

In and Out of the Rabbit Hole: Unpacking the Research Proposal

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Commentary

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Introduction

The research proposal is almost a fairy tale document. And I don't mean it is fantasy or beyond belief (although some probably are), but rather that, at the time of composing, a research proposal is not quite research, not quite fiction, and a whole lot of optimism about a happy ending. The happy ending is not guaranteed, either.

There are research proposals (ideas on the back of a napkin) and RESEARCH PROPOSALS (a far more formal proposal for either a PhD or large funding grant such as a SSHRC grant). I think, for most of us here at the C-EBLIP Fall Symposium, specifically practitioner researchers, the research proposal will fall somewhere between these two extremes. I suspect that most research proposals written by practitioner researchers are shorter in length, possibly from 1 to 3 pages.

For this presentation I am going to share with you the process I've been going through for my latest research project (working title – Walking the walk: Librarians sharing their research data).

Composing research proposals remains one of the invisible or “inside the black box” parts of research. In an attempt to unpack and refine the process, I will briefly walk through the steps and missteps, including some highlights of conversations with people I consulted for advice, background readings, and pre-research that I have done.

The method I am using within this presentation is autoethnography. For those of you not familiar with this method a concise definition is qualitative research where the researcher/author utilizes a method of written self-reflection to connect and position their story and experiences to a broader cultural, social and political context (Maréchal, 2010). Briefly, I will use my

experience writing a research proposal for a specific research project to illustrate some of the benefits and drawbacks of investing time, itself a valuable resource, in advance of undertaking a research project.

I learned about autoethnography as a research method from an Anthropology – Fine Arts student who was writing her master’s thesis. She was examining her place as a Metis artist – defining what it meant to be Metis, how the work of Metis artists was often not identified as such, and what that “erasure” meant – a very political as well as a very personal work. Working with her led me to believe there were many more places where this method could be applied with fruitful results.

As I was looking at my way of creating a research proposal, I was also situating it within the body of practitioner-researcher scholarship, even more specifically within academic librarian practitioners. My work is not as political, nor as personal, but I do think it contributes to the small c cultural definition of librarian researchers.

My research process begins with an idea. The first concrete step I take with my idea is to conduct a little “pre-research” – a literature review that takes absolutely no more than 30 minutes. That amount of time seems to be enough for me to determine whether the idea has already been investigated and my question answered, or to determine whether I feel there is a gap in the literature. Maybe the last work that was done on the question was so old as to no longer be relevant. Maybe it was done in a setting that was not directly comparable to the one I was considering. Maybe the idea is worth taking to the next step.

If an idea is “testable” outside the literature, I do a short test. Sometimes this involves sending a couple of emails seeking information. Maybe I ask a few people I know whether they know of information about my idea. I have found it pays to beware of “good ideas” – often many people

have the same good idea at the same time and sometimes my ideas are not as fresh as I think they are. I have learned the hard way it is far better to spend a short amount of time checking out an idea – the quick and dirty lit review, followed by a very small sample to test an idea is far, far better than a few weeks (or more) developing a fully-fledged research proposal only to discover it has some fatal flaw – like it’s been done before, or someone else is currently doing it.

There is no single right way to write a research proposal. There is no one right way to create a research proposal, but there appears to be widespread support that research proposals are a useful tool (Fain, 2013). Yesterday, I learned a new-to-me tool for creating research proposals – identifying institutional stakeholders, services librarians and the library could be using or offering to support the stakeholders, then figuring out what method would be appropriate to study that (Henderson, 2016).

Many things will influence what your research proposal will look like. Don’t get hung up on the form of it, unless the form is important to the proposal’s purpose, such as a funding application where you will be judged not only on the intellectual content of your proposal, but also on your ability to write well and follow instructions. In those specific instances, follow the instructions closely. Make it easier for the adjudicators to say yes to your proposal.

A really good question is why write a research proposal? Why not just jump right in and do a full literature review, or start designing that questionnaire to circulate, or pull down the datasets from your ILS? A research proposal gets the idea out of your head and into tangible form. As I mentioned, more formal research proposals – such as those you might submit for funding – have greater structure. However, all useful research proposals have a few things in common. Without simply being a checklist, it can also provide you with a list of “to-do” items to nudge you forward at the times you might

feel stuck. It may contain questions you will need to wrestle with as your work through an ethics proposal. It may help you define what your answer will look like so you will know when your research is complete. Some other benefits to having a research proposal include having a document you could use to

- Enlist research partners
- Get validation for your idea
- Find gaps in your plan
- Begin to build a network of support for your research (colleagues send you literature you didn't know existed).

This stage is one I call scary, because this is the point at which I really start to talk about my idea with OTHER PEOPLE. It's one thing to write something down in the privacy of my personal notebook. It's entirely something different to share that with others, even if the others are friendly, kind people who want to see me do well and want to help me.

There are some drawbacks to having a research proposal (Really...):

- Use all your time creating the "Perfect Research Proposal"
- Be criticized for your idea
- Fall into the comparison trap (their research proposal was better than mine).

There will always one more question that needs to be answered to "complete" the research proposal – one more cost that needs to be noted, one more timeline that needs to be fleshed out - and so on until your idea becomes old and stale. A research proposal is a tool, not an end product. I believe having a research proposal is more useful than not having one only up to the

point where it (the research proposal) has ceased to move your research forward.

If you don't have a formal research partner at least have a trusted colleague who will help you do reality checks. Believe it or not – trusted colleagues are the best support system for doing research. Sometimes it is even better if your trusted colleague don't "know" what you are researching so they can ask you the naïve, direct questions that you had glossed over or hadn't thought about – yes, reality checks are hugely important. Even if they aren't a research partner, if you have a colleague who will call you on it when you go down the rabbit hole or on the wild goose chase or pick your favorite metaphor for getting sidetracked, then you are indeed a lucky researcher.

In closing, written research proposals can support the research process. I encourage you to try incorporating them into your practice. Feel free to discard them if they don't provide you with any value.

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