Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Research in Practice

Librarian Research: Making it Better?

Virginia Wilson
Director, Centre for Evidence Based Library and Information Practice (C-EBLIP)
University Library
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada
Email: virginia.wilson@usask.ca

A few weeks ago I was having a conversation with a senior colleague in my field about librarians as researchers. This colleague mentioned that traditionally, librarian research hasn't been "very good" and then asked me, "How do we make librarian research better?" As a proponent and supporter of librarians as researchers, and as one who knows we are getting more rigorous and adept with our research all the time, I kind of inwardly bristled, but attempted to answer the question. I couldn't shake this question, though, and so I consulted with members of the Centre for Evidence Based Library and Information Practice (C-EBLIP), asking for their thoughts on how to make librarian research better. Several of my colleagues* responded to my query of how to make librarian research better and some common themes emerged.

Before I get to the themes, however, I want to explore the skepticism that one colleague felt concerning the notion of librarian research traditionally not being "very good." Since the start of my library career, I've heard disparaging talk about the "how we done it good" papers (the first time was in library school, sadly enough), case studies that are descriptive in nature and not necessarily generalizable. Yes, the library literature has many such pieces. Are they useful? It depends on what you're looking for. Are they generalizable? It depends on a number of factors. But to generalize about them all, much how the original observation lumped all "library research" into one thing, is something we want to avoid. My colleague pointed out that there was a time when quantitative research was the top of the pile and every other type of research was looked down upon. Assumptions were challenged and now

there are qualitative and mixed methods research projects that are as rigorous as you would want. I share my colleague's view: any research that brings new knowledge to the forefront is important. Have we been told that our research isn't "very good" for reasons other than an objective and fair assessment of quality? My colleague stated that "when a tall grown man tells a young kid that he (the kid) is not tall enough then one needs to be a bit skeptical about the intention behind such a remark." Is the same thing happening here?

Regardless, there's always room for improvement in any discipline. As one colleague pointed out, we are not the exception. There is research published all along the continuum, from hogwash to exemplary, in all disciplines. (Which brings up a whole new topic that will not be explored here. Hello, peer review.) So with the help of colleagues and of course my own thoughts on the matter, I have compiled six strategies to consider that may make librarian research "better":

1. Confidence

I am not being overly hierarchical with this list, but I purposely chose confidence to be number one. This was my answer to the senior colleague's question outlined in the first paragraph. I have talked to many librarians in different countries about research and, more often than not, the idea of confidence, or the lack of it, comes up. Imposter syndrome, self-deprecation, low research self-esteem, lack of confidence in research skills – I would argue that these all play a role from time to time in even the most seasoned librarian practitioner-researcher. Thoughts of "I can't do this," "I don't know what I'm doing," and "I don't want anyone to read this stuff" are common. If you have been feeling like you are the only one who doesn't know what is going on with all this research business, you are not alone. That doesn't mean that you stop conducting research. However, a good dose of confidence can help us navigate the research process and there are ways

to gain confidence for research. Three ways follow.

2. Collaboration

Collaborating with a colleague on a research project is one way to feel like you're not going it alone. Teaming up with a like-minded colleague allows you to have a second set of eyes (or more if the collaboration is larger), to split the work, to share the credit, and to learn and grow as a researcher. Research quality can improve by collaborators being accountable to one another. If your research partner is at the same stage you are, you can learn together and learn from each other. If one collaborator has more experience, then mentorship can come into play. One of my colleagues feels that what is even stronger than collaboration alone is collaboration with a mentorship component. And mentorship is next on the list.

3. Mentorship

A research mentor, either one within or one outside of your discipline or area of interest, can help with confidence issues and can provide advice and suggestions in all areas of the research enterprise. Research mentors can comment on drafts of work, help with grant writing, and suggest venues for dissemination. Mentors can be found online (i.e., http://interlibnet.org/) or in person. Libraries can have formal mentorship programs or the mentorship relationships can happen spontaneously. There are mentoring relationships that consist of peer mentors or of an experienced mentor and a novice mentee. Age really isn't a factor as there might be an early career librarian who is well versed in a specific methodology mentoring a later career librarian who is a novice in that area. At the University of Saskatchewan Library, C-EBLIP rolled out four research mentorship teams this year for new librarians, each consisting of four mentors and the mentee. We will be assessing the program to see if it meets is objectives – preparing faculty librarians for the tenure

process and resulting in more robust programs of research.

4. Practice makes better

As with anything that takes a certain amount of skill, research takes practice. Early endeavours may be fraught with "oh no, I should have" or "why didn't I." But just as piano playing, skiing, and tai chi improve with practice, so can research. The collaborations and mentorship spoke of above can help early career librarian researchers get where they are going, whether it's tenure or improving practice. One of my colleagues pointed out that the thing to do is to just do it. Take the plunge with useful guidance and advice from peers and mentors, and chances are the research will improve. And you will gain confidence!

5. Education – library schools; professional development

The required research methods course found in most Canadian library schools is not enough. From my own experience in library school (and I've heard this anecdotally elsewhere), the program neither prepared me to conduct research as part of a librarian job, nor did it make it clear how important research can be to one's practice – as a requirement for tenure/permanent status or as moving practice forward in a systematic way no matter what the library sector. As well, at least when I received my MLIS, the thesis route was not encouraged. One colleague reported that early in the library school program, the class was actively discouraged from doing a thesis as part of the program. Without much opportunity to be immersed in a research project, librarians are hired into institutions with research expectations without the necessary tools and knowledge. This dilemma has a chicken/egg feel about it. If libraries do not specify a requirement for research as part of the job description, then library schools are not going to make it a priority. And without a rigorous research foundation in library school, librarians are ill-

prepared to undertake research on the job. Librarians in all library sectors are conducting research. It is beneficial to practice and to practicing in an evidence based way.

So, fast forward to librarians out of library school and on the job. Professional development opportunities can include sessions on research methods, the research lifecycle, basic how-to knowledge, and other topics pertaining to research. Professional development can help with instilling a research culture in an organization. Once research becomes an accepted part of practice, one can hope that library schools will follow suit and offer broader research programming. As well, professional development can help us branch out from just doing what we know. Another anecdotal complaint about librarian research is that is it most often done using surveys. And there is some merit to this observation. Need to know some stuff? Let's do a survey. Or, let's do a survey. What question can we ask? Don't get me wrong: sometimes a survey is completely appropriate and I don't want to give the impression that I find that methodology lacking. The process of choosing a research method is driven by the research question asked, and as one colleague pointed out, there are a lot of interesting and appropriate methods we can borrow from other disciplines.) Finding or creating professional development opportunities to learn more about research is going to help librarians doing research in the long run.

6. Develop specific research needs for specific areas of librarianship

Many of the above strategies are specifically for the librarians who are also researching. This point calls on associations, groups, and organizations that focus on specific areas of librarianship to talk about what research is needed to move their specialties forward. One colleague talked about defining specific areas of research and around those, developing goals, expectations, and best practices in order to increase quality. There are already groups that

are doing that, for example, the Medical Library Association has The Research Imperative (http://www.mlanet.org/p/cm/ld/fid=545), and a list of topics for future research in cataloguing was released after 2010, The Year of Cataloguing, to name just two. Finding a niche in a specialized research area and then working with others to define and target research topics can move the specialty forward as well as provide collaboration and mentorship opportunities with the goal of making librarian research better.

So, there you have it. Just the tip of the iceberg, I'm sure. Librarian research will keep on improving the more it is accepted in library culture and the more library schools prepare new graduates for conducting research. The library literature is filled with rigorous and valid research studies, studies that practicing librarians can use to make decisions in practice, to explore new ways to practice, and to inform their own research. As we keep contributing to the Library and Information Studies body of knowledge, we will gain confidence and we will aid and inspire other librarians in practice and in research.