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Communicating through research

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“We conclude that PhD candidates’ use of online tools is not so much a question of skill proficiency as it is about the tools’ immediate utility in relation to candidates’ time-pressured and habitual ways of researching” (Dowling and Wilson, 2015, p. 1).

Secker (2012) identified the rewarding and challenging nature of working with a diverse range of research students with specific and individual requirements and advocates for personalised library services for them. I work as a Research Librarian at City, University of London providing services, resources and training to research students and staff in a multi-disciplinary context.

Being conscious that doctoral students are very busy and may have teaching, employment and other responsibilities, I have utilised different methods of communication with these students. In particular, I would like to outline how undertaking a piece of research connected with my role enabled me to communicate directly with doctoral students.

I have recently completed an MA in Academic Practice (a teaching qualification) in the Department of Learning Enhancement and Development (LEaD) at City, University of London.

My reasons for undertaking the Masters were:

- The opportunity to undertake a small-scale, research project relevant to my work.
- To ensure my research skills and awareness of literature were updated.
- To experience being a researcher.
- To have the opportunity to communicate directly with and gain insight from doctoral students.

A great benefit of undertaking the project was the opportunity to conduct some research-based practice and put myself in the position of being a researcher (Pickton, 2013). My dissertation topic was: *“Which factors may contribute to differences in the digital literacy skills of research students?”*

As part of my research, I conducted a literature review where I considered definitions of digital literacy. These ranged from accessing information via computers (Gilster, 1997) to the skills and tools required to retrieve, manage, curate and share information in different formats (Martin, 2006) to being a digitally capable citizen (Jisc, 2015). The literature review was helpful to place digital literacy in context but I was aware it would not fully answer my research question. I therefore adopted additional research methods and surveyed 27 doctoral students at City using an anonymised online survey and interviewed 8 of those students. This approach was very rewarding as it allowed me both to experience being a researcher and to communicate my research in writing, through the survey and in the interviews.

The most enjoyable and useful part of my research project was the opportunity to communicate with doctoral students. This took the form of semi-structured interviews with a sample of 8 students who were studying across different disciplines and were at different stages of their doctorate. I found that the students were generous with their time in answering the questions, interested in the project and that they regarded me as a researcher. This helped to build relationships in some cases which continued after the end of the project and it allowed me to obtain feedback on our Library Services for researchers. It also gave me a greater understanding of the challenges they face for example with the choice of research methods, data analysis, time pressures and how to keep up to

date with new research being published. I also feel I can advocate more strongly for the students' needs for example with regard to their training requirements.

“By becoming research active the practitioner researcher gains first hand experience of the research process, increases their familiarity with research tools, builds empathy and credibility with researchers, and can foster profitable collaborative relationships” (Pickton, 2013, p. 11).

In March 2017, we were refreshing our Library Research Guides and transferring them to a new template. We decided to try and broadly map our *Library Services for Research* Guide (City, University of London Library Services, 2016a) to basic stages of the research process such as finding information, literature searching, managing information etc. We decided to link our general research guide with our subject based guides so that subject specific resources could be explored as part of the research process. I then worked with colleagues to produce the content.

During my research project, I found that there were differences in the way that students wished to communicate online and create a research presence for themselves, particularly using social media. Half of the students interviewed used social media tools such as LinkedIn for employability, Twitter to network with other researchers online and for conferences and current awareness and Facebook for more social and emotional support and advice. The other half of the interviewees did not wish to use social media tools in their research or to have an online research presence themselves (with the exception of having a professional page on the university website for example). They felt that the information provided in a social media context was of lower academic quality and the tools themselves could be distracting and time consuming (Acord and Harley, 2013).

Pickton (2013) found that having experience of the research process assists librarians to develop bespoke support to researchers at appropriate times. With this in mind, I decided to create a new *Research Impact* Guide (City, University of London Library Services, 2016b) which was based on a guide from another university. This is partly written from the point of view of identifying highly cited research articles and high impact journals in particular fields. It also covers individual researcher impact and developing an online research profile (eg. using ORCID and Researcher ID) and academic networking and sharing websites such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu. I felt that in some way, this guide was a continuation of my research project in respect of enabling students or staff to consider their potential research impact and decide whether to develop an online research presence or not.

Conclusion

Overall, I found that trying to understand students' needs and challenges through conducting research to be a highly rewarding and insightful process. Being a part time researcher myself, and having to choose research methods, conduct a literature review in a current and changing area and design, produce and analyse the survey and interview outcomes helped me to identify more with the students. I have a greater awareness of the doctoral research lifecycle as I spoke to students at different stages of their research careers (Spezi, 2016). I am more conscious of the challenges and time pressures faced by research students (Dowling and Wilson, 2015) and believe I can more strongly advocate for them and create resources and training to support them. An added benefit has been that I have updated my research skills and knowledge of qualitative methods in particular which is an advantage when working with research students and staff.

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