Introduction

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In the early 1970s, John Berger created a television series for the British Broadcasting Corporation called "Ways of Seeing." Following the television series, Berger created a book, also called Ways of Seeing (Berger, 1974) which, like the television series, could be said to be "about" art and visual images. This issue of Library Trends is "about" qualitative research in the same ways that Berger's Ways of Seeing is "about" art; we are using a concept—in the one case, art, in the other, qualitative research—to investigate a "way of knowing," to understand and make sense of the phenomena we observe in our professional and academic settings. In Berger's words:

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is the seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. . . . This seeing which comes before words, and can never be quite covered by them, is not a question of mechanically responding to stimuli. . . . We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are. . . . And often dialogue is an attempt to verbalize this—an attempt to explain how, whether metaphorically or literally, "you see things," and an attempt to discover how "he sees things." (pp. 7-9)
Qualitative research, in the way that the following articles discuss it and provide examples of its practice, is also about ways of seeing. Starting with "interesting, curious or anomalous phenomena" which the researcher "observes, discovers, or stumbles across" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 16), the qualitative researcher sees (observes) these in the context of a natural (rather than experimental) setting. The goal of research, whatever its methodology, is understanding gained through a process of discovery. What is expressed in qualitative research is a process of discovery which asserts particular assumptions of how knowledge is perceived and acquired—a particular epistemology—particularly knowledge of complex human social interactions.

This collection of articles grew out of Library Research Seminar I, a unique and wonderful conference held in Tallahassee, Florida, in 1996. The conference was unique in that it required presentations to demonstrate, in the supportive context of research, the confluence of academics and practitioners. And the conference was wonderful because it succeeded so well in demonstrating the value and power of research for all areas of the profession. Because there was no published proceeding of the conference, we (along with others who were excited by the quality of the presentations) sought an outlet for publication. The papers represented many research traditions but, because it is our particular interest, the large number of presentations employing a qualitative methodology or issuing from a naturalistic approach struck us as a significant indicator of the growing prevalence of qualitative research in the library-related contexts of the seminar.

Not all the articles in this issue of Library Trends are exactly as presented at the Library Research Seminar I. When we approached authors for contributions, many felt they wanted to refine their papers—either because of direct responses received at the seminar or because of the influence of others’ seminar papers on their initial perspective. Original papers have also been added to broaden the library-related context to include such themes as the teaching of qualitative research and a view of qualitative research from the perspective of journal editors.

In assembling the presentations that follow, we started from the assumption that one of the key responsibilities of the library profession is to facilitate the process of perceiving and acquiring knowledge in an environment of complex human social interaction. Academics and practitioners share the responsibility in the complementary roles that they play in professional practice. They also share the responsibility for research, particularly research that risks accepted norms by informing—and being informed by—research methods and traditions that cross the boundaries of narrowly defined academic disciplines.

There have been many recent and excellent discussions about research traditions and disciplinary foundations in library and information science...
(e.g., Bradley, 1993; Budd, 1995; Glazier & Powell, 1992; Mellon, 1990; Pierce, 1987; Sandstrom & Sandstrom, 1995). We trust that the articles that follow will add significance to these discussions and make contributions of their own.

In an instructive bibliographic essay, Jim Horn traces four frameworks that have provided the underpinnings of many qualitative studies: symbolic interactionism, phenomenological description, constructivist hermeneutics, and critical studies. The richness of these informing traditions is indicative of the fertility that qualitative approaches hold out to the rigorous, receptive, and creative researcher.

Qualitative research may be as longitudinal as any extended clinical study in the quantitative tradition. Similarly, many qualitative studies look at the same phenomenon over time, but the intent is often to build new theory rather than to test existing theory. Gary Radford, singly and in collaboration with other researchers, has been developing a body of research that probes the inadequacies of the positivist epistemology. In the research essay he presents here, Radford’s focus is on the modern academic library (particularly its users), but the approach is from the perspectives of literary criticism through a consideration of Foucault’s “La Bibliotheque Fantastique.”

Mark Day presents findings from the most recent of his career-spanning research, also focused on the modern academic library. Beginning with a review of the development of the academic library as part of a broader historical process, Day is interested in making sense of the ideologies of organizational change, not in offering another interpretive scheme to those already found in both the managerial and library literature of the last half century. Within ideologies, the literatures of the various discourse communities become the means of analysis. Day has effectively used the software program ATLAS/ti to aid in the development of grounded theory.

Peter Liebscher is both a researcher and a teacher and shows how each of these roles continuously benefits the other. He argues for a field-based multi-method approach (i.e., quantitative and qualitative) to teaching research fundamentals at the master’s level and offers a recent example of such an approach.

The next four articles are indicative of the range of research studies emerging from the cross-disciplinary qualitative toolbox. Gillian McCombs’s cultural analysis of an academic computing center employs techniques adapted from anthropology and the recording of what Clifford Geertz (1973) termed “thick description.” Academic computing continues to be a focus of concern for academic libraries because the lines between the two organizations continue to become more blurred. The cultures of each, however, are not as blurred, hence a cultural analysis offers a particularly valid lens on the organizational behavior exhibited in each organizational culture.
Marie Radford's interest in librarian/patron interaction focuses on the concept of approachability and how a librarian's nonverbal communication may affect the decisions users make to approach the librarian when seeking help with an information need. The study is a naturalistic one employing observation, interviews, and a content analysis of the resulting data.

Moira Smith and Paul Yachnes used a similar ethnographically informed approach to their study of an electronic text center in an academic library. Their interest was in identifying that collection of metaphors which might indicate the cognitive frames patrons used to understand novel situations, such as an electronic text center in a print-based academic library.

Victoria EM Pendleton and Elfreda Chatman's ethnographic inquiries offer an extremely rich examination of the information worlds of ordinary people—i.e., the "small world" of the ordinary, routine, and unexceptional. Their concern is to conceptualize rather than to prescribe designs for information delivery systems, to present the "small world" perspective, to present it as accurately as possible to readers cognitively and experientially outside the small world. The research foundations available from anthropology and sociology have given Pendleton and Chatman the platform on which to build the linkages to information behavior in a small world and to give us such significantly heuristic scholarship.

As seasoned editors, Danny Wallace and Connie Van Fleet offer their perspectives on the relationship between qualitative research and editorial traditions in the library literature. While editors and authors share responsibility for understanding the expectations of the other in the publishing process, both expectations and process may differ significantly in the publication of qualitative research from the norms established around the publication of positivist research. Within the qualitative toolbox, there is an embarrassment of theoretical, disciplinary, and methodological riches from which to draw, no single one of which can claim precedent over any other. The nature and goals of the research, the research questions of concern, and the value system and skills of the researcher must determine the appropriate choice. These are not approaches of choice for those researchers who are unwilling or unable to live with chaos, ambiguity, uncertainty, and perplexity. And it is not for those unwilling to gain knowledge of the interdisciplinary traditions by which any single research question might be approached. Amid this complexity, a frame must be established, a "way of seeing" must be chosen, or the researcher becomes paralyzed (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 19).

It is the contextual nature of qualitative research that distinguishes it from other approaches. The emphasis on context is particularly apt for the world in which we—as practitioners and academics alike—operate today. Libraries, defined as broadly as possible, are cultural constructs,
established because of the value we, as a human race, have historically placed on learning, knowledge, and the preservation of the collected messages of those who have come before us. The cultural construct of today, the today in which we work as researchers or practitioners, is no longer that of a single culture (if, in truth, it ever was). Add to this the truly fundamental changes that the information technologies have given us the opportunity to achieve, and we are presented with some very interesting choices in our “ways of seeing” a changing library and institutional context.

As organizations of all kinds flatten and accommodate to a networked rather than a hierarchical environment, they need the guidance that the results of well-constructed qualitative research can offer. The old templates, the old models of knowing, are at odds with contemporary experience. Being unable to accommodate the unpredicted influence of technology and the politics of race and gender has compromised their predictive power. If our definition of research can broaden and become more inclusive, if the tools we employ are appropriate to the tasks of our investigations, the value of research can attain a renewed significance in managing the complexity of human interactions which are at the heart of many of our most pressing library issues and problems. In the academic training of researchers in our schools of library and information studies, it also allows us to inculcate “permission” to approach research in multiple ways. Over time, such permission broadly influences the nature of research and ultimately the nature of the profession itself.

REFERENCES