



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Journal of Academic Librarianship



Finding and Reading Reports of Research: How Academic Librarians Can Help Students Be More Successful

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 March 2016

Received in revised form 22 June 2016

Accepted 28 June 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Finding research reports

Analytic induction

Scholarly writing practices

Reading research reports

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study used analytic induction to examine the content of seven prominent library research journals in terms of the characteristics evidenced in reports of research. It examines questions such as: How does one differentiate a research report from other types of scholarly writing? What are issues that impact success in effectively searching for and finding a report of research? Where might students encounter stumbling blocks in successfully reading and understanding a report of research? Implications from the findings of this study are generalized into recommendations for how academic librarians can apply their professional skill sets to aid students whether undergraduate, graduate, professional or doctoral to effectively find and successfully read reports of research.

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Introduction

As three library and information science (LIS) faculty who teach a semester-long graduate research methods course required for the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS), we began this project with questions that arose from our own experiences and those of our students. Key elements of the course we teach include helping students learn to find, read and analyze reports of research in the LIS literature. However, we noticed that in trying to find reports of research, students were floundering. A simple request to find and read an experimental study met with confusion and frustration. This was not completely due to failure to understand the characteristics of experimental research. Rather it was also due to:

- discrepancies and inconsistencies in the infrastructure of search engines, databases, and controlled vocabulary that may interfere with finding reports of research.
- variations in social and cultural conventions of writing in the research reports themselves.

In addition, conceptual knowledge required to critically read and analyze different types of research reports varies widely. From issues of reliability and validity to issues of trustworthiness, credibility and transferability — novice readers of research reports have considerable new knowledge to acquire, build, and practice. These social and cultural

conventions influencing the writing and publishing of research reports also affect the skills needed to find and read reports of research.

While our questions began with graduate students in a School of Library and Information Science, we realized that students of all types may also struggle with the same questions and same complaints regarding reading research: "It's boring." "I just read the findings." "Why can't researchers write so people can understand them?" "It's too esoteric." "They're just proving what we already know." "Why waste the time?" "I can't find any research on the subject I need, so why bother?" With this study we aim to help academic librarians in their conversations with students regarding why finding and reading reports of research may be a valuable and useful practice (in addition to getting a good grade). We set forth a few possibilities here:

- Developing learning agility through practice reading difficult and complex materials.
- Improving search strategies toward finding more relevant and scholarly materials to answer not only academic questions but questions from all parts of life.
- Successfully completing a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation.
- Writing grant proposals and requests for funding.
- Making decisions, which need support and justification.
- Keeping up to date on interesting ideas and new concepts.

Through examining articles in seven library research journals we explored commonalities across different types of research designs and research methods in terms of challenges that might cause readers difficulty in understanding or interpreting the value and relevance of the research they read.

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Conceptual foundation of the study

In this study we applied analytic and inductive processes toward examining a broad and general question: How might characteristics of research literature be related to successful experiences in reading reports of research? We were interested in characteristics and features that might create challenges to motivation and to practice with reading reports of research. For the purposes of this study, we adopt a definition of the term research that foregrounds the processes of defining questions and conducting research studies aimed at improving practice in the information professions (Wildemuth, 2009, p.3).

Through examining and discussing the data for this study we realized the process of reading a research report is comprised of two distinct components: finding and reading. The precursor skill to this process is being able to find a relevant research study matching some criteria the searcher has in mind. Therefore, we developed the following conceptualization:

The first steps in successfully using a report of research are the skills of *effectively finding* and *critically reading* the research.

When students attempt to find reports of research, they may not only experience difficulties because of structural barriers that present themselves in databases and other institutional repositories, but they may also experience difficulties because of the way they have been socialized to understand the idea of research itself.

When younger students are asked to carry out research in grade school it often amounts to search and retrieval. This fact-finding approach has been criticized by some scholars for promoting plagiarism and diminishing critical thinking among students (Loertscher, Koechlin, & Zwaan, 2004). This criticism has become even more heightened with the onset of online searching where students can easily retrieve and copy information and pass it off as research. To that end, a study conducted by the Pew Research Center (Purcell et al., 2012, p.4) notes that “for today’s students, ‘research’ means ‘Googling.’” As a result, some teachers report that for their students, “doing research” has shifted from a relatively slow process of intellectual curiosity and discovery to a fast-paced, short-term exercise aimed at locating just enough information to complete an assignment.

Undergraduate students bring these ideas of research from their early experiences into the higher education arena. This common conception of research is about a generalized process of finding, evaluating and using information. The type of research discussed in this study is research that is often labeled as empirical or systematic: A study where data is collected and analyzed and results of the study are presented.

Compounding the problem of ambiguity in the conceptualization of research is what academic librarians, as information professionals, may have previously learned about research. In their undergraduate or master’s programs academic librarians may have been trained within a research tradition (e.g. quantitative or qualitative) or with one tradition being privileged. In other words, if one has only been exposed to a single research tradition then there may be limitations in helping students across the disciplines find and read other kinds of research reports. Those who are trained in qualitative or rooted in interpretivist epistemologies would have similar difficulties. For example, an academic librarian may struggle to identify relevant research related search terms in order to construct a successful inquiry for a student of anthropology when the librarian’s background is in chemistry. Disciplines such as anthropology and chemistry use different types of research methods and research designs. The above are a few of the structural and social challenges that may present themselves when academic librarians are presented with helping students find and read a report of research. The current study seeks to illuminate other characteristics that academic librarians can consider and apply to help their students become successful users of research reports.

Research methodology

The research method used to explore these research studies was analytic and inductive (e.g. Spurgin & Wildemuth, 2009). Data collection and analysis led to further questions, sometimes calling for additional data and finally the drawing of conclusions. The process is described below:

- The research began with all three researchers reading reports of research in the seven library research journals chosen for this study: College and Research Libraries (C&RL), Journal of Education for Library and Information Science (JELIS), Journal of the Medial Library Association (JMLA), Library and Information Science Research (LISR), Information and Culture (formerly Libraries and the Cultural Record), Library Trends (LT), and Library Quarterly (LQ).
- As the reading progressed we realized a need to narrow our conceptual frame and focus on critical areas where academic librarians could apply their professional skills to aid students.
- Narrowing the conceptual frame helped us understand that while we were focused on reading research reports, finding reports was also part of the process. This realization resulted in collecting more information than that supplied by only reviewing journal articles.
- The new information resulted in additional understanding and new questions that took us back to the research reports.

While the bulleted points above imply a linear progression, this process was iterative and interactive. These are not “steps” but rather action components that comprise the systematic process leading to the results of this study.

Journal selection process

The journals chosen for this study were based on a purposive sample. We were looking for high quality research journals that focused on library content. The reason we were focusing on library content was twofold:

1. The LIS field has two somewhat differing components: Library and Information Science. Historically the research methods for each come from varying traditions and focal points. While there has been considerable merging of the fields contemporarily we wanted to partially eliminate the confounding which might take place when combining the two areas.
2. Initially this study was to help us help our LIS graduate professional students become more effective consumers of research. However, through the analytic induction process used in this study of reading, reviewing and reconceptualizing the data we realized the characteristics we were observing could generalize to other areas and disciplines. These understandings might be particularly relevant to academic librarians who, similarly to the three of us, need to help students find and read reports of research.

To identify high quality research journals we used the Nisonger and Davis (2005) evaluation of research journals by library deans and directors and Institute of Scientific Information (ISI) (2012) ratings. ISI provides a list of journals in specific disciplines ranked by their impact factors. We chose the first seven journals with the word “library” in the title of the journal to represent library-focused journals. There was considerable variability in the types of research designs represented across the seven journals chosen although studies related to the scientific disciplines were less represented than the humanities and social sciences.

Preliminary identification of relevant characteristics

As we read through the research reports, we took notes and asked questions regarding characteristics we thought would influence the understanding of research reports. Many discussions, iterations and ways

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