Affecting Librarianship in Action: The Dissemination and Communication of Research Findings

ABSTRACT

Issues and problems related to and techniques for improving communication between practitioners and researchers in librarianship are presented. The underlying assumption of this essay is that research, when designed with the practitioner in mind and communicated specifically to the practitioner, will positively affect the practice of librarianship.

INTRODUCTION

Communication of research is simply the systematic presentation of the systematic investigation of a problem. The research process is not complete until it has been reported. How it is reported depends upon the purpose of the research; it may be appropriate to communicate results in a variety of ways. For example, reports at meetings, technical reports, books, or journal articles either for the researcher or the practitioner community may be the most appropriate form.

The most important aspect of communicating research is that it be through a reaccessible package—presently primarily the journal article or book—indexed or abstracted by one of the services organized for those purposes. The reasons research must be accessible follow:
1. so others can determine the validity and reliability of the process used;
2. so others can replicate the research or create new projects from that research;
3. so that a contribution to knowledge is made; and
4. so that the number of those who know is increased, thereby increasing the likelihood that knowledge will be further increased.

Most researchers communicate their research because they have been educated to know that the research process is not complete until publication takes place. Most researchers also publish (a) because there is something new to say or because there is a new way of saying it, (b) for prestige, (c) for survival, (d) because someone asked that it be done, or (e) because the researcher simply cannot help him or herself.

Asking why researchers transmit their findings is somewhat similar to asking why the consumer of research consumes it. There can be many reasons, including (a) simply to increase their knowledge store, (b) in hopes that it may be useful knowledge in the future, or (c) in hopes that it will be useful in solving a problem immediately at hand.

PROBLEMS IN THE DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

Historically, the mainstream of librarianship has not been oriented toward the systematic search for knowledge regarding information production, storage, dissemination, and use. Many practitioners view neither theory nor research as necessary bases for reliable and valid knowledge. The knowledge base is rather developed from previous practice, authoritative pronouncement, and intuition; however, there is now a growing research sophistication in the profession. This growing sophistication has been brought about by a number of factors: the importance of information to today's society; shrinking research resources forcing researchers to find new ways to select, acquire, disseminate, and use information; institutional demands for accountability in resource use; a larger number of doctoral level educated information professionals (although there needs to be an increasing number of doctoral educated individuals to replace the many reaching retirement age); and a growing number of individuals in related disciplines becoming interested in addressing information problems.

RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS: TWO WORLDS

Most fields have become seriously bifurcated into researcher versus practitioner communities. Both communities must strive to unfreeze
this situation of "two cultures." As conceptualized by Donald Schö\n, professional knowledge is generally thought to best be understood from a hierarchical model: basic science, applied science, followed by skills and attitudes of practitioners as they perform their services. Research is considered to be "institutionally separate from practice, connected to it by carefully defined relationships of exchange. Researchers are supposed to provide the basic and applied science from which to derive techniques for diagnosing and solving the problems of practice. Practitioners are supposed to furnish researchers with problems for study and with tests of the utility of research results. The researcher's role is distinct from . . . the role of the practitioner" (Schö\n, 1983, p. 26).

Most practitioners and researchers will agree that the purpose of information research is to contribute to the body of knowledge that will ultimately allow, for want of a better phrase, "things to get better." Most practitioners and researchers generally agree that "good" research is able to fulfill that purpose; however, many factors militate against the development of sufficient knowledge about and understanding of research to allow meaningful communication between the two groups to take place. Some of the key militating factors follow:

1. Researchers too often identify problems worthy of being solved by talking only with other researchers, ignoring or overlooking the importance of identifying problems to be solved with practitioners.
2. Practitioners too often cannot identify researchable problems when requested to do so.
3. Researchers too often use language when communicating with practitioners that is not required and is not understandable to practitioners, not because practitioners are lacking in any way, but rather because they have not had appropriate educational experiences.
4. Too few practitioners have education in the research- or knowledge-creating process and are therefore unable to use findings that would be applicable to solving their problems.
5. Researchers too often write for and publish their findings in reports and journals that are not read by practitioners.
6. Practitioners too often fail to read research literature.
7. Coordinated and accessible dissemination systems for research findings have not been adequately developed.
8. Practitioners, but also often researchers, fail to use the dissemination systems available.

**BRINGING THE WORLDS OF PRACTITIONERS AND RESEARCHERS TOGETHER**

In this period of increasing demand for accountability and decreasing funds, it is time that researchers and practitioners reach an
understanding about the synergistic relationship that should exist between them so that they can join together to solve critical problems in their fields. What follows are some suggestions as to how a base could be developed from which an improved understanding could be reached.

**What Practitioners Can Do**

First and foremost, all members of a field must be educated in appropriate knowledge production processes. Although it is not necessary that this education be in such depth that all practitioners are capable of undertaking knowledge production, it is necessary that they have sufficient knowledge of the appropriate processes to be able to translate on-the-job problems into appropriate problem statements and, further, that they be able to read the field’s literature with sufficient understanding to determine its meaning and utility. It will not be sufficiently timely to simply require all who are now entering the field to take methodology courses while obtaining their basic education, although this should definitely be done. In order to reach a timely and effective understanding, present practitioners who do not feel comfortable with their basic knowledge of methodological processes must acknowledge their dis-ease and proceed to relieve themselves from it.

Undoubtedly, the most effective way for practitioners to learn the basics of methodological processes is to take courses; however, with an ability to extrapolate basic research process knowledge to the field’s problems, practitioners can benefit from taking an introductory methods course offered in any related discipline. Such general research methods courses are readily available in community colleges, colleges, and universities. If it is not possible to enroll in a semester- or quarter-length course, a continuing education short course would be a useful beginning point for practitioners. Head librarians might also engage in in-house staff development projects through bringing an instructor in research methods/problem solving to the library to highlight the importance of the acquisition of this knowledge.

Becoming familiar with methodological processes is one of the best investments that practitioners can make for both themselves and their profession. Acquisition of knowledge production processes enhance the practitioner’s self-image. Further, because research and researchers are generally held in high esteem throughout society, the value of the field to society will also be enhanced. A community of practitioners with greater sophistication about knowledge production processes would do much to alleviate the problems that beset communication between the field’s researchers and practitioners; they would be better able to identify
researchable problems, and researchers would be more likely to turn to them for problem identification. The language barrier between the two groups would be lowered, and practitioners would be better able to evaluate the utility of the research literature.

What Researchers Can Do

The burden of lowering the communications barrier between researchers and practitioners does not lie solely with the practitioner. Researchers need to publish their research findings in journals that are read by the practitioners for whom the results would be most useful. They should write articles using clear direct language. Unfortunately researchers seem to write most often for the benefit of other researchers and do so chiefly because they are more interested in and dependent upon having their work evaluated by their research peers rather than their practitioner colleagues. It is difficult to "blame" researchers for doing this because most often those doing research are employed by institutions that reward them through promotions or tenure based upon peer recognition rather than colleague acceptance. The journals in which the researcher must publish in order to gain peer recognition are not those to which practitioners generally turn.

It would do a great deal to lower the communications barrier between researchers and practitioners if researchers would also write versions of their results for journals aimed primarily toward practitioners. It would not be difficult for them to do so using common, shared language, referring readers of the practitioner-focused version of their findings to the research-focused version so as to assuage any doubts they might have regarding the constraints that a practitioner-focused version would undoubtedly face. But most researchers, it should be understood, would prefer to (and should) spend their time moving on to new research projects that will add depth or scope to the field's knowledge base. They should not spend their time writing a practitioner-focused report of research that has already been completed and published for the research community. If a larger number of practitioners became knowledgeable about the research process, they would more often be involved in the research process from its inception. They could become partners on research teams, and one of their major responsibilities could be the writing of practitioner-focused versions of research reports.

Although there is never a panacea for all the ills that beset a field, certainly an increase in the research sophistication of the practitioner community would go a long way towards improving the usefulness of the research that is undertaken, delivering to practitioners results of more useful research.
PUBLISHING RESEARCH RESULTS

As was stated at the outset of this essay, it is critically important to publish research results. To reiterate: publication allows others to have access to results in a reaccessible package. Although it is also important to communicate with practitioners through presenting papers at professional meetings, it is only through publication that access can take place at a time determined useful by the practitioner. Publication assures, to the extent possible, that research results are reaccessible. Publication allows for the evaluation of results and, further, allows those who would find it useful to repeat research in a different setting or using a different methodology to do so. Although academia-based researchers usually publish their research results, too often practice-based researchers do not. They often seem to believe that their research is only of interest in their own setting or will have little utility in another setting. Although this may indeed be true, it is preferable to let an editor or reviewers of submitted manuscripts make that judgment.

Although it is true that a portion of the research that is published is not used by practitioners either because it is really not of use or is unintelligible (unintelligible either because of the way in which it is written or because practitioners lack the basic skills necessary to be able to understand it), the results of much significant research are available. Yet, much useful research is not easily available because it is only accessible by searching several indexing and abstracting tools. The field of education has several well-developed dissemination networks: the National Diffusion Network, the Research and Development Exchange, and the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). Practitioners in library and information studies must begin to demand more easily available access to research results in our field.

DISSEMINATION OF FINDINGS

There are three basic types of dissemination: one way, two way, and audience based. (These three types are based upon material in Increasing the Impact of Social Innovations Funded by Grantmaking Organizations [Lindquist, n.d.].)

Type I Diffusion

Definition

One-way communication—disseminator to audience. Examples are publications and speeches. Generally one-shot approaches. Material centered.
Applying Research to Practice

To Be Effective


Skills Required

Knowledge of the material being diffused; presentation ability.

Limitations

This approach informs but does not persuade. Unless the material is easy to communicate and the audience is ready, it will result in use by only a few. Most people need interaction over time with respected leaders to become convinced. In addition, the audience may not have implementation authority.

Type II Diffusion

Definition

Two-way communication—disseminator with audience. Examples are participative workshops and consultations. Includes linking agents and interaction networks.

To Be Effective


Skills Required

Knowledge of the material; presentation ability; knowledge of alternatives to the material for solving the same problem; ability to facilitate information-sharing workshops; commitment to the material and openness to audience.

Limitations

Requires prolonged personal contact; may not provide sufficient impetus for local implementation.

Type III Diffusion

Definition

Audience centered. Disseminator facilitation of local adaptation. Goals are local development of innovations with existing research results as stimulants and guides to adapt, not adopt, and to increase local systems
problem-solving ability. Includes assessment of local needs; linking local audiences to one another; aiding collaborative formulation and decision making; aiding in preparation for implementation.

To Be Effective

Establish contact with decision-making authorities. Encourage and practice openness of both information and motives. Develop a leadership team. Collaborate with audience to create local ownership of result. Make involvement rewarding— intrinsic satisfactions and formal rewards. Seek valid and reliable information. Note benchmarks but keep at it.

Skills Required

Knowledge of material; presentation ability; linkage skills; ability to facilitate information sharing; commitment to material and openness to audience; and ability to use material in the context of local development and adaptation.

Limitations

Requires intensive facilitation of local planned change but probably is the only way to create impact in complex systems.

QUALITY OF DISSEMINATION

Communication and research results must be clear whether a presentation is oral (formal or informal) or written (formal or informal). The first consideration is answering the following questions (Hernon & McClure, 1990, p. 199):

- Who is the audience and what are their needs and expectations?
- Is the communication well prepared, credible with and understandable to that audience?

The second consideration is to decide how visuals will enhance the presentation.

Upon completion of either the paper or the outline upon which an oral presentation is to be based, or of a written report, journal, or book manuscript, one should go through the following checklist in order to identify areas that need additional clarification, simplification, or development (Hernon & McClure, 1990, p. 210):

1. Are the study components (e.g., the problem statement and objectives) clearly and concisely stated?
2. Have the objectives, hypotheses, and/or research questions been adequately addressed?
3. Are the findings, conclusions, and recommendations clearly stated and do they match the objectives, hypotheses, and/or research questions? Do the findings, conclusions, and recommendations appeal to the intended audience?
4. Where necessary are significant or potentially controversial statements supported by the literature?
5. Are there weaknesses in logic or mistakes in spelling or grammar?
6. Are concepts and technical words adequately explained?
7. Could a major point be better represented through a table or figure?
8. Are sentences repetitive, clearly expressed, and easy to read?
9. Is the report/article objective?
10. Does the report/article [sound good] or read well?
11. Does the title adequately describe the contents of the report?
12. Is the use of headings and subheadings consistent throughout the report?
13. Is each paragraph essential and in its proper place?
14. Does one paragraph flow naturally into the next?
15. Does the report/article contain contradictions?
16. Do sentences contain passive voice, wordy thoughts, and unnecessary words?
17. Is there consistent use of hyphens, spelling, and word capitalization?
18. Are references accurate and do the dates in the list of references match those presented in the text?
19. Are pages numbered correctly?
20. Are tables and figures correctly numbered?
21. Are quotations correct?
22. Is there any copyright problem associated with the quotation of text?
23. Are all references necessary?

It is also valuable to have at least one critical ear or eye go through the presentation or manuscript prior to its being presented or submitted to clients or editors.

**CONCLUSION**

How then is research useful in practical terms? Although the specific impact of research on decision making can seldom be documented, the awareness of research on the part of decision makers is a component of that amorphous attribute called "professional judgment." The practitioner's knowledge of research findings, along with experience, common sense, intuition, and familiarity with local traditions and politics, all play a role in decision making. Using research results in
decision making is important for at least two reasons: First, many service-related decisions would undoubtedly be improved if the results of research were clearly delineated as one of the choice factors. Second, a more vigorous reliance on research results rather than on the more subjective elements of professional judgment would surely enhance the effectiveness of the field within its local institutional environment. It would clearly be in the best interests of practitioners if the findings of research could become a larger and more visible element in decision making.

In order to balance what is usually an overdependence on local, situational factors in decision making with research-based factors, research must be of dependable quality and capable of withstanding the critical scrutiny of the institutional officers and constituents to whom practitioners are accountable. For this reason, the most critical issues for users of research are those having to do with upgrading the quality and usefulness of research. Among these issues are the following (Hewitt, 1983, p. 131):

1. The need to develop and propagate standard, reproducible research designs specific to the problems of the profession.
2. The need to re-orient some segments of the professional research community to more useful approaches and methodologies.
3. The need for improved training in research design and methods in library schools, both to produce better qualified researchers and more critical and demanding consumers of research.
4. The need for effective orchestration of research efforts in order to create a coordinated approach to major research problems.
5. And finally, the need to acquire a stronger empirical base for understanding the interaction of research and practice in librarianship.

REFERENCES


Lindquist, J. (no date). Increasing the impact of social innovations funded by grantmaking organizations. Battle Creek, MI: W. K. Kellogg Foundation.


ADDITIONAL REFERENCES


