



OTHER ARTICLES

Anthropologists in the library: a review of *Studying Students*

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review the book *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester* edited by Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons.

Design/methodology/approach – The review first examines the methods used in the Rochester study, and then considers the conclusions for their local implications as well as their meaning for the library profession.

Findings – The Rochester study should serve as a wake-up call for librarians that imagine they understand their user-base. Over and over again in this book the authors note how much they learned about the students after studying them systematically and how surprising they found the results. It seems unlikely that the Rochester experience is unique.

Originality/value – The transformation that took place at the University of Rochester Libraries should serve as an example for the profession as a whole.

Keywords Social anthropology, Libraries, User studies

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

I have often heard librarians tell me that they understood student needs. Librarians who interact with students regularly have a sense that they know them well. *Studying Students* (edited by Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons) overturns this notion:

The project was a wake-up call. We saw over and over again how much we did not know about our students and their academic endeavors. But, perhaps more important, we saw how often our personal assumptions about the students, which have guided years of decisions, were incorrect (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 81).

The benefit of an anthropological study is that it can provide concrete information about the diverse populations for whom library resources are intended. Research libraries often engage in scholarly self-examination. The LIBQUAL[1] studies are an example of a systematic attempt at understanding how our users regard the service we provide, but LIBQUAL does not reach the people who ought to be at the reference desk and simply never go there. The Rochester study does.

I have used and have advocated anthropological research for libraries since I became editor of *Library Hi Tech* over a decade ago. The work of Bonnie Nardi and Vicky O'Day (1999) represented a milestone in the application of anthropological methods to library issues. The Rochester study by Nancy Foster and Susan Gibbons is a second milestone, not merely because of the methodology, but because of the



professional staff's personal involvement – roughly 30 percent helped in one way or another (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 55). An anthropologist did not study libraries at Rochester – rather an anthropologist taught librarians how to apply ethnographic methodologies for themselves.

Having an anthropologist on staff has made it possible for library staff to learn many different techniques borrowed or adapted from a wide range of anthropological and ethnographic studies. It has also helped us develop a toolkit to use whenever we find ourselves with a question that we could answer if only we knew more about our students, our faculty members, or our own staff (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 81).

If this catches on, it can have transformative implications.

This review has three parts:

- (1) a look at the methodology used in the Rochester study in order to suggest how other libraries can copy it;
- (2) a look at the results and the degree to which the results can be generalized; and
- (3) my own analysis for the implications of this study on the library and information worlds.

Methodology

Anthropological methodology relies heavily on observation and interaction with the groups and cultures under study in order to collect their own stories in their own words. This is more challenging than it may sound. As lead anthropologist, Nancy Foster provided a number of established techniques to help this process.

Observation and interview training

Foster sent librarian participants out in pairs to sit discreetly and observe the activity around them. This kind of explicit observation heightens awareness of the surrounding environment and helps the inexperienced observer grow accustomed to noticing and recording details.

After interviews the librarian participants also took part in a co-viewing exercise.

Coviewing is a technique used to bring people together in a setting where data from the study can be collectively viewed and discussed (see Suchman and Triff 1991; Brun-Cottan and Wall 1995). In our case, staff involved in the project were brought together to watch videotaped interviews of students jointly and then engage in discussions about content from the interviews (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 56).

This offered a chance to see how an interview went and to talk about what might be done better, as well as to hear the responses.

I am a camera

Christopher Isherwood used the camera metaphor in *Goodbye to Berlin* (Isherwood, 1939). The Rochester study made the metaphor real by putting cameras in the hands of students and asking them to photograph specific objects of importance in their lives, including the computer they use in the library, what they take to class, their favorite place to study, their dorm room, their favorite part of the day, and 15 other topics (20 total). (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 41) The photos provided a framework for interviewing the students about their daily lives.

The Rochester study provided the students with throw-away cameras. This had a few disadvantages: the flash sometimes failed, developing the film added a step that took time, and the images had to be digitized. This created a time gap between the photography and the interview that left some students struggling to remember details. The cameras did, however, equalize resources for those who did not have a digital camera of their own.

Time and space

The Rochester study used anthropologist Michael Moffatt's (1989) method of asking students to draw maps of the campus to help to "understand their cultural construction of the landscape" (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 48). The maps add a spatial dimension to the place the physical library inhabits in the student's world. The Rochester study provided the students with printed campus maps to chart their movements. This simplified the task for the students, though it left out potentially interesting information about how the students' sketches represented distances.

For our project, we melded Moffatt's approach with another anthropological technique, the time allocation study, which we knew through the work of Daniel Gross (1984) (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 48).

The students recorded the times on the maps so that the times correlated visually with their spatial movements. This also helped in the later interviews. The technique had a low impact on the students' time and proved to be a rich source of information about their behavior.

Workshops

The Rochester study involved students in "charrette-style workshops" where they participated in specific library-related design tasks. In this case the task involved a \$5 million renovation project for the building:

The design charrettes taught us two important lessons. One is that gathering student input need not be a burdensome, time-consuming process . . . The second lesson reinforced what we have learned throughout the Undergraduate Research Project, which is that we, as librarians, cannot assume we know how our students do their academic work or what they need (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 29).

Such workshops both garnered student input and had an educational function in giving students experience with high-stakes decisions.

Rewards

While some students would doubtless have participated in the Rochester study without any incentives, their numbers would likely have been lower and the follow-through more sporadic. The rewards for participation tended to be simple and gimmick-free, mainly food and small amounts of cash that varied depending on how complex a task was. Paying the students even a small amount created an implicit contractual obligation that improved their task-completion rate and perhaps also gave students a sense that the library cared about their input.

Results

The results of the Rochester study need to be considered at two levels. One is specifically for the University of Rochester's libraries. Another is the more general potential implication for US and international libraries.

Local implications

Anthropological studies are inherently local. The anthropologist studies a particular place at a particular time. As Clifford Geertz (1988) wrote:

The highly situated nature of ethnographic description – this ethnographer, in this time, in this place, with these informants, these commitments, and these experiences, a representative of a particular culture, a member of a certain class – gives to the bulk of what is said a rather take-it-or-leave-it quality.

For the University of Rochester libraries the detailed results from the study are clearly relevant. Staff have a much better idea of what students want from the library, when they use it, and how they would ideally reorganize its space and website. Instead of bland assertions about what their students ought to want, the librarians have concrete evidence from the students themselves.

Anthropological studies like this one make no statistical claim to represent a particular population within a particular error-term. Librarians could reasonably claim that other students might have different opinions and different work patterns, since no attempt was made to get a random sample of the student population. Persuasion in anthropology rests largely on providing a convincing description. It seems clear from the number of librarians participating in the study and writing chapters for the book that the evidence presents a convincing portrait of their student body.

The libraries have made changes to their services based on early results from the study, the most notable of which is the "Night Owl" project that extended reference desk from 9.00 p.m. to 11.00 p.m., based on information that students did much of their paper-writing after the reference desk closed.

What does make these data interesting is that we have usage statistics for our regular working hours (9 a.m. to 9 p.m.) for the same days (Table 3.2). With them, we see an interesting jump in activity during the extended reference hours on Sunday, April 23: questions per hour during the day had averaged only 1.4, but from 7 to 11 p.m. we were helping an average of 3.3 people per hour (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 18).

The same rates did not persist on the subsequent Sunday, however, as the end of the semester approached and (presumably) student assignments changed. In any case this night owl service will continue, the library web site will adapt to student suggestions, and the space renovations will build on student input. The Rochester study had a clear local impact.

Potential generalizations

Generalizing from anthropological evidence can be risky. Validity depends on how similar the populations and cultures are to those in other localities. The University of Rochester is a relatively elite and competitive institution, not exactly Harvard, but certainly in a different class than compass-point state universities with mainly local students. It is also very much a US institution. Some of the characteristics may apply to students across Lake Ontario in Canada, or to my own students at Humboldt

University in Berlin, but many do not. My German students, for example, seem not to have constantly hovering “helicopter” parents. Nancy Foster and her colleagues are quite careful not to theorize in advance of the facts, and readers should be as well.

Nonetheless librarians at a broad range of schools should be able to draw implications about their own student populations. In this article I consider four areas: branding, communication, information access, and dependence and independence.

Branding

The results of the Rochester study suggest that librarians have failed badly when it comes to branding ourselves as information professionals, at least in the minds of these students. They cannot tell a librarian from a latte maker:

Students rarely make distinctions between the types of staff needed in the library. Instead, they include a generic staff person who is expected to provide reference assistance, check out materials, answer IT questions, and brew a great latte (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 25).

... our research shows that students do not necessarily know that reference and circulation are two different desks, designed for different purposes. They expect that anyone behind any desk will be receptive to a variety of requests (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 76).

In so far as they recognize an information-role for librarians the association is primarily with “books” or “print”:

I would talk to a librarian when I need to find books. I can’t imagine anything else I would need them for ... (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 10).

As one person put it, “In the minds of students, librarians equal print” (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 60).

The words “books” and “print” could simply be careless language for any written materials in paper or electronic form, but it could well also mean literally what they say and imply that librarians mainly work with warehoused paper.

In any case the students tend to turn to an alternative professional source for help finding information:

... we have learned in our research that students look to their professors as the preeminent authorities on research paper resources (see Chapter 2). But we also know that faculty members are often poor users of such finding aids as online library catalogs and databases (Barry 1997; see Chapter 1) (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 77).

It seems unsurprising that students would turn to professors as the authority for relevant information – professors do the grading – and unless librarians establish a close partnership with faculty, students are likely to continue to treat them as second-best information providers.

Communication

It seemed reasonable to provide services like instant messaging that students use constantly to provide service. Unfortunately it did not work:

... we learned that, although students are in constant touch with each other, their parents, and friends via instant messaging, our generic library IM name was not an effective way to reach them – or rather, for them to reach us. It got almost no use (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 19).

The Rochester study did not explore the reasons why students did not think of instant messaging as a way to reach library services. Perhaps it does not matter, since neither instant messaging nor chat seem to offer a comfortable environment for the reference interview.

Information access

When the students suggested revisions to the Library website, they wanted information tailored to “their personal needs and visual preferences” (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 37). “What they clearly did not want were information silos” such as the existing library-resources only structure (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 38). This could seem selfish of them if one forgets that the technology for customization is well-known and widely available on commercial sites like Google.

While librarians often fear that students turn only to Google, the Rochester study suggests “that the typical student in our survey sample was familiar with databases other than Google” (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 8). Students seem to like the extreme simplicity of Google’s screen design. Foster suggests how librarians might take advantage of this:

We might not want our students to use Google all the time, but giving them Google-like simplicity in the library interface – on top of functionality that supports precision searching and advanced forms of browsing – would certainly be desirable (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 77).

The Rochester study does not find that students are completely technology-oriented:

Some of the students in our project needed a partial escape from computer technology itself, preferring, for example, to print out articles to read for a paper or print a paper draft to proofread rather than doing it entirely on the computer (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 69).

Of course printing may have less to do with escaping technology than with the relative transport ease of a few pieces of paper instead of a heavy laptop.

Dependence and independence

Foster takes an historical view to explain the difference between librarian service expectations and the relative reluctance of students to ask for help. Librarians in their 50s in the USA grew up in an era where many stores provided service and attendants even pumped gas at gas stations. The world that contemporary students experience is quite different:

Now that self-checkout is available at many supermarkets and discount stores, it is possible to conduct an entire transaction without human contact. Given the change in the day-to-day service experience, it is hardly a surprise that today’s students have a vastly different concept of service than librarians – or that they feel comfortable seeking answers to their questions on Wikipedia, WebMD, and Google (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 75).

One of Foster’s most interesting conclusions is that students want a single point of service:

If they want a need filled, they want to go to a font of all sorts of service, a sort of universal service point, a physical Google. In other words, they want Mommy (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 76).

This “mommy model of service” does not mean, as Foster makes clear, that they want their mothers *per se*, but rather a service that does not force them to disaggregate the components of the problem they face. Whether it is really good for the students to provide such service may be a valid concern. Nonetheless it explains some student behavior.

Implications for libraries

The Rochester study should serve as a wake-up call for librarians that imagine they understand their user-base. Over and over again in this book the authors note how much they learned about the students after studying them systematically and how surprising they found the results. It seems unlikely that the Rochester experience is unique.

Certainly other libraries can make use of and (with appropriate caution) generalize from the results of the Rochester study, but this does not mean that the work is over: quite the opposite. The user-base for each library is unique, and the more that librarians study the various groups, sub-groups, local cultures and micro-cultures that use their resources, the better they will be able to serve their needs.

This does not necessarily mean that libraries should simply give users anything they want. We may, to use Foster’s term, decline to serve as “mommy” to solve their information problems. A good mother, after all, helps its child grow up and our student users may need some day to be able to solve information problems on their own. Our job is to learn how to reach them and teach them.

This study shows libraries how they can do their own anthropological studies of their own user populations. Hiring a professional anthropologist is certainly one way to start, but it is not the only alternative. Many academic libraries have staff with anthropology backgrounds, perhaps from their undergraduate training. The anthropological literature is also readily accessible to most librarians. It requires no special mathematical or technical training, but rather a mindset about how to view the world in which we live.

In short, the transformation that took place at the University of Rochester Libraries should serve as an example for the profession as a whole. Thirty percent of the staff at the libraries temporarily became anthropologists and used anthropological tools to become better librarians. Others can too.

The work is not over at Rochester:

In late 2006, the River Campus Libraries began a two-year research project on graduate students. With generous funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, we will delve into the academic practices of graduate students, with a particular focus on the research and authoring of dissertations, using many of the methodologies that proved so successful in our undergraduate project (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 63).

This is a good example of how a library continues to look at distinct cultural groups within its user population. It is easy to imagine further studies involving faculty, research assistants, administrators and perhaps even librarians, who use library resources as heavily as anyone.

The current Rochester study is a mere beginning. They plan to do more and other libraries should as well.

Note

1. See: www.libqual.org/

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