

It's all about keeping quiet – using focus group interviews to understand the everyday life of researchers in order to support their research

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Abstract. This paper describes how focus group interviews were used in a project on developing research support services. The object of the interviews was to understand the everyday lives of researchers and the obstacles they experience in their research process. Advantages and challenges of the method are discussed, e.g. the benefits of the interaction and the free form that the method allows for and the challenge not to interfere in the discussions and yet see to it that the discussions keep to the selected themes and keep on going.

Keywords: focus group interviews; academic libraries; collaboration; research support services; research process; interaction

1. Introduction

Over the last decade the interest in research support services at libraries has increased and there are discussions on the contents and design of the support. In Sweden, university libraries have to a large extent been focusing on developing their support for students but now the time seems to have come to focus on researchers. New ways of publishing and accessing research and increased demands for evaluation of research and open access of results and data, call for new roles for libraries and librarians (Borgman, 2007; The LimeGuild, 2009; Webb et al., 2007). The importance for librarians to be pro-active is stressed, i.e. to anticipate needs of the users and act so that the needs can be met when they occur, see e.g. Bent (2004) and Neal et al. (2009). In the literature, descriptions of how specific libraries work with and develop research support services are

common, often from a UK and US perspective, see e.g. Ashworth (2009), Bradbury and Weightman (2010) and Gerson (2008), as well as reports on future roles for libraries and librarians (CIBER, 2010; Kroll and Forsman, 2010; Larsen et al., 2010). Much of this literature is written from a library perspective and research support is seldom described in relation to the researcher's everyday lives as researchers.

In 2012, a project was undertaken at Lund University Libraries with the purpose of identifying areas where the present support services ought to be developed and strengthened. This was done by a three folded design: a literature review focusing on what research support services are, what libraries offer and what researchers need, a survey of the current research support services at Lund University Libraries and lastly, focus group interviews with researchers at different faculties. The three parts were analysed together in order to suggest areas for development (The full report in Swedish:Voog et al., 2013; for a summary in English:Wiklund and Voog, 2013).

For the focus group interviews, the central idea was that if libraries are to offer relevant research support services this must be built upon an understanding of researchers' needs and wishes in relation to their work as researchers. In short, we wanted to shift perspectives from the librarians' notions of research to the researchers' experiences of research. To allow for open discussions we decided to use focus group interviews. To further help us focus on the researcher's everyday life we chose a schematic model of the research process as a theoretical framework. We found the method to be most useful and rewarding for furthering our understanding of how research is performed. The purpose of this paper is to describe how the method was used and to discuss its advantages and challenges. Since the theoretical framework was important for the design of the interviews we start by describing the model of the research process.

2. Shifting perspectives

There is a large body of research about scholarly communication and research practices, and the everyday life of researchers has been thoroughly studied from several perspectives. Borgman (2007) highlights the importance of considering possible changes in scholarly communication in the realm of digital changes and its influences on how research is performed and communicated. A starting point for such studies is that there are differences between disciplines in how knowledge production and dissemination is done (see e.g. Kling and McKim, 2000, Talja et al. 2004). Accordingly, our approach is based on the understanding of how disciplines or epistemic cultures are constructed as an interplay between epistemic and social circumstances (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Knorr-Cetina, 1999).

As mentioned earlier in studies of research support services in library settings, there has been a tendency to focus on the support services themselves, e.g. what is offered, how they are carried out and how they can be developed. But there are examples of studies where more attention is paid to the research process and different ways of doing research. For example in a report from University of Minnesota Libraries (2006) activities of the researchers are used as a starting

point in order to understand and analyse the support the researchers need. Palmer et al. (2009) call attention to differences between disciplines and how these differences should have an impact on the kinds of support services that libraries offer.

As a consequence, instead of starting to assess already existing services or functions a shift in perspectives is important if the development shall be in line with the researchers needs. In our study we used focus groups on a faculty level, thus dealing with different disciplinary settings and research practices. In order to focus on the researchers' perspectives and to be able to categorise and analyse their experiences we decided to use a schematic model of the research process. It was inspired by Bo-Christer Björk's (2006) work on scholarly communication and his modelling of it as a process. His model, however, is broken down into a complex seven-level hierarchy and was too complex in this project. Together with thematic areas from Blaschke et al. ([2009] (Unpubl.)) an adapted model was formed instead; a model that contains four different parts with each part consisting of several possible research-related activities.

Figure 1: The research process, a schematic model:

<i>Start a research project</i>	<i>Collect material</i>	<i>Process/analyze/write</i>	<i>Communicate results and make data accessible</i>
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(Voog et al., 2013)

In *Start a research project* we include e.g. activities to find new ideas, to write an application and to monitor funding agencies. *Collect material* holds aspects regarding searching for literature and being updated on particular research areas. The activities in *Process/analyse/write* often overlap when it comes to how a researcher processes and analyses collected data or material and how conclusions are presented. In the last part of the model *Communicate results and make data accessible*, aspects on making research available are found as well as how research results can be used to evaluate research output e.g. to allocate funding.

However, to create a generalised model will inevitable mean that the research process will be represented on a rather superficial level (in a one-dimensional way). The parts are more complex than presented here and the process is never as linear as the model describes. Not to mention that it also differs between disciplines how the activities in the different parts are carried out in practice. Nevertheless, overall the model was a useful way to structure the different parts of the project; the literature review and the existing and future support services. In the part with focus group interviews it was, as mentioned before, a valuable help to focusing on the researchers as well as an analytical tool when processing the interviews. In the next section we discuss how the model of the research process was translated into interview themes.

3. Implementing the focus group method

Focus group interviews can be used as a tool for librarians to learn more about specific users, in this project it works as a way to gain insights into the everyday lives of the researchers and their research cultures. The main idea with focus group interviews is to get the participants' point of view and the interviews can be more or less structured (see e.g. Short, 2006). To allow for as open and different views as possible on the research process we chose to use semi-structured focus group interviews, see e.g. Wibeck (2011) and Billinger (2005). Semi-structured focus group interviews are more like conversations than regular interviews. The moderator introduces different themes and then let the participants discuss the themes without interrupting or taking part in the actual conversation. During the conversation the moderator might ask clarifying questions or introduce aspects of the themes that have not been dealt with.

In our project much work was done on developing a scheme for the interviews, i.e. identifying themes and related questions. The focus areas for the interviews had to be constructed in a way that gave us good insights through the researchers' own descriptions of the obstacles when moving from an idea to a publication. Based on the model of the research process we used the different parts of the process as overall themes and areas that we wanted covered. For each theme we identified a number of related questions. These questions were never intended to be asked directly in the interview setting. Instead they could be used if the researchers found it hard to understand the themes or they could be used if the conversation stopped.

In the interviews, the themes were introduced in such a way as to encourage a discussion between the researchers and to avoid addressing the moderator. One example of how this was attempted is how the theme *Start a research project* was introduced: "I would like you to think about your latest research project, large or small, and tell each other about how you started that? How did it proceed? Were there any obstacles?". This opening gave the participants the opportunity to describe how they work in relation to this particular aspect of their research process and also, in relation to the other participants' stories, reflect on and discuss how research is and can be performed. By talking freely the moderator got an insight in the research practice of the researchers' disciplines.

The project group met several times and discussed the interview themes back and forth. There were sometimes vivid discussions on how the questions should be used in the interviews or why we wanted to use a certain theme. We all studied the method and with the discussions our knowledge of the method deepened. These meetings also functioned as an important mental preparation for the interviews and equally important, as a way to develop a common language and understanding of the purpose of the interviews.

As a complement to the interviews we decided to start and end each focus group interview with a small exercise called *minute paper*. A *minute paper* is a pedagogical reflection that more often is used in teaching (Angelo and Cross, 1993; McKeachie et al., 2006), which gives the participant the possibility to

reflect and write down a couple of words in regard to the subject of the reflection. In this case we asked the researchers to start to write down the main obstacles that they experience in their work as researchers. By doing so they had to start to think and formulate themselves before the main discussion began. The focus group was ended by yet another question, namely what they thought were the areas that, the university at a large or the library, should focus on in order to make their everyday life as a researcher easier. The papers were then collected and used when analysing the interviews.

In our project we made seven focus group interviews, one at each participating faculty, each group consisted of 4-6 researchers from different departments and disciplines at the faculty. The literature on the subject states that 4-7 participants make an ideal group size for the method (see e.g. Billinger, 2005; Wibeck, 2000). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each interview was done with a moderating librarian from the same faculty as the researchers and an assistant from another library that took care of the recording device and took notes. The moderator's task was, as previously described, to introduce the different themes for the participants. The themes reflected the schematic overview of the research process in the model and the main question was what kind of obstacles the participants experience in the different phases.

When the focus group interviews were completed, the *minute papers* and the transcribed interviews were analysed faculty by faculty, by the moderator and the assistant. Every interview transcription was analysed with the help of the themes introduced by the moderator and themes that arose in the conversation. Different aspects of the same theme could occur in different stages of the conversation and were highlighted and analysed in its context. From the analysis and in relation to research support services that are already offered, suggestions for further development for each faculty were reported.

The results collected from all interviews were also translated into a more general context. Themes that could be found at several faculties were identified, and seen as areas that the library network could/should further work together with in terms of competence development and communication of experience. We also looked at how one and the same theme could be discussed in different disciplines, e.g. descriptions on the same theme but different obstacles and perceptions.

4. Some findings and results from the project

Since this article focuses on the method we refer to the article *It takes two to tango* (Wiklund & Voog, 2013) for a comprehensive overview of the findings. In short, an overall finding is that the researchers' everyday lives are influenced by the lack of time, money and the possibility to focus on their research. In addition, although the researchers share the same problems, different disciplines have specific research practices, e.g. ways of performing and communication research, that affect the kinds of solutions that are relevant.

Therefore, one conclusion is that all research support services need to be accessible, visible and developed in close proximity to the researchers in order to be used. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution, instead support services need

to be developed in relation to different research practices. In addition, for the support to be as complete and varied as possible, it is important that the library creates alliances with other units that offer support to researchers within the university.

Focus group interviews made it possible to gain insights into researchers' everyday lives and research practices. In the next section we will further develop the pros and cons of the method.

5. Benefits and challenges with focus groups interviews

As discussed above, the theoretical perspective initiates a shift of focus from the librarian's points of view to the researchers' perspectives. In the interviews the researchers are introduced to themes by the moderator and are then free to discuss whatever aspects that they find most relevant and interesting, relating to these themes. By not asking directly for the researchers' opinions but by asking them to discuss the themes from their own perspectives, we get a view of their perceptions and experiences. That is how the themes are understood and fit into their everyday lives. The free form of the interviews is then a major advantage since it allows for the discussions to take different directions and focus on what the researchers find relevant.

Another advantage is the interaction that takes place between the researchers. Different opinions can be aired and discussed in relation to each other. One researcher's thought may trigger other thoughts. The interaction is a way to share experiences and in doing so the researchers also negotiate knowledge about the themes, e.g. what is included or excluded in a theme. These negotiations are valuable since the way things are talked about gives an understanding of how things are perceived in relation to specific research cultures. It also shows how a theme fits into the everyday life of their research. Even misunderstandings or obvious inaccuracies are valuable examples of how things are perceived.

But this also connects to one of the challenges with the method; limitations for the moderator to interfere in the discussions. Apart from seeing to it that the conversation keeps going and that everyone participates, the moderator should interact as little as possible in order not to disturb the discussions. This holds challenges, in particular when there are obvious inaccuracies or misunderstandings. For example, the researchers sometimes expressed a wish for support services that already exist or they were uncertain of aspects of a theme. There were also examples of myths and misunderstandings about concepts, e.g. open access. Many times the moderator found it difficult not to interrupt in the discussion to straighten out certain aspects since that would have disrupted the rhythm of the interaction. Sometimes the researchers addressed the moderator for help to clarify certain details. The moderator then had to find a short and acceptable answer and then back out of the discussion. So although valuable in the investigation, misunderstandings and such are a challenge during the interviews. By keeping quiet we gained a rich material that gave example on how certain myths are reproduced within in a group, an important knowledge

that can be used when designing support structures around different subjects such as the example of open access publishing.

Another challenge is that the free form does not ensure that all questions that an investigator has are answered in the session. Since the discussions are steered by the researchers there may be aspects that are not dealt with. The moderator may try to introduce certain angles but if the researchers do not pick up the idea, the aspects will be left which may be frustrating to the investigator. But undealt aspects are equally important since they state something about how a theme is perceived. It may be an indicator that the aspect is not relevant or that it is too abstract or unfamiliar. Should the librarians leave the aspects or pose the question differently? This highlights the importance of analysis. Focus group interviews do not deliver direct answers to the research questions but require an analysis in order to be useful. Analysis is in fact needed for all methods but it may be less obvious when a more clear-cut questions-answers-method is used. In the project there were two dimensions of the analysis: one to identify the different parts of the research process for different subject areas and the related obstacles and one to understand the researchers' experiences in relation to our knowledge as librarians of information handling and already existing support services. Only after these two steps could we point out different kind of support that would be helpful in certain situations and what we should develop further.

In order to go beyond traditional notions of what libraries do, we tried to tone down the library context before and during the interviews. One way was to stress that we did not seek to evaluate existing support services but wanted an unbiased discussion about their work and experiences as researchers. Naturally it was impossible to get totally unbiased perspectives: we all came from the library, some of us knew the interviewed researchers and many of the themes could to a large extent be related to the library. Even so, we found that by asking the researchers to take a broad perspective we could identify areas where other units at a university might offer help, perhaps in collaboration with libraries.

6. Conclusions

To sum up, the method of focus groups interviews is very much about keeping quiet in order not to interrupt the discussions but also not to interfere when the researchers tell about how they experience a certain theme. This is also a method that clearly requires that the material is analysed for it to get a meaning/make sense. In this analysis a theoretical model is helpful.

Focus group interviews are a useful tool for librarians to learn more about specific users, in this project it works as a way to gain insights into the everyday lives of the researchers and their different research cultures. By using the free form of focus group interviews with researchers from different faculties, variations of how research is performed and understood become visible in the ways they describe how they for example find literature and publish results. At the same time similarities as a constant lack of time and money in their everyday lives become clear when hearing them discuss. By relating the library context to the contexts of our researcher's relevant research support services can be developed.

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