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Something to Talk About: Re-thinking Conversations on Research Culture in Canadian Academic Libraries

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Abstract

As Canadian academic librarians have experienced an increasing presence in faculty associations and unions, expectations of librarian scholarship and research have increased as well. However, literature from the past several decades on academic librarianship and scholarship focuses heavily on obstacles faced by librarians in their research endeavours, which suggests that the research environment at many academic libraries has stalled. Though many have called for the development of a research culture, little has been said regarding how the profession might go about encouraging this development: conversations often become mired in the contemplation of obstacles. As a way to move forward, we suggest building upon pre-existing strengths by adopting the model of “intellectual communities” put forward by Walker et al. They describe four qualities necessary for strong “intellectual communities”: shared purpose; diverse and multigenerational community; flexible and forgiving community; and respectful and generous community. Although these qualities are often embedded within our libraries, they need to be made a conscious part of our research environment through reflection and conversation. Working toward strong research cultures requires that we focus less on obstacles and more on reflective and productive activities that build on our strengths.

Keywords

Research culture; academic libraries; research and scholarship; intellectual communities

Introduction

Contributing to the scholarly and professional conversation is acknowledged to be a professional responsibility of academic librarians and one that is increasingly emphasized in the library literature. This shift is due in part to the professional movement within libraries towards evidence-based librarianship as well as an increasing expectation for meaningful measures of libraries and the services they provide ("Research Competencies" 4). Many academic librarians in Canada are required, as members of faculty associations and unions, to engage in research and scholarly activities in order to meet the requirements for tenure and promotion.¹ Although there is an increased emphasis on research and extensive literature has been written on the subject, little has been written about the research environment at Canadian academic libraries.

During the past several decades, the literature has remained fairly consistent in its emphasis on the obstacles librarians face when it comes to research. If we see the published literature on research in academic libraries as a reflection of the state of our profession, we can see that we are at an impasse.² An oft-suggested solution to the impasse is the development of a research culture. Despite the recurrence of this logical solution, little has been done to articulate what an academic library research culture is, what such a culture might look like, or how we might go about developing a robust and supportive research culture. Furthermore, discussions that should be creative and visionary often get mired in articulating or enumerating obstacles. Rather than attempting to build something new in order to move beyond obstacles, we suggest that we build upon the qualities and strengths that already exist in our academic library environment.³ George E. Walker et al., who have written about the nurturing of scholarly communities in higher education, provide a framework for us to re-envision our environment and highlight the qualities needed for a vibrant research culture.

Academic Libraries and Intellectual Communities

We draw on the work of Walker et al. as a way of conceptualizing what a research culture in Canadian academic libraries might look like, and how we might nurture one within our workplaces. Walker et al. argue that there are four

¹ David Fox reports that 63% of librarians in Canadian academic institutions belong to a faculty association or union, many of which have expectations for librarians to do scholarly research ("Demographic" 546). Fox also notes "More than half (51.4 percent) of survey respondents indicated that scholarship is either required or encouraged at their university" ("Time" 453).

² In Janet Swan Hill's "Constant Vigilance, Babelfish, and Foot Surgery: Perspectives on Faculty Status and Tenure for Academic Librarians," she observes "it was impossible not to notice how little had changed over the years" (8).

³ Joseph Fennewald's study of research productivity among librarians at Penn State reveals that "no one interviewed indicated that [promotion and tenure] was the only reason they did research or that, having been awarded tenure, they no longer felt the need or the desire to do so" (8). These findings contradict the assumption that tenure and promotion are the only motivations for participating in research activities.

qualities that are requisites for strong intellectual communities: a shared purpose; a diverse and multigenerational community; a flexible and forgiving community; and a respectful and generous community (125-126). Using their discussions of intellectual communities as a framework for the nebulously defined idea of research culture in academic libraries, we propose that these four central qualities may already be present--though perhaps dormant or under-developed--in our libraries. If we can focus on identifying, building or revivifying these qualities, we can work toward realizing a vibrant research culture. In order for us to work toward this community and culture, we first need to engage in productive, reflective conversations within our libraries and within our profession about librarianship and research. From there we can work on discussing how we-- as individuals, as libraries and as a profession-- might best work toward actualizing a community and culture that supports librarians' research endeavours.

While Walker et al.'s discussions of intellectual communities are grounded in the context of doctoral education, their findings are deeply relevant to intellectual communities within libraries and the conversations related to research culture within librarianship. Their articulation and description of the four qualities that contribute to strong intellectual communities can be used as starting points for discussions about how we can develop, nurture, or reinvigorate research cultures in our own work lives, our libraries and our profession.⁴ In the sections that follow, we examine how Walker et al.'s four qualities relate to academic libraries and how they can help us identify opportunities for inquiry and reflection as well as articulate possible ways to navigate obstacles and impediments.

Intellectual Communities Have a Shared Purpose

According to Walker et al., shared responsibility and stewardship are the "hallmarks of intellectual community" (125). Walker et al.'s description of the need for a shared purpose in intellectual communities is one that is likely to resonate deeply with academic librarians. If asked to articulate a shared purpose for our profession, many academic librarians would suggest that it is to serve our multiple communities in the most effective and efficient ways possible. As an inherently service-based profession, we have a long history of being committed to professional development and improved service. While there is a recurrent suggestion in the literature that research has the potential to undermine our commitment to service, the contrasting perspective is that research -- at its best-- does not distract us from our work as librarians in the traditional areas but

⁴ While there are significant similarities between our vision of library "research cultures" and Walker et al.'s "intellectual communities," we use the term "research culture" to describe the intellectual community found in academic libraries committed to research and scholarship. This culture co-exists with other intellectual communities in academic libraries.

instead supports, nurtures, nudges and strengthens our work and our profession.⁵

Although service does form a major part of the work we aspire to do as librarians, our commitment to service is not the only shared value librarians possess. Research offers an interesting and exciting means to explore these values and integrate them more consciously into our work. In their "Core Values of Librarianship" (2004), the American Library Association (ALA) states that the "foundation of modern librarianship rests on an essential set of core values that define, inform, and guide our professional practice" ("Core Values"). Service is listed but so are ten other values including access, confidentiality/privacy, democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, preservation, the public good, professionalism, and social responsibility. The "Core Values of Librarianship" is a useful document for academic librarians since it enables us to think about our diverse yet shared purpose within librarianship. This document is not intended as a statement regarding academic librarians' research, however we see it as a document that suggests that there is a unity to librarians' diverse and seemingly divergent research interests and goals. When we talk of a "shared purpose" it is important to note that a shared purpose does not necessarily mean a narrowly conceived vision of what we want to achieve: a shared purpose can be as broadly (or narrowly) defined as the community needs or wants. What is important is that the shared purpose is discussed and reflected upon and that actions are taken to move toward related goals.

Our shared purpose--the various values and beliefs we hold about our work as academic librarians--is ever-present yet we often do not take the time to acknowledge, interrogate or reflect upon it. What are the most important things we value in our work as individual professionals? Is it service? Preservation? Access? The public good? Regardless of what we value in our profession, research can help us work toward actualizing individual or collective goals within our shared purpose.

Intellectual Communities are Diverse and Multigenerational

Walker et al. describe how an "intellectual community able to stimulate new ideas and development is one with an appreciation for the generative potential of multiple perspectives" (125). In its present state, the profession of academic librarianship is diverse and multigenerational.⁶ The diversity of perspectives present in academic libraries can be seen in both the list of traditional librarian responsibilities (cataloguing, information literacy, reference services, access services, etc.) and the breadth of diverse personal and academic experience that

⁵ For a useful discussion of these issues see Koufogiannakis and Crumley's "Research in Librarianship: Issues to Consider" (2006) and Isaac's "Librarian, Scholar, or Author: The Librarian's New Dilemma"(1983).

⁶ For a discussion on how the academic librarian population is comparably older than other similar populations, see Wilder's "Chapter 1 The Age Profile of Librarianship."

academic librarians bring to their work. Most libraries are already benefiting from the diverse and multigenerational community Walker et al. describe but we need to further explore how this kind of community can help foster intellectual communities. The literature of the last several years has pointed to a distinct generation gap in academic libraries, where a large portion of the librarian population nears retirement age. According to the Canadian Library Association's "8Rs Study" (2006), an estimated 43% of Canadian Academic and Research Libraries (CARL) librarians will retire by 2014 (Whitmell 10). This trend means that the community is losing and will continue to lose large numbers of librarians and their extensive experience and knowledge. The increase in retirements will also bring in new colleagues, and we must integrate their perspectives into the intellectual community. Similarly, we contend that the collective experience of highly experienced librarians ought to be sought and engaged with for the enrichment of newer librarians. Research can only benefit from conversation, collaboration and the development of intellectual communities between generations of diverse and unique academic librarians.

Intellectual Communities are Flexible and Forgiving

Walker et al. stress that the most productive intellectual communities are those that provide "opportunities for experimentation and risk-taking" and therefore encourage a flexible and forgiving environment (126). One of the strengths of librarianship as a profession is our commitment to improvement through innovation, something which requires great adaptability and accommodation. In this way, most libraries already have the underpinnings of the flexible and forgiving community, however it may not always be consciously translated into the arena of research. Flexibility must be acknowledged as part of the research process. As Angela Brew reminds us: in order to "contribute to the solving of important questions, it has to be recognized that some of the seeds will fall on stony ground" (183). Individually, we can never be sure where research will take us or how it will conclude, but being flexible and forgiving in our thinking will allow ideas and research interests the time and space needed to grow, develop and evolve. It is in spaces of curiosity, exploration, investigation and creativity that "possibility" emerges. Collectively, reminding ourselves of the need for a flexible and forgiving community will bring to the fore the importance of taking chances. Flexibility and forgiveness also help us to understand that our final research "destinations" may not be initially clear or evident, to see mistakes as par for the course in innovation, and to remain open to different research paths.

Within academic libraries, our flexibility and forgiveness must go beyond the manner with which we approach the uncertainty of the research process. It must also be present in the ways in which we envision the overall endeavour of research for ourselves and for others. Given our various backgrounds as librarians, our diverse job descriptions, and the wide-ranging communities that we serve, we need an intellectual culture that is flexible and forgiving in the ways librarians conceive of, conduct and perform their research. This means being

flexible in and accepting of what we research, how we conduct research, and what we value in research as academic librarians. It also means that we need to be flexible in how we think of others' research, especially when it does not conform to our own conceptions of research.

Similarly, we should expect academic librarians to explore a wide range of research interests. Our backgrounds and our roles within the library will greatly influence the passions we wish to follow. The research environment must find the flexibility within itself to make a space for the digital librarian's analysis of social networking tools as well as the history librarian's exploration of the preservation of illuminated manuscripts. In addition to the variety of topics embedded in the library, many academic librarians have the expertise and desire to contribute to bodies of research outside the direct purview of librarianship. The conception of research within academic libraries must be flexible enough to recognize and accept the contributions to scholarly disciplines outside traditional library research.⁷ Academic librarians' contributions to library and non-library research have the potential to benefit the individual librarian, the library, the profession and higher education as a whole.

In the end, the diversity within our profession generates a wide-ranging and seemingly disparate body of research.⁸ A consistent methodology, format, style, scope and subject in research by academic librarians is not possible. This diversity must be viewed as a strength of our intellectual community, not a weakness. As such, it is important that no topic or method of exploration be weighted with more relevance or value, but rather only viewed as different. A flexible research environment is critical to achieve this ideal. The research interests of academic librarians are as diverse as the research approaches employed, and each must find a welcoming space within the body of literature and also within the library research communities.

Intellectual Communities are Respectful and Generous

In their final quality of intellectual communities, Walker et al. emphasize that "an intellectual community depends in large measure on positive relationships... intellectual community is strengthened by close ties, and the general atmosphere ought to be civil, respectful, generous" (126). Members of intellectual communities can show their respect and generosity by sharing opportunities, intellectual resources, and connections. Respect and generosity can be as simple as giving time, ideas, and feedback to colleagues (127). In the end, this respect and generosity benefits the entire community because "success and achievement are not a zero-sum game; one person's success does not come at

⁷ See, for example, Montelongo, Gamble, Brar, and Hernandez's "Being a Librarian Isn't Enough: The Importance of a Nonlibrary Research Agenda for the Academic Librarian: A Case Study" (2010).

⁸ Fox's "The Scholarship of Canadian Research University Librarians" provides an overview of the diverse research interests and areas of scholarship of Canadian librarians (19).

the expense of another's" (127). Although many librarians are by nature respectful and generous, it is worth reminding ourselves of the communal value of bringing respect and generosity to the table when we talk with each other about research and librarianship.

It is critical that we not only demonstrate respect and generosity towards our colleagues' research, but that we show a deep respect for the endeavour of research itself. Research is often described as something *extra* or *added onto* the regular work of librarians or something outside the traditional purview of academic librarianship.

Given that research is currently and will continue to be an expectation of many academic libraries, there is little to be gained by revisiting the long-standing debates about whether or not librarians should or should not do research. To debate these issues further keeps us at an impasse. Instead, we would like to suggest that when research is an expectation or requirement of academic librarians, it is critical that academic librarians and library administrators make a generous commitment to this requirement and develop a deep respect for the endeavour of research, including the time and energy it requires. The inclusion of research into the expectations of academic librarians requires an acceptance that research is: something integral to our work as librarians; something that contributes to our libraries' goals; and something that advances our profession. It is only when our research reflects a generous commitment to, and respectful belief in, the professional endeavour of scholarship that the quantity and quality of that research will be strengthened.

Moving Toward Reflective Research Cultures

Perhaps what is most useful to academic librarians about Walker et al.'s four central qualities of strong intellectual communities is that all four exist in some form in almost all academic libraries. When we talk about the development of research cultures, it is critical to remember, as Walker et al. so cogently argue, that intellectual communities are not "simply a matter of ambiance" nor do they "happen by accident or by magic" (127) and that intellectual communities are "larger than the sum of the activities and structures" (139). Intellectual communities, they argue, are "both a reflection and a product of the rich exchange of ideas and perspectives that characterizes scholarly life at its best" (139). For research cultures to develop, we need to be cognizant of the conscious efforts and actions that need to be taken in order for these communities to develop. Some efforts will be practical and changes can be easily implemented through specific actions, but other efforts will require administrative or procedural changes and these may take more time and effort to put into place. Still other efforts will be attitudinal, so changes may require more time to take root. How to proceed in working toward developing or nurturing a research culture will vary from librarian to librarian and from library to library. Because of this variance, it would be impractical-- if not impossible-- to lay out a

step-by-step guide on how to develop a research culture. Instead, we believe a useful starting place for building or revitalizing research cultures is to consider the four qualities described by Walker et al. and have reflective conversations about how these qualities can be developed or supported in our daily work lives and within the library structures in which we work.

How precisely we might go about creating the kinds of activities, actions or endeavours necessary for nurturing a research culture is a useful starting place for reflective, productive conversations within academic libraries. Some of the qualities might need formal arrangements but others could be developed informally and individually. Significantly, each of the four qualities that Walker et al. describe has components that each of us could implement individually today: we could work toward building an understanding of our shared purpose by having a conversation with a colleague with whom we do not often talk or by reading a colleague's recent article. We could explore our library's multigenerational and diverse community by having a conversation with a colleague about an area of librarianship with which we are unfamiliar. Congratulating a colleague on a job well-done or passing along a call for papers or an article that may be of interest to a colleague are things we could (and should) easily do to nurture a respectful and generous community. We could take a chance on a far-fetched idea or read articles in areas that will take our inquiries into new terrain as a way of working toward a flexible and forgiving community. All of these steps are small but vital ways of not only building strong research cultures but strong library communities as well.

If we apply the concepts of Walker et al. to our work, long-standing issues might look a little different and ways around obstacles might become evident and our impasse could be bridged. Often we need to be flexible, forgiving, respectful and generous with ourselves. We need to feel comfortable with knowing that closing our door and turning off our email for an hour a week to read the first article on the top of the stack that accumulates over the year or taking five minutes between meetings to write down an idea for a project *is* part of our work as librarians. Other times we need to be flexible, forgiving, respectful and generous with our colleagues by valuing their way of researching or their research questions, or taking on a few extra desk shifts to help out a colleague with a deadline, or working toward developing policies or procedures that will facilitate the development of a research culture.

Actions that can help develop a research culture also exist on administrative and professional levels. How, for example, can established researchers work toward nurturing and supporting new researchers? How might departments structure workload to facilitate research? How can administrators help librarians develop the skills they need to perform more comprehensive kinds of research? How can scholarly journals work toward developing or mentoring researchers with promising projects? How can peer reviewers do a better job of helping researchers build on projects or develop ideas so that the peer-review process is

a more constructive learning process? How can MLIS programs and library associations help foster a research culture within the profession? Intellectual communities and research cultures will develop if we work individually and collectively on both the small and large pieces.

Conclusion

This has not been a *how-to* article nor has it been a step-by-step template as to how we might go about developing research cultures. Instead, it is a call to re- envision our research environments in academic libraries and to engage in reflective, productive conversations about research and how we-- as individual librarians or as a profession-- can work toward the development and support of research cultures. In our busy work lives, it is tempting to wish for a template to guide us step by step toward building an intellectual community. If a research culture is to develop, however, it must develop organically through the grass- roots levels within departments, libraries, campuses and the profession. How we do this is up to individual librarians and specific libraries but it is something we need to consider on individual and professional levels through reflective, productive conversations, and through reframing the way we each view our research environments. On their own, small actions like closing one's door to read an article or congratulating a colleague on a job well-done will not create a research culture; neither, however, will large actions like the creation of a policy on research release time or the availability of sabbaticals or profession-wide initiatives. These small and large actions must work together with attitudinal changes on how we view research and the environments within which we work. A research community that is diverse and multigenerational, flexible and forgiving, respectful and generous will help us work toward our shared purpose collectively and individually, locally and globally.

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