

Rachel Sarjeant-Jenkins and Keith Walker

# Researching in communities

## A librarian's checklist

**A**lthough we have both been librarians for decades, we are novices in the formal research process. It is only in the last four years that either of us started building a research program, and we have been lucky to have had the opportunity to learn and work together. Our shared interest, and our research focus, is on partnerships between academic and public libraries in Canada. Our research began with a broad overview of existing academic-public library partnerships. Later we grew more focused: looking at partnerships between three library sectors in one community (Project A), then at two joint use community-academic libraries (Project B).

Through both positive experiences and mistakes, our research taught us much about the process of conducting research. For those of you like me, still new to qualitative, community-based research, I hope that sharing some of our insights about the research process will help reduce your stumbles along the research path. These insights do not replace the value—indeed the necessity—of reviewing the vast literature on qualitative research. Instead consider them a six-point checklist in the development of your own community-based research project.

*1. Establish community contacts.* Ideally have someone within the community to set up meetings and build interest in the project. For Project A a local person contacted participants and scheduled interviews. We did not have a local person in all of the communities in

Project B and found establishing interviews challenging. Working with a local person may have led to more meetings, more interviews, and more engagement. For both projects we approached participants first by letter and then by email. When further contact was made by phone, the result was universally positive.

*2. Be as concise as possible on the consent form.* At the interview you must review the key points on the consent form verbally to ensure that participants understand the purpose of the research and their rights before signing the form. Our forms were daunting two-page documents. When faced with the form for the first time at the beginning of the interview, some people trusted our summary of key points, but others simply chose not to sign the form at all. If it is necessary to have a lengthy consent form, send a copy in advance along with an overview of the consent form's key points.

*3. Develop interview questions and send in advance if possible.* Having an initial set of questions provides structure to your interview and helps to initiate conversations, particularly with people who are not interested in the topic or are not talkative. However, be prepared to adapt and revise on the fly. Questions

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may be more relevant to some participants and their role(s) than to others.

Send initial questions to participants ahead of time. Although some people are comfortable responding spontaneously, others benefit from having time to reflect and gather their thoughts. In Project A, the one group who received the questions in advance appeared to have a better understanding of the interview goal. In Project B, one participant received the questions in advance and those interview responses were thoughtful and extensive.

*4. Carefully consider interview participants and interview format.* The presence of a supervisor, mentor, employee, or board member can affect how participants respond.

In Project A, recognizing the possible impact of a supervisor's presence during interviews at one library, we deliberately excluded the supervisor from the interview group. At another library we had supervisors and employees in the same interview group. Although it is difficult to know to what degree the supervisors' presence impacted overall participation, during one interview a participant openly deferred to the supervisor when responding to questions. In Project B, including the supervisor in interviews with library boards and employees may have affected interview results, particularly when discussing partnership challenges. At the same time, the supervisor's familiar presence may have increased the participants' comfort level.

In both of our projects, interview groups ranged from one to eleven participants. To help determine interview group size, consider the intent of your interview. Group interviews can be effective in brainstorming or developing concepts, however, some participants may not participate fully in the conversation. We also learned that the first speaker can set the tone and direction of the conversation, resulting in a potentially challenging interview which may not provide the desired breadth of discussion or range of perspectives.

*5. First impressions count.* Think about what you wear. How do you want to come across? There is a balance between overdressing and appearing too authoritative, and under

dressing and implying that the participants don't warrant the effort or that the research isn't important.

Bring something as a "thank you." Cookies or donuts worked well for group interviews in Project A; boxes of chocolates seemed to work well for Project B. Ensure that the thank you suits you as well, otherwise you will come across as awkward and uncomfortable.

*6. Be flexible, play it by ear.* Your role is to gather information and to learn. Be prepared to have a conversation when the opportunity arises. If a person is ready to talk, talk! Allow the meetings to occur when it feels right, not necessarily as planned.

We missed excellent opportunities because we were too tightly bound by our interview schedules. In Project B we could have spoken with community members about their library, but we were not willing to step outside of our plan. Our research required community perspective; to compensate for our inflexibility we had to amend our methodology to include a community survey.

These tips come from our research experiences, use as you see fit. What is absolutely critical, though, is to approach your research project as an opportunity for personal learning and growth, not just for data-gathering. Your research will teach you about new places and people, about the research process, and quite a bit about yourself.

Each of our projects has led not only to a greater understanding of a unique partnership and the workings of partnerships in general, but also to a fuller understanding of interview techniques, the research process, the variety in communities, and how cultural differences impact the research process. We have learned about similarities between libraries regardless of geographic location, community, or culture.

And we have learned about ourselves: how we respond in different situations, our own biases, and what our challenges are, and how to overcome them. View your community-based research through a larger learning lens; it is an opportunity to grow as a person and a researcher, while you gather project-specific data. *~*