
So Everyday: Interviews with Academic Researchers to Understand Their Day-to-Day

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Abstract

Academic researchers work differently today than they did in the past. If we were to design a library from scratch to support today's academic researcher, what would it look like? How can we adapt our libraries now to best facilitate our researcher's academic lives? To help answer these questions, seven Cornell librarians partnered with Ithaca S+R to study the everyday lives of 21 faculty, graduate, and undergraduate researchers at Cornell University. These participants represented a wide range of disciplines, representing the humanities, social sciences, and sciences.

For one day, participants documented their whereabouts and activities, and then were interviewed using an ethnographic technique. Interviews were transcribed and coded, and major themes emerged to form a picture of the day-to-day lives of academic researchers. Although the qualitative methodology that we used took concerted effort and time, the outcomes of our research were as dynamic as the lives of the people who we studied. Other assessment methods would not have yielded such a deep understanding, and may have fallen short in addressing the transforming lives of researchers. This paper outlines the qualitative methodology that we used, which can be applied to many different populations and user groups to understand the needs, challenges, and variety of people that your library supports.

Introduction

In *Being an Academic*,¹ Joëlle Fanghanel discusses how academic work has changed over the last three decades in relation to social, political, economic, and technological factors. This will come as no surprise to academic researchers who are faced with increasingly complex work demands and growing bodies of literature. These researchers are adapting to changing digital environments while navigating a traditional academic cultural environment, and are often managing far-flung scholarly communities. But how do these changes drive the day-to-day needs of

academic researchers, and how might they continue to evolve in the future?

At Cornell University Library—a library system that supports an Ivy League, R1 research university with approximately 2,700 faculty, 22,000 students, and 94 PhD fields, and whose motto is “any person, any study”—we were wondering this very question. As the lives of academic researchers evolve, the libraries that support these populations must similarly adapt to facilitate their research. Furthermore, with this evolving landscape in mind, how can we, the library, best adapt to facilitate research in the academic pursuits of our researchers in terms of academic information, higher education as an industry, and institutional variables at Cornell University?

Kornelia Tancheva, our team lead and associate university librarian for research and learning services, wanted to find answers to the above questions. It was apparent that using an assessment technique such as a survey, which asks specific questions and might not uncover the underlying motivations of certain practices or actions, would not provide the type of insight we were seeking. To understand researchers' day-to-day needs, motivations, and challenges, Tancheva turned to an ethnographic methodology along with the help of Nancy Fried Foster, senior anthropologist at Ithaca S+R.

Tancheva determined that the best way to answer these questions was to gain insight into the lives of academic researchers at Cornell University to discern where the library might integrate into their research processes. To do this, she assembled a team of Cornell librarians who were trained in ethnographic interview skills to help answer her questions. Ultimately, the team sought to understand details of the day-to-day lives of academic researchers, such as their needs, struggles, motivations, and workflows—both academic and personal—to then identify intersections where the

library can adapt to better support members of this population. This is in part because she recognized that, in order to best support a population, the library needs to support the whole person, not just the academic component.

This paper reflects the experiences and observations of two of the team members who conducted this ethnographic research. Both authors were new to this qualitative research method and found the process and outcomes enlightening. Not only did the authors gain deep insight into their library patrons as researchers, but also in taking on the role of researchers themselves, they gained a deeper understanding of the work of their patrons, the work of their colleagues, and the qualitative methodology itself.

Methods

In January 2015, seven librarians (hereafter referred to as the research team) from Cornell University Library embarked on a project to understand the day in the life of a serious researcher at Cornell University in order to imagine what a library built from scratch for the 21st-century researcher might look like. The interdisciplinary research team had representation from the humanities (3), the social sciences (2), and the sciences (2).

Members of the research team participated in two training sessions with Nancy Fried Foster. The first was a day-long orientation to learn ethnographic interview techniques. As a part of the orientation, three researchers from Cornell University were recruited to be interviewed as practice participants. This allowed each member of the research team to participate in at least one practice interview. Though information gleaned during practice interviews was not included in the final analysis, the authors felt that the time spent learning how to interview a participant was invaluable to our training. Learning the art of interviewing takes practice, not just following a list of do's and don'ts. We found that our interviewing skills strengthened with each interview, and that we gained a stronger sense of when to pause and wait and when to ask another open-ended question. The second training occurred after we completed our interviews (more on that below).

The research team recruited 21 researchers (hereafter referred to as participants) at Cornell University for our study. Postings were made on Listservs, and many of the participants were

directly recruited based on personal relationships between the researchers and the participants. The participants represented various subject areas (8 from the humanities, 7 from the social sciences, and 6 from the sciences), with 15 women and 6 men participating, and included undergraduates (3), graduates (9), junior faculty (6), and senior faculty (3).

Participants were asked to pinpoint a day during which they planned to concentrate on research. Once they identified this research day, they met with the research team two times. The first time was for a brief introductory meeting between the participant and a research team member. This was held a day or two before the research day, during which the research team member explained the purpose of the study, gave the participant a map and a form on which to record their movements and activities for their research day, and answered any questions. During the introductory meeting, a follow-up interview was scheduled to be held immediately after the participant recorded their research day. It was important to schedule the follow-up interview to be held as soon as possible after the participant's research day to capture details before they were forgotten.

Between these two meetings, participants documented their activities for an entire day during which they focused on research—from waking up to going to sleep, whether academic or personal—as well as their whereabouts at the time of each activity.

At the follow-up interview, two research team members spent approximately one hour with the participant, and interviews focused on how the participant interacted with information during their day. Research team members were assigned to interview participants in an ad-hoc manner, and may or may not have had common disciplinary backgrounds with their research team partner or the participant being interviewed. Participants were asked to bring their form and map and/or anything else they used to keep track of their day. The participant then told the research team members about their day in chronological order. Research team members asked questions throughout the interview to understand the participant's practices in research. When asked to elaborate, participants often generalized, and research team members were careful to bring the conversation back to what happened on that day. At the end of the interview,

participants were given \$50 for participating in the study. Interviews were recorded with two audio recorders and transcribed by a professional transcription service.

Interview transcripts were coded using a grounded theory approach first introduced by Glaser and Strauss.² This qualitative research method uses coding and other procedures to help the researcher understand participants' behavior.³ With this grounded theory approach, members of the research team each read a subset of the interview transcripts. Guided again by Nancy Fried Foster of Ithaka S+R⁴ in May 2015, the research team met for its second training session, a one-and-a-half day exercise to begin to identify themes in the transcripts. The process of identifying themes continued over many meetings, and after much discussion, codes were agreed upon. Transcripts were again divided equally so that each transcript was coded by at least two research team members who then compared notes. Major coding fields included: (1) academic activities; (2) seeking information; (3) use of library resources; (4) self-discipline/self-management (e.g., tactics employed to manage researcher's own habits, motivation, and distraction); (5) space/work environment; (6) circum-academic activities (e.g., networking, use of social media for academic purposes); (7) obstacles (e.g., interruptions in work); (8) brainwork (e.g., thinking and sensemaking); and (9) technology use. For more information on major coding schemes and results, see Tancheva, et al.⁵

Interdisciplinarity Leads to Richer Outcomes

The interdisciplinary nature of both research team members and participants brought rich outcomes to this project, which were experienced at each phase (implementation, analysis and write-up). Research team members gained insights about the academic research activities of those in other disciplines. For example, the constraints of archival work of historians was revealed to a science librarian during an interview, and was something that the science librarian had not known to consider previous to her involvement in this study. These insights first began to occur when research team members would participate in an interview of a participant with a background other than their own, and it was magnified during the analysis and write-up phases of the study.

Of particular importance in the qualitative methodology that we used were the different

viewpoints of research team members during the interview. Because team members often had different backgrounds and therefore different points of view, interviewers complemented each other in asking questions of the participant that the other may not have thought of, which brought a deeper understanding of the participant's narrative. Although we paid no heed to subject backgrounds of interviewers and participants, a mix of backgrounds often proved useful in questioning during interviews.

The interdisciplinary nature of this project also became very apparent during the analysis phase of the study. We quickly realized the difficulty in getting all members of the research team to agree on how to code the transcripts. Although it was established at the start of the project that we would work out a coding scheme, working our way through the process of establishing a scheme was a process in itself. This may be due in part to the interdisciplinary nature of our team, although it probably has something to do with human nature as well. In order to move forward in this phase, strong communication skills and an effort to reach an understanding was necessary for all members of the research team.

Interpretation of the transcripts was another area in which surprising differences—and insights—became apparent. Many participants described processes or behaviors that were foreign to some members of the research team. Reading through these narratives helped research team members from different disciplines develop an awareness of the day-to-day research in other disciplines. In addition, the comments or insights on these behaviors from the subject librarian also helped research team members from other backgrounds understand a particular practice in a new light, like seeing something from a different angle for the first time.

Finally, composing the final report, which was shared with Cornell University Library members and was published on the Ithaka S+R website,⁶ was an awakening of a different sense. As the research team collaboratively wrote the final report, we realized that we each had a different way of envisioning how to present the report. These differences were especially apparent along disciplinary backgrounds—research team members with a science background had a much different vision about layout and prose than those with a humanities background—and compromise was essential in reaching a meaningful

endpoint. The same can be said when it came to drawing conclusions from the research and finding a way forward.

Ultimately, we realized that the interdisciplinary nature of both the participants and team members brought an unexpected layer of outcomes and conclusions that would not have become apparent had we not included research team members of diverse backgrounds. We believe that the outcomes of our project were amplified by the interdisciplinary nature of research team members. With this in mind, we recommend others who utilize this approach to gather a team of individuals with diverse backgrounds.

What We Learned

“When you want to know about the lived experience of fellow human beings”—what life is like for an academic researcher in the 21st century—“you just can’t beat unstructured interviewing.”⁷ The in-depth interviews we conducted with our researchers provided us with a wealth of information that could not have been gathered in a less resource-intensive method like conducting a survey. The research team spent multiple days in training and held several team meetings in order to work on the project. The scheduling alone was not an easy task to accomplish with seven different schedules to accommodate. In addition to the time spent with our participants, in the training and in discussion with other members of the research team, each individual spent considerable time going through the transcripts multiple times. Was the time worth it? In our opinion, it was.

Not only did we get a peek into the lives of our patrons, which deepened our understanding of them across disciplines and ranks, but we also learned more about our fellow research team members. As many of the team members were subject librarians, the opportunity to see what research is like in a different area was not only interesting, but it also opened discussions among team members about search best practices and subject context. This unexpected but beneficial outcome of the project has led to some interesting cross-disciplinary discussions and possible research projects within our library.

The research project also allowed the team members to learn and practice what was a new research methodology for most of us. Learning to conduct in-depth interviews has helped us learn new

approaches to conducting our reference interviews and informational interviews. We do not claim to be expert interviewers (on the contrary, we wished we had done just a few more practice interviews before diving into the real thing for our project), but have certainly learned new ways of listening and encouraging the participants (or patrons) to share their thoughts with us.

Because this qualitative research method was new to many of us, it was invaluable to have had Nancy Fried Foster as our guide. Not only was she well practiced in ethnographic research, but she also had experience specifically with libraries and the use of the “Day in the Life” method. Her insight and guidance gave us confidence that we could go out and gather good information with these interviews. We feel that if a librarian is interested in doing a similar project and has no experience with such qualitative methods of research, it may save you time, money, and effort in the end to go to an expert to get you started.

The authors also found that this method, as revealing as it is, is also incredibly time intensive. From scheduling meetings for the team to scheduling interviews with participants, it helped to have administrative support for this project. The most time-consuming aspect of the work was the coding process. Getting seven people to agree on a definition of a code takes time, so it is important to try to schedule this activity during a time of the year where the researchers are not also busy with their day-to-day work, such as the beginning of the semester.

Finally, we found that the most challenging part of the research was to figure out how to use the results from our research to answer our question: If we were to design a library from scratch to support today’s academic researcher, what would it look like? Having gained insight into a day in the life of our 21 researchers, we organized the information to reflect the research process, academic networking, and self-management. Based on these themes, we suggested two possible service platforms the library could offer the researcher of the 21st century: (1) Make our online presence customizable to the researcher’s idiosyncratic research method with the creation of an app store; and (2) think of the library as a social research hub. Interestingly, Cambridge University Library hired design company Modern Human,⁸ and independently came up with a similar idea for an app store. Is this what the library of the 21st century

will look like? We do not know, but it is a place for research libraries to start the conversation.

Conclusions

In *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*⁹ the authors state, “In order to get access to everyday events and actions and understand their meaning for the participants, the researcher has to spend time with the people and engage with their lives.” We embraced this sentiment in order to understand the day-to-day lives of the researchers that our university supports. By doing so, we were also able to identify key steps we can take towards meeting the needs of academic researchers in the 21st century.

In summary, the use of this qualitative assessment method led to surprising results, both about the participants that we set out to study and about our colleagues on the research team itself. More importantly, the methodology that we used helped us to develop a story about our study population that reflected the complexities, idiosyncrasies, and the human aspects that we would not have captured otherwise. This methodology can be widely applied to research about libraries and the populations that they support.

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