Adapting Your Research Design:
When the Best Laid Plans Go Awry

Rachel Sarjeant-Jenkins

INTRODUCTION

Throughout my library career, I have been interested in partnerships—how to build them, what makes them successful, and how libraries can work together to reduce duplication and share costs and expertise. My move into the academic library world eight years ago allowed me to turn that interest into a program of research. I developed a research partnership with a librarian from another institution, and together we looked at library partnerships across Canada, gradually honing in on joint-use libraries.[1]

Joint-use libraries are libraries developed in partnership to serve multiple constituencies where the partners share the costs of running the library and maximize each other's unique strengths.[2] As our research progressed, my research partner and I grew increasingly interested in the possibilities inherent in the joint use library structure—shared space, materials, expertise, governance, and operational costs—of creating libraries that are more economically viable for rural and remote communities and, therefore, in libraries that are more likely to be sustainable. We learned about joint-use libraries in northern Manitoba, Canada, and the benefits and challenges of the joint-use library structure in delivering library services to those remote communities.[3] We discussed how we could move our research into something that could be applied by communities, perhaps developing a joint-use library framework that communities could use. The possibilities were exciting.

Our research came to an abrupt standstill, however, when I learned that my research partner was retiring and would no longer be working in libraries or involved in the research. I struggled with the idea of being a solo researcher and questioned whether I had the necessary confidence to "go it alone." In the end, the research hiatus was brief. My belief in the role libraries play in creating a socially and economically healthy community

fed my desire to keep exploring whether joint-use libraries might be a solution for sustainable rural libraries. I decided to continue with the joint-use library research but this time on my own.

Much of the literature on joint-use libraries comes from Australia where the joint-use library structure has been widely embraced. Many Australian states have guidelines around joint-use libraries,[4] and the Australian Library and Information Association has developed its own policy.[5] In particular, the state of South Australia has more than forty joint-use libraries and is unique in its statewide programmatic approach to school-community libraries. I wanted to learn from the South Australian experience and established a research project aimed at achieving that. I created a research design I was certain I could follow, believing that its success (or lack of success) was entirely within my control. While this is the story of that South Australia research project, in the end, it is far less a story of what I learned about the state's joint-use libraries and much more about what I learned of the art of reflection, the impact of emotions on research, and the need for flexibility in research design.

RESEARCH JOURNALING

I am a novice researcher with much still to learn. I do know, however, that my own perspectives and values affect what I observe, the questions I ask, and the areas on which I choose to focus.[6] Fortunately, as I began my research project, I also started an online course using critical reflection to explore librarianship.[7] Course readings highlighted the wide variety of disciplines that value critical reflection in improving practice and research. Early in the course, journaling surfaced as one tool to assist in that reflective process. Scholars across a variety of fields write about journaling as a research tool and reflection as a way to understand the research process and acknowledge researcher emotion, including

- Helen Hickson and Claudia Malacrida, both social work scholars;
- law professor Brendan Ciaran Browne;
- Nandini Maharaj, a researcher in public health;
- Simon Borg, a scholar and speaker on teacher professional development; and
- Marion Heron (Engin), a lecturer in higher education.

Hickson talks about the need for researchers to be reflective, "that is, appreciating the influences of [their] own background, assumptions and expectations on the research process and outcomes."[8] Borg,[9] Browne,[10] and Engin[11] all speak to the importance of a journal or diary to help researchers reflect on what they are seeing, hearing, and participating in. "[B]y reflecting, the writer questions, examines and makes decisions. The reflective process acts as a prompt for constructing knowledge."[12] Motivated by the writing and class discussion from my online course, I chose to use a research journal as a way to record my research experience and as a tool to help me reflect on my decisions, actions, and assumptions. "Part of the motivation [is] a recognition that my feelings have to impact some of my research decisions—how aggressive will I be at trying to get answers? Will my concern about offending someone or 'doing the wrong thing' affect the questions I ask?"[13]

While research may have traditionally been considered as rational and unemotional, according to Malacrida, "Emotions in research are not only unavoidable but also desirable."[14] If there is no outlet or place for the emotional side of research, then the implication is that it has no role in the research process.[15] The research journal provides a space to express those emotions. Browne speaks of the cathartic nature of journaling, using it as means of documenting fears and anxieties for later review and reflection.[16] Borg affirms: "Emotions …are an undeniable part of the human researcher's work, and the research journal can assist the researcher in acknowledging these emotions, expressing them, and, particularly where these emotions threaten the progress of the research, analysing and reacting to them."[17]

For both Borg[18] and Browne,[19] the research journal also serves as a support for researchers who do not have opportunities to engage with others to discuss their work. As Engin states, "The diary then becomes a colleague …someone to confide in."[20] For me, the research journal helped to fill the hole left when my research partner retired. It provided a safe place to examine ideas, challenges, frustrations, and worries. Using the research journal developed me as a reflective researcher, serving as a venue for reflecting on and understanding my own thoughts and actions as well as aspects of the research project and process.

GETTING STARTED

In November 2017, I flew to South Australia armed with what I thought was a robust research design. I was confident that over the next five months, I would read about South Australian joint-use libraries, hold a workshop, conduct on-site library observations, and interview joint-use library stakeholders. Two university-sponsored grants were supporting my research and I had connected with an Australian librarian colleague who was interested and willing to assist me in my work. Everything seemed aligned.

What I did not realize was that I had made my first mistake before I even touched down in Australia. I had created a research design and submitted grant proposals based on my own experience and knowledge. I had shared the proposals with my Australian colleague, but we did not develop them together; neither the research design nor the proposals benefitted from his expertise and knowledge of local library context and governance.

Within two weeks of landing in Australia, I met with my Australian colleague. This initial meeting was our first opportunity to talk through the research project's purpose and structure and the occasion of my first setback. It was here I learned that the first stage of my research design, a workshop with the joint use library managers, would not take place. The cancellation of the November joint-use library managers' meeting meant that my workshop suffered the same fate. My stomach dropped. The workshop and the opportunity it provided for me to establish connections was a necessary precursor for my onsite visits and interviews with library stakeholders.[21] No workshop, no interviews. Before I had even started, my whole research project was in jeopardy.

I now faced a dilemma. With no library manager meeting planned until March 2018, what was I going to do? Aside from reading about joint-use libraries, and South Australian

libraries in particular, how was I going to progress my research between November and March? I had a responsibility to the university for my research time as well as my research grants.

Luckily, my colleague saw my research as potentially beneficial to South Australian libraries and his work at the state level, and had already been thinking of ways to develop my knowledge, help me build relationships, and gather data. My colleague proposed some alternatives, including

- short visits to selected joint-use libraries to meet library managers and learn about the South Australian libraries' environment;
- two smaller focus groups located in regional towns; and
- a survey of joint-use library stakeholders.

The visits and focus groups sounded like good options. They would fulfill two of the objectives outlined in my grant proposal: to establish a baseline understanding of the joint-use library structure in South Australia and help build relationships with the joint-use library managers.[22] A survey was not something I had planned, but the idea of gathering information from stakeholders across the state was appealing.

My colleague's interest in my research and the anticipated usefulness of the results meant that he was willing to dedicate some of his own time—not only to meet with me but also to drive with me to the libraries—as well as staff time to assist me in my work. Great news for me, but it elicited conflicting emotional responses. I was thrilled and excited to have the support, but I felt an additional sense of responsibility. I questioned whether I would alter how I approached my research or what questions I asked, knowing that the work I was doing was not only for my research project but also for the benefit of libraries and library stakeholders in South Australia. I also worried about how I would be perceived: "Nervous. Want to come across as smart, like I know what I'm looking for and know what I am doing. I don't want him to feel like he's wasting his time."[23] Reflecting on my emotions meant I had to acknowledge my own insecurities and forced me to analyze how I was approaching the research.[24]

The first library visits took place a couple of weeks later. In the course of one day in late November, my colleague and I visited four libraries near the capital city of Adelaide. Three were joint-use libraries and two had partnerships with local council services. As well as seeing the environment in which South Australian joint-use libraries were located and learning a bit about some of the joint-use library structures in existence in the state, the day of travel was an excellent way to strengthen my relationship with my colleague and learn from his deep local knowledge.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

By early December, my project seemed back on track. Yes, my workshop had not worked out as planned, but focus groups would be happening at some point prior to my departure. There were many published works on joint-use libraries for me to read, and my Australian colleague had provided me with substantial reading material on the history of public libraries in South Australia and the development and structure of the state's

school-community library program. I had already visited four libraries and had learned a lot about the libraries in the state from my conversations with my colleague as we traveled.

I had plenty to keep me busy for the next month or so. I needed to apply to my university's Research Ethics Board for ethics approval of the focus group sessions. I had accepted that I would be returning to Australia the following November to conduct on-site observations and interviews; permission was now required to change the timeline and budget I had originally outlined in my grant proposals. Both grants were for two years and I was already half-way through the first year. Leaving the interviews and observation to November 2018 put them very close to the grant deadline, an ever-present stressor hovering in the background. And while I was busy doing my reading and writing, my Australian colleague and his staff were going to look at options for more library visits and the focus groups with library managers.

What I had forgotten, in my northern hemisphere mindset, was summer holidays. The majority of joint-use libraries in South Australia are school-community libraries located within school grounds. Many of the library managers are teachers, with scheduled time off during school holidays. With the school year ending in mid-December and not recommencing until February, school-community libraries have minimal staffing and shorter hours. In addition, summer holidays were when my colleague and his staff were on vacation. There would be no visits and no focus groups scheduled until mid-February at the earliest.

It was during this period of reading and writing that I had time to reflect on my learning and recognized the potential of the South Australian school-community library program as a model for rural and remote community libraries.[25] I wanted to learn more about what is working well with the program and where there are challenges. "The [school-community library] model works because of the governance set up in South Australia but it is tweakable, I think. Interesting concept…."[26] While not a wholesale change in my research project, this signified a narrowing of focus—from the broader spectrum of joint-use libraries to the school-community library program.[27]

THE SECOND SETBACK

After the lull of the summer holidays, I checked in with my colleague regarding further library visits and the workshops. My need to work with and through my colleague demonstrated my reliance on him and his staff for my project to progress.[28]

> I am finding I am relying quite a bit on [my colleague] and his staff to connect me with the libraries/communities. It takes some pressure off me in one way but means that I am reliant on others to progress things. A bit frustrating at times. I would be curious to know if this …is the best approach to community-based research. Perhaps it is. They can open doors I can't.[29]

Although my colleague had a full-time job (one that certainly did not include my personal research project!) and had taken on some additional duties, all it took was one

reminder email from me to get things moving again. The result was two days of library visits to the southeast corner of the state—incorporating eleven libraries—scheduled for the end of February. About half of the libraries were part of the school-community library program, and a couple of others had shared-use or joint-use facilities.

Seeing the environment that the libraries were in, their schools, their communities, and their landscape helped me to understand the challenges that they face. Speaking with the library managers gave me some personal insights into organizational politics, governance, and challenges. Once again, however, the time spent in the car proved the most beneficial. Conversations with my colleague as we traveled between sites allowed me to unpack what I had seen and heard. The libraries served as jumping-off points for discussions about school-community library governance and the state's role in public library service. I came back from those two days with a lot to think about and many questions.[30]

On the last day of visits, I had another setback. Scheduling the regional focus groups had been unsuccessful. Instead, my colleague suggested that I attend an upcoming joint-use library managers' meeting. In a final attempt to salvage the focus group component, I asked about the possibility of a short session during or immediately following the meeting where I could collect data on library manager perspectives on the school-community library model. However, my attendance at the meeting, much less any opportunity for a focus group, was dependent upon the committee chair, the meeting agenda, and the personal schedules of participants. Once again, I realized how little I controlled the research process: "I do feel rather at the mercy of others …because I don't know the players and therefore can't step in and start taking the lead. I need to sit back and relax and be available wherever and whenever something arises."[31] My experience fits with Maharaj's notion of insider or outsider status, where the extent that a researcher is an insider facilitates their access to a particular environment or to certain information.[32]

In the end, the focus group was not possible. At this point in my project, however, I was learning some realities of research. "I had kind of anticipated that this might end up being the case, so I've drafted out a potential timeline for my return in November that …would include a focus group as well as the library visits/observations."[33] I had finally started to accept my lack of control.[34]

Although there was no focus group session, attending the meeting and talking about my research helped me to develop connections with library managers and build community interest in the project. There was support for conducting a survey of school-community library stakeholders. The library managers saw my research as potentially beneficial to them, particularly in raising the profile of their libraries at the state level, and saw my position as an outsider and an academic as adding credibility to any research findings.

A REVISED RESEARCH PROJECT

By the end of March 2018, when I left Australia, I had only achieved the reading portion of my original research design. Not only the research design but the project itself had changed. The project was narrower and more focused, looking primarily at the state's school-community library program. Data collection methods were more diverse (survey,

focus group, onsite observation, and interviews) to broaden participation and increase the depth and quality of the data. I was now thinking of my project in two phases. The knowledge-building phase was complete. The data-collection phase has just begun.

In my revised research design, the survey of school-community library stakeholders is the first data collection activity. This, too, has involved learning, challenges, and temporary setbacks. Survey development went smoothly; an Australian librarian provided local expertise and the assessment specialist from my own library provided her survey design experience as well as an outsider's perspective. Unforeseen barriers arose with the survey distribution. I knew the survey required ethics approval from my institution's Research Ethics Board, but surveying school employees also requires research approval from the state's education department. I needed to submit a research proposal and await approval before any further work could progress. Due to privacy concerns, neither the education department nor the state local government association could provide me with individual email addresses of survey recipients. Rather than being able to set up distribution through the survey software, I had to rely on individuals in schools and local government to send out the survey email on my behalf. The survey results were always going to be anonymous so I would never have known how many (or which) schools and local governments participated, but now I will not even know how many individuals receive the survey invitation in the first place.

I had hoped to have the survey closed and data analyzed before my return to South Australia for the on-site portion of the data collection. As the days progress and I await confirmation from schools about distributing the survey, I am less and less sure that timeline will work. I am learning to live with this uncertainty (not happily, perhaps, but stoically) and to continue to work on elements that I can control.

The survey was not part of my original research design, but I now feel invested in it. I believe that the information it could garner will be very helpful in understanding the strengths and challenges of the school-community library program and will assist the state library, education system, and local government in determining whether and how it might be revised. But my belief in the survey's value does not guarantee its success. If no one responds, then the research project will move on without that information. If there is minimal participation, then the responses will serve solely as supplementary information, helping to flesh out the other data gathered in this second phase. Once again, I must rely on other people to progress my research project.

The observation, workshop, and interviews that I will conduct in South Australia are also looking different from my original research design. The timing, of course, has changed. Different libraries will participate in the interviews and observations based on local advice, geographic reality, and the project's new emphasis on school-community libraries. What I originally envisioned as a workshop will now be a focus group. These changes were not planned, but the result of the extended timeline, the introductory visits to libraries, and the additional data collection methods is a more focused and robust research project. Even so, many of the components of the on-site data collection are still reliant on the support and assistance of others. Further change in my project is bound to happen, but this time, having seen how the setbacks have made my project stronger, I am ready and willing to weather the emotions and see the possibilities that change might bring

REFLECTIONS

The story of my South Australia research project is ultimately the story of my development as a reflective researcher. Through journaling and the reflection it encourages, I learned about the effect of my emotions on how I approach research and respond to what I discover. Exploring emotions helps to surface the biases and the perspectives that researchers bring, consciously or unconsciously, to their research. "In the end, understanding one's position in terms of research topics, methodologies, and analytic frameworks is critical to producing accountable research narratives."[35] Examining the stages of my project through the pages of the research journal assisted me in focusing the project and recognizing the value that collaborators and local experts bring. Reflection helped me to acknowledge situations, consider options, and adapt research design.

I began my research project believing that I had a solid research topic and a robust research design. The realities of my research landscape—geographical, organizational, and societal—impacted that design; the expertise of local people helped to focus the research topic and improve the research design. The changes have led to a stronger research project and required me to become a more reflective researcher by using the research journal as a tool to explore issues, acknowledge emotions, and work through solutions.

- Research design is a "best guess" built on the information you have at a specific point in time. It is critical to be able to adapt to local conditions or new information, to be open to revising data collection processes, research methods, and even the focus of your research project.
- If your research involves distinct participant groups or research sites, there is considerable value in having research collaborators with "insider"[36] status. Involve research collaborators early in the research design and proposal writing stages.
- Use a research journal to reflect on your experiences and brainstorm ideas, solutions, and new approaches. Journaling also serves as a record of the research process, tracking decisions, and the reasoning behind them.

NOTES

1. Rachel Sarjeant-Jenkins and Keith Walker, "Working Together: Joint Use Canadian Academic and Public Libraries," *Collaborative Librarianship* 6(1) (2014): 5–19; Rachel Sarjeant-Jenkins and Keith Walker, "Library Partnerships and Organizational Culture: A Case Study," *Journal of Library Administration* 54(6) (2014): 445–61.
2. Alan L. Bundy and Larry J. Amey, "Libraries Like No Others: Evaluating the Performance and Progress of Joint Use Libraries," *Library Trends* 54 (4) (2006): 501–18; Kathleen R. T. Imhoff, "Public Library Joint-Use Partnerships: Challenges and Opportunities," in *Joint-Use Libraries*, eds. W. Miller and R. Pellen (New York: Haworth Information Press, 2001), 17–39.
3. Rachel Sarjeant-Jenkins and Keith Walker, "Serving Remote Communities Together: A Canadian Joint Use Library Study," *The Australian Library Journal* 64(2) (2015): 128–41.
4. Examples include New South Wales (https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/advice-and-best-practice/library-council-guidelines/co-location-and-joint-use-libraries) and Queensland (http://www.plconnect.slq.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/191433/SLQ_Joint_Use_Checklist_20110504.pdf).
5. "Joint-Use Libraries," Australian Library and Information Association, accessed August 2018, https://www.alia.org.au/about-alia/policies-standards-and-guidelines/joint-use-libraries.
6. Nandini Maharaj, "Using Field Notes to Facilitate Critical Reflection," *Reflective Practice* 17 (2) (2016): 115, accessed September 2018, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2015.1134472.

7. The course was called *Exploring Librarianship through Critical Reflection*, taught by Rick Stoddart through Library Juice Academy, November 2017.
8. Helen Hickson, "Becoming a Critical Narrativist: Using Critical Reflection and Narrative Inquiry as a Research Methodology," *Qualitative Social Work* 15 (3) (2016): 382, doi: 10.1177/1473325015617344.
9. Simon Borg, "The Research Journal: A Tool for Promoting and Understanding Researcher Development," *Language Teaching Research* 5 (2) (2001): 160.
10. Brendan Ciaran Browne, "Recording the Personal: The Benefits in Maintaining Research Diaries for Documenting the Emotional and Practical Challenges of Fieldwork in Unfamiliar Settings," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 12 (2013): 423.
11. Marion Engin, "Research Diary: A Tool for Scaffolding," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 10 (3) (2011): 297, doi:10.1177/160940691101000308.
12. Engin, "Research Diary," 299.
13. Rachel Sarjeant-Jenkins, Research Journal, 27 November 2017.
14. Claudia Malacrida, "Reflexive Journaling on Emotional Research Topics: Ethical Issues for Team Researchers," *Qualitative Health Research* 17 (10) (2007): 1330, doi:10.1177/1049732307308948.
15. Borg, "The Research Journal," 164.
16. Browne, "Recording the Personal," 421.
17. Borg, "The Research Journal," 164.
18. Ibid., 165.
19. Browne, "Recording the Personal," 432.
20. Engin, "Research Diary," 299.
21. The objectives of the meeting are outlined in my grant proposal: Sarjeant-Jenkins, "Joint Use Libraries."
22. Sarjeant-Jenkins, "Joint Use libraries."
23. Sarjeant-Jenkins, Research Journal, 29 November 2017; Maharaj, "Using Field Notes," 121.
24. Engin, "Research Diary," 301; Maharaj, "Using Field Notes," 121.
25. This reflects the process outlined by Borg, "The Research Journal," 163, about using research journaling to discuss and evaluate research assumptions.
26. Sarjeant-Jenkins, Research Journal, 29 December 2017.
27. Borg, "The Research Journal," 163, also speaks about the act of reflection leading to a change in research focus.
28. The importance of having local people assist in connecting the researcher with others is also stated in Browne, "Recording the personal," 429–30.
29. Sarjeant-Jenkins, Research Journal, 22 February 2018.
30. Ibid., 5 March 2018.
31. Ibid.
32. Maharaj, "Using Field Notes," 117.
33. Sarjeant-Jenkins, Research Journal, 14 March 2018.
34. Hickson, "Becoming a Critical Narrativist," 834, 837 also discusses the importance of learning to give up control.
35. Malacrida, "Reflexive Journaling," 1329.
36. Maharaj, "Using Field Notes," 117.

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