

## COLLABORATION IN LIBRARY RESEARCH

by Anthony Stamatoplos  
&  
Robert Mackoy

**C**ollaboration provides many opportunities and benefits to partners in library research, as well as to the library profession and literature. Through the application of diverse but complementary perspectives and skills, each partner plays an important role and makes a unique contribution to the whole enterprise. Research collaboration is a relationship and a process in which two or more persons work together to produce new knowledge. Ideally, each party contributes in various unique ways to the endeavor.

There are different levels of research collaboration; here we discuss the most basic level, collaboration between individual researchers. Ours is an example of interdisciplinary research collaboration, using a team composed of an academic librarian and a marketing professor. Our collaboration also uses an "insider/outsider" approach to research at a particular institution. This collaboration began with one bibliographic instruction project, and has continued with a much larger on-going assessment of library services. We first collaborated on a project that used survey methodology to evaluate library instruction in several sections of a college composition course. The study examined changes in student expectations of library services following library instruction, and how those expectations related to overall satisfaction with the library. We co-authored a journal article based on that project.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, we began our second collaborative project, which was a general assessment of library use and user satisfaction of the IUPUI University Library. That project provided a baseline of data, and began an annual assessment that has continued for five years. Through that project, we have learned who uses the library, how they use it, and their level of satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> Our purpose here is to discuss the collaborative process which grew from this research.

### INITIATING COLLABORATION

Beginning any research project involves certain key steps, and the impact of collaboration is evident even in these early stages. For example, research questions should be formulated and grounded in the theoretical

frameworks and practices of a discipline. In interdisciplinary collaborative research, we have found that the potential domain of relevant frameworks and practices is significantly broadened. In addition, appropriate goals, objectives, and investigative methods must be considered, as well as various practical aspects of the work. Again, in collaborative efforts, the perspectives and methods of multiple disciplines can be considered, thereby adding a richness often absent from single discipline efforts. In all collaborative efforts, the work and relationship of the researchers must always promote the goals and needs of the research itself, that is, the project should always be the primary consideration.

Collaboration between individual researchers commonly arises, as with our case, out of an informal relationship between persons within an existing intellectual network. Casual and informal communication, e.g., seeking advice or assistance, may lead to a more formal relationship, as in our case. Over time, we formulated goals and questions grounded primarily in our respective disciplines, but which still addressed the primary research objectives.

The librarian had originated basic research questions related to evaluation of library instruction at his institution, with objectives of identifying and measuring user perceptions of the library and evaluating user skills. A basic question was, "Does library instruction affect student users' perceptions of the library and their own skills using it?" This researcher had already discovered relevant research and theory in service marketing literature, which he wished to apply to research in an academic library setting. He had developed a research design and questionnaire, using pre- and post-measures, and anticipated what in retrospect would be simple statistical analysis, and descriptive presentation of the findings. Though the basic research question may have been unique, generally the design, analysis, and presentation of findings would be fairly typical of library science studies. The research plan had been submitted for institutional review and approved.

Though the project was apparently ready to begin, the librarian researcher sought feedback and advice from a few colleagues, one of whom wisely suggested

asking a marketing research expert to review the study's methodology. Drawing upon his existing network of colleagues, the librarian contacted a marketing professor, who introduced him to another colleague, an expert in the field, with whom he eventually formed a collaborative research relationship. Discussions of question design progressed to a general discussion of methodology and data analysis. The potential value of the marketing professor's perspectives, experience, and insight became apparent immediately. With this fresh input, the research began to evolve, increasing in scope and complexity. What initially was a perfunctory consultation quickly developed into a more formal and involved collaboration, which has persisted beyond the original project.

Our next collaborative research project grew out of the first. We were asked to conduct a basic overall assessment of library service at the IUPUI University Library. Because of the emphasis on customer service assessment and the necessity of more complex data analysis, the marketing professor took the lead this time. As there was already a collaborative relationship, identifying skills and negotiating roles was relatively straightforward. Once again the difference in perspectives was immediately apparent and contributed to a stronger research effort. For example, the librarian understood specific issues facing his library such as the need to provide high quality services to an extremely diverse group of library users (including traditional and non-traditional students, faculty from a variety of disciplines, staff, and community members). The marketing professor perceived this issue as a fairly typical challenge of providing a set of services to multiple unique segments of service consumers.

### **THE NATURE OF THE COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP IN RESEARCH**

Inherent in research collaboration are interaction and communication. As with any team endeavor, each member brings a set of unique skills and perspectives. Early in the relationship, we began to identify these. In our case, for example, there were different disciplinary perspectives and research experiences. The librarian approached research from an anthropological orientation because of his academic background. The professor had extensive experience in marketing research, was skilled in statistical analysis, and was knowledgeable of relevant theory. As we discovered our unique and complementary skills and perspectives, we negotiated our roles in the project. A key aspect is the synthetic quality of the work.

Our collaboration has been based on identifying needs, and then identifying which partner could best contribute, whether because of particular knowledge, skills, interest, or practical considerations such as schedules, location, and contacts. Workload and

division of labor also were distributed using similar considerations. Some things simply came naturally, without any deliberation. For example, it was natural that the librarian undertook much of the on-site administrative work, and scheduling and management of data collection. Likewise, it was natural that the analytical expert managed the statistical work and presentation of findings. Both partners brought ideas to the table. In the beginning, the librarian posed questions, and the professor suggested methods of data collection and analysis. In turn, the professor presented results and questions, and the librarian suggested explanations. In time, each partner learned from the other. We believe the results were much more rich and relevant than they would have been absent our collaboration.

Throughout the course of the projects, we took advantage of our positions and the perspectives and opportunities they afforded. The complementary nature of our roles strengthened the collaboration. One set of complementary roles was along the dimension of what might be called "insider/outsider" roles. Others have addressed the benefits of insider/outsider roles in research. For example, Bartunek and Louis characterize such work as follows:

A research effort constitutes an example of I/O teamwork to the extent that

1. a research team is responsible for the study;
2. the research team is composed of people who differ in their physical and psychological connectedness to the research setting and focal questions being examined;
3. insider members of the research team contribute beyond serving merely as sources of data—they work jointly with the outside researcher in designing the research, collection, and analysis of data; interpreting results; and crafting the story presented about the setting; and
4. insider and outsider members of the team share authority for decisions about the story told about the phenomena/setting under study.<sup>3</sup>

The "insider" partner, the librarian, brought an understanding of the library profession, its needs and perspectives, and familiarity with library science research and literature. He brought an understanding of library staff culture, values, and concerns. He brought an understanding of the conventions of library instruction and its evaluation. The insider had existing contacts and status in the university, as well as a more natural acceptance and credibility among peers in the library. His position enabled him to analyze findings and suggest explanations in the context of library science theory and practice.

On the other hand, the "outsider" partner brought fresh perspectives and played complementary roles. For example, his objective point-of-view complemented the insider view. He could see things in much wider contexts, sometimes which were unfamiliar to the insider. He also brought a variety of experience from analogous research fields and service settings. For example, he was familiar with the theory of satisfaction formation, which indicated that satisfaction was largely the result of the *relationship* between one's expectations and one's perception of performance. That is, patron satisfaction with a library could increase because of improving library performance or because of lowering unrealistically high expectations. One focus of the library instruction project mentioned earlier was to determine the effects of explicitly managing student expectations in addition to teaching traditional library skills. Without this perspective, the research would not have been grounded in theory.

The outsider partner often made observations that the insider might miss or take for granted. These and other factors presented opportunities for analysis and explanations that would not exist with insider researchers alone. One valuable aspect of the outsider position was the perceived and sometimes real naiveté of that person's viewpoint. He was permitted to question commonly accepted assumptions and practice. Because he was an outsider, he could credibly demonstrate incomplete understanding of numerous issues, and thus was permitted to ask questions that an insider wouldn't. In essence, he was excused for asking "dumb questions," and could elicit better insider information. We found that people would explain things to a naïve outsider in different ways than they might to an insider. Insiders were more forgiving of the outsider. We used this to our advantage throughout the project, from the early design stages all the way through interpretation of results.

## BENEFITS OF RESEARCH COLLABORATION

There are multiple benefits of research collaboration; we have identified several that closely parallel and elaborate on those discussed by others.<sup>4</sup> Generally, researchers can accomplish more in a given period of time. Researchers can more effectively use their respective abilities and thus more effectively carry out the research. Collaboration allows for more flexibility in the workflow, so no one has to do it all. Partners share the workload and work where they are most capable and effective.

Research collaboration presents opportunities to compensate for one's deficiencies in knowledge, skills and experience. As the partners bring complementary strengths, they broaden the range of skills available in the research and develop a symbiotic and reciprocal

relationship. Through collaboration with researchers outside the library profession there is an opportunity to address weaknesses in the quality of our research and theory, while maintaining the values of our unique perspectives as librarians and information professionals.

On another practical note, librarians have a valuable but often-overlooked resource: data. We've found that our colleagues in social science, education, and/or business departments are developing and testing theory which is applicable to libraries, their users, and even their employees. Creative collaborators can often identify numerous projects of potential value to all parties.

By using collaboration, librarians can make the most effective use of methods and perspectives from different fields. They are able to conduct research that involves more sophisticated methodologies and analytical techniques. Rather than trying to borrow methodologies and theory from other fields, without adequate understanding of the conceptual frameworks to do quality research and apply the results, librarians can enhance their research using the experience and expertise of people from other fields. Outside perspectives can provide objectivity and breadth of understanding. Through collaboration, researchers learn new ways to approach a problem, which enhances their understanding. This allows for a cross-fertilization of ideas, which ultimately benefits the profession.

Research collaboration is an intellectually stimulating process. It can play a role in the researchers' professional development and extend their network. Through it they enhance their own skills and knowledge, and gain new perspectives and insights. Research partners teach and learn throughout the collaboration. They sometimes learn more about their own fields as they teach others. They learn other ways to approach problems and can open their eyes to new methods or new applications of them.

Finally, we have found that interdisciplinary collaboration gives broader context to research and practice, opening up new opportunities for publishing and presenting. Researchers and practitioners find other audiences for what they do, and this initially unfamiliar audience can challenge one's assumptions and methods. Through collaboration researchers can move away from in-bred research and literature and find other or wider meanings in what they do.

## NOTES

1. Anthony Stamatoplos and Robert Mackoy, "Effects of Library Instruction on University Students' Satisfaction with the Library: A Longitudinal Study," *College & Research Libraries* 59 (July 1998): 323-34.

2. Anthony Stamatoplos and Robert Mackoy, *Assessment of User Response to the IUPUI University Library: 1999-2003 Studies* (University Library, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, 2003).

3. Jean M. Bartunek and Meryl R. Louis, *Insider/ Outsider Team Research* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1996): 20-21.

4. See, for example, J. Sylvan Katz and Ben R. Martin, "What is Research Collaboration?," *Research Policy* 26 (Mar. 1997): 1-18.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Anthony Stamatoplos (astamato@iupui.edu) is an Associate Librarian at the University Library, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

Robert Mackoy (rmackoy@butler.edu) is an Associate Professor at the Butler University College of Business Administration.