Faculty Perceptions of a Library: Paneling for Assessment

Jacob Berg

In this paper I introduce librarians, information professionals, and library staff to "panels," a methodological technique that comes from anthropology, and shows great promise as a library assessment tool. At our institution, a small, private university in Washington, DC, we have employed panels to organize faculty perceptions of the library and its services, presented these results to university administration, and included them in external accreditation documents. In addition, library staff have acted on these panels, improving services based on faculty responses. In this paper, I discuss how and why we use panels, what we have learned from them, and how this methodological technique can be applied. Our use of panels, an interpretivist methodology, demonstrates the promise of similar techniques and tools that are often ignored or unused in research on library assessment.

In studies of information-seeking behavior, both focus groups and in-depth interviews are common ways to find out how members of library communities, our patrons, use and perceive libraries. Panels are a way of coding the stories and dialogue from focus groups and interviews; it is a qualitative research method designed to organize the discursive patterns found in interviewing to showcase commonalities across populations. Liisa Malkki developed panels when conducting research among Hutu refugees in Burundi in the late 1980s, before the Rwandan genocide. Panels arose as a solution to issues of representation in data collection from informants (Malkki 1995, 56), people willing and able to communicate cultural knowledge to an anthropologist.

Panels offer "a sense of collective voice," (Malkki 1995, 56) allowing informants to both construct and strengthen narratives. The informants mentioned in this paper, the faculty, are talking about our library

in a certain way or ways, sharing stories, which both construct and strengthen narratives about the library, its efficacy, and its place in the academic community. These narratives, faculty perceptions of a library, have implications for faculty research, and may manifest themselves in classroom setting, which impacts student success. This was recently the case at Purdue University; librarians successfully marketed to faculty, who then were able to reach students (Dugan 2011). As a librarians, we should be aware of these narratives, these perceptions, and use them to improve libraries and library services because there is often a disconnect between what library staff do, what staff purport to do, and what faculty think staff does.

Using an upcoming Middle States Commission on Higher Education visit as a point of departure, library staff and university administration convened semi-structured focus groups, arranged by school, program, and major, where possible, over the course

Jacob Berg, e-mail: BergJ@Trinitydc.edu

of the spring 2014 semester. We asked in-depth questions in these small groups, following up on some points, what Guest, et al. term "probing" (2003), in order to gain more knowledge about faculty perceptions of the library.

We arranged faculty into their communities of practice, hypothesizing that disciplines would have their own narratives, dominant perceptions, concerning the library. Focus groups also allowed us, as researchers, to obtain the maximum number of responses from faculty in a setting that, because of the presence of their peers, would be most familiar to them. There was a risk that organizing these groups as we did would create a form of selection bias because familiarity often comes with its own forms of conformity and silencing, but even across the groups, themes emerged. One way to avoid this bias in the future would be to interview faculty members individually and use the data collected to form panels.

Panels require interpretation, in the form of editing, on the part of the person or persons collecting the data. As a methodological tool they are not free of biases. When using panels, researchers edit narratives, and one must be both transparent and self-conscious about manipulating the testimony of informants (Malkki 1995, 57). One key advantage of paneling is that the editing and coding process retains a significant measure of autonomy and voice to the informants. Following Alan Feldman, it is useful to view editing as "part of the construction, reconstruction, and simulation of context" (1991, 12), not as a betrayal or corruption of communication, but one that sharpens it, brings it into focus. Writing is not "extrinsic to the fieldwork process," rather, writing cannot be separated from it (12). Here then, is the most salient critique of panels: they standardize. Counter-narratives and dissent are lost (Malkki 1995, 58). As a result, panels are at their most useful when there are clear narratives present (Malkki, 57), as is the case concerning faculty perceptions of this particular library.

Following data collection, I coded the narratives, looking for discursive commonalities among and between the focus groups. The results were organized into five panels: physical library space, the library website, library instruction and information literacy, the print and online collections, and customer service. None of these panels truly represents a discrete function of library services; it is impossible to separate the website from the online collections, for example, but the narratives within these panels have clear boundaries. Panels are not independent variables; the interactions between them, and between narratives, do not have an effect on a dependent variable. Multicolinearity is not an issue.

Physical Library Space

There was near unanimous agreement on two aspects of the library building. First, the library needs more space that emphasizes quiet and private group study. Across schools and majors, faculty requested "seminar-type" spaces that are "intimate, yet comfortable," in the words of one informant. Second, our attempt at creating classroom space in one of the rooms that houses stacks is a failure. Focus groups were rife with complaints about the temperature and sound levels, the room also houses one of the library's HVAC units, and one faculty member went so far as to note that the room was "scary."

Overall, faculty expressed a strong preference for flexible learning spaces (Neill and Etheridge 2008), though they rarely used this or related terms, and had clearly spent time thinking about the interaction between learning, architecture, and design.

These narratives presented library staff with actionable items: create these kinds of spaces within the library, monitor their use, and follow up with faculty. When I noted that weeding and deaccession of some of the library's less popular items would help create such spaces, faculty remained enthusiastic, and appreciated the transparency of the process.

The Library Website

The clear narrative to emerge from this panel was that while many of our faculty start at the library's website, they often ended up elsewhere out of frustration, usually other institutions at which they are credentialed.

However, during the period in which these focus groups took place, the library website underwent significant changes (Berg 2014). A significant number of faculty who had used the library website to conduct research post-transition noted the improvement.

Overall, faculty asked for more tutorials, exercises, and other learning objects on the website, an actionable item for library staff.

Library Instruction and Information Literacy

The clear criticisms present in other panels were absent from this one, making it the most challenging to code. School by school, narratives emerged. One has a mandatory three-credit information literacy instruction course. The others rely on "one-shot" library instruction sessions in which library staff are invited to a classroom at a set time. As a result, the overwhelming response from these schools' faculty was to ask for more delivery methods, which ties into the website panel, above; multi-shot information literacy sessions, the first of which took place shortly after the focus groups; and to lobby for semester-long, for-credit information literacy courses in their schools.

Print and Online Collections

The dominant narratives from this panel were that library collection development policies and procedures seem unclear to faculty and the print collection is out of date. Both are easy fixes, the former via more clarity on the website and communication with faculty, the second via weeding and deaccession, which will free up library space for other uses, including a more contemporary print collection. Unsurprisingly, many responses from faculty included requests for library materials in their fields of expertise. Discussing collections also gave library staff an opportunity to promote open access and open educational resources (OERs) to faculty.

Customer Service

Overall faculty would like to see more events held at and hosted by the library and its staff, in particular events featuring faculty research. This is a clear positive sign; faculty are reaching out to the library, seeking partnerships. A second narrative involves hearsay. According to faculty, students tell them that nobody can help them at the library. Faculty do not seem amenable to this narrative on the part of students, but enough faculty members shared this story that it is worth investigating.

As an aside, one faculty member referred to a reference librarian as the "nice lady at the reception desk."

The data from panels suggests that the library needs to improve in multiple ways, such as creating spaces that emphasize privacy and small group study; making the website more user-friendly by streamlining and simplifying the research process; hosting and sponsoring campus events, like talks by faculty and instruction sessions; making collection development policies and procedures more clear; and updating our print collections; among others. Library staff are acting on these requests, building trust with the faculty.

"Higher education is quantitative in part because of a policy orientation where evaluation is seen as equivalent to counting and measuring," notes one researcher (Lanclos 2014). Popular means of data collection in libraries include surveys, statistical data, and, increasingly, ethnography, among others, and no doubt many librarians and information professionals will recognize the strengths and weaknesses of these methods. It is unlikely that library staff would be able to obtain this level of feedback from faculty using more traditional methods.

Given the low response from faculty to previous surveys at this institution, the respondents would have given library staff a non-representative sample of answers. In addition, we never would have found out what faculty think of a particular classroom in the library building through survey data. E.C. Shoaf notes that this lack of depth, an inability to probe and follow up, is a problem for surveys (2003).

More traditional focus groups would have had the same problem in terms of representation; we in the

library needed the hovering presence of Middle States accreditation, an exogenous shock, to have faculty participate. That both of these methods of data collection were non-starters for us when choosing how best to assess faculty perceptions of the library may hint at problems in the library-faculty relationship, but panels can help the relationship as well.

While statistical data is useful for library staff, it, too, has limitations here. The methods associated with statistics are better employed for so-called "counting stats," such as circulation of library items, article views and downloads, website visits, gate counts, and the like. Library staff at our institution use statistical data such as those described above in internal and external assessment documents, as in our opinion mixed-methods assessments are the most effective. More recently, researchers have used sophisticated statistical analyses to show relationships between library usage and student success (Janetti and Cox 2013, Soria et al. 2013, Stone and Ramsden 2013). However, using statistics to assess faculty perceptions of our library would have been inappropriate, akin to using a hammer to fix a light bulb.

In terms of methodological appropriateness, the next-best option to panels was ethnography, another interpretive methodology, embedding a researcher in the library to observe our community. Ethnographers and anthropologists at other institutions have generated fascinating research on libraries (Kim Wu 2011), Using this method, however, would be too time-consuming and cost-intensive for our university.

Library staff and university administration may make use of the methods discussed in this paper in the future. For example, the number of adjuncts at our institution comprise a four-fold increase in faculty, and many of our part-time faculty have taught at the institution for years. This population would be well-served by focus groups as well, and it would be interesting to compare faculty perceptions of the library based on employment status. Both counting statistics and anecdotal observed evidence lead library staff to believe that other university staff do not use the library and its services. While survey data may help us

understand this disconnect, based on our experience, focus groups would be a more robust option.

Thanks to panels, library staff have robust data that allows us to demonstrate our value, and our values (Bourg 2013, Fister 2014) to actors both inside and outside the institution, and the ability to act on that data. We use both the methodology and the findings in internal and external assessment documents. Moreover, the focus groups we employed were the start of a conversation between library staff, the administration, and faculty that was long overdue. These focus groups provided library staff, administrators, and an assessment regime with a snapshot of how faculty view the library. We have built on these groups, using them as a precedent to make assessments continual. We will use faculty narratives to construct some of our own.

The strengths of panels demonstrated here poses a conundrum: if this method has been used in anthropology for over twenty years, why haven't library and information professionals borrowed it, as they have with other social science methodologies? I suspect that library and information professionals' bias towards positivist methodologies plays a role here. Even within the academic library community, the place most likely for interpretive methodologies to flourish, some of the premier publications were perceived to be unfriendly to these kinds of research. It was only in 2015 that *College and Research Libraries* published an editorial welcoming critical theory to its pages (Elmborg and Walters 2015).

Panels fit comfortably within qualitative methodologies and assessment tools used by librarians, but the explicit admission of subjectivity, the centrality of the researcher to the method, that comes with editing and coding places it apart at the same time. Methodologies are best thought of as tools in toolkits; interpretivist ones have their time and place in library assessment as well. Panels are not a panacea, but based on our experience, they are an effective assessment technique and librarians and information professionals would be wise to consider their use at other institutions.

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