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Imagination, exciting mixes and the improvement of information research

"It is my contention", writes Paul Sturges in a recent article (Sturges 2012), that much of LIS research at all levels, throughout the world, is dull formulaic and often disgracefully bad". This is bad for research, of course, but "given that LIS is a practical discipline, it is something of a professional disaster. The great virtue of LIS research is that first it deals with issues that are both fundamental (how human beings interface with information of all kinds) and immediate and urgent (the effectiveness of technologies and systems). Its second strength is that the LIS research literature addresses communities of practitioners – people who look to it for guidance in their professional lives. LIS researchers can make a difference much more than can their fellow researchers in predominantly academic disciplines". Finally, he adds that "the almost universal lack of inspiration is depressing".

It is some consolation that, as a board member of *Journal of Documentation*, Paul excludes this journal from the worst of his criticism, allowing that "*Journal of Documentation*, for instance, consistently publishes an exciting mix of material with many different approaches to LIS". Nonetheless, his criticisms will give pause for thought to anyone involved in library/information research or education, or who cares about the relation between research and practice in our subject.

His basic contention is that much information research lacks imagination, which he associates with openness, unpredictability, making connections, exploring unlikely looking possibilities, and a willingness to stretch, or even break, norms and rules. What it not suffice is "hard work [and] the following of a set of rules obtained from a textbook on research technique"; there is sometimes "such a slavish respect for rules and conventions that excellent work is sadly predictable".

These trenchant criticisms are expanded and exemplified by analysis of five aspects of the LIS research literature. There is a disappointing lack of imagination and ambition in the *topics* chosen: students choosing dissertation topics, in particular, are all too often "frighteningly conventional". Whenever possible, a researcher should ask "is there a question I really want to answer?" and use this as a basis for topic choice. *Theory* is sometimes wrongly used or over-used, and can lead to unnecessary obscurity; research results should be accessible to a wide audience, though this is certainly not a reason for avoiding theories and models. Research should be grounded in a wide reading of the *literature*, and not only the library/information literature. Imagination is needed in the choice of appropriate *methods*; the over-use of questionnaire surveys in information research amounts to a form of "slavery". And *findings* need to go beyond an identification of what is interesting, to show what is significant, and why. This involves time and imagination, both of which may be short as deadlines for the end of the research approach.

This splendid article should be made compulsory reading for all novice researchers, especially for students embarking on masters dissertations and doctoral theses, and also for jaded old hands. As for *Journal of Documentation*, we will try to live up to Paul's commendation, and continue with as much of a novel and imagination mix of material as we can.

David Bawden

References

Sturges, P. (2012), Imagination in LIS research, *Library and Information Research*, 36, no. 113, 15-23 [online] available at <http://www.lirjournal.org.uk/lir/ojs/index.php/lir/article/view/530>