft-making classes offered at many public libraries. Were these programs just fun for individual participants? Were they for the purpose of making wonderful art? Both "fun" and "great art" are perfectly acceptable intrinsic reasons for individuals to participate in art programs in libraries, but do programs like these positively impact the teens as a group? Are there extrinsic, community-wide benefits to arts programming? This line of research has implications that could shift how funders view programs that they sometimes consider as outside of a public library's mission. But the most interesting part of this study was the unique research method my team used. My research team was not a bevy of professionals: it was the teens whom I was studying, and me, an embedded researcher-practitioner. Over the course of the research project, the teens and I built a grounded theory that described their experiences of the programs, and discovered how the programs increased social capital (Crawford Barniskis, 2012b), using embedded, participatory techniques. These techniques, when paired with grounded theory methods, build testable theories from the ground up, based on the real experiences of those involved, including the librarian. This method offers practical solutions for other librarians while furthering a theoretical research agenda.

In line with the reflexive nature of this research, I am writing in the first person, as an "embedded author" telling a story in which I am not merely a narrator, but a co-creator of meaning.

Background

In library and information science (LIS), as in many fields, practitioners do little research, and those working in public libraries do even less. Even though they comprise 28 percent of all librarians (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), public librarians have contributed at most 3.37 percent of the research (Buttlar, 1991). The latest published count by Penta and McKenzie (2005) finds that public librarians contribute a mere 3 percent to the general LIS literature. *JASIST*, the largest publisher of scholarly LIS work, published work by 1,011 authors, according to the Penta and McKenzie study. Of those 1,011, not one was a public librarian. In 2010, of 405 articles in 11 top LIS journals, only 2 percent of the authors identified solely as public librarians. Those public librarians who did publish research published only in public-library-specific journals, even though the subjects they studied were often applicable to a wider audience (Crawford Barniskis, 2010). Academics do the research in the LIS field, and they are generally academic faculty, not practitioners.

As Moeller, Pettee, and Leeper (2011) point out, the lack of the "teen voice" in library research is especially problematic; they call for teens to participate in the research process, and for their points of view to be fully represented:

> Those of us who are granted the privilege by young adults to use their voices in our research know that their voices give our work depth, interest, and relevance. Those who further engage their young adult

> participants in the process of member-checking more soundly validate their research and the young adult's experience. To produce robust, informative research, we as scholars need to talk *to* young adults, not just about them (para. 6).

While I did this research before this call for more thoroughly integrating teens in studies, this method is a response to the same concerns of marginalization. However, the embedded, heuristic research method I used could be effective with adult populations as well. There is no other evidence of LIS studies done by public librarians as embedded and participatory members of the group being studied, nor other studies in which the participants under study are active members of the research team.

Literature Review

The concept of the embedded researcher is not new. Anthropologists have incorporated themselves into the environments under study using naturalistic field methods since the 1970s (Clarke, 1975). Since the 1960s, research methodologies and their epistemic justifications have become more connected, and more aware of contingencies and biases (Code, 1997; Robson, 2011). Researchers practicing embedded techniques are able to be more aware and connected than aloof, "unbiased" research approaches may require. Sociologist Valerie Jenness (2008) defines an embedded researcher as similar to an embedded journalist, one who is "occupying multiple locations within and under the control of a single field of play while also moving from one site to another, one host to another, one level of analysis to the other, and one constituency to another" (p. 6). Jenness describes the work embedded researchers do as "systematic back-translation" (p. 4).

In this article, the term "embedded researcher" reflects the research I did while also acting as a practitioner. In this framework, the researcher uses heuristic techniques to derive a praxis-based result, which is verified in partnership with the people being researched. This definition of "embedded" is different from "embedded design" methodologies, in which one set of data supports or explicates the other (Creswell, 2012). Instead, this is collaborative research in which a researcher is a practitioner, or is temporarily submersed in a practitioner's environment. There are several related or overlapping frameworks that researchers use instead of, or in addition to, "embedded research."

Table 1 describes several types of methodologies that have one or more points in common with the type of embedded, participatory research described in this article. In each of these methods, the researcher participates in the experience under study, utilizes a practice-informed framework to guide the study, or is particularly sensitive to the context of the experience under investigation. These research paths can stem from critical analysis of power inequities by Foucault, Bourdieu, and Friere (Leckie, Given, & Buschman, 2010), which offer useful paradigms for examining teen perspectives or the perspectives of other marginalized groups. The pragmatic nature of these approaches means that whichever framework a researcher chooses, the end result will have some immediate utility to practitioners. However, the embedded, participatory framework described in this article combines many of these frameworks into a single method.

I will not delve deeply into the epistemic pros and cons of the embedded researcher model I espouse here, but I will touch on a few points. The justification for this sort of idiographic knowledge goes back to the qualitative/quantitative break that many researchers analyze and the tension between positivist and constructivist methodologies.

Table 1
Examples of Similar Frameworks and Methodologies

Similar frameworks and methodologies	Potential similarities	Potential differences	Descriptions in the literature
Heuristic research	Hands-on, practice-informed research design.	Not necessarily embedded researcher, may be interventive or modelling.	(Poulter, 2006)
Interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary research	Often praxis-based, using multiple frameworks, hermeneutics.	May be quantitative, no embedded researcher necessary.	(Wickson, Carew, & Russell, 2006)
Situated research	May mean ethnographically situated in the context being studied.	May also mean "situated" in the sense that the research or theory is situated in the larger corpus of research (e.g., what I am doing here with the "embedded researcher" concept).	(Miller & Goodnow, 1995)
Action research	Often involves a practitioner-researcher; results in practical recommendations for action.	May be only a local solution, not generalizable or abstracted.	(Kuhne & Quigley, 1997)
Participatory research	Like action research, can "enable local people to seek their own solutions according to their priorities." Allows those being researched to also be in the powerful position of researcher.	May be only a local solution, not generalizable or abstracted.	(Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1668)
Design-based research	Similar to action research, a practical partnership between researcher and practitioner.	Focused on interventions, "doing," and measuring rather than simply examining.	(Anderson & Shattuck, 2012)

The benefits of participatory, embedded research include:

- This technique builds relationships between concepts, academics and practitioners, and the researchers and the researched.
- It reduces power disparities between practitioners and researchers (Nutley, Jung, & Walter, 2008).
- Researchers have a framework and impetus for increased reflexivity and examination of biases (Hoskins, 2000; Miller & Goodnow, 1995; Reis, 2011).

- The research is more relevant for practitioners, and may be more relevant for library boards or funding agencies.
- This technique incorporates the practitioner's tacit knowledge into the research, both methodologically and as an actionable response to the analysis (Miller & Goodnow, 1995).
- Researchers who are aware of the subtleties of the researched environment may more sensitively translate experiences of marginalized populations (Li, 2008).
- The research narrows the gap between the actual and the empirical, and the events and the studied, recalled experiences (Tsoukas, 1989).

Some of the limitations include:

- The contingent nature of this research requires significant abstraction for generalizability.
- Sometimes interactions can feel awkward or forced (Hoskins, 2000).
- Practitioners or "teachers are usually too busy and often ill trained to conduct rigorous research" (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012, p. 17).
- Challenges abound regarding the "soft" nature of any qualitative research in its credibility and bias, but especially one in which the researcher lacks "scientific" distance from the researched.
- While collaborative methods can bridge the lack of research knowledge of practitioners and the lack of tacit knowledge of researchers, such collaboration is costly, time-intensive, or unlikely to occur in locations where there are no local academics interested in partnerships.

Neither the limitations nor the benefits of being an embedded researcher can be ignored, but one benefit is paramount: adolescents, in general, perceive that they lack a voice, power, and advocates (e.g., Levine, 2008; Marshall & Arvay, 1999; Ross, 2006). Practitioner-based research that incorporates teens as research partners activates the teens' voice. It gives them a venue to speak for themselves with the support of an interested and often advocacy-minded adult.

Methods

The research project used in this study generated a grounded theory through a qualitative case study structure (Crawford Barniskis, 2012b). I advertised for applicants in several media outlets, through library flyers, and in the morning announcements at the local high school, and chose 11 teenagers out of a pool of 20 applicants. Those chosen represented the widest-possible range of demographics in age, gender, family income level, church attendance, volunteerism, language spoken at home, and educational background of parents and teens. The group included five boys and six girls, ages 12 to 18, though one boy had to leave the study due to scheduling conflicts. Some were regular library users; some had never been to the library. Two lived in different towns entirely. This group of teens had the opportunity to participate in six art programs at the library and earn a ten-dollar gift card for each weekly program they attended. They attended at least five programs and the focus group interview after the program series ended. The art was varied, including poetry readings, a modern dance performance, manga and graffiti workshops, and artist trading card and photography classes. Many other teens attended these programs as well.

At first the participants didn't know which social aspects were under investigation. At the beginning of the first program, the teens filled out a survey asking how strongly they agreed with statements such as, "I feel like a valued member of my community" and "I think playing sports or exercising regularly is important." At the end of the final program they filled out the same survey. I never intended the pre- and post-test surveys to generate statistically significant data because the sample size was too small.

Instead, I illustrated the survey data using comparative pie charts, which were a jumping-off point for discussion during the focus group and individual interviews.

The focus group interview, held after the series of programs ended, lasted two hours and involved junk food, 10 teens, and me – armed with a list of questions, charts, and an audio recorder. The interview covered questions such as, "How did the art programs you attended here change – or not change – how you feel about the people in the program? The library? The community?" These were big questions, and required big answers. I expected that some of the teens would avoid the hard questions with a joke or a brief answer, e.g. "The programs didn't change anything for me." But I was intrigued to receive complex and reflective answers from all of the participants, regardless of age or personality. Early in the planning process for this project, I decided to take the unusual step of inviting the teens into the researcher's role by asking any interested participants to work on the grounded theory coding with me, after they had finished the interview process and their answers could not be biased by seeing preliminary results. When I saw that the teens were being careful and conscientious scientists, I knew I was on the right track. One teen untangled correlation from causation when she said:

> *Somebody who makes art is pretty much probably a smarter person. As someone who writes a letter to the editor is also a thinking person. And they are likely to do both of those things, but one does not lead to the other.*

Even the youngest participant, aged 12, stepped back from her own experiences and biases to clarify her conjectures about others' motivations: "*It depends on the person*." Every teen interviewed tested the falsifiability of the theory they were generating, establishing the parameters of "trueness" by exploring who could not or would not be likely to be affected by library art programs. They did this with little prompting from me. They were good scientists.

Researchers deduce top-down theories, such as those described in a meta-synthesis of the literature on this topic (Crawford Barniskis, 2012a), based on previous research (all of which had been done exclusively by adults, and never in this intersection of art, libraries, and teens). We inductively developed a "bottom-up" theory based on the teens' perceptions, building a testable theory using Charmaz's (2006) active coding method. This approach allowed the teens to speak their language with as little mediation as possible.

Grounded theory is a useful method when a phenomenon is established but little work has been done to examine it. In this instance, public libraries have offered art programs to teens for years. No one had published research on this phenomenon, but practitioners wrote about it in the form of how-to manuals and descriptive articles. A phenomenological method would have been appropriate to simply describe the experience of the teens in these programs, but I was seeking a deeper, more correlative examination of the impact of the programs – the "why" and "how" as opposed to the "what."

The basic steps in constructivist grounded theory construction are iterative (Charmaz, 2006):

- Coding line by line, or capturing the essence of the statements using slightly simplified terms. These codes are "open"; the researcher is not attempting to make them similar or standard at this point
- Adding more data in the form of memos.
- Coding sentence by sentence, often at a slightly more theoretical distance, or other larger granularities.
- Sorting these codes into groups that make sense.

- Using constant comparative methods. When describing this to teens, I used the visual explanation at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxIErzX3aQQ (researchjimminy, 2009), which was more instructive than anything I could write.
- Discovering the themes in the sorted "piles" of codes.
- Acquiring more data when the theory needs fleshing out, using theoretical sampling.
- Describing the themes to create the theory.
- Connecting the themes as far as is possible, to make the theory.

In this project, I recorded and transcribed the focus group interview, then followed these steps. Using Atlas.ti software, I lightly coded each line of the interview transcript. I often listened to the recording to get a sense of the context of the comment, and to refresh my memory of the non-verbal communication. I coded each line with simple gerund-based codes that captured the activity occurring in each line. For example, one teen said:

> *Yeah, I definitely do feel closer to the libraries that I go to after going through a program. So it's like the more programs that you go to the more it feels kind of like home in a way. Not as really home, but like a really comforting awesome place.*

For this statement, the codes included "feeling closer to library" and "feeling comforted."

At this point I returned to six of the teens who had volunteered to be part of the research team, to make sure I was coding using language with which they felt comfortable, and that I was capturing what they were intending to say. This process went beyond what is known as member-checking, in which researchers show their analysis to participants for basic validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). I met with two teams of teens. The first session included three teens, and occurred just after I had finished my initial open coding of the focus group interview. I showed the group a brief video on the constant comparative process, and spoke briefly about how coding and categorizing worked. The teens mostly learned by doing. They used my codes, tweaking some of them to better reflect the intended meaning, and added codes of their own. The teen coders, for instance, changed the original code "feeling comforted." They believed that the library was the critical reason for the comforting feeling this teen experienced, and had to be included in the code as the active force: "library comforting." The teen coders reasoned aloud as they changed and added codes. I recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed the teens' discussion during the coding sessions, because, as one of the originators of the grounded theory method notes, "all is data" (Glaser, 2001, p. 145). The second meeting with the teen researchers included one returning teen and three teens who had not coded before. In this session, I repeated the video and basic instruction. We worked at a more abstract distance from the focus group and some individual interview transcripts. This team of coders was also encouraged to change or add codes, at either open, descriptive levels, deeper more theoretical levels, or to sort the codes into categories. They reasoned aloud as they worked with the data.

I treated the transcriptions of these two coding sessions as data for coding, and as memos of the researchers' thought processes. Writing down one's own feelings, biases, intuitions, and reasoning is central to the grounded theory method. My memos, as these diary-like notes are called, were treated as data, as were the thought processes of the teen researchers. By coding and comparing these memos, I was able to notice and challenge some of my own biases and assumptions, clarify the teens' thought processes, and build a theory more grounded in the teens' experiences. In addition, the teen coders validated the nascent theory, keeping me on track.

As a theoretical sample to flesh out the theory, I interviewed four teens not part of the original focus group, who had attended some of the art programs. I interviewed these teens one at a time, until new concepts appeared exhausted, and the theory was fully fleshed out. These teens were just as sensitive to the contextual experiences of art program participants as were the focus group teens, and were equally careful scientists. In addition, the one-on-one interviews offered much more data than the original focus group interview. While the point of the focus group interview was that teens could feel comfortable and bounce ideas off each other – and that did happen – some teens spoke up more than others and depth was sometimes sacrificed in the interest of everyone having a chance to speak.

Results

In the end, the teens and I had compared over 2,000 lines of open coding, and discovered 60 categories, which we grouped into 7 themes. The central theme was "The library can make a difference for us," with the library as locus of change. The remaining themes described what change occurs through art programming in libraries and how it occurs:

- Art moves us.
- It's an adult's world.
- We want to connect, we want to open up.
- Creating a community that supports us.
- We want to help, but don't push us.
- Does our engagement shift?

These themes describe the contexts, processes, and activities of teens who have experienced library art programs and how these experiences affected their civic engagement. I wrote a paper describing the theory and how we generated it. Five of the teen researchers read my written interpretation of the data and verified the theory and implications. The original intent of the research project came full circle with the teen validation. The teens themselves decided how legitimate the theory was, whether statements meant what I assumed they meant, and ensured that the theory remained firmly grounded in their perspective. Validating the findings of a research process with the people involved in the study can address issues of bias. It can also signal to the participants whether their concerns were heard and understood, which can be helpful when dealing with marginalized groups.

Discussion

Our research described how art programs in public libraries positively affect the social capital of teens, including their sense of power and capability. The programs revealed new role models, friends and advocates, as well as new ways to civically engage. Teens experienced heightened empathy, and shifted their concept of the library from book-place to creation-space in a way that empowered both creativity and social connectedness. The teens felt more valued by their community after the programs and were able to pinpoint why and how this shift occurred. The art programs supported the skills, values, and motivation for civic engagement through these social connections and the activities in the programs. However, we revealed little evidence that library art programs bridge the "activation gap" (Rheingold, 2008) between the desire to engage and engagement behaviour such as volunteering or political activism. The gap between the building blocks of civic engagement and the actual engagement behaviour is significant. The teens in this study described their intent to engage inchoately and fragmentarily, and the factors of active engagement need to be explored more thoroughly in further research. Nevertheless, the data reveals an intent for the teens to bridge the activation gap and become more civically engaged with the understanding that they would be supported by public library programming in specific ways that address their concerns of adult hegemony and limited time to engage. Since a grounded theory should reveal why and how something occurs, researchers can use quantitative methods to determine the

extent to which the themes play out in a larger sample population. Practitioners can examine their programs to see if or how they would want to address this gap.

Implications

This project discovered implications for further research. The embedded participatory research process reveals an ethnographic description of a problem or experience, but also allows for the discovery of conceptual associations for further examination. In this project, we were able to uncover several themes, and qualitative studies can now test these themes. Many library services could benefit from similar studies. Libraries are often under attack during the funding process and must justify their existence to those who do not value the intrinsic benefits of funding such programs.

Research is needed to addresses teen participation as research partners and the effects of this participation. Participation as research partners may improve skills in research or critical thinking, teen self-image, and teen perception of the institution that offers them an opportunity to participate. One may wonder if research participation opportunities, such as the one described in this paper, increase the social capital of teens. If this is true in this research project, how much of the teens' shift in civic engagement and social capital derived from the art program participation, and how much derived from participating as researchers? It is difficult to say. Still, the teens described most of the increases in social capital before they acted as part of the research team, and even before that they knew they would have the opportunity to do so. In addition, those teens who did not participate as researchers described similar shifts. Further research should consider whether acting as a researcher impacts the teens' social capital, educational outcomes, or otherwise positively affects teens. In this way, the body of theoretical knowledge for LIS scholars can be improved with more embedded, heuristic research.

The project also made visible several implications for practice. Outcome-based research can help to justify a library's need for funds. How do library services affect civic engagement, or student satisfaction with their school, or bullying, or … ? Pick an outcome that a funding agency cares about, and determine if or how your program helps. Such research may ignore or marginalize the individual, intrinsic benefits of library programs, such as having a good time and making friends, but few funding agencies appear to care about such intrinsic benefits. They are more interested in how a library service furthers their social agenda. Social agendas such as that of educational attainment and civic engagement are good touchpoints for funders interested in attaining educational and democratic goals. The pedagogical benefits for students who learn research skills could impact their educational attainment.

Librarians need more evidence-based practice, especially research grounded in the users' experience. Librarians already collect and share assessments of various programs, often through surveys or informal interviews. Expanding local assessments into generalizable research may be a more or less seamless process, leveraging these surveys and interviews into user-validated results. Dissemination of research results can help improve the practice of other librarians, because the research is often based on pragmatic situations which practitioners can emulate.

The act of research itself also may improve practice. In my case, I became more aware of the smallness of the teen world, their lack of opportunities to create and display art, and the way they feel systematically silenced by the institutions that rule their lives. This improved my work as a librarian. During this research project, I was able to extrapolate from the findings to offer many ways for public librarians to support civic engagement for teens. The teens offered many of these suggestions, and validated the ones I generated. Such recommendations are responses to the

librarian's need for more evidence based practices. As practitioner-researchers delve deeply into their work and the impact it has on those they serve, the feedback can reinforce the best of their work and help better align outcomes with the needs of users. In fact, this research method blurs the line between research and practice. This research project bled into my practice, and emerged from it, being at the same time a recursive "cause" and "effect." While the research project was a formal, albeit embedded, grounded theory study, it evolved into the participatory heuristic described in this paper. The method is the message, to paraphrase McLuhan.

Finally, doing research with teens is fun. Though it can be difficult to strip away assumptions based on one's own teen years, or adult "wisdom," hearing the teens describe their experiences is enlightening and enjoyable. Reflexively, I know that enjoying being in a position to ensure teens are heard is ego-based. Still, it is satisfying to identify a problem (teens feel voiceless), offer a small, local, and temporary solution (a few are given a venue to speak), and perhaps a more lasting and pervasive one (if others take on such research, many teens will be offered venues to speak). This research process can act as an amplification of the participants' voices.

Conclusion

The method described in this paper is recursive not only in the methodology – in the way it coded the coding process and utilized the voices of the participants to drive the research – but also in that the phenomenon under study, social capital, may have been furthered by the research method itself. The framework straddles the intersection of research and practice. Yet the method is emergent, and needs further trial. It has both theoretical and practical implications for librarians, researchers, communities, and users of library services. Practitioners who do research in partnership with those they are serving can make new connections between their practice and the big picture of librarianship. They can support transformational experiences for those they serve, aside from and in concert with the services themselves. Librarians further expand, improve, legitimize, and advocate for their field of work when they publish research. Embedded, participatory methods build testable worldviews from the ground up, based on the real experiences of those involved, offering practical solutions for other librarians while furthering a useful research agenda. Users and communities benefit from these embedded, participatory research processes when their stories are authentically conveyed and conceptualized and their voices are amplified, and they sample the skills and habits of research. Libraries can benefit from the establishment of user-verified outcomes of programs and services. This is especially valuable when libraries are trying to demonstrate how their services benefit the communities that fund them.

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