

Workplace Research for Cataloguers: What's Stopping You?

Research is formalised curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose - Zora Neale Hurston (1942)

For those outside academia, the word *research* can offer a scary image. People often picture a scientist in a lab surrounded by test tubes or a historian pouring over ancient documents which can seem miles away from the daily role of a cataloguer. However as the Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston says in the quote above, research is really just a formal way of being curious. It offers a chance to find out about something following a defined set of guidelines. Given that cataloguers are known problem solvers who enjoy following rules, workplace research is a great fit for their skill set.

This article will look at how cataloguers can fit research into their role, what they can investigate and showcase some different ways they can communicate their results to the wider world.

Why do research?

There are several benefits to both the individual and the wider organisation of doing research. Perhaps the main reason that practitioners undertake research is to help them solve a problem. Although this is not always seen as research it has a lot of the same steps - a problem is identified, the cataloguer looks around to see what options there are, chooses and implements a solution and then evaluates that solution. If you take a step back from the terminology this process feels a lot like research. Carrying out research also offers back up to what librarians know and helps to make the case to stakeholders - whether this be asking for more money or the introduction of a different process. Having solid evidence as a result of research can be hard to argue with! Producing research can also help with career advancement. It helps to make a job application stand out in the pile and gives the candidate some great examples to bring to interview. Perhaps the biggest benefit of doing and sharing research is that it helps others to learn from what you have done. Like many other sectors of the profession, cataloguing and classification has a lot of the same problems no matter which institution you are based in. Instead of working to reinvent the wheel over common problems, research helps to share the solutions with the wider community so that others can build on them and develop new ideas.

Fitting research into your role

For many cataloguing practitioners the main concern around doing research is how they will fit it into their existing role. It is unlikely that you will have dedicated time built into their job description unless you have academic responsibilities so something else will need to be sacrificed, especially as formal practitioner research can take a significant amount of time.

The good news is that cataloguers are likely to be doing some form of research already. As discussed above, research and problem solving are essentially two sides of the same coin. Cataloguers work to solve problems every day and research is just an extension of this. These problems can be used as a good jumping off point for more formal research projects. Try talking to your manager about the possibility of taking work time to carry out research. Be careful to outline what is in it for them as well as for you. Will you help to develop a new process that will benefit the department or solve a longstanding problem? Imagine you are building a business case to justify the cost to them in releasing you from your duties. What will they be getting in return for their investment?

Sometimes carrying out a research project by yourself can seem daunting so why not team up with colleagues in the same or even a different department? This can be a really great way to spread the load, promote good working relationships and get a different perspective on problems. If none of these approaches work and the research is something you feel passionate about then you may need to accept that you will have to do it in your personal time. This may be for a one-off project or the start of a longer term sideline in research. Although it can feel harsh having to do work in your own time consider how important the research is to you. If it is important then you may feel that the sacrifice is worth it. If you want to pursue research longer term then it may be that you have to work on the first piece in your own time but once you have proved the benefits to the department you may find that your manager thinks differently!

Communicating your research

Once you have done your research then it's time to think about how you will share it with both your peers and the wider cataloguing community. There are lots of different ways to share research depending on the type of research it is and your own personal preferences.

When we talk about communicating research most people think of formal routes such as peer reviewed journal papers and conference presentations. These are great ways to talk about research but they require a lot of effort. You need to find the right venue and then it could be months before the research is actually published. On the plus side they are recognised methods of sharing research and are likely to open your work up to the audience who is most interested in research.

Peer reviewed journals and conferences are seen by some as the gold standard of sharing but this view is based on a time when they were the only option to share research. Today there are many more routes available, both formal and informal. Giving a speech at a conference can be intimidating, especially for the novice presenter, so why not consider a poster presentation instead? This will give you a chance to showcase your research in both a textual and visual form to a conference audience. Although you will have to present your poster by talking to attendees this is much less pressured than a formal presentation as you mostly speak to people one on one. If you want to write about your work then why not try the professional press (like Information Professional or C&I!). These publications will have a targeted audience who are likely to be interested in the topic of your work. You might also want to look at any institutional

publications which showcase research. These can be an excellent way to make a local audience aware of your work and promote the library at the same time. If your research is really in-depth then you might consider contributing to a book on the topic, although again this can be time consuming.

Social media has had a huge impact on the way that research is shared. As well as sharing links to published papers or presentations it can be used to share other aspects of the research process. You could blog about how you are approaching your research, the differences from your day job and any difficulties you come across. This can really help to demystify the research process and encourage others to get involved. Social media can also be a useful way to get feedback. Next time you are stuck on a problem why not tweet about it and see how fast the solutions flood in?

The most important thing to consider when choosing a communication method is what is appropriate to that particular piece of research. We've all seen research presented in hour long conference papers that would have worked better as a poster or a blog post so think about your choice carefully and let that guide you.

Ideas of areas to research

Another common question for those new to research is *what would I talk about?* Most people assume that their problems are so local that they couldn't possibly be of interest but in a discipline such as cataloguing it is likely that there will be a lot of crossover. Most departments are tackling similar issues and looking for solutions to the same problems. Even if your department does things in a very specialised way it may still have applications to other institutions.

With that in mind there is really no end to the areas you could cover. Have you overcome a problem in your department? Perhaps you have trialled a new way of working or reaching out to library users? Maybe you want to challenge the way things have always been done or apply a theory you have recently heard about to the cataloguing process? Consider everything you do in your department and see whether it could be the start of a research project. You could also look to the wider information world for inspiration. The introduction of new technologies and their influence on libraries always provides a solid basis for research, for example with innovations such as Linked Data moving towards the mainstream perhaps this has implications for the future of metadata? It's also worth considering that RDA cataloguing rules have been around for a while now so perhaps the time is right to assess the impact of the new standard on catalogues and their users.

As well as looking forward you could examine some long standing practices in the light of new ways of working. There has been a great deal of discussion in the cataloguing community recently about the use of certain terms in subject headings and classification. You could undertake research and build on that discussion. Or maybe you want to look at the changing role of the cataloguer over time? If you are unsure of the topic you want to explore then it might

be a good idea to look on social media. Many events and conferences use Twitter hashtags meaning that you can see the sort of areas that are being discussed and this could help to inspire you.

So what next?

Although people often have an uneasy relationship with the term *workplace research* it can offer a lot of benefits and opportunities for those in the cataloguing community. It can afford a chance to really sink your teeth into a problem which in my experience is something that a lot of cataloguers relish. It is important to share the outcomes of this research with both your peers and the wider library world. We are often told that cataloguing and metadata is a dying specialism but showcasing our research is a great way to demonstrate that we have a lot to offer. This is your chance to make an impact on the information profession and the good news is that it is likely to be easier than you think. The only thing holding you back is choosing which project to get stuck into first!

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