Good practice, good research

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What is research?

What constitutes research in librarianship? Who is carrying it out and where? What topics are being examined? Who determines the research agenda? What methods are being used? How are the results disseminated to other researchers, and in particular to practitioners? How is research being funded? What indeed is research?

If one defines research as *'diligent and systematic inquiry or investigation into a subject in order to discover facts or principles'* (*Macquarie Dictionary*, 3rd ed,1997), then perhaps few practitioners are doing it. Practitioners are too busy keeping the ship afloat to investigate the sea below. However, if research includes such applied aspects as market research, action research, operations research, evaluation, benchmarking, continuous improvement and quality management, then librarians as practitioners are carrying out research.

The practitioner/researcher perspective

Libraries are, in reality, research engines. Librarians build and maintain the knowledge base for researchers, assist those researchers, adopt new information media and develop new products and services — for use by others in the research process. Librarians are partners in the research activities of their users. Librarians, in teaching information skills and search strategies, must understand the research process itself and frequently enhance user understanding of the research process. Librarians are primarily practitioners. However, in performing effectively, they adapt services and facilities to meet customer needs, manage large budgets and change, and operate under pressure. In getting on with the job, librarians constantly analyse their environments, identifying problems and areas for improvement, developing plans for the future and determining priorities, using such methods as monitoring what other librarians are doing, conducting customer surveys, identifying service options and implementing and marketing new services. They measure success and performance, and determine outcomes. Librarians are practitioners conducting research.

What research methods do library practitioners use?

Library practitioners use quantitative and qualitative methods such as collecting and analysing statistical data (both within and between libraries), benchmarking outcomes against others or themselves over time, maintaining logs of computer data to provide opportunities for comparisons, devising and conducting questionnaires of their users, observing behaviour, and, increasingly, analysing website use. In recent years, focus groups have been utilised to explore user behaviour and to identify new ways of service delivery. Online chat or discussion groups have been used heavily as a means of problem solving. Librarians publish the results of their activities, although probably not frequently enough. The 'oral' tradition and word of mouth have been more popular as a means of dissemination of research in practice than the written word, largely because library practitioners do not necessarily see what they do as 'research' or as having the potential for transfer to other areas.

Appropriate use of new information technology has often provided the impetus for change. In finding new solutions to problems and new ways of realising goals, understandings are enhanced and work is improved. New knowledge based on evidence is created, although its value may not be recognised by those who have created it.

There are many library practitioners who 'suck it and see' and trial a new service. This is rarely thought of as 'research', yet the results — including failure — would be useful to others. Broader generalisations could be made from the observations and lessons learned. Customer surveys could be replicated in different situations, with results able to be validated and then applied more widely.

Library practitioners and current research

Library practitioners are currently engaged in a broad range of research activity. Information seeking and utilisation are reflected in such research as collection use (materials availability, use of websites and electronic resources), customer satisfaction, services for particular groups, e.g. children, and services in particular environments, e.g. universities.

Knowledge management has become a significant area with much activity occurring in the areas of gateways/portals, digitisation, scholarly communication. Examining procedures in collection management, lending and shelving are important and surveys and analyses of collection adequacy, particularly those related to information technology, are carried out. Research continues into information literacy, and flexible delivery as education becomes e-education. Other areas being pursued include co-operative activity, best practice, strategic planning and leadership, staff perceptions and training needs, marketing strategies, innovation and activity-based costing, and the increasingly thorny area of copyright and intellectual property.

How is research in practice funded?

Funding is obtained from many sources, often quite creatively. Examples include: internal organisational funds targeted for research, e.g. within universities, government funds from numerous departments at State or federal level, Australian Research Council research and infrastructure grants, in-house resources, strategic initiatives, private foundations and commercial sponsorship. Librarians have rarely let money get in the way of a good idea and results have frequently been achieved through blood, sweat and tears in the wee small hours.

How to improve?

If the farmer and the cowman should be friends, the practitioner and the academic researcher should work more closely together. Establishing dialogue between the academy and the practice is a first step. Each can learn a great deal from the other. Library practitioners can improve their research and contribute to good practice and good research by developing skills, publishing and communicating results, developing sound proposals and seeking funds imaginatively. Academic researchers can benefit from the results of good practice through collaborative involvement in real projects.