

How to find a research topic, problem statement, or a question that's worth publishing

There is some irony as I write this, as it is the third attempt at a column for this month. The two other editorials drafted were scrapped (at least for now): one is not coming together and one is just too controversial for how it is currently framed. In going back to the drawing board, it occurred to me that this is an issue (how to find a topic to write about) that I continually hear from authors and peers (and students), so I thought I would discuss it here with both confessions and advice.

With editing the journal, I average a column/article per month (sometimes more). This may not seem like much but after eight years of editing different journals, there can be a danger of becoming stale or redundant, and seriously feeling like there are no new ideas.

I will start with a confession. When I first started as an academic librarian, I was in a tenure-track position with very specific and stringent expectation that I do research and publish. Coming from a special library, I was a bit at sea about how to begin, but having signed on to the position and to the requirements of tenure, I dove in.

Probably the first thought that went through my head was, What do I have to say that anyone would find valuable? Sometimes, it feels like we have to publish something that is Nobel-worthy. Certainly, we all want to publish something that we would like to read. If you are building a career on it, you want what you write to be worthy of that career. Especially as once it is published, it is out there and open to critique by experts.

Fortunately, there were several senior librarians in that organization who were

supportive and offered to mentor me on research projects. I did collaborate sometimes, but always tried to make sure I pulled my weight and learned as much as I could about the writing process, about working with coauthors, about research methods, and about the publication process.

I also considered papers I had written in graduate school, thinking that if PhDs can get their dissertations published as monographs, maybe there was a kernel of scholarship in one of my papers. As it turned out, I did revise and submit one for publication, and while it was my first (and compared to my current writing, it looks like it), I am still proud of what it communicates.

When I think about writing now, I am generally driven by one of two factors: an opportunity that has arisen to collaborate or respond to a professional issue or engage the scholarly dialogue or a topic that has meaning and may raise awareness in the profession. Basically, I find myself unable to write well on a topic in which I am not invested. That is a conversation that I also have with students during research consultations—find a topic that interests you, that you feel strongly about, and research and write about it. You will be more diligent in the research and the interest in the topic will come through in the writing, engaging the reader.

Easier said than done, right?

Well, that is just one perspective, so I also asked a couple of the editorial board members to share their insights.

Erin Owens: “For me, the most useful tactic is to think about where I see problems or inefficiencies, either with my work or with my patrons’ experiences. I start by identifying something that may not work as well as I wish it did, and then I dig into questions such as: What literature, data, or evidence already exists from other librarians that could inform this problem? What solutions have succeeded or failed for other libraries, according to the literature? What internal data do I already

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have that could be leveraged to inform my approach? What new data would be enlightening, and how might I go about collecting and interpreting it? How will I assess what I'm doing, e.g., if I collect new data, how will I decide if it answers my question/resolves my problem, or if I implement a new solution, how will I determine whether it has been a success."

Penny Beile: "I typically point to existing research agenda set by various ACRL units. For example, ReSEC recently published their research agenda¹ The Instruction Section has one,² and, of course, there's the Academic Library Impact text on student success."³

These are just a couple of approaches to consider. From my perspective as an editor, the kind of research that needs to be published is the kind that pushes the scholarly dialogue and informs practice, but that also pushes boundaries—in terms of method, content, or format. The November issue meets these conditions, looking critically at research methods, teaching practices, and core services and considering the responsibilities around data and preservation of the print record.

"In Aggregate: Trends, Needs, and Opportunities from Research Data Management Surveys" by Abigail Goben and Tina Griffin. A popular starting point for libraries engaging in research data management (RDM) services is a needs assessment (NA); a preliminary count identified more than 50 published NA case studies. However, no overarching analysis has yet been conducted. The authors compared assessments to characterize the case study institution types; establish the target population assessed; discover cross-institutional trends, both in the topics covered and the issues identified; and determine remaining gaps in the literature. Thirty-seven studies conducted in the United States were included. Twenty-five were at public, doctoral, highest-research institutions. The most frequently assessed respondents were faculty ($n = 3,847$). The most frequent topics involved storing, sharing, and maintaining long-

-term access to data. Gaps include assessing students, staff, and nonfaculty researcher needs; determining needs at various sized and degree-granting institutions; and investigating RDM needs for non-STEM disciplines.

"Dissatisfaction in Chat Reference Users: A Transcript Analysis Study" by Judith Logan, Kathryn Barrett, and Sabina Pagotto. This study aims to identify factors and behaviors associated with user dissatisfaction with a chat reference interaction to provide chat operators with suggestions of behaviors to avoid. The researchers examined 473 transcripts from an academic chat reference consortium from June to December 2016. Transcripts were coded for 13 behaviors that were then statistically analyzed with exit survey ratings. When present in the chat, three behaviors explained user dissatisfaction: clarification, transfers, and referrals. The absence of three more behaviors also explained dissatisfaction: ending the chat mutually, maintaining a professional tone, and displaying interest or empathy.

"Everything Not Saved Will Be Lost: Preservation in the Age of Shared Print and Withdrawal Project" by Zachary Maiorana, Ian Bogus, Mary Miller, Jacob Nadal, Katie Risseeuw, and Jennifer Hain Teper. This paper's review of current issues in shared print retention and preservation identifies such shared issues as the cataloging and validation, retention, and withdrawal of holdings; loss rates; current condition of holdings; recommendations for the number of copies to retain; and storage environments. Library institutions require a communitywide dialogue assessing practical retention concerns. We hope that our recommendations and discussion will serve as a call to action for further study and greater interest in strong cooperation at both institutional and repository levels, including collaborative action for multiple levels of collection assessments.

"Critical Appraisal of Mathematics Education Systematic Review Search Methods:

Implications for Social Sciences Librarians” by Ashlynn Kogut, Margaret Foster, Diana Ramirez, and Daniel Xiao. Social sciences librarians have an interest in supporting systematic reviews, but the available guidance is focused on health sciences settings. This study contributes guidance specifically for social sciences librarians using the Campbell Collaboration’s standards to evaluate the search methods reported in systematic reviews on K–12 mathematics education. After searching ERIC (EBSCO), Education Source (EBSCO), Academic Search Ultimate (EBSCO), and Compendex (Engineering Village) in April 2018, we included 40 systematic reviews. The reviews were evaluated on the transparency of the reporting and the comprehensiveness of the search as required by the standards. The findings revealed deficiencies in search processes and reporting of search methods. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for librarians collaborating with social sciences researchers.

“First Principles: Designing Services for First-Generation Students” by Xan Arch and Isaac Gilman. For many first-generation college students, traditional academic culture and structures can create barriers to their engagement on campus and academic success. To ensure that academic libraries are not also presenting unnecessary challenges to these students, first-generation needs and expectations should be important considerations in library service and facility design initiatives. Drawing on a multidisciplinary literature review and a survey of high school counselors’ experiences advising first-generation students, the current study identifies common needs and challenges of first-generation students and provides correlated recommendations for how libraries can best equip themselves to meet those needs.

“Chinese Students’ Motivations for Overseas versus Domestic MLIS Education: A Comparative Study between University of Tsukuba and Shanghai University” by Patrick

Lo. Recently, the globalized economy and the rapid growth of developing countries has driven a large number of students to study abroad in different developed countries. To compare the factors affecting their choices, this qualitative study collected data from a series of in-depth one-on-one interviews with 12 Mainland Chinese students who were undertaking a Master’s in Library and Information Science (MLIS) degree program at two different universities (namely, Shanghai University and the University of Tsukuba). In addition to ascertaining the perceptions, perspectives, and experiences of these student participants, we used the “pull” factor framework of Everett Lee to analyze how these graduate students from Mainland China were attracted to an MLIS education in Japan and in Shanghai. Our findings indicated that university reputation was a key academic factor, while many students from diversified undergraduate disciplines were attracted to an MLIS education as a professional training for a wide range of information-related industries, regardless of the destination of their education. Meanwhile, for students who were considering a destination for their overseas education, they considered the costs of living, tuition fee, geographic proximity to home country, and affinity with the Japanese culture to be factors that are important to their decision making.

Our findings may provide valuable insights for LIS educators to improve curriculum designs and practitioners to plan their human resource development, as well as ensuring future MLIS graduates’ employability in the global, highly competitive knowledge-driven economy.

“Affective Aspects of Instruction Librarians’ Decisions to Adopt New Teaching Practices: Laying the Groundwork for Incremental Change” by Elizabeth Galoozis. This article addresses the question: How do emotions and emotional labor relate to instruction librarians’ motivations to adopt new teaching practices? Twelve informa-

tion literacy instruction librarians were interviewed about their motivations to adopt new teaching practices. An initial round of coding was completed using grounded theory to surface themes of motivations to adopt new teaching practices. In a second round, the themes were retained while further coding was used to identify language reflective of emotion and affective labor, along with five conditions for human motivation identified by Charles J. Walker and Cynthia Symons: competence, autonomy, worthwhile goal-setting, feedback, and affirmation. Using the results of the analysis, suggestions are made for library managers and administrators to lay the groundwork for developing supportive and collegial environments that

encourage incremental change and emotional self-reflection.

Notes

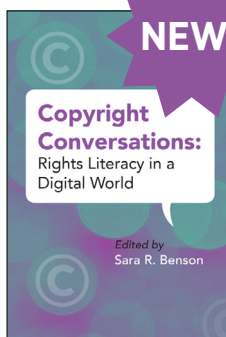
1. ReSEC research agenda, <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/acrl2019-acrls-new-research-agenda/>.
2. The Instruction Section agenda, <https://acrl.ala.org/IS/instruction-tools-resources-2/professional-development/research-agenda-for-library-instruction-and-information-literacy/>.
3. Academic Library Impact text on student success, www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2017/09/acrl-releases-academic-library-impact-action-oriented-research-agenda-library. *ZZ*

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