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A Librarian's Journey to Becoming a Researcher-Practitioner

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This article is about my journey as an early career tenure-track academic librarian and how I became a researcher-practitioner. It reflects the contexts, both organizational and personal, that were formative in my professional development and distills lessons that I learned when developing a research area and research project. I speak as a research method enthusiast, and an avid reader of methodology, rather than a methodology expert. In this direction, I am a practitioner of social science methods in questions that arise from my curiosity, work, and profession. It is this "Research," with a capital R, that makes me love my job in the university library. As a librarian, I help patrons navigate knowledge across a number of academic disciplines. There is no other job quite like it in the academy; librarianship is truly interdisciplinary in nature, and one of the few places left where working as a generalist is advantageous.

Getting Comfortable in My Setting

Brooklyn College, where I work as a reference and instruction librarian, is a public, urban, undergraduate liberal arts college, with some graduate programs, and is part of the larger **City University of New York (CUNY)** system. Our reference department has a busy course-integrated instruction program where we share teaching duties for the introduction to research writing courses in addition to teaching for our liaison departments (for me, business, sociology, and linguistics). I also teach most of the library instruction for the English as second language (ESL) research writing courses, and I work with the career center. I typically staff five to seven hours a week at our busy reference desk. The final piece of my work as a tenure-track librarian is research and publishing.

CUNY librarians have six years to publish. I found this to be a daunting amount of time to plan a research agenda that would be broad and flexible. When I arrived in 2011, I did not have a bigger picture of how my work fit into the campus-wide or system-wide mission. My work in instruction, as a department liaison, and in building campus- and system-wide library collections provides starting places for research projects, places where I can plug into an active working area where library services are critical to the university's mission. It took until my third and fourth years to have a good sense of how my spheres of work fit into other pieces of curriculum, departments outside the libraries, and libraries outside of my campus. I believe it is important for librarians to understand their place in this organizational culture before engaging in research that impacts the organization. When I look back on how difficult it was in the beginning to formulate a research area related to my work, I now understand that in the first few years I actually spent a lot of time accumulating institutional knowledge and practices.

Developing an Interest

In those first few years, I focused on familiarizing myself with the literature and exploring journals such as *College and Research Libraries*, *portal: Libraries in the Academy*, and *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*. Research leave gave me time to explore topics and understand journal audiences. I wanted to identify a topic that built on my academic interests; if a topic couldn't hold my interest, I would not be motivated to continue to develop that area for six years. Finding the balance between my own research interests and practical organizational questions was an intellectual tension, a problem that I wrestled with during my annual reviews and discussions with colleagues. In the carnival of research topics, everything looked so interesting, and my inclination as a generalist was to want to do everything, which of course was not sustainable.

At my library, librarians are not required to publish in library science journals, so for a while I read journals published by the **National Council of Teachers of English**. These journal communities were engaged in a rich conversation around English language learners and teaching in the undergraduate classroom and, as a librarian, I could identify with many of their concerns. I also cultivated informal discussions with colleagues at my university system, and I found that publishing interests were quite diverse. Some colleagues chose to publish articles on how they implemented a program or service. Others leaned toward more humanistic topics and were very interested in publishing essays on scholarly publishing, privacy, critical theory, and social justice. It became clear to me that not only did I need to find a research area, I also needed to find an audience where I could present my work at conferences.

Honing In

My own interests in language and libraries came from my training as an ESL teacher and as a linguistics graduate student. I queried several journals, proposing essays on particular topics such as language access, sociolinguistic concepts, language technologies, language rights, and multilingualism in libraries. After several rejected queries, I surmised that these topics were too specific and too technical. My topics had to broaden in order to be accessible to an academic library audience, and I needed to make a case to the academic library audience on the importance of these topics, why librarians should be thinking about them, and how they impacted library services.

Eventually, I found that my research interests converged with library research on the topic of international students and library services. The international student library user population has a deep literature and history in library science. Common themes around international students and library work include user studies, English as a second language, diversity, multilingualism, and information literacy. It took a lot of reading to realize I could connect my own interests to librarianship research by studying international student services and libraries.

While reading the literature I was able to identify an issue in how inconsistently the terms "international students," "immigrant students," and "ESL students" were used. I realized I could contribute to the field by making these definitions more explicit, because I knew from experience that not all ESL students are international students. At **Brooklyn College**, we mostly work with immigrant students and the children of immigrants, which are very specific groups, distinct from international students (who are generally planning to return to their country after their course of study). If I used this practitioner-knowledge to form my research questions, I could contribute something to the conversation by creating a study and bringing in concepts from linguistics and English as a second language.

The role of original data in publishing is very important. Initially, I relied on colleagues who kindly shared copies of their project proposals for grants. I had discussions with my unit head, a trained anthropologist, about human subjects research, and through these I realized that I wanted to gather data by actually asking students questions. From my colleagues, I learned about the procedures and offices that I needed to connect with to run a study on foreign-born students, the different sources of funding, and how funding sources

work at my institution. I applied for funding, encouraged by the proposals my colleagues shared with me. I had done enough reading to know that the population that I needed to study was the broader category of foreign-born students, rather than just international or immigrant students.

Research Methods Training

In 2014, I was selected as a student for the inaugural Institute for Research Design in Librarianship (IRDL), a nine-day research design boot camp for information professionals that took place at **Loyola Marymount University**.[1] It was a great experience and I was able to develop my project there. At IRDL I found a community excited by evidenced-based library and information practice (EBLIP) and by qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches to research. EBLIP came up in many discussions in reference to both the journal of that name and the decision-making model practiced by medical librarians. As a newcomer to library research, I found approaches like EBLIP and applied social sciences (as taught in IRDL) attractive because the community of librarians focused on library research questions posed in an organizational setting and discussed using a shared social science vocabulary.

EBLIP

According to **Denise Koufogiannakis** and **Alison Brettle's** *Being Evidenced Based in Library and Information Practice*, "EBLIP provides a structured approach to decision making. It begins with an issue or problem that arises in the workplace — an area where librarians are looking to improve practice. The problem may start out somewhat vague, and should be formulated into an answerable, well-built question. Depending on the domain or domains into which the question falls, databases are searched to find research evidence, and other types of evidence."[2] My own research question also started out somewhat vague, but soon I began to translate it into an answerable research project using focus groups and surveys. Building those projects took continuous reading and self-teaching, reviewing books assigned to us at IRDL, including *Collecting Qualitative Data* by **Greg Guest**, **Emily Namey**, and **Marilyn Mitchell**[3]; *How to Conduct Surveys* by **Arlene Fink**[4]; and *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* by **Richard Krueger** and **Mary Anne Casey**.[5]

Data Collection

The fun part was actually talking to students, inviting them to sit in the focus groups or take the survey, during the data collection. I found that the process of collecting and analyzing data, revisiting research questions, and thinking about concepts that I was applying to practice was an iterative process, one that required a lot of reflective practice.

Reflective practice is discussed in detail in a forthcoming book called *Enhancing Library and Information Research Skills: A Guide for Academic Librarians* by **Lili Luo**, **Kristine Brancolini**, and **Marie Kennedy** (social science trainer and lead investigators at IRDL). The authors describe the importance of gathering evidence and reflecting on it using the lens of workplace practices: "There is a strong relationship between EBLIP and reflective practice. Reflective practice calls upon practitioners to draw upon what they have learned from their professional experiences in order to inform their work. It is a form of dialogue with oneself. Reflective practice advocates the integration of theory and practice."[6] For me, reflective practice meant constantly thinking, through the project cycle, about multilingualism, mission statements, immigration status, and cultural interpretations of what research is.

My original research questions were quantitative, focused on gathering demographic patterns in library use of foreign-born students with attention to language preferences for information and cultural perceptions of research practice in American academic libraries. The statistical analysis showed that foreign-born populations were multilingual, using multiple languages for both academic and non-academic tasks. A concrete example is that British English (Caribbean students) speakers gravitated toward British English sources. My analysis also showed no statistical differences in library use between immigrant students and international students, which was something I did not expect to find. There remains more to be done.

The Transition Complete

Being recognized as a practitioner-researcher is essential to success. According to **Luo**, **Kennedy**, and **Brancolini**, recognition should come in the form of real work resources: "When the value of research is recognized by library administration and research efforts are encouraged, research becomes an integral part of librarians' everyday responsibilities. Academic librarians are likely to enjoy a support structure that provides dedicated time and funding for research, and a research-friendly environment where they feel motivated and enthusiastic about research."[7] On the other hand, "insufficient training in research methods, lack of confidence, lack of time, and lack of support" are the key barriers to cultivating a culture of research, publication, assessment, and inquiry.[8]

Being reflective, intentional, and flexible are traits that I developed through this process. I made mistakes, and I did my best to learn from them, or at least record them in the limitations section of my research reports. I consider research with students to be a type fieldwork, and in all fieldwork there are many variables that librarians cannot anticipate; as a result, research designs undergo constant change throughout the process of data collection and analysis. My own philosophy toward

research topics and professional development is to share ideas, tools, and methods openly. There remains a lot of work to be done on the study of immigrant students and academic libraries so it's important for me to get people interested, share findings, and keep fresh by reading about new methods and instruments.

I am grateful and feel privileged that I was able to move my projects forward and develop a research area that includes thinking about languages and cultures in academic libraries. I have directly benefited from collaborations with colleagues and with a research partner because we are able to discuss common mistakes inherent in qualitative work and quantitative work. We even presented a panel on the rough spots of our first projects at **ACRL**. The critical moment when I became comfortable with the label "researcher-practitioner" was when I realized that, through IRDL and my colleagues in my department, I had been connected to this growing community of researcher-practitioner conferences, journals, and conversations.

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> **Endnotes**
> 1. **Kennedy** and **Brancolini**, "About IRDL."
> 2. **Koufogiannakis** and **Brettle**, *Being Evidence Based in Library and Information Practice*, 7.
> 3. **Guest**, **Namey**, and **Mitchell**, *Collecting Qualitative Data*.
> 4. **Fink**, *How to Conduct Surveys*.
> 5. **Krueger** and **Casey**, *Focus Groups*.
> 6. **Luo**, **Brancolini**, and **Kennedy**, *Enhancing Library and Information Research Skills: A Guide for Academic Librarians*, 12.
> 7. Ibid., 5.
> 8. Ibid., 4-6.