Sims Kline

The librarian as ethnographer
An interview with David Green

A significant development in the design of user studies has been the application of ethnographic methods to capture in-depth information about users' information behavior. The most comprehensive and thorough ethnographic studies conducted and published widely to date are those produced by the Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries (ERIAL) Project.

David Green, associate university librarian for collections and information services at Northeastern Illinois Library, wrote the original research grant and served as project coordinator. For two years, five academic libraries in Illinois worked with two full-time anthropologists to study students' library research experiences in order to improve services. More than 700 student, faculty, and librarian interviews were conducted using a variety of methods. Green's perspective and comments about the project and implications for effective academic librarianship are instructive and challenging.

Interview with David Green

Q. You attended a presentation in 2007 by Nancy Fried Foster, anthropologist at the University of Rochester, about her library ethnographic research. What was particularly compelling for you in her work—which then provided the impetus for your study?

A. What caught my attention was how the ethnographic methodologies she used seemed to allow one to step into the shoes of the user. She was finding information that was really hard to discover using other methods. It seemed an excellent way for me to become familiar with the students at Northeastern Illinois University, where I had only recently been hired.

Q. I was struck by the reported phenomenon in one of the ERIAL documents of the *invisible librarian*. That's an interesting term. Could you elaborate on that finding?

A. What we started seeing early on in the student interviews was that librarians were just not a part of the students' world. There was no understanding of the librarians' role in their own academic endeavors. They simply didn't know who the librarians were or what they did.

Q. Would it be your impression that, in a residential campus setting the *invisible librarian* is less of a problem? Are the librarians there more visible?

A. The lack of awareness was pretty consistent at all the different institutions, whether they were residential, nonresidential, or mixed. So, no.

Q. A discouraging finding on the one hand, but certainly a spur for change on the other?

A. At first, it seemed discouraging. But we also found that many students were

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pretty much lost when it came to finding information and really needed librarians' help to succeed. Also, teaching faculty were unaware of the degree that students were struggling. In addition, students who had library instruction and used librarians acknowledged how valuable that help was. So, the results of the study started off somewhat disappointing, but then became strongly reaffirming.

Q. In your studies there is this kind of statement by faculty (I'm paraphrasing here): "Well, I know the librarians are good as generalists, they can find books on the shelf and articles in the databases, but I don't think of them being able to work with my students on discipline-specific content." Am I overstating that, or is that something you ran into in terms of faculty perception?

A. There was a statement from one member of the teaching faculty to that effect. However, after the findings of the study came out in the press, there was an overwhelming level of support from teaching faculty for librarians.

Q. Perhaps the study itself helped to reorient or make more visible the librarians?

A. Absolutely.

Q. [Was this] an unintended effect, but nonetheless significant, or an intended effect?

A. When the State Library of Illinois awarded us the LSTA grant, they made it clear that the expectation was that the research would lead to documented improvements for students. That was really the whole point and why they gave us the grant. The question wasn't, "What are you going to discover?" but "What are you going to do about what you discover?"

Q. That brings me to the question concerning changes: specific changes **that might have been effected both in your library and the other four campuses. The changes might have been made, or anticipated to be made, in these areas: instruction, relationships with faculty, space planning, curriculum, Web design, even librarians' schedules. What would you like to summarize in these areas?**

A. I can start with the first one, library instruction. The general finding was that students struggled with information literacy issues to a degree that even shocked the librarians. When teaching faculty learned of this they requested more library instruction sessions than any time in the last 30 years. Our library instruction sessions increased 50 percent over the previous year. Our provost was thrilled with this, and it has helped us get more resources.

The study showed we needed to focus on relationships with faculty. We created an Outreach Committee, but its focus is not marketing. The goal is to build *relationships* with each of the different groups that we strategically target. We're trying to personalize all of our communications, get our faces and names known, make visible who we are as people, and [let faculty know] how we can address their needs.

So the relationship with teaching faculty is key: it is why library instruction has skyrocketed.

In relation to space planning, we have received about $200,000 to develop a master plan for the library. Regarding curriculum: we now have a requirement for all English 102 classes in which all students complete a library research assignment working with a librarian. That's actually stated in the curriculum. Also, we have finally been successful in having the library as one of the stops on the orientation tour for incoming freshmen.

Some of the libraries that participated in the study have reported similarly significant successes, in particular, Illinois Wesleyan University.

Q. The ERIAL studies refer to teaching faculty as "gatekeepers" and "brokers" between the students and the librarians. What is the impact of this? Do more substantial librarian-faculty relationships make a difference, encouraging faculty to refer their students to librarians for discipline-related, content-specific help?

A. Yes, and also it depends on the teaching faculty member. Some teaching faculty may never change their minds, but I think that once you start developing these relationships, you can make improvements.

The fact that faculty are gatekeepers is both good and bad. I mean, it's hard to reach out directly to students and make a big difference, but at least we know to whom our outreach should be directed. Teaching faculty have the power to make the difference libraries need.

Q. The Project ERIAL Web site[1] is a goldmine of information on library ethnography. Do you have a lot of visitors to the Web site?

A. We do have Google Analytics running, and we do keep track of usage. One of the deliverables in the grant was to have a "toolkit" or guide for other libraries to help them to their own studies. The toolkit and other information is available on the Web site, and we encourage librarians to take advantage of it.

Q. My impression is that when a librarian gets involved in one of these studies and gets some training in these methods, it's not an exaggeration to say that they are really doing the work of an ethnographer, even though they're not degreed anthropologists. To what extent would you agree?

A. We relied on anthropologists for our study. We couldn't have done it without their help. But librarians are able to be trained enough to do the job to get results that they can use to make positive change.

Q. To what extent can a small academic library reasonably expect that they could do a useful ethnographic study without having an anthropologist on board?

A. You can discover a lot about your users, even with a small study. There's no question that you can do that without an anthropologist—other libraries are doing it. The major issue is that it does take some staffing time (it's not that expensive), but it does take time. And if you have an anthropologist who's willing to help and has some background in ethnography, that can be a plus. The toolkit on the ERIAL Web site is designed to assist libraries who want to do their own study.

Q. Are you aware of any studies underway that are focusing specifically on graduate students' information behavior?

A. No, but I would guess that there are some underway. It's an important user group.

Q. The information behavior of our faculty colleagues is also of interest. My impression is that faculty have certain favorite channels of information. They're on their own electronic lists, tip sheets, e-alerts, RSS feeds, journal tables of contents—faculty have their own way of navigating the information landscape. To what extent do you think it would be helpful to do ethnographic studies on faculty information and research behavior? Would it be informative? Would it be helpful?

A. I think you would find some interesting things. Certainly it could be very important. The results from these types of studies would vary by institution. What is important is to pursue a project that would allow one to do a better job, to be more effective, to serve better one's users. I'm sure you can find some interesting things. Absolutely, that could be very useful.

Q. The ERIAL Toolkit, linked on the project Web site, is quite impressive, more than 30 pages, and includes the Institutional Research Board (IRB) issues and procedures. I expect it was a challenge to coordinate the IRB process among five different institutions. Did your anthropologists write the IRB applications?

A. It was a very critical piece. I've had some experience with IRBs, and I know how unpredictable the process can be, depending on the institution. At my institution, Lisa Wallis was our lead research librarian for our local ERIAL research team, and she was responsible for putting together the IRB. Each of the five lead research librarians worked with their anthropologist, but the librarians were responsible for getting it through. If you have a tight timeline, the IRB can be an issue, so it's something to be aware of.

Q. Were the students for the interviews chosen randomly?

A. Actually, no. This was a qualitative study. There was no attempt or goal to have a sample size that was representative of the student population. And, in fact, doing a study of that kind is almost impossible, since it is so difficult and expensive to get the appropriate sample for every group of student. We would do whatever it took to get student volunteers: bribe them with pizza, put ads in newspapers—all kinds of things.

Q. You advertised for your participants?

A. In a variety of ways. And we found, at some institutions, a certain medium would work, but at others, it wouldn't. Sometimes an anthropologist walked up to a student while they were looking for information in the library and asked if they could film them while they searched. That particular method—student research process interview—was often the one that was most revealing and required no advertising.

But to answer your question, a variety of recruitment methods was used, but it really is just finding what works best at your institution.

Q. Is there anything else you'd like to comment on?

A. Yes, there is an additional point I'd like to make.

I mentioned this student research process interview that our anthropologists Andrew Asher and Susan Miller did. They would walk up to a student at random and ask permission to follow them around and film them while they searched for information. The anthropologist would occasionally ask the student questions just to clarify what the student was doing. But the anthropologist was basically a passive observer. When the research teams later reviewed the films, they got to see the research process from the student's perspective.

For the first time, librarians get to see the whole process, from beginning to end, of how students actually navigate (or fail to navigate) our physical libraries, our online resources, and numerous services. Librarians can now see what kind of help they get (or don't get) from various service desks, how they persevere, how they momentarily give up, what they do after that, and how they compensate. This is the first time any of us [has] had a chance to experience how well all these parts work together as one integrated system from a user's perspective. Many of us found the experience humbling.

Libraries need quantitative data to make informed decisions. But ethnography provides qualitative data through a process that takes librarians out of their world and puts them in the users' world. It puts a human face on real issues experienced in the real world and creates empathy, motivating us to address the issues instead of just talking about them.

Note

1. Visit the Project ERIAL Web site at www.erialproject.org.