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AUSTRALIAN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE ACADEMICS:
ATTITUDES TOWARDS RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this research was an article by Pauline Wilson in which she blamed academics in library and information science for not developing a research ethic, the lack of which was hampering the growth of knowledge in the field. Wilson said that "library educators have not been fully socialised in their role as the academic segment of a profession and as university faculty" [1979, p. 7].

Wilson was not, of course, the first to address the problem of the slow growth of knowledge in library and information science. Others [e.g. Grotzinger 1975; Shaughnessy 1976; Houser & Schrader 1978; Freeman 1985] have also addressed the problem. But what was different about Wilson's article was her quite detailed proposal for someone to do research which could shed a more illuminating light on the reasons for this. This is the challenge which we accepted.

The research which had been done on academics in our field prior to our study had focused on library and information science academics' personal characteristics [Danton 1978; Denis 1979] research productivity [Lane 1975; White and Momonee, 1978] and attitudes toward research [Katz 1975].

Generally the interpretation of these findings has been that library and information science academics have been found wanting and that they lacked the scholarly attributes found in academics from other fields.

However, when you look at the studies of academics in general [e.g. Fulton and Trow 1979; Parsons and Platt 1973; Rich and Jolicoeur 1978] there is considerable variation among academics in their values, attitudes,

activities,
etc., particularly as these relate to research and publication. Indeed, a
number
of studies have found that many academics do no research, and publish very
little, if at all. These differences have been found regardless of the
type of
institution and within individual colleges and universities, fields of
study,
departments etc.

Academics in professional schools are particularly diverse. For example,
Katz
found that attitudes toward research differed more among library educators
that
between the library academics and the social scientists she studied.

The previous research suggested to us that the search for and description
of a
research group in library and information science might help illuminate the
potential for an increase in research.

The purpose of our study was to determine whether there is a research-
oriented
group of Australian library and information science academics (that is, a
group
concerned with the advancement of the body of knowledge through systematic
inquiry). And, if there is such a group, what characteristics are
associated with
that group, and what are the reasons for membership of the group.

METHODOLOGY

Since we were trying to go beyond what had already been found through
quantitative methods, this study was based on quantitative methodology. We
interviewed 21 academics from ten library schools (8 in colleges of
advanced
education and 2 in universities) throughout Australia. It is not a
representative
sample. Our aim in choosing academics was to ensure coverage of a full
range
of views and not to generalise to a population. We collected the data
through a
semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions based on a number
of topics, e.g. work activities, important issues facing library and
information
science academics, their views on how the knowledge base is developed.

RESULTS

An analysis of the data indicated that there were considerable differences among library and information science academics on many of the topics discussed, and that there were two groups - a research-oriented group and a non-research oriented group.

For the purpose of this paper we are going to concentrate on what the academics said about their work activities. Among the most important characteristics which distinguish members of a profession are those which relate to work activities, e.g. the tasks which are performed, those which should be performed and those considered "core".

When we asked them what they did, the academics talked about a number of different activities or tasks, but two were mentioned by all - teaching and administration and about half the sample mentioned research, and activities related to contact with the profession and professional involvement.

Generally

then the responses fell into the four categories often associated with academic

work: teaching, research, community and professional service, and administration.

Although there was considerable agreement on the range of activities there were obvious differences in the importance placed on activities and many of the

academics stated their preferences directly. For others their preferences came

through their choice of what activities to discuss in the interviews, the amount

of time spent talking about certain activities, and the approach they used to

describe those activities. In this study the academics were divided almost evenly between those who were not interested in research and saw themselves involved primarily in teaching and professional activities and those who viewed

their work lives revolving around teaching and research. A description of the

two groups follows, using quotes from the academics themselves to illustrate

points made in the paper.

Work Activities: Non-Research Group

Teaching

When we asked the academics to describe their work activities, the ten members of this group talked a great deal and without prompting about their involvement in teaching. They said they enjoyed teaching, were always trying

to improve their teaching, looking for new ways of presenting material, and ideas to aid student learning.

As one said:

I love preparing and giving lectures and the contact time with students.

And another said:

You see, I'm a teacher above everything.

Professional Activities

This group also talked a lot about their relationships with the practising library and information professions. For many it was an active, enthusiastic relationship, and they stressed the importance of professional activities for academics in a professional area like librarianship.

Some identified so strongly with libraries that they referred to themselves as librarians and used the term 'we' when referring to librarians, rather than 'they'.

Others had shifted their interest to information management or information technology.

Some of the reasons given for contact with the profession were the need to be aware of developments in practice, to keep up to date for teaching purposes, or to assist in developing broader information based courses.

One academic said:

Unless we stay in touch we can either have events pass us by and we can become very very rusty in the actual practice of librarianship, and I therefore feel that it is important to actively seek practicing librarians to visit, to work with, to talk to, over and

above LAA meetings ... it's important to go out and see their problems, learn of the changing nature of the profession simply for our own educational background and our own ability to teach and to bring a pragmatic background into a classroom.

Research

When it came to talking about research, they were somewhat less effusive. Only one person in this group mentioned research without prompting. When they were prompted by the interviewer, they talked only briefly about research.

In a few cases it was possible to work out what they meant by research.

Some

talked about writing in general, e.g. conference papers, or consulting.

They did

not appear to draw a distinction between research and writing, or, in some cases, practice.

For example, the one person who included research in the description of her work activities said:

In librarianship I always think of it as action research. It should be

in the workplace so a person might do something like produce an excellent A/V kit or something like that.

One academic specifically stated that she was not interested in doing research.

She was, she said, above all, an educator:

Oh well, there again the academic makes his choice. If you've got a very high commitment to racing around the ridges, talking at seminars and so on, you may not have time to do an in-depth study to an extent that it's really going to push the frontiers of knowledge a little further in the field.

Research was seen as something separate, something to be done outside 'normal' work time, if at all, not an integral part of the job.

There were very few reasons given by this group for not doing (or not doing enough) research. The reasons appeared to be 'pro forma' - "very little time to

do research, unfortunately". The lack of time, they said, was due to the amount of time spent on either teaching or curriculum development, or administration.

No-one in this group gave research as the unique purpose of academics in the

field of library and information studies. Nor did they consider research necessary for a good performance as an academic, or for entry into academia.

Professional experience and the ability to teach and communicate were seen as

far more important.

As one academic (a Head of Department) said:

It doesn't concern me whether the staff members go on to do higher degree work or not because that may simply be a choice of that person not to do so. I think that in many universities particularly, too much emphasis is placed on getting higher and higher academic qualifications. I call it academic inflation.

And another said:

Some people mightn't have a masters degree or a string of formal qualifications but they might have attended a lot of workshops and taken a strong interest in professional associations. You know that they have developed their knowledge and updated themselves, they're widely read. Another person who might have a master's degree or even a doctorate may have a very, very narrow specific interest and may not have kept up in other ways, so I don't think you should say that to be a lecturer in librarianship you must have a PhD or a Master's degree or something.

In summary, academics with a non-research perspective on their work activities had a number of characteristics in common. Firstly, when prompted, they talked only briefly about research. Research was seen as something separate, not an integral part of the job. Secondly, research was not given as the unique purpose of the library and information science academic, and, thirdly, research was not seen as necessary for a good performance as an academic, nor for entry into academia. Overall, research was not on their agendas and was only discussed before being dropped in favour of other interests, e.g. in teaching or professional activities.

Work Activities: Research Group

Research

As stated previously all of those in the sample mentioned teaching and administration when discussing their work as academics. Eleven respondents also gave research as one of their job tasks.

For some in this group their work consisted of two parts:

I teach and I do research.

Others saw research as one of the three main areas traditionally associated with academic work,

Well my role is of course that of any member of the academic staff which is to teach and then to involve myself in community service and research ..."

while others saw research as one of many activities:

So there are really five things I do: teaching, research, professional activities and professional things to do with the institution, talking with members of staff and students. And again it is difficult to separate those, isn't it?"

Like the respondent above, a number of other academics also found it difficult to compartmentalise their activities and a perceived synergistic relationship between research and other activities was one of the dominant themes in the interviews.

Many of the 11 saw research and teaching to be complementary:

I don't actually think it is true that my Ph.D isn't of any use to anybody. It makes my teaching better: and I do think it makes my teaching broader.

I don't feel about research in the same way as I do about administrative tasks because I think in order to continue being credible and at the forefront of knowledge you have to do research and that in fact it can contribute to your teaching.

Others saw a relationship between research and all their activities:

Well you can choose, you can say I'm going to be a teacher ... but in fact I find it very hard to distinguish among teaching, research and community service, because I don't think in fact you can divorce the three. I think the research drives my teaching. ... and I feel that the experience that I'm gaining in research and the information that I gain is a constant teaching tool; and the community service role ... is an aspect of my perception of what research is and that comes back into the teaching.

The importance of research as an activity was expressed in a number of ways.

All members of this group mentioned research without being prompted and many spontaneously talked about their own research and its importance to them. Approximately half of this group said that research performance should be used as a criterion for selection, promotion or tenure. Although others were more hesitant about using research performance as a criterion, they did see the

need to appoint staff who show research potential, as evidenced, for example, by an advanced degree with a major research component. Some indicated that they saw research as a responsibility or role of an academic:

We have a responsibility to the taxpayer, too. We are employed to do other things like research. It is our responsibility to perform as well as we can in that area and not short-change it although there are a lot of pressures.

Definition of Research

For academics so interested in research few attempted to define research in a systematic manner. Moreover, when asked about their definitions, many hesitated and seemed to have some problem with the questions - there were a number of hums, hah's and silences on the tapes.

Most addressed these questions by giving examples of what they considered research to be, for example surveys and experiments, and what they considered research not be e.g. the preparation of bibliographies..

There were, however, two characteristics of research which were mentioned by all members of the group. Firstly, the use of "the scientific method" broadly defined:

I use scientific method as a way of talking about inquiring in general. I don't really think that the way historians go about their work is much different from this method, they just put different labels on it. They apply the same kind of rigour and scepticism about the evidence and there are hypotheses even though they don't call them that.

and secondly, the development of new knowledge or ideas.

Barriers to Research

A number of respondents mentioned obstacles to conducting research although these were not belaboured. Rather these barriers were discussed as a fact of life. The obstacles fell into four categories:

1. The time consuming nature of administrative tasks.
2. "Over-teaching"

Although no one identified teaching as a hindrance per se, some talked about the tendency to let teaching become an overwhelming part of the job.

I think the division between teaching and research ought to be something like 50/50.

What is preventing this?

Well, I think that we tend to over-teach. We tend to assume that people don't learn things unless they sit in a classroom and hear about them or unless we assess them.

and from another respondent:

I find that during term times it's sort of Parkinson's Law - teaching expands to fill the time allotted to it.

3. Lack of Blocks of Time

I happen to think that doing good research requires a big block of time to sit down and think about nothing else.

Most respondents who mentioned this as a problem put the responsibility of factors outside their control:

I think for research I need really long slabs of time, I really need a whole day ... Not only my own fault - things about the way the School is run that I can't get much in the way of long periods.

4. Personal characteristics

This was the most common reason cited for not doing more research. The 11 respondents in this group saw themselves and their work habits as the or one of the major barriers to research. Most often we heard the straight forward statement "I'm not good at organising my time", but some were more introspective:

I structure my life in a way where I don't have time to think about the things that are really hard - ... and I feel very badly about that

... I think that's a deficiency in my character and the sort of person I am.

From the above it is obvious that members of this group had a number of characteristics in common but there were also differences in their approach to research. The most important of these was the importance placed on theoretical versus problem-solving research.

Some of the group emphasised theoretical research but at least one member was what might be termed "anti-theory". The difference in perspective is shown by the two quotes below:

I don't think that research is simply problem solving. I do think that research is something about theory building".

You are nowhere unless you are into theory building or something like that. And all that happens is that in librarianship you finish up with the greatest amount of sociological rubbish. It's unintelligible.

This latter respondent, who was actively involved in research and development projects, went on to say that "society cannot afford the angels on a pin stuff". Most of the respondents, however, saw theoretical and applied research to be complementary:

I think the purpose of the more quick and dirty research is to solve immediate problems but also to build up the state of knowledge and then contribute to the testing of the more general types of things.

DISCUSSION

In this paper we have portrayed two different groups: one which sees research as an integral part of the academic's life and one which does not. We are left with the question as to what may account for these differences?

Reasons for membership of a particular group given by academics themselves

Interestingly the academics in the study offered only a few hints of what these reasons might be. Rather they tended to talk about reasons for their own level of research productivity: "no time", "over teaching", "administrative tasks", etc. Although important for helping to explain why research productivity in the field is low, they do not address the issue of why some of the sample were engaged in research and others were not. However, several potentially more fruitful

reasons did emerge. Almost all of these came from the research group; this perhaps again illustrates the lack of interest in research by those who held the teaching perspective. The reasons advanced fell into two categories:

1. Intellectual Qualities

Some of those in the teaching-research group though their colleagues were "a bit weak, leave a bit to be desired, not very good academics, not creative nor innovative". "They are not inner directed and they do not think about their discipline".

Another talked about the "old brigade", that is academics who came into academic work after many years in practice:

They tend not to be risk-takers and they tend to be uncomfortable with doubt, whereas I think that's part and parcel of teaching any academic subject - being willing to say I don't know.

2. Lack of Socialisation into Academia

Several respondents talked about the fact that some colleagues, particularly the "old brigade", were still socialised into the work activities of a practitioner rather than those of an academic. In a colourful quote one said:

They are going to meetings - and it's all squeak, squeak. They tend to run off and do something quick - or help this or help that, whereas one of the things you have to learn is that you have got to sit down and take time and you must think.

It is interesting that this person and indeed others who talked about lack of socialisation were themselves very active in professional activities. Therefore it would seem that those in the research group do not believe that the academic must remove him or herself from contact with the profession and professional activities, but that they must also take on other activities.

Other reasons for membership of a particular group

In addition to the reasons cited by our respondents, we saw several differences

between the groups which might explain why some were involved in research and others not.

1. Differences in perceptions of the role of Academics in Professional Schools

There is evidence in our study that those in the non-research group saw the role of academics in professional schools quite differently from those in the research group.

As one member of the non-research group said:

I think ultimately, that in our particular field it comes down to the laying on of hands and passing of knowledge about the profession to students, - if it were, say, a science faculty or something like that, it might be altogether different.

Presumably those with this perspective will emphasise those activities involved in the preparation of new professionals, for example, teaching, contact with and contribution to the profession. This, of course, is what we found.

On the other hand, those with a research perspective saw their role to be a dual one - one that involves the laying on of hands and the "advancement of the profession by building new knowledge through research and research related activities". Generally this group did not see themselves as different from those in science or arts faculties.

... Sometimes I find myself in the invidious position of justifying all this long holiday and I say to people that research is part of the job.

Presumably those with this view will emphasise teaching and research activities and de-emphasise contact with and direct contribution to the practicing professions. To a certain extent our data confirm this, and some members of the research group did have a much lower involvement in professional activities.

On the other hand we found what quantitative studies have found - a number of academics who can be termed "triple threats" and who are heavily involved in

teaching, research and community or professional service.

2. Deeply ingrained personal preferences for activities other than research

What comes through the interviews with those academics who did not mention research as an activity was not only a lack of interest in research, but a positive preference for other activities.

My personal interest is education and that is teaching, ways of teaching and learning. I'm really a teacher. My favourite tasks involve teaching, particularly with adult learners.

Others talked about their "love of teaching" and spoke at length and effusively about the process of teaching and the interactions with students.

None of those with a research perspective spoke about teaching in this way. They tended to talk about the aims or end result of teaching not the process itself.

To this group changing the profession was an important aim.

Well, what I am trying to do is change the profession. I think libraries and librarians can play an important role in helping people to run their own lives, to be themselves ... so that's what I think libraries and librarians can do ... I think they could, but I don't think that they do.

and another one when answering "what's the purpose of it all"?

Fundamentally I think it's to improve the quality of the relationship between the practitioner and the client - full stop.

3. Preferred Ways of Knowing

Other research has found that academics can have quite different views about the methodologies appropriate to the field. We tried to address this in our study by asking questions about how the knowledge base is built and how the knowledge base might be extended.

Almost all of the sample regardless of which perspective they held said it is extended through "research and practice". However, when probed for more detail, there did seem to be differences between those with a research orientation and those without.

Not surprisingly those in the research group tended to emphasise research and de-emphasise personal experience as a methodology.

If I were to prioritise research and experience I would put research first and experience second.

Those with a teaching perspective focused on the importance of personal experience in building the profession's knowledge base. As expressed by some members of this group the process of building or extending knowledge starts with personal observations and/or reading the literature, attendance at conferences, etc. This private knowledge becomes public when it is transferred to students and others in the profession through writing, giving papers at conferences, continuing educational programs. This dissemination leads to discussion which then leads to new personal knowledge and the cycle continues. One respondent called this the "snowball effect".

... by pupils' experience and writing that up and then someone else taking their idea or program a bit further and giving a different response. There's that snowball effect.

4. School Research Climate

When the institutional affiliations of the respondents are compared, it becomes obvious that some schools are over-represented in the research group and others in the non-research group. Those in the research group included a college of advanced education as well as a university. Because of our sampling method, these results must be interpreted with caution - although this finding would make sense with other writings in higher education and common sense.

Interestingly enough there was very little mention by any of the respondents of mentoring, collaboration with other staff members or other indicators which might indicate that a research climate was present in the institutions we visited.

This was true even for those institutions which had a number of active researchers. There was one notable exception where the three respondents interviewed talked about the value placed on research and the expectation that those appointed would do research.

CONCLUSION

Implications of these findings

Our study found a group of academics in Australian library and information science schools with an orientation towards research. The data for our study was collected several years ago (1983/84), yet we still find the same criticisms about the lack of development of the knowledge base in our field (Maguire 1989). Perhaps a critical mass of research-minded academics has not yet been reached. What can we do to improve the situation? Our research indicates that changes could be made at a number of different levels: the individual academics, work organization, the library and information science schools and the links between academics in these schools.

1. The individual academic

We could select into our schools those whose preferred way of knowing is through research and who have the intellectual qualities required for research and who do not have a deeply ingrained personal preference for activities other than research. We could also encourage existing staff to develop interest and skills in conducting research.

2. Work organisation

We could reduce the amount of over teaching, the amount of time spent on curriculum development, administration and professional activities. We could give academics more blocks of time to do research.

3. The library and information science school

A climate favourable to research could be developed by making changes to the academics and the organization of their work (already mentioned), building research networks through mentoring, having larger library schools which would make it more likely that there would be someone else to share research interests with and locating library schools within institutions which foster and reward research.

Many of these suggestions have profound implications for professional education. The extent to which any of these changes, if implemented, would impair or enhance the effectiveness of the preparation of new professionals in information and information science is a matter for debate.

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