



Understanding the “Complexity of Experience”: Modeling Faculty Research Practices



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ABSTRACT

Despite the amount of research that faculty do and the influence they have over their students' use of the library, faculty research is not well understood by the academic libraries trying to support it. Rather “research” is often considered synonymous with information seeking and other information behaviors. This grounded theory study interviewed nine internationally recognized scholars about their research practices, and proposes a model of research that is complex and intimately connected to the other areas of academic practice (teaching and service). This model includes information seeking as one aspect, but also considers social, environmental, organizational, and dissemination components, and how those components interact. Having a better understanding of research equips academic libraries to better support faculty, and through the faculty, their students.

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Academic libraries serve several constituencies. Most libraries focus primarily on two: students at varying levels of research expertise and with widely divergent needs, and faculty, who also have varying needs. Much attention, and indeed much library literature, focuses on students' characteristics, habits, needs, and wants, while much less engages with faculty. This is hardly surprising since the student population significantly outnumbers the faculty population at most institutions. And yet faculty have a tremendous influence over their students' use of library resources, including research help and specific tools, due to the amount of contact they have with students, and the position of authority that they occupy (Leckie, 1996). Positive or negative comments made about the library in a syllabus or during class can influence students' perceptions of the resources and help that are available. Faculty members' use and perceptions of the library can thus have significant impact on the ability of an academic library to fulfill its mission to support the academic needs of both students and faculty. Because of this, understanding faculty work is vitally important for academic libraries.

Research that does engage with faculty often focuses on their use of specific resources, their information seeking habits, or partnerships with librarians that benefit students (e.g., Bauder & Emanuel, 2012; Borgman et al., 2005; Easter, Bailey, & Klages, 2014; Ellis, 1989, 1993; Ellis & Oldman, 2005; Ge, 2010; Hoppenfeld & Smith, 2014; Meho & Tibbo, 2003; Rowlands & Nicholas, 2008; Rupp-Serrano & Robbins, 2013; Shen, 2007; Watts & Mahfood, 2015; Wiberley & Jones, 2000).

It is understandable that information seeking and other information behaviors are a focus of library literature, given the extent to which information is central to the mission of the academic library. Even the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) describes itself as “dedicated to enhancing the ability of academic library and information professionals to serve the information needs of the higher education community and to improve learning, teaching, and research” (ACRL, 2015a). Yet information seeking and information behaviors, defined as “the totality of human behavior in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking, and information use” (Wilson, 2000, p. 49), represent only one component of faculty research. And without understanding it in its entirety, the complex needs of faculty cannot be adequately addressed.

Academic research as it is conducted at its broadest level has not been extensively researched (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 1998; Kyvik, 2013), despite the fact that research is considered to be one of the primary functions of scholars in higher education, together with teaching and service (Boyer, 1990; Henderson, 2009). Some literature attempts to describe research from an information science perspective (Palmer, Tefteau, & Pirmann, 2009; University of Minnesota Libraries, 2006), and Kyvik (2013) identified six components of research based upon extensive survey data. Zoellner, Hines, Keenan, and Samson (2015) explored research and publication practices among faculty from education and psychology departments. Yet there is little other literature that explores research across disciplines at its broadest level. There are several challenges to conducting this sort of research: 1) the diversity of research approaches used across disciplines and academic divisions (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Keeran & Levine-Clark, 2014), and 2) in certain areas of literature (e.g., library science) a propensity to

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equate “research” with library research, or “information seeking” (Abbott, 2014).

This lack of understanding and conversation surrounding research makes it difficult to identify changes and trends that may be taking place, such as those resulting from technological developments that have been occurring at ever-increasing speeds over the last thirty or more years. All that can be identified are changes affecting very specific populations or tools. This lack of understanding also makes it difficult for academic libraries to make choices that really consider the needs of faculty. Research, as a subset of academic practice, is highly complex, and there is much to be gained from understanding its components and how they interact.

This project grew out of a perceived need to understand and model the complex world of faculty scholarship. The purpose of this study was to identify the components of research, as well as the relationships that exist among those components. This will provide a better understanding of the role that information seeking and other information behaviors play in research as a whole, the way in which research integrates into a scholar's academic life, and will facilitate research support by those who are peripheral and yet essential to that work, such as libraries, archives, and IT departments.

METHODOLOGY

This research was part of a larger project intended to identify all of the activities and information behaviors in which scholars engage during the course of their work, and the relationships that exist among those activities (Falciani-White, 2013). Principles of grounded theory were used to develop this model, because grounded theory is employed when exploring complex phenomena about which little is known. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection for this study, and analysis of the participants' published research served a supplemental role.

Participants were selected from among researchers at a large Midwest research university in the United States, who had been recognized for their significant contributions to research in their fields. Participants who were recognized in this way were required to be prolific researchers, and many had achieved an international reputation. For the purposes of this study, interviewing participants with significant amounts of disseminated scholarly work was advantageous because it suggested that the activities in which such a scholar engaged were systematized. In addition, this professional recognition suggests that they were successful not only in their choice of *what* research-related activities to engage in, but also in their decisions of *how* to engage them.

Sampling in this way follows Patton's (1990) strategy of “intensity sampling,” in which the researcher endeavors to find “excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 171). Patton suggests that because the participants used in intensity sampling are such rich examples of the topic being studied, fewer participants are needed to reach an accurate representation of the phenomenon. In this study, interviews were conducted with three faculty members from each of the three academic divisions (humanities, social sciences, sciences), for a total of nine interviews.

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, in which participants were asked to describe a particular research project that they had worked on for a significant amount of time, from initial conceptualization through conclusion. Questions about participants' use of the library were intentionally avoided, in an attempt to keep participants' descriptions of their research as unbiased as possible. Interviews were coded immediately upon transcription, and then analyzed. Published projects, when available, underwent document analysis to confirm

participants' descriptions. The final model with its description was submitted to participants for their review and comments.

RESULTS

The model described here emerged as codes were revisited and grouped to account for most of the variation in the patterns of behavior seen in the data (Glaser, 1978). The first pieces identified were the core categories, followed by the relationships among those categories.

The activities of, and influences on, scholars coalesced into five core categories: information seeking, environment, social, dissemination, and organization. Two groupings of these activities then emerged: inputs and outputs.

The scholars in this study described similar behaviors and activities, but their approaches varied not only in *how* the behaviors and activities were done, but also in *when* they are done in relation to one another. Thus a model proposing any linear process of research would be inaccurate. Participants discussed linearity during the study:

[Research is] like a pinball machine, you get bounced around so... And it radiates. It's like a crystal. It grows like that... So crystal doesn't grow linearly, it grows organically... And I don't know who could possibly research in a linear way, which would mean a trajectory conceived from the outset. It's unthinkable (Humanities 1).

If you look back on [all] the research I've done... it's linear that way because now I can understand how one thing led to another. But as I was doing the research it was anything but linear. There were maybe periods of up to a year where I had no idea where we were going. I knew the questions we wanted to answer, but we had no idea what the answer was going to be or what even the scope of the answer was going to be (Sciences 1).

These comments support existing literature that argues against a linear “research process,” such as Boyer (1990), who states that “... knowledge is not necessarily developed in such a linear manner. The arrow of causality can, and frequently does, point in *both* directions (pp. 15–16).

The two groupings (inputs and outputs), and their associated research activities, will be described in the following sections, with the model presented at the end to visually depict the relationships among them.

INPUTS

“Input” refers to anything that a scholar takes in that contributes to his or her work. It includes interactions with students either in or outside of a classroom environment, reading, conversations, conferences, or a significant life event. The definition of input is necessarily broad, and the activities associated with a scholar's inputs can differ based on the individual's discipline, personality, or way of interacting with the world. Inputs comprise three core categories: social, environmental, and information seeking.

SOCIAL INPUTS

Social inputs are those that involve interactions with others, either in-person or through technological mediation. These inputs include activities such as collaborating, networking, and teaching, as well as conversations, conference attendance, or referee feedback on a publication submission. Also included in this category would be actively engaging with other scholars through reading.

Social interactions were very important among these participants for generating and shaping research ideas, identifying new areas of research, and collaborating on projects.

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