Research in Librarianship: Challenges, Competencies, and Strategies

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by

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Research in librarianship, particularly within the context of the Philippine situation, is sad to say, very disappointing. Why, because there is really not much to talk about on research in Philippine Librarianship, outside of the realm of graduate work, or research pursued in connection with graduate studies. While our profession has an abundance of well-educated, well-trained professionals, it is sadly lacking in research-oriented librarians. There are many reasons why:

The foremost reason I could offer is: lack of research-mindedness. This is attributed to the fact that librarians have too many things to do that conducting research is just out of the question. How many of us even consider it as part of our work?

Then, there are librarians who feel overwhelmed by the professional literature, and there are those who do not even have access to this professional literature, to be able to conduct an honest-to-goodness research. How many of us even bother to read articles in library journals as part of our daily routine?

Then, there is this great amount of research jargon that discourages librarians from reading the research literature. What do we know of conceptual framework, thought processes, theoretical and empirical concepts, library domains?

Other related reasons are: Librarians have all that they can handle keeping up with emerging information, and they simply have no time due to technology and service responsibilities.

Another possible reason is their feeling that their education or training in research methods is inadequate. Librarians who have not pursued graduate studies in Library Science are not comfortable in conducting research work.

There is also the perception that research is lacking in practical applications or mission orientation, which means, conducting research is not part of their library's mission or function.

Of course, a bigger reason is lack of financial incentive, or funding.

A more complex reason is the natural resistance to change or new research ideas.

However, despite these setbacks in our profession, it is widely accepted by librarians here and abroad that research is necessary, some may even say, essential, to our work, for the simple reason that we want to improve the quality of our services. Of course, there are many good reasons why librarians should conduct research:

One, and to me this is the most important, is to improve problem-solving and decision-making in the workplace. There is an increasing demand for accountability, particularly for library administrators, requiring informed decisions, and the best way, instead of relying your judgment on opinions, is to back up your decision by research results.

Second, to create new knowledge and thereby contribute to the growth of LIS as a profession or discipline.

Third, to make library professionals critical consumers of the research literature. Librarians are information providers, information managers, but not information consumers.

Another good reason is to better equip librarians to provide optimal information services to researchers in other fields.

Conducting research can contribute to career advancement for librarians, especially academic librarians on tenure track, or those we might call "library faculty" or "faculty librarians." Colleges and universities require their faculty to do research, otherwise, their promotion is in peril. The saying, "Publish or Perish" may also be applied to librarians who enjoy faculty status. Do we want to gain the respect and recognition of the teaching faculty?

Conducting research can also improve our ability to think critically and analytically, improve staff morale, and enhance the library's status within its community. A librarian who conducts research gains the respect and stature, not only of his or her staff, but overall, the community he or she serves.

BUT, is research really necessary? According to Professor Michael Buckland of the University of California in Berkeley, "Librarians have many and varied difficulties. For some library problems, research is not the best remedy." He goes on to say that "Investing in research, like any other kind of investment, should be judged in terms of the probability of success, the likely delay before results are achieved, and the impact on the population of competent researchers, as well as the perceived importance of the problem." So, what makes research necessary?

Buckland continues, "Librarians, especially library administrators with difficult decisions to make, often call for more research and we would do well to ask them to compile a list of what they most need to know. But, before converting such a list into a research agenda, we need to ask two questions:

First, is research really what is most needed? and,
Second, in which areas is research likely to be most productive?"

If we say yes to the first question, then a research agenda should be based on and driven by specific problems identified by librarians and library administrators.

Nurturing a professional environment in which conducting and using research becomes an accepted and expected part of our practice will require basically certain attributes to become a successful research librarian. These may include:

Intellectual curiosity or enthusiasm
Research-mindedness

Diligence and persistence, and the
Ability to be resourceful and enterprising

Educational background does not necessarily prepare librarians for research. Quality research will require research librarians to possess excellent communication skills. They are committed to life-long learning and personal career development. Of course, some training and know-how in conducting research is basic as a competency requirement, because conducting research requires methodological competence. And seminars like the one organized by PAARL last year at Naga, and this one, are welcome opportunities to stimulate our interest in research and to provide us with basic training skills to conduct our own research

How do we become competent researchers? First we learn to think like researchers – critically, analytically, methodically. We educate ourselves on research methods, and I tell you, there are many. We read other librarians' researches, and try to evaluate their work, critiquing on their shortcomings or limitations.

To better prepare our librarians for this challenging role as research librarians, we have to be proactive, innovative and well-trained to develop some strategies. For one, research training, whether formal or informal, must be re-introduced as part of our growth and development. Training should involve concepts and procedures for preparing, designing, conducting, and evaluating research.

Any training should provide a survey of social science research methodologies and a review of their applications, to be knowledgeable about the strengths and weaknesses of various types of research methodologies for studying different problems and issues.

Librarians should be active participants in research, planning, and evaluation within an organization or institution.

Another strategy is to develop EBL. Have you heard of EBL, or **Evidence-based Librarianship**? Evidence-based librarianship is a relatively new concept for librarians. It introduces a new way of thinking about research in librarianship. As a profession, research in librarianship should be less rigorous and more practical, that is, applied to their practice.

EBL is a means to improve the profession of librarianship by asking questions as well as finding, critically appraising, and incorporating research evidence from library science (and other disciplines) into daily practice. The best available evidence, moderated by user needs and preferences, is applied to improve the quality of professional judgments in decision-making.

It also involves encouraging librarians to conduct high quality qualitative and quantitative research.

To advance the concept of EBL, I suggest that professional associations conduct seminars or conferences focused mainly on an exploratory discussion of EBL, and how it can be applied to our regular work.

They say that "in the middle of difficulties lie opportunities." So, what can the library profession do to improve the research environment?

To stimulate and motivate librarians to do research will definitely require assistance in identifying ideas for research. Some may even need some kind of mentoring by an experienced researcher. Financial support, time to do research, rewards for completing research in a timely fashion are necessary ingredients to encourage them to do research.

LIS degree programs, professional associations, and libraries have an obligation to motivate and prepare librarians to conduct and critically consume research. It is a sad development that a few library schools now are offering non-thesis program in their master's degree. I think, personally, this is a great mistake. Our library research literature is nurtured by significant researches conducted by our graduate students, and this unfortunate development does not contribute at all to the growth of that literature.

Support and encouragement from library associations can come in the form of research grants and other incentives, like awards for Outstanding Researches. PAARL every year awards two librarians in their thesis work with financial grants ranging from P5,000 to P 10,000. It also honors an outstanding library program that has significant impact on research development, and in recognition, grants a cash award of P 5,000.

Employing institutions can also provide appropriate incentives, support, and rewards including the following: staff development activities, released time for research, sabbatical or special leaves, merit salary increases, and financial and clerical support for research projects. At De La Salle University, faculty librarians are granted a month's salary for submitting a research article, published or delivered. They are also given time off to do research, or they can do this as part of their work. Assistance in matching research projects with personal development, and encouragement to apply the results of the research, go hand in hand in creating a conducive research environment in the workplace.

In conclusion, if research has an important role in understanding the needs to which libraries should be responsive, and if librarians need to conduct research in order to better assess the effectiveness of their approaches to delivering library services, then librarians and other LIS professionals, including the agencies responsible for educating them, and their employing institutions, should be more attentive to such a critical activity as library research.

Thank you for listening, and have a great day!

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