The LIU Libraries Ethnographic Study: Librarians-turned-Ethnographers Share their Experiences

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Background and Methods
Ethnographic Research

● The study of a culture to improve one’s understanding of it

● Involves smaller numbers of participants, but in thorough detail

● Qualitative methods, rooted in anthropology: participant observation, reflective diaries, interviews
Our University

LIU Brooklyn

LIU Post
Why?

- Examine our local culture of student research habits
- Provide need-based services
- Make ethnography a consistent and ongoing practice
Previous Major Studies

- University of Rochester “Studying Students” Project
- Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries (ERIAL) Project
- CUNY Undergraduate Scholarly Habits Ethnography Project
Our Study’s Design

SURVEY → OBSERVATIONS → INTERVIEWS
# Our Study’s Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2012</td>
<td>IRB approval received</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall 2012</td>
<td>Survey distributed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring 2013</td>
<td>Observations conducted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2013</td>
<td>Interviews conducted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2014</td>
<td>Coding process started</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2016</td>
<td>Coding process completed</td>
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Survey

- 51 questions on tech use, library use, research and study habits
- Administered Fall 2012
- 1100+ responses
- Used survey data to create interview questions
Sample Survey Questions

“Have you had any library instruction while at Long Island University?”

“During the last academic year, how often was the Libraries’ website a basic part of your research process?”

“Which of these resources do you use most often?”

“Would you use text messaging to get an answer to a reference or research question from the LIU Libraries?”
LIU Post Survey Team
Survey Kick-Off
Survey Demographics

**SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS**

Live ON/OFF Campus

- ON campus: 85.20%
- OFF campus: 14.80%

**SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS**

Area of Study

- Social sciences: 20.99%
- Arts and Humanities: 17.85%
- STEM: 11.51%
- Business: 5.72%
- Education: 45.94%
Observations

- 32 hours of unobtrusive observations completed
- Conducted Spring 2013
- Recorded field notes
- Recorded interpretations
LIU Libraries' Ethnographic Study
Observation Recording Sheet

Observer Name: [Redacted]
Location: Reference Room—tables along windows and carrels
Date: 2/19/13
Time started: 11:30am
Time ended: 12:50pm

A - Activities are goal directed sets of actions-things which people want to accomplish
E - Environments include the entire arena where activities take place
I - Interactions are between a person and someone or something else, and are the building blocks of activities
O - Objects are building blocks of the environment, key elements sometimes put to complex or unintended uses, changing their function, meaning and context
U - Users are the consumers, the people providing the behaviors, preferences and needs

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Every table is occupied with more than one student.</td>
<td>The Reference area along the windows is often used for collaborative study in groups, this type of collaboration often requires a lot of discussion and can get loud – need spaces where students can work in groups and not disturb people trying to study quietly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three guys are sitting on the window ledge, with four of their friends at the first table. Many men come and join and leave the table over the course of an hour. Three of the men are wearing suits and talking on the phone. Most of them have iPhones. At the largest, the group totals 10 men. Most of them stand around and talk as they join the group – they have coopted the table but rarely use the chairs. (12:25 – four of the men are now sitting, but have not unpacked very many materials from their bags, they are mostly talking).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lots of talking. Furniture moved - computer chairs have been rolled from the computer area to the tables. (12:12 – there has been significant turnover, one table is now free, and another table is all new students.)</td>
<td>Furniture is often moved and rearranged – new investments in furniture should be modular, portable, and resistant to carving/graffiti.</td>
</tr>
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Interviews

- Recruited interviewees during the survey stage
- Conducted 30 one-hour semi-structured interviews
- Included “show me” questions
- Videotaped and professionally transcribed audio
Sample Interview Questions

“When you get an assignment for a class, what is the very first thing you do?”

“Do you seek help from library personnel?”

“When you study in the library, do you prefer to be around other students, or have more of your own personal space?”
Data Analysis and Findings
Survey Analysis

1. Library staff and graduate student entered data into SPSS
2. Quantitatively analysed closed-ended questions using proprietary survey software
3. Performed content analysis for open-ended questions
4. Graphically depicted major themes to identify areas of focus
5. Themes further analyzed
Survey Analysis
Survey Analysis

- Status = 6
- discipline = 4
- home camp = 5
- Semesters = 3
- Live on/off = 3

- home campus
  - Live on/off
  - discipline
  - Status
  - Semesters

- use (pad to browse web)

- Bring laptop to LIU

- Research

- Notes

- Cellphone = read
- **Added codes identified during coding process (six versions)**
- **Resulted in 459 codes at question, unit, and thematic levels**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Research Strategies</th>
<th>RESSTRAT</th>
<th>First Source Consulted</th>
<th>FIRSTSRC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RESSTRAT</td>
<td>Search Engine Use</td>
<td>SEARCHENG</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RESSTRAT</td>
<td>Evaluating Sources</td>
<td>EVALSRC</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RESSTRAT</td>
<td>Shelf Browsing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RESSTRAT</td>
<td>Catalogue Browsing</td>
<td>CATBRW</td>
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<td></td>
<td>RESSTRAT</td>
<td>Keyword Search</td>
<td>KEYSEARCH</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RESSTRAT</td>
<td>Copy and Paste as notetaking</td>
<td>CPPSNOTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RESSTRAT</td>
<td>Textbook Acquisition</td>
<td>TEXTBKAQ</td>
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Observation Coding

1. Combined into one document and analyzed for frequency counts
2. Read field notes and coded the text
3. Library staff and graduate student entered data into SPSS
4. Statistical analysis performed
Interview Coding

1. Transcripts coded individually, by pairs and as a team (4 coders)

2. Paired teams and entire team reconciled coding to ensure inter-coder reliability

3. Library staff and graduate student entered data into SPSS

4. Statistical analysis performed
Survey Findings

- Majority were not taking advantage of University iPad program
- 75% received some type of instruction on how to utilize the Library and its resources
- Used Google and the Libraries’ databases equally to complete their work
Observation Findings

- Came and went while studying; left personal items
- Seated in groups but worked individually and “cocooning”
- Space used for both academic and non-academic tasks
Interview Findings

- More likely sought assistance from peers or professors than librarians
- Print resources often favored
- Some research and study habits were mutually informative
Triangulated Findings

- Actively browsed for materials as means of discovery (i.e. shelf browsing, catalog subject headings)
-Began assignments with resources from the open web
- Multitasked using technology
Actions Taken and Lessons Learned
## Actions Taken

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instruction</strong></td>
<td>Revised core and library curriculum, performed syllabus analysis for various departments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Space</strong></td>
<td>Group study areas, natural light, “Genius Bar” setups</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reference</strong></td>
<td>Extended hours, website redesign, Skype by appointment</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Technology</strong></td>
<td>App development, dissolved iPad program, added electrical outlets</td>
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Actions Taken
Challenges

- Time! Four years from start to finish
- Maintaining continuity in the project
- Sifting through the data; huge number of variables makes it almost impossible to exhaust all possibilities
Advantages

- Gained a more complex understanding of library use that could not come from stats and numbers
- Meaningful data to support requests for resources
- Adds a critical lens to what students say and do AND what we think students say and do
- Framework to build upon for future studies & comparisons
Takeaways

- Estimate the amount of time you need, then double it
- Find motivated team members willing to learn as they go
- Find supporters, such as your dean, director, or teaching faculty
- When possible, invest in professional services and resources (i.e. statistical software, transcription, data entry)
Thanks!

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