



Research in Practice

Networks: Making Connections and Sharing Information

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This latest installment of the Research in Practice column is an exploration of networks: groups or systems of interconnected people or things (Network, 2016). I would like to admit a particular interest in networks, as the Centre for Evidence Based Library and Information Practice (C-EBLIP) has launched the C-EBLIP Research Network – an international affiliation of institutions that support librarians as researchers or that are interested in evidence based library and information practice. Since the end of April 2016, 17 institutional members have joined the C-EBLIP Research Network. These members include institutions and groups from Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Hong Kong. The C-EBLIP Research Network, though an international affiliation of institutions, is particularly for librarians who are interested in research, are conducting research, or who are interested in evidence based library

and information practice. The advantage of an institutional membership is that it becomes a public declaration that the institution supports its librarians in these endeavors. However, while I do have a vested interest in the success of the C-EBLIP Research Network, I am mindful that networks can come in all shapes and sizes to serve all types of functions.

Networks come in many forms: computer networks, telecommunication networks, business networks, and social networks, to name a few. There are laws that pertain to the functionality and impact of networks. For example, there's Metcalfe's Law: "a network's impact is the square of the number of nodes in the network" (Metcalfe's law, 2016). Basically, if the number of nodes in the network is 10, the impact is 100 (10 x 10). The more nodes you add to a network, the greater the number of possible

cross-connections. And then there's Reed's Law: "the utility of large networks, particularly social networks, can scale exponentially with the size of the network" (Reed's law, 2016). The bigger it gets, the more useful it is. There's a mathematical formula involved in that one, too. It seems like a reasonable assumption: the more members you have in the network, the more potential there is to make connections. Networks all have one thing in common: information sharing. Whether we're talking computer networks, your central nervous system, or television station affiliates, networks are designed to facilitate the sharing of information by making connections.

Setting up groups is not unusual. If we think about library associations, special interest groups, support groups, or any other groupings of people around a central theme or themes, we see that they are pretty ubiquitous. In terms of research groups for librarians, I know of two off the top of my head: the Libraries Nova Scotia Research Support Group (LNS RSG) in Canada and LARK Library Applied Research Kollektive in Australia. The goal of LNS RSG is "to increase the amount and quality of library research in Nova Scotia" (n.d.). RSG members "can learn about research, communicate research projects to each other, pose questions to the group, practice presentations, and create constructive feedback - drawing on the strengths of the group to raise the level of research for all" (n.d.). This group aspires to share information by making connections. LARK "fosters evidence-based practice and applied research in library and information studies" (2016). LARK provides and promotes research support events, is actively involved in social media, and is a member of the C-EBLIP Research Network.

Okay, so we set up networks to share information by making connections. That's pretty simple, but it makes for a short column if that's all there is. What is the value of this? What are the potential impacts that can be made by making connections and sharing information? And why is such a structure needed? So many

questions, so I'll start with the last one first: Why is a formal structure important? If you google "networking" you'll see plenty of tips and advice for how to do this activity. Networking is getting out there, putting yourself forward, and making connections, and no one seems to doubt the benefits you can derive from such an activity. But let's face it: networking is hard! And for the more introverted among us, it's really hard. And we're busy. Our work involves many components, and while we know that we could benefit from making connections and sharing information, sometimes it's all we can do to get the daily tasks completed. If left to its own devices, networking drops down the priority list. So, something that is more formal in structure that focuses on networking, that brings that activity to the forefront, and that not only provides opportunities but also places the opportunities directly in front of you almost makes networking a "can't fail" proposition.

If the purpose of networks is to share information by making connections, what can come of that activity? I believe that several powerful things can happen once people start to make connections and share information:

- Collaboration

Early career librarians, solo librarians, or librarians working in highly specialized areas can particularly benefit from collaborative research relationships. Additionally, a particular project may benefit from having more than one co-investigator. Sharing a research project, co-presenting a conference paper, or even co-planning a conference allows for the exchange of vital, useful, and transferable information between colleagues and beyond.

- Mentorship

The nice thing about forming a mentorship relationship (whether it be formal mentorship, peer mentorship, or reverse mentorship) is that very often, both parties benefit. What we've discovered at the University of Saskatchewan is

that our librarians have different kinds of research experience and expertise, and in one instance, one librarian serves in the role of the mentor while in the next instance, the other librarians may well serve that function. The one-to-one relationship between mentor and protégé (or one-to-many relationship of a mentorship team) functions as an information transfer node which can grow roots in the fertile soil of a network.

- Peer support

I see peer support as being different than mentorship. Sometimes it's not the expertise or the knowledge that is needed – it's the support. It's commiserating, listening, coaching, or cheer leading if necessary. It's finding someone who has walked in your shoes and who can provide impactful empathy to get you over the occasional bumps in the research road.

- Motivation

The collaborative, mentoring, and supportive connections that can result from participation in a network can assist with motivation in the form of accountability, inspiration, and encouragement. Often just having someone to report back to, however informally, is enough to keep a timeline on track and deadlines met. If a project hits a roadblock, the act of being able to brainstorm ideas or discuss methods or topics with someone else can provide needed inspiration. And sometimes all that is needed is a pep talk or a pick-me-up – some encouragement to see you through the revisions, the last bit of data analysis, or the final stretch of a literature review.

- Career advice/opportunities

Traditionally, networking is related to career advice and advancement, and this can still be the case. Increasing your professional circle increases the number of new and interesting job opportunities you will be exposed to and also provides a wider range of people who could

offer valuable career advice. In turn, if your organization is on the searching end of the job opportunity, belonging to a wide-reaching network expands the pool significantly.

I am in favour of all kinds of groups that get librarians together to communicate and share. The more we are exposed in meaningful ways to what's happening in the wider world of librarianship, the more progress we can make in whatever area we are working. When it comes to research or evidence based practice, getting together with like-minded others can get the creative juices flowing. Connecting with different-minded others can be helpful as well. It's difficult to generate new ideas while working in a vacuum. It's always useful to get a second opinion, a second set of eyes, or a viewpoint from a different perspective. If you or your institution is interested in joining the C-EBLIP Research Network, you can find more information on the C-EBLIP website (<http://library.usask.ca/ceblip/c-ebliip-research-network/About.php>) or you can contact me directly.

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