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Permeating the Porous Boundary Between Librarians and Faculty Research

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The Context

“Our research indicated that librarians generally find it difficult to articulate the support they provide for teaching and research, beyond their traditional remit of providing access to resources...Research support to faculty was significantly less developed than teaching support, which is consistent with the fact that there appears to be less evidence of librarians' engagement in research support in the literature.”

Creaser, Claire & Spezi, Valérie (2013) Improving Perceptions of Value to Teaching and Research Staff: The Next Challenge for Academic Libraries. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*

Research Questions

Big question: How can libraries and individual librarians can best support faculty members' research?

Research questions:

1. How do librarians perceive their role in relation to faculty member's research and how is this put into practice in their work?
2. How do researchers perceive the role of librarians, and can a librarian make a substantial contribution to faculty research?

Methodology

- Undertook an action research project, with a self-study component.
- Emailed an open-ended invitation to the Faculty of Education mailing list, explaining my project and offering to provide any form of research assistance that would be beneficial.
- Documented my research strategies, time expended, and my own thoughts/experiences about each project.
- Faculty participants were interviewed by a colleague to allow for genuine feedback.

The Projects

- Seven projects: two for one individual, and one for a pair of researchers
- Met in person with all but one researcher; with one, discussions happened by phone
- Worked on 1 or 2 projects at a time; most completed over a four-month time period
- Shortest project about 12 hours; longest about 50 hours. Total about 200 hours.

Nature of projects

All requests were for variations on literature searches.

Fell into three categories:

1. Comprehensive academic journal literature searching
2. Identifying relevant primary sources and ways to search for them
3. Searching for and summarizing key ideas and sources about a topic

Communicating the results

- Used different methods for different faculty members, depending on nature of their requests and their own preferences:
 - for two faculty, I exported results into Refworks files that I shared with them
 - all others preferred that I convey the results in a Word document. None of those reports consisted simply of citations; all were organized to provide an interpretation of the results, as well as abstracts, summaries or relevant excerpts from sources.

Excerpt from a report

Adult Learning in Business and Industry

There are a number of different 'constituencies' when it comes to adult learning in Business. Each seems to come from a different perspective, and use somewhat different terminology - workplace learning, training, human performance technology, organizational development, human resource development, coaching, etc. Overall the emphasis seems to be on improving performance, and there are a significant number of recent articles concerned with transfer of training, informal learning and e-learning.

I've listed below some of the key organizations that seem to house these 'constituencies' and some related articles/documents. I can't say that these are the seminal or best articles around – it's too huge a literature to say anything more than that these seem representative of recent publications. Some are attached as pdfs, some are simply links.

Key organizations

I. **American Society for Training & Development (ASTD)** - <http://www.astd.org>

"The world's largest professional association devoted to the training and development field." Publishes *T&D magazine* and *Public Manager* magazine.

Attached to this email are EXCERPTS from four ASTD publications (the titles of the books are linked to the library catalogue record that will take you to the fulltext)

- [ASTD Handbook for Workplace Learning Professionals](#) (see especially page 3 re: terminology and foundations)

What I learned

- When it comes to research support, faculty assume librarians' primary skill set is strong search skills
- I was able to contribute something valuable, without having a specific academic background in the discipline
- Faculty were surprisingly comfortable leaving selection and interpretation up to me
- I had to learn new databases, information sources, techniques, and topics because Education is so multidisciplinary
- The work was interesting - if at times tedious - and I learned a lot

Survey Questions

- What prompted you to respond to Barb's offer to provide research support?
- What attributes did you believe Barb would bring to the work? Why?
- Could this work have been given to a graduate research assistant instead? If so, why didn't you choose that approach?

- Did you rely on Barb to screen the literature and select the most relevant materials? If so, were you comfortable with her making those decisions?
- To what extent did she accomplish what you desired?
- What issues did you encounter in this collaboration?
- What benefits, if any, did you gain from Barb's involvement?

- Based on this experience, what role do you see for librarians in supporting faculty research? Can you envision any different kind of involvement?
- What factors did you take into consideration before involving a librarian in your research?
- Librarians have many job responsibilities including developing collections, providing class instruction, and providing one-on-one assistance to undergraduate and graduate students. Given that, how should librarians prioritize providing support to individual faculty member's research?

What We Heard

- Accepted Barb's offer due to:
 - Her reputation within the Faculty
 - A "colleague"
 - Her knowledge of the databases and the subject
 - Her "assumed" research expertise
 - Ability to "zero in" like a "laserbeam"
 - Her helpful, supportive nature
 - Detailed orientation, commitment

- Added benefits to Barb's involvement:
 - Accessed literature the faculty member would not have located themselves
 - Identified synonyms, "off the wall" terms
 - Asked insightful questions at the beginning of the research project and provided divergent/new ideas at the end of it
 - "took us places we may not have anticipated"
 - "brought us into a sphere we may not have gone"

- GRAs performing this work:
 - All but one said would not have given this project to a GRA
 - One did and then had Barb perform search
 - GRAs do not have skills to perform comprehensive research without a lot of oversight and mentoring
 - Which may have limited the resources utilized as the faculty members do not trust their own research skills and knowledge

- Roles for librarians in Faculty research
 - Valued brainstorming partner
 - Brought a different perspective to their research project
 - The questions she asked at the beginning, the perspective she brought, and the analogies she used in the research endeavour
 - Co-authorship a possibility
 - All agreed (or suggested) this type of activity could deserve co-authorship on a paper

Takeaways

- Reputation is everything
 - Involvement with the Faculty
 - Instructional success
 - Research expertise
 - Attitude
- Act like a colleague
 - Brainstorm and push them in their thinking
 - Ask questions and make suggestions

- “I won’t do the work of a GRA”
 - GRAs are not (necessarily) being asked to perform research
 - Generally supporting instruction
 - There is a gap in research support being offered to faculty members
 - Better research training for GRAs needed?
 - Or should librarians fill this gap and provide this type of research support to faculty members?

- Co-authorship is a possibility (or is it?)
 - All these faculty members suggested or agreed that this activity warrants co-authorship
 - Appreciated the questions she asked, the different perspective she brought to the project, the analogies she was able to bring to the research project
 - Health Sciences Librarians are an example; systematic reviews lead to co-authorship
 - Different levels of support for different levels of credit from the faculty members?

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