_____

Letter to the Editor: Comments on Sturges, "Imagination in LIS research"

Christine Jean Urquhart

Sadly, students choosing a dissertation topic are frighteningly conventional. All too frequently they come to a potential supervisor saying something like 'I want to research student responses to a particular service or technology and I want to use a questionnaire'. Fellow students form an easily accessible community, response to an existing service is nice and specific, and everyone does a questionnaire, don't they?

(Sturges, 2012, 17)

I am surprised that this is Paul Sturges' experience, and I would respectfully suggest that if the teaching up to that point has been unimaginative and unchallenging, the reaction of the students to the demands of a dissertation topic will simply reflect the way in which they have been taught. If we encourage students to regurgitate, unchallenged, the opinions of the "great and good" in essays, then LIS academics cannot complain that students are ill prepared to undertake research. In my experience, the first discussion between potential supervisor and student should aim at finding a suitable research question from the problem area that interests the student. And for me, working with distance learning students, there often were problems around the workplace that deserved attention. More often the difficulty was to persuade students away from the idea that it was going to be easy to prove that A resulted from B, or that correlation did not necessarily show causation.

The problem about questionnaires is not that "everyone does them". In fact, we might know a lot more about the users of our services if everyone did do more questionnaires, but we have to do a lot more to ensure that the questionnaires used are validated. It is acceptable to replicate someone else's questionnaire (preferably validated), as that gives the researcher some more assured basis for comparison and aggregation of findings. In a chapter on quantitative research I have explained why library surveys often tell us very little – our sample sizes are too small to be able to say that 65% (plus or minus 5%) of users preferred this or that service (Urquhart, 2013). More likely, the confidence interval is not 5% either way, but more than 10%. However, by combining the results of the same survey

_____

Author

Christine Urquhart is Senior Lecturer at Aberystwyth University.

Email: cju@aber.ac.uk

_____

questions, across similar samples, some meta-analysis of the findings might tell us with more certainty what is going on. It is not lack of imagination that is the problem for LIS research, it is the mistaken idea among students that they have to design their own questionnaire to be original.

Sturges goes on to state "Surveys generally tell you what you wanted to be told in the first place; and you can use statistical tests of significance to 'prove' that what you have been told is true." The phrasing here is unfortunate, and seems to show a misunderstanding of hypothesis testing and tests of statistical significance.

On the use of theory, Sturges states: "The philosophising is seductive and articles from Scandinavian and German colleagues can often contain more arcane argumentation than actual reporting of investigations and practical findings." If I were reading this in a student essay, I would expect some examples to justify the accusation of arcane argumentation and overuse of theory. Let's have some quantification of the problem, perhaps? Anecdote is not evidence. The problems over theory are discussed in more detail, with reference to an analysis of 500 articles on qualitative research in information science by Cibangu (2013). There are problems, but it is not simply that devotion to theory "leads to adoption of a language and terminology that is so gratuitously obscure as to defy comprehension." Perhaps journal editors and peer reviewers (academics, presumably) need to bear some responsibility for publishing such material, if this is the case? But it is not, perhaps, the theory itself, or its application that is to blame, here. Comparison, as Cibangu suggests, with the information systems literature, is instructive.

Sturges goes on to urge use of different methods in library and information science research – and as long as the method fits the question, that seems sensible. But it is not necessary to be imaginative to do this, as there are plenty examples of different methods in the research methods textbooks. Yes, some lateral thinking in seeing how the methods may be applied to the problem may be required, but flights of fancy are not necessary. Methods from systems analysis can often be invoked – the output need not necessarily be a new system or database, and the methods used by the systems analysis lend themselves to research on information systems and services that help to explain and explore. Good systems analysis leads to a creative solution that works – rather than automating the status quo. And creativity does not come out of nowhere – it relies on a deep understanding of the situation, and the evidence (or lack of it) for ways of practice, with a willingness to challenge assumptions, and curiosity.

References

Cibangu, S. K. (2013). A memo of qualitative research for information science: toward theory construction, *Journal of Documentation*, **69** (2), 194-213.

Sturges, P. (2012). Imagination in LIS research, *Library and Information Research*, **36** (113), 15-23. URL: http://www.lirgjournal.org.uk/lir/ojs/index.php/lir/article/download/530/563 [accessed 13.9.13].

_____

_____

Urquhart, C. (2013) Quantitative research. *In*: Grant, M., Sen, B., and Spring, H. (eds.) *Research, evaluation and audit*. London: Facet [in press].

_____

_____