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### Introduction to "Reflections on Practitioner Research: A Practical Guide for Information Professionals" (ACRL Publications)

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# Introduction

*Lee Ann Fullington, Brandon K. West, and Frans Albarillo*

## WHAT IS A PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER?

What do we mean when we say practitioner-researcher? When we were thinking through the proposal for this book, we looked at numerous handbooks and textbooks about conducting research, and Helen Kara's definition resonated with us. She defines a practitioner-researcher as "anyone doing research while working in a public service, whether that work is paid or voluntary, informal or formal, and whether their research is under the formal auspices of the organization or an academic institution."<sup>1</sup> This definition struck home, for as information professionals, we are very much working in a public service, whether it be at a library or an archive, and many of us may be doing research in our roles, whether formally or informally. Kara also stresses that "it doesn't matter if you are novice or experienced; whether your project is one of many in your life, or the only piece of research you ever carry out. While you are doing your project, you have the identity of 'researcher' to add to all of your other identities: friend, colleague, sibling, parent, service user, and so on."<sup>2</sup> We liked Kara's emphasis on these overlapping identities, as so many of us play so many different roles both at our institutions and in our personal lives.

Using Kara's definition as a jumping-off point, who then do we mean when we say practitioner-researcher when we are talking about the field of library and information sciences? Is this the reference assistant collecting data to write an internal report about how often certain reference titles are reshelved? Yes. Is this the archivist who created a survey to find out how romance writers are using archival materials in their historical fiction? Indeed. Is this the library assistant who asked each child who came to Drag Queen Story Hour to tell her what their favorite part of the event was so she could compile information for the library director? Of course! Is this the librarian who set up interviews with undergraduates to have them try out a new discovery tool to determine if the facets made sense to students? Absolutely! For this book, we deliberately chose to describe information professionals who are conducting research as "practitioner-researchers," and we are using the term "information professionals" to refer to librarians, archivists, administrators, and other staff members, whether in a public library, academic library, corporate library, law

library, museum, archive, or other special library. We wanted to capture the multifaceted roles we adopt when we do formal or informal research and use our ingenuity and skills to solve problems, evaluate, assess and improve services, make policy decisions, or simply satisfy our own curiosity.

We approached curating this book with the idea that a practitioner-researcher is an information professional who may not have formal training in using research methods and is learning how to use these methods on the job. We believe that practitioner research, whether the findings are generalizable or simply descriptive and reflective, is important for information professionals who build and learn on past practice. At the same time, we also acknowledge that practitioner-researchers face limitations when conducting their research. We often do not have a laboratory condition with randomized controlled trials. Sampling frames are challenging to construct, perhaps due to our respect for privacy and the necessity to keep minimal personal data on our populations. And most important, our research budgets and research staff tend to be small or non-existent, and we may often be going it alone as researchers. In the face of these limitations, this book celebrates and tries to draw insights from the messiness of applying research methods. It was our intention to create a book that shows the complexity of using a research design by information professionals who are picking up these skills along the way.

We acknowledge that conducting research is often at odds with the service orientation of the field. In our experience as academic librarians, we are often promoted as campus resources for students, faculty, and staff and are expected to be giving of our time. We also teach information literacy across multiple subject areas, consult with faculty on curricular matters such as assessment, and serve on library and campus-wide committees. These responsibilities can overwhelm our schedules, making it difficult to build in regular time to focus on our research agendas.

We feel our experiences may be common for most information professionals, as evidenced in our professional literature. Koufogiannakis and Crumley's content analysis of the LIS research base helped them identify obstacles adversely affecting librarians' utilization of evidence-based research methods. The obstacles include the lack of formal mechanisms for funding librarians' research, librarians' lack of experience in using research methods, librarians lacking time during their workday to perform research, lacking support from their employer to conduct research, and/or lack of access to research-based literature, which is more likely to affect public, special, and school library professionals, who often do not have access to LIS journals and databases.<sup>3</sup> Kennedy and Brancolini's research about the attitudes and perceptions of academic librarians regarding their research capabilities also speaks to these difficulties. They found that librarians report that time continues to be a limiting factor in their research (specifically, reading research-based literature) and that many librarians believe that their LIS programs do not adequately prepare them to tackle their original research agendas.<sup>4</sup> While this research offers some validation to our research experiences, resting on these excuses inhibits practitioner-based research from evolving.

Several training programs have emerged recently to address this growing need for research training of information professionals. In 2012, the Canadian Association of

Research Libraries began offering the Librarian's Research Institute (LRI) and trained its first cohort of practitioner-researchers.<sup>5</sup> In 2014, the IMLS-funded Institute for Research Design in Librarianship (IRDL) launched its first cohort.<sup>6</sup> Not long after, in 2015, the Colorado State Library and the Colorado Library Consortium Association began hosting a similar program—the Research Institute for Public Libraries (RIPL)<sup>7</sup>—for public librarians who wanted to develop research skills. And in 2018, the Medical Library Association offered its first Research Training Institute for Health Sciences Librarians, also partially funded by an IMLS grant.<sup>8</sup> These programs, and others that surely will follow, are helping information professionals hone their research skills. Unfortunately, however, not everyone who would like to participate can, as the time commitments, lack of support from home institutions, personal or family needs, or other issues may make it difficult to attend. Our intention with this book, then, is to complement these research training programs and share practical advice and helpful stories. Not everyone can attend an immersion program, but we can all read about projects and what happens behind the scenes and learn from our peers in this companion book.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

The purpose of this book is to help information professionals build an understanding of the research process as applied to our field. Our goal in compiling this volume to address the challenges of undertaking research as a practitioner, as well as to offer support and advice for all stages of a research project, from writing the proposal to collecting the data to disseminating the findings (whether through an internal report or a published journal article) and the myriad pitfalls that can occur along the way. It is our hope that the stories in this book will inspire you to find ways to integrate strategies that will help you become more productive in your research.

This book, however, is not a comprehensive textbook or handbook for doing research as an information professional; if you are looking for such guidance, the Recommended Readings in the appendix, compiled by the editors and contributors, point to numerous textbooks, handbooks, and articles we found useful in our own development as practitioner-researchers. While handbooks and research textbooks provide step-by-step instruction for conducting research, this book attempts to capture the actual experience of doing research and the lessons that can be gained from that experience. The chapters are snapshots of practitioner-researcher projects that convey the unique experiences from which we can learn or relate to in our own projects. Research can be messy and take twists and turns. Projects and studies are not always as linear or without hiccups as the published literature may lead us to believe.

The chapters are a collection of narratives written by a blend of novice and experienced practitioner-researchers. For this reason, we encouraged authors to write in a first-person perspective in order to promote the feeling of having a conversation with a colleague. Our intention with taking this approach is to highlight the issues that arise when putting theoretical research methods into practice. We asked contributors to reflect on key aspects of their research, but not necessarily the project itself, so you will only find finished articles or

reports in a chapter's bibliography. Woven throughout each chapter, you will find advice, tips, and support that you may find helpful for your own research.

We have thematically organized the book into three sections that highlight different facets that researchers encounter when they become practitioner-researchers. The organizational structure we chose was not designed to be read in a linear progression. We believe that it is more beneficial to pick and choose chapters to read based on the relevance to your research interests, projects, or needs.

## Section 1: Research Process

The first section of the book is a collection of chapters that grapple with various aspects of the overall research process, from topic selection to research design to time frame. How do you set a research agenda? What happens when your plans get derailed? How do you approach a topic that may be controversial?

This section begins with Rachel Sarjeant-Jenkins' chapter about flexibility in research design and what to do when your plans go awry. This chapter also discusses the importance of keeping a research journal to document progress, emotions, and changes along the way. Maureen Babb's chapter details breaking your research agenda into smaller projects, which is key for anyone who is on a short-term contract or pressed for time. Jessica Perkins Smith's chapter describes her journey of being an archivist who is figuring out her research interests. Ruby Warren's chapter looks at the aspect of the scale of a project and how to specifically scale a project to be bigger or smaller, depending on your needs. This concept of scale is further explored in Jill Barr-Walker's chapter that deals with conducting research on a controversial or sensitive subject—in this case, sexual harassment. Finally, this section concludes with Justin de la Cruz's thoughtful reflection about working with an institutional review board (IRB) to get approval for a research project that involves human subjects, and how seeking approval may wind up changing the research study you envision.

## Section 2: Research Methods

This section examines how information professionals use specific qualitative and quantitative research methods in their projects. Some methods may be popular and familiar and some novel or unfamiliar, and we encourage readers to explore the methods in this section and draw inspiration from our contributors. The chapters in this section blend practical advice, storytelling, guidance, and rationale for using particular methods. We have included chapters that address key methods used in LIS research, ranging from surveys to interviews to content analysis and more. The chapters complement each other and may address different facets of the same method or approach the method from different angles.

The section opens with Kristin Hoffman and Selinda Berg's and Michelle Sweetser and Alexandra A. A. Orchard's chapters about various aspects of using surveys for research, including tips for collaborating on surveys, drafting solid survey questions, adapting other survey tools for your needs, and using statistical tests to analyze your survey data. Surveys are a popular research tool for information professionals, yet this type of research is not

as easy or straightforward to do as it may seem. The section then moves on to interviews and focus groups, as these qualitative methods are also often used in our field. Rachel Wishkoski's chapter addresses how to conduct semi-structured interviews and analyze the interview transcripts in teams. Lauren Olewnik's chapter examines the importance of probing (asking good follow-up questions) in interviews. Matthew Harrick and Lee Ann Fullington discuss recruiting participants and crafting questions for focus groups.

Later in this section, Maura Smale and Mariana Regalado's chapter discusses various ethnographic methods, including photo elicitation, drawing, and mapping. Hillary Estner, Katie Fox, and Erin McLean give an account of running an observation study of youth programming in a public library. Paul Moffett and William H. Weare, Jr.'s, chapter details how they conducted their content analysis study. Lucie Olejnikova and Jane Bahnson examine evaluating the effectiveness of live and recorded lectures using the quasi-experimental design method. Both Melissa Burel and Marlee Graser's and Ilka Datig's chapters discuss mixed-methods research projects, in which the researchers have chosen to use two or more different methods to answer their research questions. Both chapters discuss choosing the methods; Burel and Graser reflect on working as a team to collect and analyze the data and Datig recounts two different mixed-methods studies she conducted. Claire Walker Wiley, Meggan Houlihan, and Amanda B. Click contribute a chapter about systematic reviews, a type of research that draws from the biomedical sciences, in which researchers collect studies on a particular topic that meet certain criteria set by the researchers in order to evaluate the evidence regarding a particular topic to develop best practices or understand the state of the research on that topic. Finally, the section is rounded out by Katherine Gregory's chapter about qualitative data analysis and considerations we should bear in mind when we are deciding if we need to use specialized software, and if we choose to, what to think about in terms of software functionality.

## Section 3: Relationships

Many practitioner-researchers often find themselves collaborating with other information professionals, faculty members, and colleagues from different institutions. This section investigates the ways in which relationships form and how they can impact the research process. While most people understand what it means to collaborate, working with others can become more complex when research is on the line. The chapters we selected for this section highlight different strategies that can help make your collaborative efforts successful rather than stressful.

The section begins with Michele A. L. Villagran and Shamika D. Dalton reflecting on their research journeys as female faculty of color to examine the relationship between race and research productivity in higher education. Matthew Harrick's chapter examines the relationship of a new researcher pairing with a more experienced mentor in order to navigate a research project, from selecting a method to applying for a grant and IRB approval. Sarah E. Fancher and Jamie L. Emery examine the characteristics of their accountability partnership and how this relationship has been essential in making them productive writers. Brianna B. Buljung and Leslie Light address developing a research partnership with a faculty member to address topics of interest to both the librarian and faculty member. The

final two chapters explore research teams conducting qualitative research. Hilary Bussell and Tatiana Bryant explore this idea as a group of individuals working across different institutions, while Jessica G. Benner, Matthew R. Marsteller, and Xiaoju Chen's chapter is about the experiences of a small research team situated on the same campus.

## NOTES

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