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Librarians are already in the field: how and why to begin ethnographic fieldwork

Abstract: Librarians want to know what users need and want from the library. Ethnography is a useful method for gaining insight into user needs and wants. Because of our presence both inside and outside of the communities we serve, librarians are uniquely well-suited for using ethnographic methods to observe and analyze how our users behave. This paper will therefore describe why librarians are ideal ethnographers and how ethnography provides unique data for library and information science (LIS) researchers. It describes two ways to enter the field: first it explains how to establish rapport with the wider study population and second how to begin fieldwork with a straightforward, low-risk data collection task.

Keywords: Ethnography; libraries; rapport

1 Introduction

Librarians want to know what users need and want from the library. Ethnography is a useful method for gaining insight into user needs and wants. Because of our presence both inside and outside of the communities we serve, librarians are uniquely well-suited for using ethnographic methods to observe and analyse how our users behave. Doing ethnography means ‘entering the field’, a phrase used to describe the site where ethnographers and anthropologists collect data. Rock describes the reluctance ethnographers frequently feel about beginning to collect data and the tendency to avoid it by searching for more background material. There is a danger that projects will stall at this stage.

Rock points out that being outside the field is more comfortable than being inside it. Whereas field research is unpredictable, full of rejections and without chances to re-read an interaction, background research is largely predictable with its familiar scholarly resources: histories, review articles, classics, databases etc. Unlike a group of people, scholarly resources cannot ignore you or get angry. Books can be difficult to understand, but they will wait patiently for the researcher to read and re-read them.

Librarian ethnographers (who will be using ethnography to study communities of library users and non-users) may feel as reluctant as any other researcher to enter the research field. It is likely, however, that because of our training and librarian skills, establishing rapport and entering the field may feel similar for many of us to carrying out our daily work of reaching out and listening to our users’.

This paper will therefore describe why librarians are ideal ethnographers and how ethnography provides unique data for library and information science (LIS) re-

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2 This article is limited to my experiences and perceptions of university libraries and academic librarians’ skills and identity in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany and things may be different in other types of librarians and other countries. The terms ethnography and anthropology are used interchangeably.
searchers. It describes two ways to enter the field: first it explains how to establish rapport with the wider study population and second how to begin fieldwork with a straightforward, low-risk data collection task.

2 Why ethnography for LIS?

Cultures, especially strong academic cultures, have an enormous impact on whether library services and resources will be adopted or rejected. Anthropological methods have great potential for helping us understand our users and reveal them to us in all their complexity. This will, ultimately result in good library services that are relevant to the way that our users work and think, rather than creating services based on what we assume they might be like or what we assume they might want or need.

Ethnography is a qualitative method that approaches culture as a ‘text’ to be read, rather than an object of study to be tested in search of laws. Clifford Geertz, a late 20th century anthropologist, stressed the importance of interpreting culture in terms of meaning and believed that it is impossible to understand humans away from their place in time and space. Rather than seeking to create a representative sample of humans, remove biases from the study, and generalize research results to describe universal truths, ethnography attempts to describe and translate culture using what Geertz calls ‘thick description’: a way of describing a cultural behavior in such a way that it makes sense to an outsider, brings to light information about library users and their context. That is just the piece of the puzzle that we so often lack (Greifeneder; Seadle).

The research product in this tends “to look at least as much like romances as they do like lab reports though [...] not really like either”. Translation involves not only fully understanding what is meant in the native but then creating that meaning again in another culture, while somehow maintaining that ‘foreignness’. Ever at the edge of our users’ cultures, librarians are well-positioned to strike the balance between foreign and familiar, as is discussed below.

Ethnography is not, of course, a suitable method for every library and information science project. It’s particularly useful for helping us to see the world through the eyes of our users but not for documenting past events or for predicting future behavior. LIS researchers have used ethnographic methods for several decades, though the approach is increasingly popular, as Khoo et al. document in an excellent survey of the use of ethnographic methods for studying library use and library users.

3 Entering the Field

After making sure that the project’s aims can be achieved with ethnographic methods, researchers will likely have an idea of how to approach the culture that they would like to study. For example, library ethnographers can use participant observation where they join in with the study population’s everyday activities. They can conduct interviews or use cultural probes, such as asking the study population to keep a diary, draw a map, or take photos or videos. Nevertheless, library ethnographers may still experience fear before entering the field, not least because of the dizzying amount of information that confronts them as research begins, where subjects and their actions seem both “mysterious and banal”. DeWalt and DeWalt describe the feelings of entering the field as ‘culture shock’ whose hallmarks include feelings of inability, failure, hopelessness and stress. Geertz describes how, for several weeks upon beginning their field research, he and his wife were treated as though they were simply not there by a community in Bali:

“As we wandered around, uncertain, wistful, eager to please, people seemed to look right through us with a gaze focused several yards behind us on some more actual stone or tree. Almost nobody greeted us; but nobody scowled or said anything unpleasant to us either, which would have been almost as satisfactory. If we ventured to approach someone (something one is

powerfully inhibited from doing in such an atmosphere), he
moved, negligently but definitely, away [...] [T]hey acted as if we
simply did not exist, which, in fact, as this behaviour was de-
signed to inform us, we did not, or anyway, not yet.”

Participant observation looks a lot like ‘hanging out.’ The
highly social nature of the method makes the possibility
for rejection and mistakes very high and researcher anxiety
is understandable. These anxious feelings can be allevi-
ated and the barriers to begin with data collection can be
lowered if the researcher begins with a relatively straight-
forward low-risk data collection technique such as a sur-
vey, some counting, sketching, or creating a map. If, for
example, librarians were interested in finding out about
how a particular group of researchers wrote and published
their work and they planned to do some participant obser-
vation, they might begin field research in the researchers’
offices and draw a map of their workspaces. If librarian
ethnographers were there for the group’s team meeting or
coffee break, they might again draw a map of where the
group members sit around the table. This type of map, as
the library ethnographers collect more and more of them,
may give them insight into relationships, power dynamics,
a group’s history, and communication patterns. If this type
of map proved useful, a librarian might also consider hav-
ing the study populations draw their own maps as librar-
ians did at the University of Rochester. Students were
asked to map their paths around campus over the course
of 24 hours. These maps demonstrated how students con-
structed the campus landscape as well as how they allo-
cated their time.

Librarians may find, however, that they are already in
the field and have a far greater familiarity with it than they
realize. An experienced librarian will have been in conver-
sation with researchers for years in the course of support-
ing research and teaching. Because of this ongoing contact
with practitioners, librarians already know much of the
language that users speak and are used to translating
information into and out of scholarly jargon while assist-
ing undergraduates and new researchers. In the case of the
academic liaison librarian, we collect our academic fa-
culty’s scholarly work in repositories, teach in their
classes, attend meetings with them, go for coffee, and
purchase the resources that support their teaching and
many other tasks. As a part of this process, many librarians
will become highly conversant in the powerful ideas which
shape the disciplinary cultures of the subjects they are
responsible for. We already see and move among our user
population every day and implicitly understand their in-
formation ecologies. Ethnography will draw upon that
implicit knowledge and force librarians to make this
knowledge explicit, as well as challenging our own as-
sumptions and received wisdom about our user commu-
nities are like.

4 Establishing Rapport for
Librarians

In order to have access to culture, rapport must exist. Rapport means that a researcher and the participant are
approaching the project with the same goals and with a
great deal of trust. The more trust that exists between the
researcher and the participant, the more likely it is that
information will flow. Establishing rapport can take a
long time and there is not a single recipe to follow for
establishing it. The classic example of the surprising way
in which rapport is established is the Balinese cockfight
described by Geertz, who, after fleeing from the police
with the community he was studying was accepted into
their midst.

Other than joining in as much as possible with the
activities and simply being there, one of the most impor-
tant ways to establish rapport is to learn to speak in the
local language or dialect. Consistent with speaking the
language, an ethnographer must also be able to act prop-
erly and use the local manners. Inevitably, the researcher
will make mistakes, especially in the domain of language
and manners. Use these experiences to learn the bound-
daries of what is correct and as a chance for the participant
to instruct the researcher about what is correct.

In addition to the outreach we do to our user commu-
nities as described above the skills librarians employ in
the reference interview – listening, patience, encourage-
ment, asking questions, hearing ‘behind’ the initial infor-
mation request and making certain we understand the true

13 DeWalt and DeWalt (note 11).
14 Foster, N.F.; Gibbons, S.: Studying Students: The Undergraduate
Research Project at the University of Rochester. Chicago: Association
15 The ways in which theory and ideas shape academic culture is
explored in depth by Abbott, A.: Chaos of Disciplines. Chicago: Uni-
16 Nardi, B.M.; O’Day, V.: Information Ecologies. Massachusetts:
Institute of Technology 1999.
17 DeWalt and DeWalt (note 11).
(as opposed to the assumed) information need – are key skills for developing rapport among our study population.

4.1 Identifying a primary informant

Upon entering the field, the researcher should be on the lookout for someone who can sponsor their research and provide them with opportunities to enter more deeply into the community. These informants should be well-respected in the community but as neutral as possible, because someone who acts as a polarizing force could possibly sway access too much in one direction and close off contact from other factions of the community. A researcher should be able to establish a relationship of mutual trust with this primary informant.²⁰

Again, as a part of the academic liaison librarian’s work, a librarian ethnographer will be familiar with finding library advocates among the communities that we are trying to reach. Whether it’s finding a keen library user (or a critical friend) among the lecturers, graduate and undergraduate students, or administrative or management staff, these relationships are key for exchanging information and for doing academic liaison librarian work. If librarian ethnographers wanted to gather data on a particular user group, they should recognize this relationship with their library advocates as a primary informant relationship. In this way, their primary informants can introduce them to others and model acceptance of the researcher and the project. This relationship will also alleviate some of the fears of entering the field as described above.

4.2 The librarian ethnographer’s ‘insider-outsider’ identity

The ethnographer is in fact the data collection instrument (as a contrast, a survey could be a data collection instrument for quantitative data collection). Understanding one’s own identity as a librarian ethnographer – of which personal characteristics, skills and training are a part – it is key to collecting valid and reliable data.²¹ Librarians wishing to study their users’ cultures are perfectly positioned to do so. Librarians are just close enough to their user populations to develop rapport easily but just outside enough to see it with an outsider’s eyes and to translate it for outsiders. Using ethnographic methods properly will allow a librarian to leverage established relationships to get objective data on what users actually want and need, rather than relying upon assumptions of what they want and need.

Academic librarians occupy a unique position in higher education, neither wholly academic nor wholly administrative. Many studies have confirmed librarians’ hybrid status within the academy (Fleming-May and Douglass²²; Shaw²³; Walter²⁴). Though institutions such as the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) recommend that academic librarians receive faculty status based on service, research, and training, whether librarians have equal status to disciplinary faculty remains disputed. Differences in the way a library environment is structured (strong management, large technological structure, hierarchical communication) as opposed to the environment in which disciplinary faculty operate (strong autonomy, weak middle management) likely has a large effect on the librarian’s professional status.²⁵

The academic librarian is also located both inside and outside the two important realms of academia: teaching and research. As Walter (2008)²⁶ describes, academic librarians are teachers. In the UK, many academic librarians are getting a Post Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PCAP) qualification or Higher Education Academy (HEA) fellowship designed to professionalize university teaching. These qualifications were designed for lecturers (equivalent to tenure-track professors in the US) and it illustrates the significant amount of teaching that academic liaison librarians are doing in higher education and the evolving emphasis on understanding curriculum content, assignment setting, and assessment methods. And yet librarians don’t spend 100% of their time in the classroom.

Librarians do a great deal of research and collect a great deal of data. Though the quality varies, through our many conferences and the vast professional literature, we are certainly prolific. In an academic setting, doing high quality research can improve the liaison bond between

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19 DeWalt and DeWalt (note 11).
24 Fleming-May and Douglass (note 21).
25 Walter (note 23).
librarian and faculty.26 This is the same as developing rapport. Something as small as knowing the correct words to use to describe the research process can be the difference between being accepted into a community and being rejected as an outsider. Someone who speaks correctly is more accepted.

This ‘insider-outsider’ identity, though not always advantageous, proves useful for a librarian wishing to study academic culture27. A certain amount of foreignness is good because it helps a researcher to see things with fresh eyes, to not just accept certain things as universal truths, and to ask ‘stupid questions’. This foreignness is essential for then being able to translate that data into information which is meaningful and convincing to other librarians, administrators, funding agencies and other community members.

5 Conclusions

Librarians who are engaged in teaching, research and embedded into their faculties are not only doing good library work, they are also well positioned to make an easy transition into ethnographic data collection. Because academic librarians are most of the way into the field already, beginning to observe and describe our user populations is a matter of research design and thoughtful planning. Of course, every project will founder if it is poorly designed or if the data are poorly analysed, and just because an academic librarian is well suited to entering the research field that is no substitute for substantive understanding of the complex and time consuming nature of ethnographic methods. Done well, however, cultural data can be used to enrich the quantitative data that libraries routinely collect including circulation statistics, web server logs, footfall, and money spent per student.

Whatever else the outcome, librarian ethnographers who develop rapport for ethnographic research will improve their link to the faculties which they support.

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27 This would probably be the same for public, school or special librarians wishing to study their patrons’ culture, since those librarians are simultaneously ‘of’ the user culture, yet play a different role. Further research is needed here.