



*Commentary*

**The Librarian as Practitioner/Researcher: A Discussion**

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**Received:** 26 Aug. 2013

**Accepted:** 28 Aug. 2013

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**Introduction**

At the American Library Association's (ALA) 2013 Annual Conference, the Evidence Based Practices Discussion Group (EBPDG), part of ACRL's University Libraries Section, met to discuss the state of research in librarianship. While the focus of the EBPDG is on informing practice with research, previous discussions revealed a dearth of good research in the literature and a lack of understanding of research methodology and practice amongst librarians. In order to address these shortcomings, the EBPDG invited three guests to answer pre-set questions for the first 30 minutes of the discussion and then opened the discussion to all the attendees for the last hour. The invited guests were:

- John Budd, Professor at the School of Information & Learning Technologies, University of Missouri
- Sharon Weiner, Information Literacy Librarian at Purdue University Libraries
- Nancy Adams, Health Sciences Librarian at Penn State Hershey George T. Harrell Health Sciences Library

These guests provided the perspectives of both practicing librarians and library school faculty, as practitioners who use research to influence practice, and as researchers for whom practice drives their research agenda. All three are prolific researchers. Lisa Horowitz (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and

Jason Martin (Stetson University) moderated the discussion.

### **Research: Choosing, Practicing, and Improving**

For many librarian practitioners, the first obstacle to overcome in research is how to select a topic. The discussion's guests provided several ways for librarians to unearth and choose research topics. One way is to see puzzles and patterns of interest in the environment. Study the day-to-day problems of your library and look for topics that will not only better your organization, but that will apply, and be of interest, to more than your institution. Research topics also spring from a librarian's strong professional interest and innate curiosity, and from systematic, logical research to identify gaps in the published research. Librarians also must be aware of what research will be funded. Research funding is ever more crucial in these times of smaller budgets and limited resources.

For many librarians, a disconnect exists between the research performed by library school faculty and practical problems of the profession. Bridging this gap is important for the librarian practitioners because it aids directly in developing evidence based practice. The best remedy for this disconnect is collaboration between library school faculty and librarian practitioners so that they may explore questions together. John Budd regularly attends practitioner conferences like ALA because he is interested in how librarians are trying to solve problems. Librarian practitioners and library school faculty must listen to each other, and practitioners should reach out to teaching faculty in nearby library schools, talk to them about their interests, and work together with them.

To improve research, librarians must start with research in mind. Too often, a librarian collects data to solve a problem or to answer a question, and then decides to write and publish an article. This leads to a plethora of "this is how we do it in our library" articles, which may or may not be helpful to others in the profession. Next, librarians need to learn

about, and improve upon, research methodology. Sharon Weiner has an online course, "Practice into Research: Research into Practice" available from the Purdue University Libraries website at <http://www.lib.purdue.edu/infolit/practice>. This self-paced course helps librarian practitioners understand the basic concepts of sound research. Also suggested were workshops on evidence based practice and classes on qualitative and quantitative methodology. Replication of published, well-executed research studies also helps to improve research skills while minimizing preparation time. Nancy Adams suggested the need for librarians to be familiar with the "Pyramid of Evidence," (Figure 1) and how research studies gain more internal and external validity as one moves up the pyramid.

Sadly, library school students are not being taught the fundamentals of research. Research methods courses are offered in library schools but are not universally required. Instead, library schools prepare students to be consumers of research, which is not unreasonable given the work they will be doing. Even non-researcher librarians, however, need to be able to understand research, to apply research results, to conduct literature reviews, and to understand what correct research methodologies are, in order to engage in evidence based practice. At the same time, without quality research, evidence based practice is not possible. The evidence used to inform decisions must be valid and reliable; therefore solid approaches to research are needed. Good research starts with a problem statement or a question, and not with data. Meaning is found in the analysis of data gathered to answer a question. In order to develop an informed research question, librarians must be well-read in a topic, which means reading until encountering repetition of citations and ideas. Librarians should also read more broadly, outside of the library literature, in fields such as management, organizational design, and information technology. This broad reading can provide the groundwork for research in librarianship. In fact, simply reading about other study designs can actually

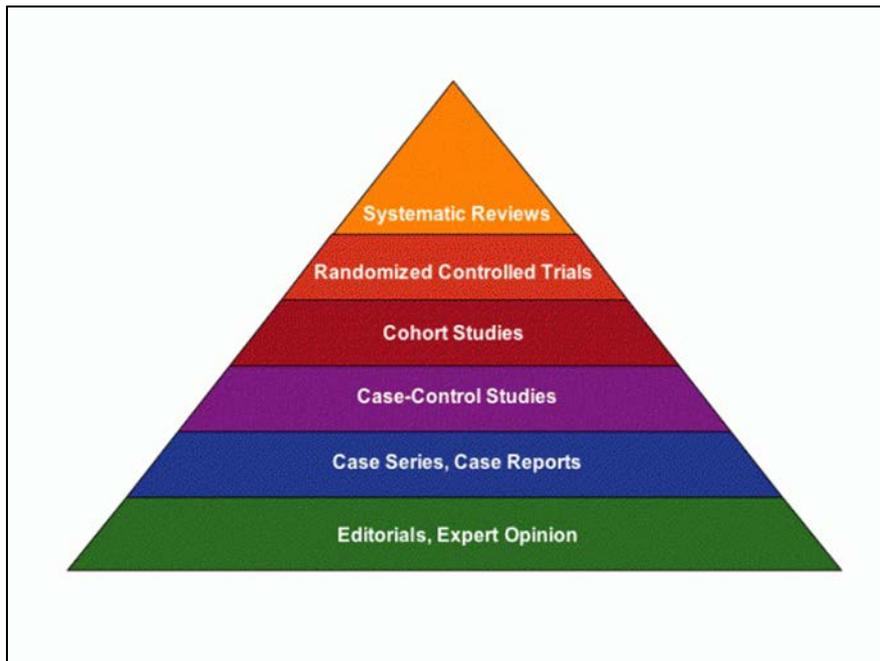


Figure 1  
Pyramid of Evidence (Information Systems Department, 2006)

stimulate research ideas. Being well-read ties back to choosing a topic since it allows a librarian to be aware of the gaps in the research.

Guests and audience members raised two philosophical conundrums: How do libraries balance the need to be nimble and innovative with the need to engage in thoughtful research? And, how do librarians view themselves? Librarians who view themselves as practitioner/researchers are more involved in and concerned about research than librarians who view themselves as practitioners who publish to receive promotions or other extrinsic rewards.

### The Role of Theory

A large part of the open discussion was spent discussing theory, both why to use it, and how to find one. Librarianship is an atheoretical profession, but theory is important to librarianship. Practitioners may seem annoyed by theory, but in reality every one of us uses theory; we are just not conscious of it. Theory provides a framework that guides the research and gives it more credibility. Theory allows the researcher to step outside of the profession and

examine it critically. Librarian practitioners must learn the importance of theory.

Finding a theoretical framework involves reading the literature and, again, not just library literature. Most research articles use a theoretical framework, and one can simply search in a database for “theoretical framework” or use a resource such as the book by Leckie, Given and Buschman (2010).

One way of incorporating theory was discussed at length - the potential use of action research in librarianship. Action research offers the ability to ground your research in the needs of your own institution. It pulls together research and theory and may be a more viable model for librarian practitioners. In action research, the researcher intervenes in the research problem and aims to change what exists, rather than simply studying and writing about what exists. Action research involves getting people to think and act differently, including the researcher. It takes formally structured research and moves it into policy and applicability and then into local institutions. In other words, action research puts analysis into action to solve a problem. Action research takes into account the agency

of all those affected by the research problem and any solutions to said problem. To learn more about action research, Nancy Adams suggested reading a text by Kuhne and Quigley (1997).

### Conclusion

Libraries of all types are under more and more pressure to show their value to the community and student learning. Further, libraries must adapt to an ever-changing information landscape and evolve to meet the needs and wants of a new generation of users. Evidence based practice is one key way libraries can change and adapt, but in order for this approach to work it is imperative libraries and librarians engage in quality research. Research can inform decision making and demonstrate value, but in order to do so, librarians must improve the quality of their research. Librarians need to do a better job of choosing their research topics, to become more informed of research methods, and to make good use of theoretical frameworks. The challenge is great, but one that is surely surmountable.

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