**Using Ethnographic Methods to Study Library Use**

As a librarian, how much time do you spend in the library? Not in the office, or on the enquiries desk, but actually in the areas your visitors use. Do you use your own library? The chances are that you don’t get to see much of what goes on in your library, and that much of what you know about visitor use comes from surveys, complaints or from briefly spotting something as you walk through the building. Using information from surveys and responding to direct user feedback are both important ways of learning about what’s happening in your library, but they don’t always produce the level of data that tell you enough about usage requirements. They might tell you that your visitors want silent areas, but not necessarily where they’d like to see them; whether they work once installed; what kind of people use the areas and whether they follow the rules. The example of silent use preference is a simple one, but demonstrates that there is a need to go beyond the kind of data surveys provide. As Given (2006) so concisely puts it, quantitative research can give you information on the characteristics of usage, but it can’t tell you the ‘why’ of usage patterns. Surveys also rely on self-reporting, and respondents won’t necessarily say what they actually do (or may even hide it if they know it is against library policy).

An excellent way to learn more about use is to utilise ethnographic methods. Ethnography is a term often connected to qualitative research in general, but its primary aim is to learn about cultures. The methods associated with ethnography can help you get more detailed, real-time, in-depth qualitative data that can be much more representative of what happens in libraries. Use of ethnographic methods is still comparatively new in the library world, considering how long they’ve been used in other disciplines, and fairly underused because they can be time consuming and complex. However, they are also extremely revealing and can provide access to data unavailable via other more commonly used methods. Libraries in the United States have been working with anthropologists and utilising ethnography for some time: see work by Foster and Gibbons (2007), Suarez (2007), Delcore et al. (2009), Duke and Asher (2012), McKechnie et al. (2006) and Wu and Lanclos (2011) in particular. The methods are starting to be adopted in libraries in the United Kingdom though: Bryant et al. (2009) conducted an ethnography at Loughborough University Library; Atton (1998) was talking about using the principles of ethnography to learn about and develop library collections as a fairly early adopter; while ethnographers were already conducting research in schools, with school libraries featuring in work by Shilling and Cousins (1990).

**Why ethnographic methods?**

So, if so many people are doing some kind of ethnographic work, why isn’t it happening more? The benefits outweigh the costs, but there are quite a few reasons why it may be overlooked, the first being a misunderstanding of what ethnography is for or about. On a very basic level, you are probably already aware of ethnography, perhaps without even realising it, and its roots can create some level of preconception. Anthropologists have been using it for years to learn about cultures different to their own, which may make you think of people studying small island cultures in far-off countries (the colonial white man looking at the ‘other’ is a common perception that many anthropologists are trying to renegotiate) rather than your own library visitors. However, the key term here is learning about cultures: our libraries have visitors that form a specific user group, which can be viewed as constituting a ‘culture’: that is a collection of ideas, values, experiences and attitudes linked to a particular group of people. There will be sub-cultures within it, such as teenagers, students, researchers, the elderly, parents with children, or librarians as library visitors. Library users are a culture, and have specific identities that can inform on their usage patterns (and in turn cycle back to inform the culture’s identities), and thus show us how each culture responds to the library’s policies, designs, resources, or anything else we as library staff might provide. And that’s something we really have to remember: we are library staff. We use libraries as library staff, whether we are working at the time in the library we are visiting or not. That differentiates us somewhat from the people we are providing for and supporting, although we might not always realise it. Using ethnographic methods helps us learn about the people using our libraries because we start to understand how they use them, in ways they might not even be conscious of themselves. In addition, using a critical approach to looking at the data collected will potentially help create an environment that enables and empowers the people who visit it, but that will be discussed later.

**Looking beyond the surface**

There are other reasons why ethnographic methods aren’t as popular as they could be in library research. To carry them out potentially means dedicating a lot of time to data collection and analysis. If you choose to conduct observations and interviews, that’s a lot of time to commit, which in turn can cost money in staff hours (and probably reimbursement to participants and interviewees). However, it is time and money worth investing. Let’s say you decide that you want to buy a full set of replacement furniture for the library. The old stuff is looking tired so you need to buy some new pieces anyway, and you successfully win funding to do so. Rather than replacing the furniture with like for like, you decide to be a bit more adventurous and buy some new fancy things to try and encourage new visitors and to brighten the place up a bit. However, you find that once the new furniture is in place people aren’t using it, or they complain about it at the desk. So you decide to change things back and rethink the layout, as you still have the old furniture lurking about. You get more complaints from other people who liked using the new stuff. Aside from totally missing out an initial consultation with current library visitors, you’ve also forgotten to try and ask why people aren’t visiting, and you haven’t looked at what people are actually doing in the library with each furniture set. Conducting some research would definitely have made a difference in this rather simplistic and frankly highly unlikely scenario (you wouldn’t buy new furniture without asking people what they wanted, didn’t like about what they had, or how they used the library, would you?), but as an extra bonus, ethnographic methods would have helped you learn more about *how* people use the library furniture before you even started the process of bidding for funding. Additionally, you don’t have to approach ethnographic methods as if you are going to do a full-blown ethnography, which traditionally can involve spending years studying a particular group of people. Without the full training anthropologists have, you are more likely to be doing something much smaller in scale, which doesn’t require you to spend a year solid of observational data collection instead of your normal job. Ideally you would be able to employ an anthropologist to work alongside you on a permanent basis and help you learn about your visitors, but what if that isn’t an option? You can utilise methods drawn from ethnography and gather data that is extremely useful to you, without having to dedicate months or years of time to the research.

Which leads to one more reason why people might decide not to take the ethnographic method route. They’ve never done anything like it before. They may have conducted some research, run some surveys, but they haven’t ventured into what can appear to be a slightly intimidating practice because of the amount of data and analysis it might involve. Ethnographic methods are what you make of them, and even more so if it is you who gets to make the decisions in your library. Smaller scale use of some of the methods can be quite similar to research already in common use, so it’s a matter of piloting a method to see if it can work for your purpose. In some cases, you might already be using ethnographic methods without realising it, including that moment when you spot something happening as you walk through the building.

**When to use ethnographic methods**

To start off with, you probably already have an idea of something you want to find out, and you need to consider what method is best for your research question. It might seem obvious, but don’t dive in assuming ethnographic methods will work to answer all your questions. If you want to know whether people are for or against opening on a Sunday, then that’s more of a survey question. If you want to find out what purpose people have when they visit on a weekend, that could be a mixed methods piece of research: that is, you’ll probably want to use a combination of statistics to measure how many people use the library, and some qualitative data to find out the purpose of visit. If you want to learn more about what’s actually happening in the library when you are open, you might want to start applying ethnographic methods.

Using ethnographic methods to study library use can give you more detail of what often goes ‘unseen’, things that you might even be aware are happening but are effectively hidden when you try to research them because you don’t get the answers you were expecting. There are all kinds of ways you can use the methods to find out more, as the literature mentioned earlier demonstrates: website usability, building usage patterns and wayfinding, information-seeking behaviours are just a few examples of research where ethnographic methods can be particularly useful.

**Types of method**

Methods used in ethnography are numerous, so this is a starter guide with lots of information on where you can learn more.

*Observation*

Observation is the one people will most likely be aware of. Spending time with the culture you want to study is a great way to learn more about them. There are a few ways you can conduct observations but these are two of the main ones.

* Active participant. This is where you join the group you want to learn more about and take part in their activities as if you were a member. Active participant observation (like all observation methods) is conducted without making judgement on the behaviours that appear as you observe. This kind of observation can make a difference to how the people you are observing behave if they are aware you are observing them: they may try to impress you, or shut you out of their normal activity.
* Non-participant. You might spend time ‘in the field’ observing what happens, but in contrast to active participation you don’t get involved at all in what is going on, and remain a detached observer.

There are a couple of ways of conducting observations whether you are a participant or not. You can either overtly observe, ensuring you tell everyone you can that you will be collecting data, or covertly observe people, observing without telling anyonewhat you are doing. To make things a bit more complicated you can also be semi-covert, and notify people that you will be undertaking observations but not tell them exactly where or when you will be doing it.

In all types of observation you need to be aware of the ethical implications of what you are doing, so think carefully about what is the most appropriate method. Approach observation in the wrong way and you can walk into a minefield of problems. Think of your legal responsibility to participants in the first instance. Get ethical approval for observation from both the people who run the place you want to observe in, and from an ethical panel (if you work in education) or legal advisor (if you work in public libraries) if possible. Theoretically, libraries of all kinds are public spaces, and in the United States and Canada regulations will allow you to conduct observations in public places as long as you don’t endanger anyone (for an example, see work by McKechnie et al. (2006)). In the United Kingdom it’s a bit different because of English and European human rights laws, and because of research guidelines such as those published by the British Educational Research Association (2011) and the Social Research Association (2003), so check with whoever is funding the research. They will usually conduct ethical checks on your research plans, or obtain legal advice if necessary. Make sure you write up an information sheet for anyone who may have any questions. These are useful for all kinds of observation, whether they are handed out or displayed at the library entrance, uploaded to the library website for information, or distributed during covert/unobtrusive observation if you are spotted and asked questions. Include an opt-out clause with information on who to contact if they want to be excluded from the data collection.

You also need to decide what kind of observation data collection process to follow. One option is to note down pretty much everything you can about what’s going on within ethical remits: you don’t want to be noting lots of personal conversation if you don’t have permission to do so from the people you are observing! Otherwise, noting down everything does mean *everything* with as much detail as possible, whether it seems important or not at the time. While quite hard-going to carry out, it is extremely revealing and can generate useful extensive data: you learn a huge amount about all the ways people use your building and spaces. When making notes, it might be useful to follow the double-entry notes style to aid logging what happens without making assumptions or judgements on actions. It’s important to try and avoid judging what’s happening while it happens, as unless you speak to people directly you don’t really know what their motivations or feelings are, you only know your own interpretations. Naturally it isn’t possible to be totally independent of your own assumptions though, so using the double-entry system will help you work with that. You use one column for describing actions as they occur, and one for your own thoughts, feelings and ideas about what is happening: that way the two are separate, but you have prompts as to how things appeared at the time, and you have an increased awareness of how much conjecture you are making about the data.

The other option is to collect structured observation notes, creating a list of things you want to look for and chart when and how often they occur, as well as potentially logging details of them (as in Paretta and Catalano (2013)). This ventures a bit more into a mixed method approach, as it involves some level of counting incidents, and you may be limiting yourself to only the items in the list without noting other behaviours or occurrences. However, it is much simpler than detailing everything and makes the process much more focussed if you are conducting smaller-scale research. Whichever method you choose, you’ll need to start by piloting and practising data collection, and refining the list of items you want to include if you use structured observation.

*Interviews*

Interviews are an excellent way to learn about how and why people use or don’t use your facilities, and yes, you will want to try and learn about those people who rarely visit. If you have been conducting observations they will link directly into your interview process, generating questions and discussion points. If not, you’ll need to start from scratch at creating some questions that will be open enough to prompt discussion and inform but closed enough to get the answers you need. There are a few routes you can take for your interview design.

* Open-ended/unstructured interviews. As the name suggests, these are very open and exploratory, and involve allowing the interviewee to lead the discussion. However, you will need to plan out how you want to guide the interviewees through the process so that it doesn’t just end up as a conversation that doesn’t tell you anything: create a list of goals for what you want to learn about by the end of the interview. Questions might involve asking the interviewee to describe a typical day that features a library visit, or telling you about what they do when they visit the library.
* Semi-structured interviews. These are fairly open and work well when used in conjunction with observation data. Design questions to discuss what you’ve noticed when observing, but leave them open enough for the interviewee to talk about their own usage. For example, to learn about specific incidents you have observed, or a particular kind of library use, design questions based around these topics. Questions could be along the lines of asking the interviewee to describe what happens when they want to borrow a book from the point of trying to find out if the library stocks it to returning it, or you might ask about how they use a specific area of the library, if at all, and why they do or don’t use it. The questions can be moved around if they fall naturally into a different order, and can be added to during the interview process to learn more about a specific comment the interviewee makes.
* Structured interviews. These involve highly specific questions that will directly ask about the issues you want to learn about in a very prescriptive way. You’ll probably already have some very clear ideas about what you want to learn about, and structured interviews provide a method to learn about just those subjects without moving away from them. The interviewer still needs to guide the process without being too closed, as there’s a risk that no useful data is collected. Questions for structured interviews will always be the same for each interviewee, regardless of their use or non-use of the library, and asked in the same order. This style of interviewing could involve asking participants about how they would score a specific library service and why, or about how satisfied they are with staffing levels. Structured interview questions can often be conducted as printed questionnaires, but the interview process provides the opportunity to prompt for clarification or more detail, thus differentiating itself from the problematic survey process mentioned at the start of this chapter.

The trick in interviews is to avoid closed questions that only prompt a yes or no answer, otherwise they won’t tell you anything much. Also be aware that while it is good practice to try and build rapport with your interviewee so that they feel they can talk openly to you, avoid putting words into their mouths by encouraging them to respond in a certain direction. Expressing your own opinion on a topic may influence their answers, whether they agree with you or not, so try and be friendly, non-judgmental and receptive without prompting in a particular direction. To learn more about interviewing, try Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), Spradley (1979) and Schensul et al. (1999).

For interviews, you’ll need to create a consent form and an information sheet including the contact details of the researcher to make sure interviewees are aware of your research intentions and their rights. Examples of consent forms and information sheets can be found on most university ethics websites (useful resources no matter what kind of library is being researched), so modify content to suit the circumstances. They usually need to contain check boxes to confirm participants understand the important details about the research, including at the very least: the way the interview is recorded; how the data will be stored; and the option to withdraw from the research at any point.

*Cognitive mapping*

Developed from a concept used in psychology, cognitive mapping is a deceptively simple process that can provide a wide range of data for a variety of use and non-use patterns, and has been used to great success by the ERIAL project (Green et al., 2014; Duke and Asher, 2012), Donna Lanclos (2013), and many more. The participant is given a sheet of paper with the research question at the top of the sheet (usually landscape orientated), and asked to create a ‘map’ of their answer over six minutes, changing the colour of their pen every two minutes. They then label up what they included in the map, and describe and discuss what they have created. The word ‘map’ can be interpreted as the participant wishes, so it could be a mind map and very text based; it could be something closer to a geographical map, detailing various spaces in relation to each other; or it could be a drawing of specific places and objects.

Because the participant has used different coloured pens during the process, you can draw some rough conclusions immediately about what is potentially the most important to them or the first place they go to. The labelling and discussion will provide more information about why exactly they were drawn first, why things included later in the map were left until that point, and what was omitted and why: certainly the omissions can be as interesting as what was included. The map is used to prompt questions and discover talking points, but having a few themes and questions prepared prior to data collection will help focus the discussion in the direction you want it to move towards. Using this method will help you learn about what works for your participants outside of the library as well as inside it, and while you may not wish to replicate other kinds of environments within the library, you can consider borrowing from their features to modify the library.

*Focus Groups*

Pretty much what it says on the tin, and not purely ethnographic as such; getting a number of people together to talk about using or not using the library is a potentially useful way to learn more about what works and doesn’t work in it. Focus groups is listed last as while it is a useful method, it is also a bit problematic. Approaching focus groups from an ethnographic perspective means they can be used as a way of collecting observational data, focussing on the participants’ experiences. Be aware that responses may differ in comparison to interviews depending on the personalities of the participants: they may influence each other’s opinions and responses somewhat, but that kind of interaction could be useful.

What the focus groups have that interviewing doesn’t is that level of conversation and discussion that can arise between multiple participants. They may feel more relaxed discussing things amongst each other rather than directly with the interviewer, but naturally this may also swing towards feeling less comfortable discussing things if there is a dominant opinion/speaker. That’s where your level of control over the discussion comes in, where you need to attempt to bring the quieter participants to the front of the discussion and give them the opportunity to speak as openly as possible. That’s not an easy task as it depends on the individuals as to whether they would feel comfortable enough to say something that contradicts what others have said, and it may be worth considering using focus groups before the interview process and then asking some of the participants to return for one-to-one interviewing.

One of the ways to help stop participants feeling that they can’t speak out easily is to start the group with a task. Delcore et al. (2009) used ‘bootlegging’ workshops, providing participants with a theme to focus on before asking them to break into smaller groups and create a skit about the related issues, or offering them the opportunity to design library spaces. Foster and Gibbons (2007) asked students to create their own designs for the library refurbishment, something that I’ve also done in my own research using LEGO, drawing materials and modelling clay. There’s still some level of difficulty in encouraging equal participation, but providing a specific task to work on in groups or individually and then gathering together to discuss what they worked on or created can generate discussion and provide more opportunities for each participant to speak.

**What do you do with the data?**

Once you’ve conducted your research, you should have a ton of data to go through. Many others have covered how to analyse the data collected (see the ERIAL project in particular, who provide an excellent toolkit on their website (Asher and Miller, 2011); also see Saldana (2013)) so I won’t go into too much detail here. There are as many routes for data analysis as there are for data collection, if not more: grounded theory, statistical analysis (in some cases), and thematic analysis, to name but a few, but here I’ll just talk more generally about ‘coding’ your data. Do you want to let the data drive your analysis, or do you want to look for specific themes or incidents? This choice will narrow down your approach straight away, but using an approach to data analysis like the routes listed above may be beyond the time and scope of your project.

The simple starting point is to begin coding: looking for and labelling any themes or concepts that appear in your data. Themes and concepts could be anything that is discussed, such as noise, food and drink, proximity to resources. Start broad, picking out as many concepts as you can and tracking their frequency, looking for commonality between them as well as the more unusual or unique occurrences. Then start refining them: look for duplication where themes are too close to be kept separate. You can still tag them as points of interest, variation or discussion. Once you have a set of codes to work with, start formally tagging your data with them, either manually using a highlighting technique, or using software. Which of these methods to use is very much a personal preference. I originally started coding my data using software, and found that I lost track of the content and got too concerned about the codes themselves. I found working in word processing software let me highlight and comment on the data just as well, but events and points of interest felt more overt and part of a bigger picture when I was reading through, rather than standalone moments separate from the rest. However, it is definitely down to what works best for the individual. Make sure you keep a record of how you code your data so that you can recreate the process and find your codes later more easily. After you’ve coded all your data, you need to collate the codes into themes, and then you can start to consider what the codes and themes tell you about the use of your library.

If you took the structured approach you will probably find the data guides you through the analytical process, as you’ve been focussed on what you want to find out from the start, and it is more a question of deciding what to do with what it shows you. Most of the data you collected from structured observations will often be number-based: counting the number of actions and when and where they happened will factor into some level of statistical analysis, often using software. However, you will probably also have additional notes and data related to the actions that will need some consideration, and will need to be examined alongside the statistics. If you carried out interviews as well, you can start to link up the behaviours and actions you’ve observed with the interview data and see if they contradict or confirm each other.

In the less structured approaches, you may find an inductive process more appropriate (i.e. letting the data lead how you code), or you may already have some ideas about the data you’ve collected and decide to focus on looking for specific issues or elements. You probably have already developed a sense of the data by this stage from preparing for interviews and possibly even have some preliminary coding completed, which should help start the analytical process proper.

**Critical approaches to your data**

I’d like to suggest at this point that you consider taking a critical standpoint when you are investigating your data during the coding process. A critical standpoint here means approaching the data from a specific socio-political perspective, so you could look at your data for any issues related to inequalities with regards to disability, gender, race, or social background (if you have engaged library users to allow you to conduct active participant observations). The changing landscape in libraries in the United Kingdom, be they public or academic, is shifting towards concerns over money rather than the needs of the library’s visitors. Library users are also changing, particularly in the Higher Education sector; we need only read the Higher Education Academy’s report (Temple et al., 2014) on the student experience following the introduction of fees to see how usage patterns are changing for some institutions. Public libraries in the United Kingdom are facing closures which potentially removes access to information, both on- and offline, for many people who don’t have access to information, computers or the internet elsewhere, which in turn can lead to a reduction in agency. Studying use or non-use of your library spaces can be used to help improve agency of users, be they public or academic library visitors, and help curb inequalities between different cultural groups. If you decide this is a route you want to take, I recommend looking at Schostak and Schostak (2008), but there is a lot of research out there that takes a critical standpoint and can help lead your planning and analysis, even if it isn’t based in libraries.

**Using your data**

However you look at your data, it’s important not to have a knee-jerk reaction and change everything immediately. I’d also suggest that if the data shows something you don’t like about usage patterns remember that it isn’t you using the library and that, depending on the usage patterns (obviously some types of behaviour are not acceptable at all!), you consider whether you need to rethink your perceptions of library use. Any changes you decide need to be considered for implementation should be fed back to the library users for their opinions before you take any further action and potentially spend money on them. Keep collecting data regularly if possible so that you can compare it over time, see if anything changes and whether any change might stem from any actions you take.

I’d also recommend very carefully considering changes where you borrow design features and service ethos from commercial ventures like coffee shops and book shops. Those companies exist to make money rather than provide a service, and while library users may like the environments they provide, you are also potentially communicating a specific message based on that commercial ethos that will influence how your library users interpret and use the spaces you provide. It isn’t to say that you should completely discard any changes that match the kind of designs they have, but the implications of incorporating that style on a wide scale need to be reflected upon.

**Conclusion**

I’ve summarised a few different routes you can take to conduct ethnographic based research in your workplace, and hopefully whetted your appetite to try them, as well as made you aware of the complexities of the process. The data you can collect using ethnographic techniques are extremely revealing, intriguing, exciting, and often difficult to obtain by other methods. There are lots of places you can learn more, and I provide some below. Look beyond the numbers to seek out the information that usually matters the most to the people using our libraries – what happens when they are in our buildings using them.

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