# Librarians as researchers

## Introduction

In the last 7 years I have done several talks and workshops about librarians as researchers. I’ll be honest, given my background (I have a PhD in history and information studies), the two professions have always seemed well aligned to me. Some of my first jobs were on research projects, funded by Jisc, the British Library and various internal pots of money at different universities. I became a librarian in the late 1990s when there was a lot of funding into developing digital libraries and online learning in higher education, so I feel very lucky to have gained so much research experience. However, I know for many librarians, they may believe they do little research in their day jobs, and if they did a dissertation as part of the library qualification, it may have been their only venture into the world of research.

This is article is a personal account about why I think doing research is central to librarianship, what might get in your way and some tips for overcoming the challenges. I hope I’ll inspire you to view yourself as a researcher more too. Librarians’ identities are changing quite dramatically. Viewing yourself as a researcher may be helpful to establishing your credibility and reputation, but more importantly I hope it might give you a reason to get up every morning and really love your job!

## Background

When I was offered the chance to take a sabbatical from my job at LSE in 2011 and spend a term at Wolfson College, Cambridge, you might have thought I jumped at the chance. Of course I was excited and flattered to be asked to do research as part of Cambridge University Library’s prestigious Arcadia Programme, but I was also pretty scared about the idea of being away from my job for a sustained period of time. I was particularly scared of having to, in a relatively short period of time, make a ‘contribution to knowledge’. I was worried about the loneliness, for despite having a PhD, in many ways what four years of independent research taught me, was I liked to work with other people. It was no coincidence that the year I started my PhD I got involved in founding the Postgraduate Society at LSE, which was an opportunity for PhD students to socialise and network, often over cheese and wine events that I organised! I was also very lucky to have a taught first year during my PhD as the university introduced a mandatory research training course, which I found hugely beneficial.

So I was incredibly lucky during my Arcadia Fellowship to be paired up with a fellow librarian, Emma Coonan, who at the time was the Research Skills Librarian at Cambridge University Library. Emma and I eyed each other up slightly cautiously at our first meeting, and I launched straight into ‘so what do you think information literacy actually is’ and we never looked back and went on to develop A New Curriculum for Information Literacy (Secker and Coonan, 2013) and the rest is history! We’ve also been speaking about the idea of librarians as researchers ever since, as it’s something we both feel strongly about. We’ve run a number of workshops for librarians wanting to do research or wanted to get published and always been really impressed with the amazing range of subjects that librarians are interested in.

This article is partly reflective but I also wanted to offer some practical advice to librarians undertaking research, whether it be for a masters dissertation, or a piece of research or evaluation for their employer. Research is exciting; it’s about finding things out, it’s about learning and for me it’s been the most rewarding part of my job. There is endless scope with research in librarianship as well, because you can actually find things out that help you do your job better and lead to tangible benefits. Doing some research into what your library users think of a particular aspect of a service, evaluating the information literacy workshops you run, carrying out some user experience research to improve the functionality of your website. The possibilities are endless. And if you are lucky enough to be able to choose your own topic, for example for a masters dissertation, then choose something that makes your heart sing! Choose something you care about. For me my research into information literacy was about improving my own teaching, improving student learning and understanding what motivated academic staff. I’ve also carried out research into librarians’ attitudes towards copyright, to help improve knowledge about this important topic in the profession. Your topic is whatever matters to you though!

## Why do research?

In recent years the idea of librarians as those who support research seems to have taken centre stage, partly in my view, to the detriment of the idea that librarians are researchers themselves. Just think for a moment of how many scientists, researchers or academics would be unable to do their research without your work as a librarian? Not only do we preserve and make collections available, but we guide researchers. In health sciences librarians undertake systematic reviews, and those of us who look after special collections, preserve, catalogue and make available these materials which is indispensable to the research process. You may have got used to calling this ‘research support’ but it’s librarians who allow researchers in all disciplines to take existing knowledge and transform it into something new. We are a vital part of research already! I found an article by Claire McCluskey particularly inspiring, about the work she does as an embedded librarian (McCluskey, 2013) where librarians ‘co-create knowledge’ with academic staff. She also touches on issues related to the identity of librarians and she convinced me of the value of research and evidence-based librarianship when she says:

“As a profession which promotes evidence based practice in other arenas (such as health), it seems contradictory that librarians do not live out the value of critical engagement in their own work.” (McCluskey, 2013 p. 12)

In certain roles in libraries it is also common to get involved in projects, whether these are the implementation of a new library management system, or an externally funded digitisation project. These are opportunities to do some research and we should seize them as a chance to learn some new skills and work with others. Most research projects I worked on were a chance to meet new people, at my institution and elsewhere and sometimes provided an opportunity to visit new places. If like me you believe in lifelong learning, then research is your opportunity to develop both personally and professionally. Getting involved in research can also be a boost to your self-esteem and can improve your credibility in your own institution. When I worked at LSE, the institution wanted to be the best social science institution in the world, and it needed library and online learning staff that were the best in their field to support them (or that was my argument anyway!)

## What might get in your way?

So if research is so great, why aren’t librarians doing it all the time? Well, as with anything finding the time is probably one of the biggest barriers. In my experience the day job gets in the way of doing research, even if it is research that will help us do our job better. You simply have to get through each day’s round of meetings and tasks and often are not given the time to reflect on what you are doing, to question if there is a better way to do it and review your processes. That in my view is a big mistake and professional development time built into your job should be mandatory, each week too. I also think we have a big problem with research simply not being recognised as part of a librarian’s remit. However, as with all professions, it’s only through taking time to reflect and review what we are doing we can make improvements. A lot of the problems can come down to a lack of support from senior management and/or colleagues who don’t place a high regard on research or reflection. And of course in many public sector jobs, where budgets are tight, professional staff can be hard pressed to justify doing something that takes them away from delivering a front line service. This is the reality and I don’t have a magic bullet, but by being aware of these barriers you can help try to avoid them. I hope my tips for success may help you find ways around some of the challenges you will face along the way.

## Tips for Carrying out research

During the workshop Emma and I have run on librarians are researchers we shared our tips for carrying out research from the practical to the more philosophical. I hope these help and inspire you. For me research has been what has got me up in the morning every day. The Japanese have a concept called ikigai (Kavedžija, 2017), which I learnt about relatively recently. It translates into ‘what makes life worth living’ and I realised that research was my ikigai. I’ve found subjects that have kept me intrigued and interested for over 15 years: information literacy and copyright. I’m not necessarily saying you should be as obsessed about your work as me, but librarianship offers so many opportunities to learn things every day, to help people and to contribute meaningfully to the world. I hope you’ll be a little bit inspired, but I also hope you’ll think about the need for an evidence-based approach to your work as a librarian.

1. **Find your thinking place:** finding time to think is difficult but for me it was often about finding a place to think. I often find myself thinking about problems and issues at the strangest times; in the bath, when gardening furiously, when I’m in the middle of a particularly difficult gym session. For me my brain works when I stop trying to force it to think about a problem. You will no doubt have your own places or spaces but I also think more and more space and physical comfort is so important when you want to think.
2. **Modify your attitude to time:** this is probably the tip that causes the most controversy to others, because I find separating my life into down time and work time increasingly difficult (see above about what happens to my brain when I try and switch it off!) However, carving out time to work on ideas (on the train, while waiting for an appointment) is now integral to how I work. If an idea occurs to me at a time when I am not supposed to working I have my phone with me so I make a note in Evernote (my memory is terrible) and it’s amazing what I find I can get done with some time management techniques!
3. **Find Your Niche / love your research:** there must be a reason why you became a librarian. Try to remember what it was that inspired you in the first place, because that’s a great place to start doing research. For me, I found information literacy and teaching students to critical evaluate sources was that thing. I also found copyright bizarrely fascinating and teaching others to realise it isn’t a horrid scary thing has become my latest hobby. It might be a collection of 18th century pamphlets in your library, or your desire to improve the functionality of your library website, whatever it is, find your niche!
4. **Find a research partner:** I’ve been really lucky finding research partners over the years, people who share my interests and who have had the patience to work with me, but also to inspire me. Emma and I found the work two people could achieve together on a research project was far more than if we had worked separately. The same is true with the copyright literacy work I do with Chris Morrison. Passing drafts of written work backwards and forwards and running workshops with someone else who gets what you get, is so much more fun than working on your own.
5. **Look for funding opportunities:** if you really want to justify your time spent doing research, finding some funding to support you may buy you time. This may sound impossible but there are all sorts of organisations and charities and CILIP groups (such as the Information Literacy Group) who give out research bursaries. There may also be small pots of money in your organisation for innovation or evaluation projects, so make some enquiries!
6. **Develop your online identity:** it’s amazing how much you can learn from social media and for me twitter has helped me build an online community of like minded colleagues all around the world. I find out about all sorts of new projects, new ideas and interesting initiatives from twitter. Having an online identity can bring new opportunities your way once you start doing research – it’s a great way of doing research, or getting some advice and support if you run into a problem.
7. **Develop a robust methodology:** if you are going to do some research, I suggest you learn a bit about research methods. Surveys make my heart sink. Or feedback collected from all the people who attended your training session. Of course these can give you some data but what about all the people who don’t use your services, and what about talking to some people to delve deeper? I really like qualitative research methods (interviews, focus groups or case studies) yes they take up more time, but they give you much richer data. So do spend some time thinking about how you’ll do your research and what data you really need.
8. **Share your findings widely:** If you have done some research into an aspect of your work as a librarian then please share it with others! It’s fairly unlikely you are the only one to have experienced this problem, so telling others about the issue and how you approached it is a great opportunity. Why not present at an internal staff meeting or take your work to a conference. If you think what you have found out is interesting, I bet others will too.
9. **Write the research up for publication:** and don’t stop with just speaking about your research, write it up! There are so many library journals out there and we need to add to the evidence base in the profession. Ideally publish it in an open access journal so all your colleagues can read it, but writing up your work formally is a great opportunity to develop your skills and to raise your profile. Who knows where it might lead?

So what is stopping you? Start planning your research project now! And if you are looking for some inspiration, start with having a think about your day job and what would make it so much better.

## References

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