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Dear Repose and Absent Solace: A Classroom Exploration of U.S. Public Library LGBT Collecting Behavior

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Abstract:

Significant attention has recently been focused on establishing the value of public library services, and in most cases, these efforts have explored their topic using currency-based measures. This paper describes a classroom project that introduces an alternate perspective related to the topic of tolerance as conceptualized by the U.S. Southern Poverty Law Center and UNESCO's Declaration on Principles on Tolerance. The issue that interested the students was the information needs of people who might be considered different or distinct within some communities, and for this project they focused on children with an interest in LGBT materials, using two related research questions: 1) the characteristics of public libraries that appear to be most and least likely to collect materials of interest to these children, and 2) whether collection is more likely to be correlated with library or community characteristics? Although most of the students had little experience with research or statistical analysis, the topic was sufficiently interesting to sustain their attention through the development and statistical analysis of data elements that combined library collection, U.S. Census, and U.S. Public Library Survey data. Student feedback indicated that the students found the work challenging, that they felt that they had a better understanding of the requirements of original research, and that, although the results were disheartening, they would be more likely to pursue a research project in the future based on this experience.

Keywords: Instructional Design, Research Instruction, Tolerance, Controversial Materials, Public Libraries

INTRODUCTION

Establishing the value of public organizations is never a simple proposition for a variety of reasons. Economic estimates are complicated by the absence of a market that demonstrates value, and in the

cases where the services provided can be classified as public or merit goods these calculations become more difficult. Cost benefit approaches can be used to develop helpful estimates; however, these assessments tend to be most useful in producing currency-based return on investment measurements. In the case of private firms, the evaluation standard is assumed. Negative is bad. Positive is good.

Publicness complicates valuation calculations and assessments. While the purpose of the firm is generally accepted to be the maximization of profit for its owners and shareholders (Pindyck & Rubinfeld, 1989; Browning & Browning, 1989), the evaluation standards considered suitable for public organizations are more varied. In the United States, at the federal level, purposes and standards are usually most obviously voiced in authorizing legislation. For example, the 2011 Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act (Pub. L. No. 111–260, 124 Stat. 751 (2010)) is intended “To increase the access of persons with disabilities to modern communications.” Under the Hazardous Waste Electronic Manifest Establishment Act (Pub. L. No. 112–195, 126 Stat. 1452 (2012)), the Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is directed to establish a hazardous waste electronic manifest system.

Public library legislation, although typically located at the state level, shares at least two characteristics with federal examples. The enacting statutes or regulations are usually straightforward: library service may be established in order to provide library services to a population service area. The manner in which this goal will be accomplished is left open to a good deal of discretion. There are no directions concerning the physical size of the libraries, their locations, their content, their staffing, or the apportionment of benefits. Delivery models and decisions are expected to be developed at the local administrative level.

The relationship between these decisions and research methods is consequently important, and recent classroom experience suggests that three aspects of the learning environment can lead to better understanding. The first is a persuasive argument for research-based practice. The second is the identification of a topic of considerable personal and professional interest. The third is the creation of a set of incremental or scaffolding experiences designed to increase research literacy.

MAKING THE ARGUMENT FOR RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICE

The first step, developing a persuasive argument for research-based practice, can be accomplished through a selection of readings on this topic. Students with a philosophical and information science bent may enjoy the discussion found at Hjørland (2011). A more general discussion can be found at Booth (2003); and Crowley’s (2004) classic provides a very readable treatment of this topic. In order to leverage these readings, students are also directed to examine the Darwin Award examples of faulty decisions based on poorly understood phenomena at <http://www.darwinawards.com> and the Ig Nobel prize ceremony typically held at Harvard or MIT to honor examples of improbable research. The 2012 ceremony can be accessed at <http://www.improbable.com/ig/2012/>. In each case students can be asked to post a summary of their favorite entry and an explanation of their decision criteria. A brief introduction to issues related to causation can be made at this time with a familiar example such as the following:

The final point that needs to be made about correlation is a very important limitation: it does not prove causation. When we think about this, we can come up with a number of examples that illustrate this fact. One of my favorites is the conclusion a Martian might make (yes, we’re back to diet) about the relationship between weight gain and salad bars. As an acquaintance of mine once noted, many of those in line (including me) tend to be, well, . . . a bit chubby. It has also been noted that most musicians have attended elementary school and many detectives own television sets. The problem here is obvious. All in all, causation and impact are very difficult to prove.

The humorous example works and, I am told, is memorable because it brings to mind a topic of particular, if not obsessive, interest to many students.

IDENTIFYING A TOPIC OF CONSIDERABLE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL INTEREST

Both theory and experience suggest that students are motivated by a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, including the relevance of learning environments to their personal experiences (*Clinkenbeard, 2012; Lei, 2010; Ryan & Deci 2000*). Shaping attitudes toward research relies on similar motivational factors. When these factors are managed successfully, seemingly obtuse but important research topics, such as constructs, metrics, and variables, can be made to unfold relatively naturally. The number of topics that create this level of interest is likely to vary from location to location, but three have proved themselves in a variety of classroom settings: wealth, gender identity, and love. The first of these is the easiest to explore, and this topic can be examined in the class environment with an exercise that asks students to design a research study that supports the contention that early to bed and early to rise will make a man healthy, wealthy and wise. The challenging aspect of this learning experience is developing metrics for each of the three variables, at least one of which meets the qualifications of an unsubstantiated construct that cannot be directly observed or measured (*Leedy & Ormond, 2005*).

Gender identity discussions also tend to rivet classroom interest, and intrinsic interest in this topic can be used to introduce scales and measurements using the Bem Sex Role Inventory as an example (available at <http://www.mindgarden.com/products/bemss.htm>). Students who become absorbed in this topic can find a number of academic articles related to scale development and obtain the Bem instrument for personal and experimental purposes for approximately 40 US dollars. Love, of course, is the perfect example of a variable that is completely open to interpretation and misconception. Whether or not it is in the eye of the beholder is just the starting point for lively class discussions, and students with liberal arts backgrounds who might otherwise shy away from the concept of *operationalization* can be drawn to the subject using resources such as the reading of Browning's *Sonnet 43, How Do I Love Thee? Let me Count the ways* (found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vog4hMSprls>) and Aretha Franklin's iconic performance of the Shoop Shoop song, *It's in His Kiss* (available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5d0u_ye8Uk).

CREATING AN INCREMENTAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

While many of the students who enter Masters in Library Science (MLS) programs have some experience with mathematics and statistics, others come from liberal arts backgrounds where quantitative skills were less frequently emphasized. In those cases, the problem at hand often seems to be a lack of basic research literacy. The remainder of this paper describes a project that addressed this problem using the incremental scaffolding approach frequently employed in other literacy settings (*Rodgers & Rodgers, 2004; Van Staden, 2011; Zang, 2011*).

Step 1. Identifying a Topic of Strong Personal or Professional Interest

The first student task, the selection of a topic that merited sustained attention, was relatively straightforward. The preceding year had been characterized by contentious debates focused on immigration and gay marriage. National elections were surfacing issues that some found disturbing, and media reports continued to provide restive examples of the unwelcome fruits of *ignorance* and *prejudice*. *Fairness* and *tolerance* were on the minds of many Americans, and consequently it was not surprising that one of those issues, *tolerance*, was selected for attention. This choice was also fortuitous from a pedagogical perspective. As a topic, it speaks to the heart as well as the mind; and research suggests that in some individuals these attitudes appear to be a personality characteristic, while in others they tend to be either learned values or situational. Classic novels and films that most students had already encountered, such *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1912) and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (McCullers, 1940), could be used to draw reluctant participants into discussions. Statements prepared by the U.S. Southern Poverty Law Center (Teaching Tolerance, 2013) and UNESCO's *Declaration on Principles on Tolerance* (UNESCO, 1995) provoked similar consideration; and Article 1 of the UNESCO Declaration provides a clear link to the professional

standards developed by American Library Association (ALA) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA):

1.1 Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. It is fostered by knowledge, openness, communication and freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Tolerance is harmony in difference. It is not only a moral duty, it is also a political and legal requirement. Tolerance, the virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the culture of war by a culture of peace.

1.3 Tolerance is the responsibility that upholds human rights, pluralism (including cultural pluralism), democracy and the rule of law. It involves the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism and affirms the standards set out in international human rights instruments.

Step 2: Identifying a Research Problem

The development of a well-articulated research problem was the next challenge faced by students. They were prepared for the task with readings from their textbook (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) that were assigned earlier in the semester and a classroom discussion highlighting the criticality of making a clear case for their research. Students generally understood that this was the point at which they would identify the specific aspect of their topic that interested them and the variables they planned to use to operationalize their inquiry. After some discussion, the efforts of public libraries to ease the social isolation of children who may be considered unusual in some communities became the focus of their attention. This interest was further narrowed as students considered the following:

For over a decade, Teaching Tolerance, a project of The Southern Poverty Law Center <http://www.tolerance.org/> has provided teaching materials aimed at “reducing prejudice, improving inter-group relations and supporting equitable school experiences for our nation's children.” These materials have won “two Oscars, an Emmy and more than 20 honors from the Association of Educational Publishers, including two Golden Lamp Awards, the industry's highest honor.” Recent surveys also demonstrate that materials of this type help students learn respect for differences and bolster teacher practices that harmonize with UNESCO's Declaration on Principles on Tolerance http://www.unesco.org/webworld/peace_library/UNESCO/HRIGHTS/124-129.HTM.

Further research provides numerous examples of the importance of materials and efforts such as these in forming the attitudes children take into adulthood, but little is known concerning the presence of materials that encourage tolerance in U.S. public libraries, especially in terms of populations that might be considered unusual or distinct in some communities. Literature reviews indicate there are instances in which these materials are available, but there is simply not enough evidence for us to be assured that they are or generally have been so in the recent past.

Step 3: Developing Appropriate Research Questions

The next step was the development of one or more research questions. This activity built upon a previous discussion and an assignment that introduced Meltzoff's (1998) question typology by asking students to develop a set of whimsical and serious questions that corresponded to each of Meltzoff's categories. When the students applied the Meltzoff assignment in their final project, their first research question was best characterized as exploratory and the second research question fit more clearly into the causal-comparative category:

RQ1. Is there sufficient evidence to conclude that most public libraries are collecting materials that are likely to be of interest to children with an interest in gay topics?

RQ2. Is collection behavior more likely to be correlated with library characteristics than with characteristics of the communities in which the children and libraries are located?

Step 4: Creating a Planning template

At this point the students were asked to use two simple planning tools or templates to indicate the variables they would use for answering their research questions, the metrics they would use to operationalize those variables, the sources of data that would be used to obtain these metrics, and an explanation of how the data elements could be manipulated in order to answer each research question. Given the need to finish the assignment within a relatively short time period, a check-list strategy was selected for data collection. Based on the assumption that public libraries would be most likely to buy reviewed and/or award winning sensitive materials (Serebnick, 1981,1982), the checklist was created using 28 Lambda Literary Award (<http://www.lambdaliterary.org/awards/>) LGBT (Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender) Children's/Young Adult category finalists and winners.

Step 5: Data Collection

The information needed to address the first research question was originally collected with the help of a graduate assistant using the online public access catalogs of a sample of slightly over 700 public libraries identified in the Public Libraries in the United State Survey currently conducted by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). The following library-related independent variables were considered most likely to influence purchase decisions: the number of staff with Master's Degree training, the size of the library service area, the total number of library staff, and the total operating income. *Education* was the community characteristic expected to be most influential on tolerance. The number of college graduates in the counties in which the libraries were located was used to operationalize this variable.

Once holdings data were collected, the community, library, and library holdings data elements were linked through the county Federal Information Processing (FIPS) codes present in both the IMLS and Census datasets. The class Instructor used off-the-shelf database management software to create the data links and produced a Microsoft Excel® spreadsheet containing all data elements.

Step 6: Data Analysis

In order to make data analysis more interesting and build a moderate level of anticipation, the students were divided into groups, and each of these received part of the final spreadsheet with instructions to use the descriptive statistics (frequencies averages, medians, modes) that they had encountered earlier in the semester to answer the first research question. Students with sufficient experience and training were allowed to use a parametric test to explore the second question. Those who did not have this background (all but one of the students) were instructed to repeatedly sort the spreadsheets using the independent variables of interest, divide the sorted libraries into quartiles, and compare the quartiles based on frequencies that indicated the number of libraries that held each title and the number of titles held by each library. Personal, telephone, and online coaching were available from the Instructor during this period. Students were also encouraged to share their experiences and problems with each other. In several cases, this part of the assignment was a first attempt at quantitative analysis, and camaraderie and humor were often the keys to successful completion.

Step 7: Results

The students generally had little trouble calculating the means, modes, and medians required to answer research question 1 and determine whether there was evidence that the libraries in their sample were proving their worth to children who might have an interest in gay reading materials. One group's results are summarized and illustrated in Table 1 below:

Libraries in Sample	240	Mean	3.83
Total Volumes	918	Median	0
		Mode	0

Table 1: Mean, Median, Mode of LGBT Volumes Held

The concepts behind frequencies were in some cases more opaque, and Excel® frequency commands also proved to be challenging, but in most cases errors could be quickly corrected and these calculations confirmed the results above.

Research question 2, whether collection behavior is more likely to be correlated with library characteristics than with characteristics of the communities in which the children and libraries are located, proved to be more challenging. However, with the analysis performed for the first assignment behind them, most of the students had developed a degree of comfort with the descriptive statistics it required. A small number forgot to sort their files using the independent variables they were examining, but these problems were typically correctable with constructive coaching and encouragement. An example of one student's quartile analysis of title holdings by library service area population quartiles is shown below in Figure 1.

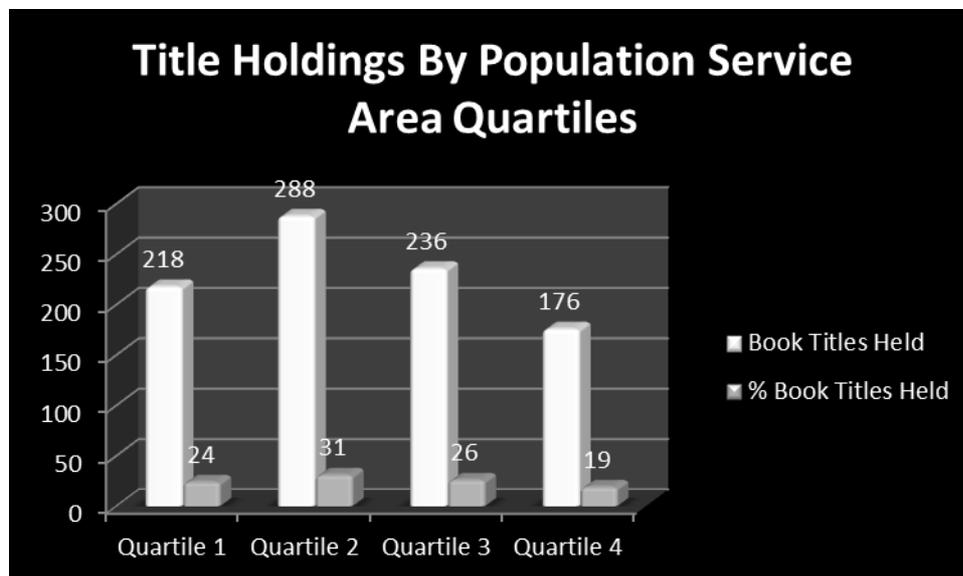


Figure 1: Titles Held and Percent by Service Area Population Quartile

An example of one experienced student's calculation of the statistical correlations between the numbers of LGBT titles and selected independent library variables is shown below in Table 2. The very small negative correlation between the number of titles and service area population was not unexpected given the relative decline of title holdings in quartile 4 (illustrated in Figure 1, above).

Statistical Analysis Table	Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient
# Items to Service Area Population	-0.001
# Items to MLIS	-0.05
# Items to Income	-0.06
# Items to # Staff	-0.04

Table 2: Variable Correlations

Step 8: Conclusions

In an earlier lesson, television weather reports were used to examine three important points concerning the content of a conclusion section. The first point was that content rules are less prescriptive. When reporting the likelihood of an upcoming storm, different TV personalities often focus on different aspects of the event. The second point was that different weathermen often interpret the same data differently. Some will indicate that rain is likely when others conclude that it is not. This point was easily brought to mind with a question that asked students to remember at least one event, such as a party or game, which foundered due to unexpected weather conditions. Lastly, two ideas surfaced as students considered their reactions to that experience: (1) the conclusion section of the report is very important, and (2) the conclusion is the point in the research process where the role of talent, intuition, and experience becomes most clear. The criticality of the conclusion section became even more evident to the students in a medical context. Medical tests are usually similar and reliable, but differences in the conclusions drawn from them can have life and death consequences.

In this case, the students concluded that the results of their analyses were disappointing. When their group files were combined, the data indicated that 74% of the libraries had fewer than 5 titles, and the small number of titles found seemed unlikely to further the Teaching Tolerance goals articulated by the U.S. Southern Poverty Law Center statement and UNESCO's *Declaration on Principles on Tolerance*. When considered from the perspective of professional standards, such as those that indicate that, "We value our nation's diversity and strive to reflect that diversity by providing a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve" (American Library Association, 1999), the results were also disappointing and seemed to suggest the possibility of non-adherence. When viewed through the lens of gay teen suicide rates (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Garofalo et al., 1999), the results seemed to take on a particularly disturbing dimension. Although the value of the library collections and services might be significant when measured on other dimensions, the likelihood of the solace that might be gained from titles such as those used in this assignment seemed to be small and unlikely to contribute to restful moments.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

As is often the case in the classroom, this assignment was somewhat contrived. The size of the library sample was constrained by the length of time available to collect data; and it did not necessarily reflect the distribution of the population from which it was developed. The titles in the checklist were also small in number; and although the Lambda Awards are generally well known in LIS circles, alternative titles, such as those that have received the Stonewall award, are available.

From a pedagogical perspective, the incremental approach discussed in this study appears to have been successful from at least two perspectives. At the end of this class and others that we teach, we generally ask the students to answer the following two questions:

In what ways have your thoughts about research or yourself as a researcher changed as a result of this class and our time together? What will you keep in mind as you

consider these tasks that you might not have thought of had you not participated in our lessons and discussions?

In this case, the answers to the first question generally spoke to issues related to research literacy. The following examples are representative:

This class has certainly served to enhance my knowledge of research. Research is quite an involved process. Before the class, I understood the general idea of the topic, but now I realize that there is “a method to the researcher’s madness” as he pursues the actual research process. G.W.

This class has been a tremendous start in demystifying the research process. Up until now, I've shied away from even considering conducting research or even reading at length academic research because of the depth of analytical and organizational skills required to conduct and interpret research; skills that I perceived were beyond my intellectual scope. And I still approach this discipline timidly but through the Leedy text, class discussions, and breeze sessions, the research process and interpretation thereof has been broken down into bite size portions that are digestible for a newbie like myself. S. R.

Since taking this class, I have realized just how hard real research is and I have gained an appreciation for the work that researchers do. I definitely used the word research too liberally in the past, when I really meant information gathering. Now that I have even more respect for the process and those who undertake it, I will not make that mistake again. M. M.

When registering for this class, I was convinced that it would best prepare me to help others in their research process. I have an interdisciplinary pre-law undergraduate degree made up of social science courses, yet I never had enough of one particular discipline to do an extended amount of research, or receive any such training. To be honest, I was turned-off by "Research" being in the course title and was slightly apprehensive at the outset. I was not at all expecting to enjoy the class as much as I did. I am walking away from this class with a greater appreciation for the work of researchers and their methods. To me, this course was like an enjoyable continuation of a critical thinking class, I feel like I have gained sharpened research abilities that will carry over to all areas of my life.

The answers to the second question were more varied, but one group of answers generally focused on improved critical thinking skills, a new appreciation of the relationship between research and practice, and an unexpected willingness to undertake future projects. The following examples are representative:

Now that I've taken this class I'll be able to scrutinize graphs and the data that they represent with some amount of confidence. I typically glaze over the empirical data when reading a research article and uncritically absorb the abstract and the discussion of the results. Often I've been skeptical of findings in some research but was not able to articulate my concerns. I hope to now be able to somewhat begin to critically look at the methodology, controlled variables, etc to test the validity of a research. S. R.

I think that I have always been a little skeptical about claims of unbiased, accurate results in commercial surveys or opinion polls. After taking this class, I believe that I will still be skeptical – but now I have a better understanding of what might lead to a potential inaccurate prediction. I guess I'm better prepared to criticize, now! E.G.

I now see myself as a researcher-both in the past and in the future. I realized that some things I have done as a teacher-collecting and analyzing data to assess student growth and performance and then using that data to make conclusions about teaching methods-was actually research. I also see myself as more capable to help others in their research endeavors and in teaching research skills as a school library media specialist. What I will keep in mind throughout these tasks, as a result of this class, is the ethics involved in research and reporting and the types of problems or questions that could be turned into research questions. S. G.

On the surface, this process can prove to be a fully involved and tedious feat; however, I believe that if the passion is there for the topic of the research, the process will move more smoothly. This thought has prompted me to possibly pursue some historical research of my own in the future! G. W.

Another group focused on specific skills:

. . . as I do research in the future . . . I will also be using the templates and checklists in your notes and the text. M. C.

The ability to develop a good research plan cannot be underestimated. A. W.

I will keep in mind the fact that a true researcher has to be skilled at data interpretation. E.E

Most importantly, I will remember that data is plural! J.

Conclusion

As students pass through our doors, they are influenced by our manner of teaching, our approach to classroom interactions, the tools that we demonstrate, and the ideas they encounter concerning the ways that libraries and other cultural institutions can be used to make of the world to be a better place. In the case of public libraries, this process includes the development of a broad understanding of the contributions that these institutions make to the communities in which they are located. An update of this project using a small random sample of public libraries and 10 of the most recent Lambda Award titles shows significant improvement with the average number of titles rising to 5. However, much remains to be studied in this area, and it is likely to continue to capture the interests of students. The value of incremental learning experiences also merits continued attention, especially in environments that promote collegial design-related experiences.

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