

Practitioner and researcher collaboration through a student master's paper

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Abstract.

Australian library practitioners perceive that research performed by library researchers is often irrelevant and unaligned to what they need. Practitioner and researcher collaboration is one solution to address this issue. This paper explores a collaboration between an academic library and a LIS department that focuses on practitioner-relevant research conducted by a master's student pursuing a Degree by Coursework. Using autoethnographic and critical reflective practice techniques, three different perspectives --- an academic librarian, a library school researcher, and a master by coursework student---on the research collaboration will be presented and explored.



First published 1 February 2020



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Introduction

In Australian library and research communities there are perceived gaps between what librarians do in their jobs and what library researchers study and publish (Haddow & Klobas, 2004; Nguyen, 2017; Nyugen & Hider, 2018; Jamali, 2018). In 2016, the Australian Library and Information Association and Charles Sturt University conducted the *Relevance 2020* study that examined, “gaps in library and information science knowledge and the need for further development of the LIS research infrastructure in Australia” (Nguyen, 2017, p. 3). One recommendation of the report was that, “LIS schools and academics should be active players in fostering collaboration between academia and practice” (Nguyen, 2017, p. 5). Curtin University researchers and librarians took on this recommendation, and this paper explores the experiences of the people involved in such a collaboration.

This paper begins with a concise exploration of literature on practitioner and researcher collaboration with a specific focus on Australia. The methods section gives a brief overview of the autoethnographic and critical reflective practice approaches used for this paper. Results are presented in three sections consisting of narratives from an academic librarian, a library school researcher, and a master by coursework student. The discussion includes recommendations about conducting practitioner and research collaborations.

Practitioner and researcher collaboration

The lack of practitioner and researcher collaboration has been noted in Australian-based research for almost twenty years. Haddow (2001) found that practitioners see association newsletters as sources of information preferable to researcher-written articles. In a subsequent publication, Haddow and Klobas (2004) identified 11 types of differences between library researchers and practitioners, including types of publications, readings, terminology, and activities. Jamali’s (2018, p.8) interviews with practitioners found that researchers were perceived as researching problems that did not relate to practice, which supports Haddow’s (2001) study. With these studies combined with findings from ALIA’s *Relevance 2020* study (Nyugen 2017), new and different ways of collaboration and connection between practitioners and researchers need to be explored. This paper describes one such exploration by presenting practitioner and researcher collaboration as facilitated by a student master’s paper and project. The subject of the student’s paper, data management plans, is not discussed in details in this paper, but can be read about in other publications (Cairns, 2019; Green, Cairns & White, 2019).

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to explain, from three perspectives, one method of practitioner and researcher collaboration that uses a master’s student paper. Two main qualitative approaches were used during this study: autoethnography and critical reflective practice. First, autoethnographic techniques were used to gather data for this paper. The autoethnographic sources used in this paper are drawn from notes and emails during the time of the collaboration. Based on those notes and emails, each study participant (i.e. all of the study authors) built a reflection of their time working collaboratively from their personal perspectives. It should be acknowledged that autoethnography is an emerging method that has many critics that point out its weaknesses (de Vries, 2012, p. 361). The strength of this method is

that the researcher has continuous access to the research material and is constantly present during the research itself (de Vries, 2012, p. 362). The weakness of this method is that it can appear more casual and less scientific. As a primarily qualitative method, its use and acceptance in Library and Information Science is still emerging, but shows promise when combined with critical reflective practice.

Second, critical reflective practice analytical techniques were used to analyse these reflections. Researchers in critical reflective practice emphasise that through reflection on past experience, the practice being analysed leads to individual developmental insight (Gahafarapour 2016; Bolton 2010; Loughran 2002). Insights gained by each author are emphasised in the narratives presented in the results and discussion sections below.

Results

The results section is presented in the form of three autoethnographic narratives: librarian, researcher, and student. Each narrative is written from an individual author's perspective and reflects the individuality, background, and experiences that make up each author's perception.

Practitioner perspective—Janice Chan

Working at Curtin University Library, I am no stranger to evidence-based decision making, as it is central to our work culture. Strategic and operational projects undertaken by Library staff often begin with literature search, data collection (from surveys, interviews, or environmental scans) and data analysis, before a report with recommendations and implementation plan is formulated based on the evidence. Many of these projects lead to publications or conference papers. However, research collaboration with academics is not a common occurrence.

Data Management Plans (DMPs) typically include information on what and how data will be created, data sharing and preservation, backup and storage, data retention requirement, and any restrictions that may need to apply to the data to comply with legislative or contractual requirements.

At Curtin University, DMPs are mandatory for researchers who require human or animal research ethics approval, or higher degree by research student when submitting their application for candidacy. In 2014, Curtin University implemented the Data Management Planning Tool (DMP Tool) that enables researchers to create and manage their DMPs. The Library plays a key role in providing training and support on the creation of DMPs.

Since the inception of the DMP Tool, the number of DMPs created continues to increase every year, to over 4,400 as of January 2018. The large number indicates successful adoption of DMPs but does not equate to improved data management practice. The Library first considered possible ways to evaluate the effectiveness of DMPs back in 2016.

When the idea to evaluate the effectiveness of DMPs emerged, the Library recognised the strategic importance of the project. A thorough, rigorous, and impartial evaluation is crucial, and it seemed logical to conduct this evaluation exercise as a research project, which would create an opportunity to collaborate with researchers in the University. A collaboration combining a practitioner's knowledge

of the topic and an academic's expertise in doing research would maximise the impact of the work.

The Associate Director, Research, Copyright, Collections, and Systems and Infrastructure of Curtin Library investigated the potential of this proposal through consultation with the Associate Deputy Vice Chancellor, Research Training. Once it was decided that it could be undertaken as a master's project in the Library, Archives, Records, and Information Science (LARIS) discipline in the University, I was brought into the discussions with the discipline head of LARIS. In a series of meetings, we discussed high-level project scope, purpose, and expected outcomes, and negotiated possible approaches to undertaking the project within the parameters of a master's project.

Towards the end of 2017, the discipline head identified Amy Cairns, at the time a master by coursework student, as the suitable candidate to carry out this project under the academic supervision of Dr Hollie White. We had further meetings to refine the project scope, research question, methodology, deliverables, and responsibilities around data management of the project. The project was set out to begin in February 2018 and complete by November 2018 in order to meet examination deadline.

Prior to Amy's starting, I consulted the literature, revisited the resources we have available for researchers, and prepared information that Amy might need for her project.

Once the project was under way, I assumed a supporting and advisory role. Throughout the project, Amy occupied a work station in the library staff work area, in close proximity to me, two days a week. The co-location was beneficial, in particular at the beginning when Amy was learning about the data management system, University policies, and historical information.

Library staff (Associate Director, Librarian supporting Research Data Management, and I) provided feedback on the literature review and gave input to the survey instrument developed by Amy. The survey comprised 16 multiple-choice questions, it also made free text entry available for some answers. The survey asked respondents how they used the DMP, and if it prompted them to think about different aspects of data management (Cairns, 2018).

We also assisted Amy in seeking feedback from the Research Office, which, as the owner of the DMP data, has a vast interest in this project. Due to confidentiality, it was my responsibility to compile a list of researcher email addresses from the DMP database, and liaised with the Research Office staff, who sent out the invitation to participate in the survey in order to maximise response rate.

Amy required less support from the Library after the survey invitations went out, which is a natural progression. I continued to make myself available when clarifications were needed, and helped removed any blockers as they arose.

The survey conducted in July 2018 was successful: Amy received 197 usable responses from the survey and proceeded with data analysis straight away, making up for the time lost due to delay in getting ethics approval. It would be ideal to complement the survey data with qualitative data from the planned focus groups. Unfortunately, poor participation rendered the qualitative data collected from the

focus groups unusable. However, Amy persevered and successfully completed this project and her Master of Information Management degree.

From the Library perspective, the project is a success. The project interrogated researchers' behaviour and perception around research data management. A particularly useful section was the analysis on whether the DMPs prompted changes in the way researchers organise, backup and store, and share their data. In addition, the findings confirmed assumptions, such as; the main reason for researchers to complete a DMP was because they are required to do so. . The Library subsequently contracted Amy to prepare a short report and presentation to stakeholders, which took place in April 2019. The findings informed the Library and the University on ways to improve the DMP Tool, and the support and services related to data management planning.

To ensure this project benefits the broader profession and research support community, preliminary findings were presented at eResearch Australasia Conference 2018, and we are working on publishing these findings to an international journal.

On reflection, I thoroughly enjoyed the collaboration and am impressed with the outcomes of the project. I had to let go of the control and flexibility I would otherwise have had if the Library carried out the project in-house. However, I appreciate the academic rigour of this research, which only further increased the usefulness and credibility of the project outputs. As practitioners carrying out evidence-based research – especially when the topic is one's expertise – it is sometimes difficult to remain objective and impartial, be fully aware of the expert blind spot to avoid drawing biased or immature conclusions (Amabile et al., 2001).

While the project overall went very well, one thing that remains a disappointment from my perspective is that the research data from this project has not been made openly available despite numerous reminders. I believe the intention to share the survey data was outlined in Amy's DMP. The extended delay in publishing the survey data might be attributed to the seemingly complex data publication process, or simply due to Amy's personal priorities having shifted after graduation. For future projects, I would include in the negotiation process a more explicit discussion between all parties around FAIR data and open scholarship, and ideally come to an agreement on when and how the research results, data, and relevant outputs will be made available as openly as possible.

Researcher perspective—Hollie White

My involvement with this collaboration began in October 2017, when an email was sent by the Information Studies department chair asking who wanted to supervise a Master of Information Management (MIM) project involving the Curtin Library. By early October 2017, the general purpose of the research had been established and Amy Cairns, master by coursework student in her final year, had volunteered and been approved by the library as an acceptable project student. By mid-October 2017, all parties had met together, and in pairs, to get a general understanding of how the collaboration would proceed.

Curtin's master by coursework degree (Master of Information Management-MIM) culminates in a two-semester long research project that is written up into a 15,000-word thesis. Semester one of this project lasted from late February 2018 to May

2018. During this semester, Amy enrolled in the Advance Disciplinary Project 1 unit, and by May 2018 turned in the first half of the thesis, which included the introduction, literature review, and methodology sections of the paper. In addition, all ethics training and submission of the research study for approval by Curtin's ethics committee was completed by this time. In June and July 2018, the focus of the project was on making any necessary changes to receive ethics approval. After the approval in mid-July 2018, the survey was distributed to participants. Semester two of this project lasted from late July 2018 to early November 2018. During this semester the student enrolled in the Advanced Disciplinary Project 2 unit and focused on finalised data collection, analysis, and writing up the last half of the thesis. The completed thesis was due in early November 2018. Once the thesis was submitted, it was sent out for examination to both Australian and international subject specialists who have PhDs.

Semester one consisted of many meetings about drafting the study documents. Many different areas of campus seemed committed to assisting with the research. Not only was the library heavily involved, but also the Research Office approved reviewed and approved the survey and agreed to distribute it amongst participants. This made the ethics portion of the survey easier and maintained the anonymity of survey participants. Because there was the need for so much feedback between the Information Studies department, the Research Office, and the library, the survey development process did take longer than expected. The Ethics process in June and July 2018 was also more complicated than those I had experienced at Universities in the United States. Amy was quite professional throughout the research process. She remained calm when asked to make changes by the various stakeholders and took constructive criticism well. For her first time conducting a research project, Amy showed great resilience.

With survey results completed by the beginning of semester two, focus groups became the research focal point of the new term. This part of the research process was the most difficult, and participation was disappointing. In the end, the focus groups had to be reformulated as interviews for the thesis write up and that data could not be included in any subsequent publication due to lack of power.

As a representative of my department, my role in the collaboration was to make sure the student conducted a rigorous research project, successfully completed the master's thesis on time, and fulfilled all the requirements for graduation. I acted as an advocate for the student and the use of systematic research methodologies throughout. Key to this was making sure that the student's labour and output would be acknowledged as her own, as well as making sure that the research was done in accordance with all Curtin ethical standards and was of high quality in order to be recognised by other Library and Information Science researchers.

On a personal level, this experience was one that I was enthusiastic to take on. Before moving to Perth in March 2017 to become a full-time lecturer at Curtin University, I had been a practising librarian in the United States. I had always wanted my own research to connect strongly to practice and wanted to continue that once moving into the more researcher-teacher focused role. I was also hoping that this opportunity would allow me to meet and interact with Australian librarians. I believe that on a personal level, I was able to achieve both of these goals.

Overall, I found this collaboration successful. It allowed me to stay connected to practice and learn more about some of the unique aspects of Australian library culture, one of my original goals for the project. An unexpected outcome has been how my perspective has changed towards the master by coursework process. I now see the master's research process as one that can help students make connections to the library and archives industries in unique ways. I have found that I enjoy mentoring MIM students and have encouraged my 2019 students to be sure that their research projects have strong connections to practice. In addition, the collaboration continues as Amy, Janice, and I work on articles together related to study results and the collaboration. In addition, there is currently discussion of other library-initiated collaborative projects planned for the upcoming year.

Student perspective – Amy Cairns

As I was going into the last year of my master degree, I was working casually both in records management and as a student assistant at Curtin University's library. I was hoping to work in an academic library after graduation. I was only studying part-time, partly because I was intimidated by the thought of taking on the research project. A classmate who started the Master of Information Management degree at the same time I did was writing her thesis in 2017, but I worried that I would not know where to begin. I thought a large project with a significant writing component might be beyond my ability. I had started but failed to finish an honours year after my undergraduate degree and was not sure that enough had changed in the intervening years to make a difference.

I spent most of that year thinking about what sort of project I wanted to work on for what was going to be the very last units of my degree. I was hoping to think of an idea for a project that would fit well enough into the research interests of potential supervisors that not only would someone be willing to take it on, allowing me to gain some useful skills for my future career, but most of all that it would sustain my interest throughout the research period.

At the end of 2017, the discipline head of the department came into one of my classes to tell us about a potential project related to data management plans and evaluating their use by researchers. This seemed almost too good to be true. The discipline lead set up a meeting between me and the Library staff who wanted the work to be done, Associate Director, Peter Green, and Janice. After discussing their needs, I thought I had found a project I could happily work on for the year.

Hollie had already been approached as a supervisor for this project, and I thought she would be a good choice for a supervisor. She had been my lecturer for a class that semester, and her teaching style and expectations were always clear. We discussed the academic requirements for the project, as well as the Library's expectations, and she gave me the name of a book on social science research methods to prepare for beginning the project in 2018.

In February 2018, I met with Hollie to start planning in earnest, beginning with creating a draft survey. Once we had a draft survey, we met with Janice and Peter to see if the survey would gather information that matched what the Library hoped to get out of the project. We met formally several more times over the course of the

project, but the Library was able to give me access to a desk near Janice's two days a week. I could work on my thesis and have informal chats with Janice there. It was especially helpful at the beginning of the project, while I was gathering information, to have this kind of no-stress access to Janice, and to have a structure in place to make sure I did work on my project every week.

However, the main benefit of working with the Library was that it allowed me institutional knowledge and access that would have been much harder to get on my own. Janice explained the data management planning process to me and told me what assistance was available. I was able to book physical rooms in the library to meet with potential focus group attendees. Janice and Peter also introduced me to the acting head of the Research Office, which was one of the owners of the data management plans. Due to this meeting, I was able to gain permission to use their data; the Research Office also agreed to distribute my survey to participants, which lent it authority it otherwise would not have had. The Library already had a list of email addresses for the potential participants, which meant we could send the survey to the target audience without my needing to view their personal information. I believe these factors led to a faster ethics approval process, and to more survey responses than I otherwise would have received. However, because the university staff had their own jobs to do, it could occasionally be difficult to get quick responses.

Hollie's experience with this sort of project was incredibly helpful for me in working out the project timing and details: what exactly I should be doing, and when, in order to complete the project in time. I relied on Hollie to ensure the project scope was appropriate, and for a lot of support in research design, research, and structuring my thesis. The style of writing was different from other essays and reports I had written previously. Hollie was also able to advocate for me where I did not know how to help myself. There were a few times when I ran into some difficulties – notably, when my focus group failed to get enough participants. Hollie helped me work through problems and had very helpful suggestions for how to work around the issues that arose.

I was overall very happy with my experience. I felt well supported in both academic and practical aspects. I was able to complete my project successfully thanks to this support, without suffering undue stress or losing interest in the topic. I would recommend a similar experience to other students and practitioners. It gave me the opportunity to have a hand in a project that could actually be useful, gave me some experience with the research process (which I have since found useful in my work as a librarian), and allowed the Library to take advantage of Hollie's research experience and my time to complete a project that the Library staff might not have had the resources to do on their own.

Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion

After apply critical reflective practice analysis techniques, as presented in the methodology section, narrative results indicate that all three participants, practitioner, researcher and student, found the collaboration successful. Two unique aspects of this collaboration were identified as contributing to its success. Firstly, this project was initiated by the library and was clearly defined to answer a research question that would influence practice. Secondly, student involvement acted as a conduit

between the library and the library school. While the jobs of practitioners and researchers are often different, the focus on student success is universal in the university environment. More research is needed to confirm if a student master's project-based collaboration would be successful in environments outside of academic libraries.

Based on study results, the following recommendations can be made to others thinking of using student master's papers as a means of practitioner and researcher collaboration:

- Research and project ideas should be initiated by the library practitioners to guarantee that questions will address issues important to practice and to avoid issues presented by Jamali (2018).
- Researchers should be contacted early (before a school year or term starts) so that proper arrangements can be made for recruiting students.
- Practitioners and researchers should meet before starting the project to get a clear idea of how the collaboration will progress and create a timeline that works within the academic calendar.
- An explicit discussion between all parties around FAIR data and open scholarship should take place at project initiation, with an aim to reach agreement on when and how the research results, data, and relevant outputs will be made available.
- Students, practitioners, and researchers should communicate with each other throughout the project to make sure the research is proceeding as needed for all parties involved in the collaboration

Overall, this study shows that practitioner and researcher collaborations through master's student papers can be successful and in line with library practice goals and needs. This is an important finding, since most of the previous Australian-based research has shown gaps between practice and research (Haddow, 2001; Haddow & Klobas, 2004; Jamali, 2018).

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