Leddy Library Publications   Leddy Library

2016

Beyond competencies: Naming librarians' capacity for research

Selinda Adelle Berg

Michelle Banks

Selinda A. Berg
Librarian and Department Head, Information Services
Leddy Library
University of Windsor
Windsor, Ontario, Canada
Email: sberg@uwindsor.ca

Michelle Banks
Professor, English - University Transfer
Medicine Hat College
Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada
Email: mbanks@mhc.ab.ca

TITLE: Beyond competencies: Naming librarians' capacity for research

TITLE: Beyond competencies: Naming librarians' capacity for research

Abstract:

There is increasing interest in defining the competencies of librarians, including the skills, abilities, and knowledge required for librarians to engage in research. While competencies are helpful when evaluating performance or identifying development opportunities, a focus only on competencies may be restrictive. Through the lens of social constructionism, this essay advocates for a shift in our conversations towards an exploration of librarians' *capacity* to experience, grow, and evolve as researchers. This shift in focus and in language may assist in building a context for librarian-researchers where research is not viewed as the application of static set of skills, where research success is understood to rely on more than the skills of the individual, where the potential for approaches to research far exceed any single list, and finally where librarians recognize that they can be successful researchers.

This article explores about how we might be able to grow a more productive and healthy research environment in librarianship by shifting our professional conversations away from documenting and demonstrating competencies and towards a recognition of our potential to experience and evolve within our roles as researchers, that is, towards an exploration of our capacity for research. In turn, our attention to research competencies may be reserved for evaluation and the identification of time-dependent educational needs. This analysis emerges out of the authors' larger project that interrogates how library professionals, leaders, and educators can ensure that librarians are inspired to and enabled to evolve throughout their entire careers within the complex and ever-changing library environment. This article zeroes in on the research environment of librarians.

Through the lens of social construction, we examine how the profession's focus on research competencies may limit the development of a strong and healthy research culture for librarians. Social construction was chosen as a key lens for analysis because of its recognition of the importance of a fluid and contextual view of knowledge, as well as its ability to encourage a more thoughtful consideration of the language we use. The article advocates for a shift in our conversations away from a seemingly exclusive focus on the research competencies of librarians and advocates for an expansive approach to include the importance of librarians' capacity for research.

Social Constructionism

This discussion is a part of a larger analysis of the profession, which applies the lens of social constructionism as a means to better understand the ways in which we create and reinforce our professional social world. To understand how social constructionism is used in this context, social constructionism is marked off against the positivist tradition which has guided so many of the principles that underly our profession.

During the twentieth century, the positivist tradition was accepted as the dominant theory of knowledge. Within the positivist tradition, it was assumed that to understand the world, the world had to be observed and measured. Alvesson notes that because "Data are consequently something that exists, is (already) there," then "the task of the researcher thus becomes to gather and systematize them" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 17). Even as the impact of the human experience was beginning to be recognized, the goal was still to measure and observe. In the mid-twentieth century, the application of the scientific method to the social sciences began to be questioned and interrogated. One philosophical theory that emerged was social constructionism. In contrast to positivism which aims to understand the natural world through empirical

measurement and observation, "for social constructionism, reality – or at least selected parts thereof – is not something naturally given" and as such "the study of how reality is socially constructed therefore becomes crucial" (Alevesson & Sköldberg, p. 24). The social constructionist approach centers on the notion that the human experience creates models of the social world and we share and reinforce these models. One way we reinforce these models is through our language. Language plays a central role in the social constructionist perspective. Following from the works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, we recognize that language not only describes reality but also creates it. Certainly there are many ways in which the research environment is created, shared, and reinforced, but for the purposes of this paper, language is emphasized as a crucial way that the research worlds of librarians are created and reinforced. In particular, we examine how the language of *competency*, as it is applied to research by librarians, may be limiting librarians' approach to research and our view of ourselves as researchers. We suggest that moving some of our conversations towards the concept of *capacity* may go a long way towards constructing an environment or professional world, where researchers are inspired and licensed to undertake research that is in depth, authentic, and progressive.

Beyond Competency Lies Capacity.

Competencies are the skills, abilities and knowledge that are required to do a job or task successfully. Over the last decade, there has been an increasing focus on defining the professional competencies of librarians as evidenced by a throng of documents outlining competencies by key professional library/librarian organizations (AALL, 2010; ALA, 2009; CARL, 2010; HLA, 2010; SLA, 2003). Often included in these documents is a section addressing the skills and knowledge of librarians about research (ALA; CARL; MLA). For

example the ALA competencies include the recognition that librarians should know "the fundamentals of quantitative and qualitative methods" (ALA). In some instances, it is unclear whether the skills and/or knowledge related to research are intended for application to librarians' professional practice or to librarians' own scholarly work. Additionally, in 2007, the Canadian Association of Research Libraries published a document outlining the competencies of librarians specific to their research endeavours. While originally intended to be a product brief for LIS educators to build a suite of skills development workshops, the authors deemed that the document "stood in its own right and was worthy of a wider distribution to CARL Directors and others interested in research" (CARL, 2007). These documents can assist leaders and professional in defining positions, evaluating performance, and identifying development opportunities.

Alongside these documents providing an outline of librarians' competencies, there is also a body of published literature which attempts to identify the competencies that librarians lack in order to do research (Kennedy & Brancolini, 2011; Powell, Baker & Mika, 2002; Schrader, Shiri & Williamson, 2011; Schrader, 2012; Sorenson & DeLong, 2016). These publications are useful in identifying small elements of where we may be able to grow a specific skills set; however, these lists also have the potential to suggest that research is a *task* which is merely the application of these discrete elements of skills and knowledge. Over time, such reinforcement solidifies and institutionalizes what amounts to a truncation in development. While the skills and knowledge outlined in these documents are a small piece of the puzzle, these skills will not foster a culture which enables librarians to see themselves as researchers.

There is value in outlining competencies as a means to define roles, to identify training and development opportunities, and to evaluate performance; however, competencies are perhaps

all too focused on the present environment, the present context, and the present understanding of the people who make up the profession. To build an environment which is conducive to research, we must go beyond skills and abilities. As such, when discussing the context of librarians doing research, there is much to be gained from speaking of the capacity—rather than the competencies—of librarians to do research. When we are not speaking about evaluation or educational possibilities, let's turn our focus towards our ability to grow and evolve.

Whereas competency focuses on the abilities, knowledge, and skills to successfully complete a task, capacity is the faculty or potential for experiencing, appreciating, and adapting. Capacity is about growth: growth of the individual in knowledge and experience. In alignment with social constructionism's emphasis on the extent to which human experience creates reality and language reinforces that reality, this article advocates that we shift our language away from the pervasive focus on research competencies and move towards adopting the concept of capacity for research.

Shifting the Focus.

While thinking in terms of competencies may be helpful to identify areas for evaluation and continuing education, looking only at skills as a way to facilitate the development and acceptance of librarians as researchers may be shortsighted. The shifting of our conversations towards our capacity to experience, grow and evolve as researchers—our capacity for research— may assist in building a context for librarians where research is not viewed as the application of static set of skills, where research success is understood to rely on more than the skills of the individual, where the potential for approaches to research far exceed any single list, and finally where librarians recognize that they can be successful researchers.

Research is not the application of static skills. There is no one static set of skills or abilities that will prepare someone to "do" research. Most librarians have had the opportunity to learn a set of skills related to research by way of their MLIS research methods courses. The majority of ALA-accredited LIS degree programs include research methods in their curricula, and many as a required course of their programs (Luo, 2011; McKnight, 2009). As such, most librarians have taken, and passed, one, two, or three research methods courses throughout the course of their education. These courses often address the importance of the research question, provide an overview of quantitative and qualitative methods, and acknowledge the process of writing for distribution. But of course a semester-long course research methods course does not fully prepare us to successfully undertake research.

In addition to courses offered through the MLIS degrees, there is a consistent call for continuing education and professional development for research skills (CARL, 2007; Luo, 2011; Sorenson & DeLong, 2016). The workshops and learning opportunity that evolve from these calls for sills training are considerably challenged. In consideration that the mentorship and learning for a single doctoral project is more than five years, the learning opportunities of these research workshops are very limited. One-, two-, or seven- day workshops are only able to refresh the basics of research skills. Learning that takes place in LIS courses and research workshops are merely generic starting points.

A researcher's career is filled with learning new methods, new technologies, new theoretical frameworks, and new approaches. The goal of research is not 'rinse and repeat.' Researchers do not advance by merely repeating the research they have done previously. Instead, they apply their acquired knowledge and experience to emerging concerns as the culture, field, practice all evolve. Librarians can aim to develop a program of research that develops their

ideas, builds off of their results, delves deeper into issues, and looks at questions from different angles and through different lenses. Research does not only require a static set of skills and abilities (competencies), but rather the readiness to continually evolve and grow in experience, knowledge, and abilities (capacity). We need to frame our thinking and acknowledge that librarians' greatest strength is our curiosity and our ability to evolve.

Research success relies on more than the skills of the individual: While the skills and abilities to do research are critical, capacity recognizes that there are important factors in the success of research beyond skills. The success or lack of success of a researcher cannot always be attributed to their level of skill and knowledge. There are many other individual, institutional, and community factors that contribute to the success of researchers (Hoffmann, Berg & Koufogiannakis, 2014). Personal commitment, institutional commitment, resources to support research, and the allocation and dedication of time to transform and evolve are potentially as important or more important factors in fulfilling both personal capacity and institutional capacity for research.

Thinking in terms of competencies implies that attaining a certain set of skills and knowledge included on a list to complete a job will lead to success, but of course this is far from the case. Capacity acknowledges that growth and experience is situated in a larger context. The ability to reach one's potential is dependent on much more than a set of skills and knowledge. The development of a researcher relies not only on the development of skills but also an environment and culture that allows the researcher to reach their potential for experience, growth, and evolution.

Research methods and approaches far exceeds any list. The diverse educational, cultural, and professional backgrounds that make up the community of librarians is likely to

provide an equally diverse perspective on research and research methods. Further, the wide array of important questions that emerge from librarians' work and the context of librarians require a diverse perspective on research and research methods. A pre-packaged and sealed suite of research skills implies that all research will fit into that package, but the wide array of methods for questioning, interrogating, investigating that librarians have available to them will far exceed any sized suite of methods. Moving away from the perspective that research success can be anticipated by the mastering of a list of skills and knowledge requirements may be liberating. A plethora of approaches will be made available to answer the valuable questions that emerge from the work and context of libraries. In turn, it will assist the scholarly community to recognize that vital knowledge emerges from many types of research approaches and methods. The acceptance and legitimacy of research should not depend exclusively on the method used to answer a question (Drabinki & Walter, 2016). While competencies have the potential to inadvertently limit our perspectives on approaches, capacity provides room for evolution for the professional and within the field.

      Empower librarians to know that we *can*: Librarians' often cite their lack of confidence in as a barrier to doing research (Clapton, 2010; Kennedy & Brancolini, 2011; Klobas & Clyde, 2010). Often the lack of confidence is attached to deficits in skills and in response, and in response skills development opportunities are created. This lack of confidence is real and the need to develop new skills and knowledge is critical. Professional development is critical for all researchers; however, we need to embrace the notion that we can do research. Practitioners within other professional groups including nursing, social work, lawyers, engineers, architects, and physicians contribute to the scholarship and research for their fields (Robson & McCartan,

2016). We are members of this wide and diverse community of researchers also engaged in the practice of our respective professions.

Embracing the ability for librarians to learn, to grow, and to adapt will also help move away from conversations (within and outside of the profession) that focus on "Librarians were not trained to be researchers," "Librarians do not have PhDs," and "Librarians lack the skills to do research." Librarians need to embrace the notion that they can evolve and transform to meet the challenges presented by new research opportunities and they must take the time for these processes to take place. Researchers from across the academy have to dedicate significant time to exploring and learning the context of a topic, to explore the wide of array of possible techniques for study, and to consider the way in which they can contribute a new understanding of a topic. It is quite possible that our first projects will not have the perfect research question, method, instrument or theoretical frameworks but from that, librarians should be motivated and inspired to learn and grow—to tap into our capacity for research.

In the end...

In the end we are left with a question. If research success involves more than skills, for those of us who want to see librarians grow as researchers, how do we help librarians recognize and embrace their capacity for research? How can we foster an environment that ensures that we meet our potential? We start to address this in the larger project, but this column is a reminder that competencies are the skills and knowledge we need to complete a task; but research is not a task, it is a process. Capacity acknowledges that research is about a constant evolution in our understandings, our knowledge, and our experiences. Such a semantic shift may go a long way towards prompting librarians, in all areas of our professional responsibilities, to transform and evolve to meet the needs of the new challenges and opportunities. As librarians, we need to

recognize that our biggest asset is our ability to learn, to evolve, and to experience–our capacity for research.

References

Alvesson, M. & Sköldberg, K. (2009). (Post-) Positivism, Social Constructionism, Critical

   Realism: Three Reference Points in the Philosophy of Science. In M. Alvesson and K.

   Sköldberg, eds., *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research,* 2nd ed.,

   London: Sage Publications.

American Association of Law Libraries. (2010). Competencies of law librarianship. Retrieved

   from: http://www.aallnet.org/mm/Leadership-

   Governance/policies/PublicPolicies/competencies.html

American Library Association. (2009). ALA's core competencies of librarianship. Retrieved

   from:

   http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/sites/ala.org.educationcareers/files/content/careers/c

   orecomp/corecompetences/finalcorecompstat09.pdf

Canadian Association of Research Libraries. (2007). *Research competencies for CARL*

   librarians. Retrieved from: http://www.carl-abrc.ca/doc/carl_lewg_product_brief-en.pdf

Canadian Association of Research Libraries. (2010). *Core competencies for 21st Century CARL*

   librarians. http://www.carl-abrc.ca/doc/core_comp_profile-e.pdf

Clapton, J. (2010). Library and information science practitioners writing for publication:

   Motivations, barriers and supports. *Library and Information Research*, *34*(106), 7-21.

Drabinski, E., & Walter, S. (2016). Asking questions that matter. *College & Research Libraries*,

   77(3), 264-268.

Kennedy, M. R., & Brancolini, K. R. (2011). Academic librarian research: A survey of attitudes,

   involvement, and perceived capabilities. *College & Research Libraries*, 434-448.

Klobas, J. E., & Clyde, L. A. (2010). Beliefs, attitudes and perceptions about research and practice in a professional field. *Library & Information Science Research*, *32*(4), 237-245.

Luo, L. (2011). Fusing research into practice: The role of research methods education. *Library & Information Science Research*, *33*(3), 191-201.

Medical Library Association. (2016). Professional competencies for health sciences librarians. Retrieved from: http://www.mlanet.org/p/cm/ld/fid=39

Powell, R. R., Baker, L. M., & Mika, J. J. (2002). Library and information science practitioners and research. *Library & information science research*, *24*(1), 49-72.

Robson, C., & McCartan, K. (2016). *Real world research,* 4th ed. West Sussex: Wiley.

Schrader, A. M. (2012). Exploring the Research Knowledge Needs of Canadian Academic Librarians. *New Trends in Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries*, 297-306.

Schrader, A. M., Shiri, A., & Williamson, V. (2011). Assessment of the research learning needs of University of Saskatchewan librarians: A case study. *College & Research Libraries*, 147-163.

Sorensen, M., & DeLong, K. (in press). Librarian Research Competencies in Canadian Large Research Libraries. *International Information & Library Review*, Pre-print retrieved from: http://www.dx.doi.org/10.1080/10572317.2016.1176460

Special Library Association. (2003). Competencies for information professionals. Retrieved from: https://www.sla.org/about-sla/competencies/