

“Give Me Some Slack”: LINQing Inquiry and Practice for Librarian Professional Learning and Development

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ABSTRACT

The Librarians' Inquiry Forum (LINQ) is a critical inquiry-based professional development program which uses technology (i.e. social media and collaborative workspace platforms) as the setting to implement a reflective community-of-practice to facilitate professional learning for pre-service librarians (LIS students) and for librarians on the front lines (LIS practitioners). LINQ has been employed to enact LIS practice-based and classroom-based outcomes via the collaborative online learning opportunities for learning and reflecting upon professional practices in librarianship. Implications include considerations for ways in which the LINQ model serves as an innovative approach for not just better learning, but also better teaching, in the LIS classroom and within LIS practitioner inquiry groups.

TOPICS:

Reading and reading practices; Online learning; Pedagogy; Critical librarianship

INTRODUCTION

The Librarians' Inquiry Forum (LINQ) is a professional development model that offers space and place specifically for public librarians to collaboratively juxtapose their professional practices as a means of professional learning. Inquiry-based and ethnographic in approach, the qualitative data from discourse within a community-of-practice connects librarians to decrease professional isolation of ideas and geography. LINQ also encourages the fostering of a wholistic professional identity that actively interweaves professional experience with a collaborative sharing of resources with other librarians for professional learning and development.

LINQ implements an innovative methodology known as 'practitioner inquiry' (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Practitioner inquiry is a critical, reflective, collaborative ethnographic approach to professional development specifically for educators. School-based and community-based educators use practitioner inquiry to study and research their own professional practices to learn more about the impacts of their work (Lytle, 1996; Mehta, 2009; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Due to its social and community-oriented means of engagement, practitioner inquiry is a fitting professional development approach for public librarians serving diverse communities, and for pre-service librarians (LIS students) learning wholistic approaches to cultivating a critical, inquiry-based librarian identity that is collaboratively constructed. Practitioner inquiry creates data in the form of 'narrative' or as we say in Hawai'i, 'talk story', to elucidate practitioners' voices in response to questions and concerns that arise from work experiences.

METHODOLOGY & DESIGN

Methodology. Librarian professional practices involve intersectional discourses that nowadays, invariably requires mediation of a technological interface in some form or another. For librarianship, particularly in the public sphere, practitioners are most effective when they are consistently involved in professional learning opportunities that enable ongoing intellectual and technological growth. Yet the intensity of public library services with the daily synthesis of services to diverse populations alongside ever-emerging technological environments, occur and impact librarian identity and iterative professional practice (Cooke, 2012).

With this context in mind, to learn more about the ways in which public library services are enacted within the only statewide public library system in the U.S., the Hawai'i State Public Library System (50 branches across six islands), we performed a year-long pilot study in 2015 to situate ourselves within an insider/outsider stance as a LIS practitioner (principal investigator) and a library patron (co-investigator) at public libraries throughout Hawai'i. We visited 38 of the 50 libraries within the HSPLS system, across five islands of the state. Our site visits brought forth qualitative data that revealed an important finding: the reference interview seemed to be missing from public library services. Our finding was substantiated by field research assignments within an introductory reference course conducted by LIS students of the UHM LIS Program: some students, too, were not having successful experiences observing or experiencing the reference interview at the public library. Was the reference interview missing because patrons weren't asking reference questions? Was the practice missing due to misappropriation of staffing at the reference desk, or was it librarian apathy? These questions were shared with HSPLS, and in response, it was agreed that to address these questions, it was important to gather HSPLS librarians into a community-of-practice so that critical conversations could generate a personal learning network for professional development (Cooke, 2012).

LINQ Design. Seventeen branch managers were selected by the HSPLS to participate in the LINQ project; no one from LIS administration was involved. Given the geographic isolation of HSPLS locations across six islands, LINQ was structured such that participating librarians interacted via the collaborative workspace platform, *Slack* (<http://www.slack.com>). *Slack* was chosen because it is a cloud-based chat-driven social networking platform that focuses on enhancing workplace communications by integrating applications that allow for seamless collaboration (e.g. chat, email, video, audio, images, Google docs, documents from one's computer/phone/tablet, Facebook, Twitter) all in one interface across digital devices (i.e. desktop, laptop, tablet, cell phone) in real-time, while at work, for immediate professional learning and application (Locke, 2016).

The LINQ+HSPLS community-of-practice was launched on *Slack* on September 1, 2016, and ran for a total of ten months, ending on June 30, 2017. Privacy was important to create a safe space for sharing amongst the participating librarians, thus out of the 25 chat channels that were generated, only 1 channel was public. The public channel was called “#linq_general” where discussion about navigating *Slack* and announcements were posted. Of the 24 private channels, 12 channels were generated by the principal investigator/facilitator during the initial three months of the study, while another 12 channels were generated by librarian participants who led group discourse on a rotation basis during months 4-10, when the group entered its sustainable phase.

DATA OUTCOMES

Data collection. Preliminary data collected at site visits included: pictures (library buildings, layouts, collections), field notes, memos, and audiotaped semi-structured interviews with the participating LINQ+HSPLS librarians. Practitioner inquiry as LINQ's methodological approach, enacted participant data collection via a facilitator asking practice-based inquiry questions. Inquiry questions can be derived from participant interviews where practice-oriented concerns are often revealed, or if facilitation is decentralized with participants taking ownership of discourse, inquiry questions can be derived directly from librarian professional practice. LINQ is designed to promote conversations that question, problematize, and resolve practice-based concerns by involving the librarians working as a community-of-practice while collecting data about work, at work, then sharing and reflecting on that data, and thus, from a collaborative process of inquiry, implementing enhanced approaches to professional practice.

Slack was used to collect LINQ+HSPLS data in various ways: librarian participants used chat "channels" to ask and consider questions and experiences about daily work, to post links of articles, video, and audio to stay discuss LIS developments, and using the 'add files' feature to upload documents and images to share (e.g. calendar of events, programming log sheets, policy paperwork, room layouts, etc.) in order to learn and refine practices from one another.

Some examples of facilitator-meditated inquiry questions, generated from librarian interview data, included:

<u>Channel Topic</u>	<u>Inquiry Question(s)</u>
#bigidea	What is the "big idea" happening at your library this month?
#friendsgroups	How does the library define the role of the local Friends group? What is the relationship between your branch and your Friends group? What kinds of activities does your Friends group engage in? How does your group raise funds for the library?
#programming	In what ways do you learn the kinds of programs your community wants and/or needs?

During the sustainable phase, channel topics generated by LINQ+HSPLS participant librarians were based on their professional practice. Examples of those topics include:

<u>Channel Topic</u>	<u>Inquiry Question(s)</u>
#priorities	What do you remember from your early library experiences that made you want to become a librarian? How do you recreate those experiences for your patrons? What are your library priorities?
#staff-training	How do you train your staff? What kind of resources do you wish were provided to help you train your staff? Are there any in-house training materials that you've created and are willing to share?
#wishilearned	What do you wish you learned in library school? Did you learn it? Do you teach it to your staff? Still waiting for training?

LINQ+HSPLS librarians accessed *Slack* in various ways: on the web as a tab on their browser, and/or as an app on their desktop, laptop, tablet, or phone. The LINQ+HSPLS librarians shared work-related data in many formats: uploaded files (64); web-based resources (20); images (9); writings (2). There was a total of 1,215 messages generated, with 73% of those messages being posted in private channels (<https://linqhspls.slack.com/admin/stats>, accessed 10/14/2017).

Data analysis. As instructor for the introductory reference course within the UHM LIS Program, research data is sometimes shared (always anonymously) to give pre-service librarians (LIS students) a glimpse into real-world applications and implications for LIS professional practice. With LINQ+HSPLS, there are many outcomes that speak loudly to LIS learning, practice, identity formation, and professional development. However, there was one unexpected outcome from the study that directly offers insight into LIS learning and pedagogy.

During spring semester 2017, LINQ+HSPLS pilot study data was shared with students enrolled in the UHM LIS reference course. The data shared included images from libraries across the state (e.g. collections, signage, decorations) and descriptive vignettes of LINQ+HSPLS topics that revealed the importance of collaborative practice amongst librarians (e.g. homelessness, Friends Groups, programming) (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The students, in turn, asked that we, LINQ+HSPLS principal investigators, forward to LINQ+HSPLS an inquiry question from the class: “What advice do you have for new librarians?”

At the time the question was posed to LINQ+HSPLS, the group was in its sustainable phase and being facilitated by a librarian participant. The librarian facilitator was contacted via email with the class’s inquiry question. In response, the librarian facilitator created the private channel, #advice-new-libs, and posted the question thusly:

<u>Channel Topic</u>	<u>Inquiry Question(s)</u>
#advice-new-libs	What are two tips you would give to new librarians?”

Of the eight active participants at the time, five librarians posted professional stances, identity constructs, and practices in response to the question. Salient data points included:

- 1) Professional Stance
 - a. *Librarian1*: Don't be afraid to fail! Try something new on a regular basis.
 - b. *Librarian2*: Don't wait until all the details are just right until starting a new thing.
- 2) Identity Construct
 - a. *Librarian1*: Learn and implement HSPLS Admin Rules, Policies & Procedures.
 - b. *Librarian1*: [L]ook at the big picture that HSPLS is one system where staff action/decision may have an outcome affecting a branch, support or head office.
 - c. *Librarian2*: Keep in touch with why you want to be a librarian but work within your organization's framework.
- 3) Professional Practice
 - a. *Librarian1*: I saw a library that had a computer screen facing the patron also so they could see what the librarian was searching for them.
 - i. *Librarian2 response*: I've worked at a library with the swivel screen so that patrons could see how you search. We got a lot fewer repeat questions, since

after watching the same steps a couple of times, many patrons learned how to complete simple searches themselves!

- ii. *Librarian3 response*: Yes, the more the patrons do themselves, the more they remember!
- iii. *Librarian4 response*: Teach a man to fish...
- iv. *Librarian5 response*: I also like the librarians that carried iPads for searching the stacks and researching a patron question without having to walk back to the ref desk.

(LINQ+HSPLS, *Slack channel #advice-new-lib*s, 24 March 2017 – 18 April 2017)

There were 15 recommendations posted on the #advice-new-lib channel. Admittedly, one drawback from the LINQ facilitator also being the LIS instructor is that the opportunity to record such an unexpected development was missed. However, class response did reveal three themes that impressed the student group: 1) the need for *synthesis of librarian identity* with organizational vision, 3) the requisite of *staying current* to sustain cultural-professional relevance and, 3) *involving patrons during the reference interview*, which is an important data point that clarifies the earlier question: is the reference interview is still relevant to HSPLS practice? Indeed, it is.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

How LINQ augments LIS learning and teaching. Given the success of the mutual professional learning opportunity that LINQ+HSPLS afforded between pre-service and veteran librarians, as an LIS instructor and as principal investigator for LINQ, I have been inspired to teaching online courses via *Slack*. Additionally, due to the “eloquent interface” (one student’s description) enjoyed by students via actual online coursework during Summer 2017, additional UHM LIS faculty members are also beginning to explore teaching options using *Slack* to frame class structure and discourse. Case in point, at UHM LIS for the Fall 2017 semester, there were three online courses offered. Of those three, two of them were taught with *Slack*, while one on-campus course also used the platform for hybrid pedagogy.

Slack analytics and student course evaluation data from summer 2017 revealed an enhanced student experience. *Slack*’s interoperability of social web applications that promote multimodal interactions that resemble the fluidity of face-to-face conversations, and also mimic interactions on popular social media such as Facebook and Twitter, was a win-win for UHM LIS students. Students also appreciated that on *Slack*, “channels” kept topics ‘on point’ and the contemporary interface gave users choice in *how* they could contribute to discussion; notifications kept members connected in real-time.

Coursework becomes more collaborative on *Slack*, creating a user-friendly space for group discourse without having to set up “group work”. For some reason (not yet to be determined at to why), on *Slack*, instructor/facilitated questions seem more welcomed as sites of inquiry and reflection, and therefore, contributory to deeper learning that enacted epistemological change and identity formation for librarianship. We look forward to continued research with teaching and learning on *Slack*, as it helps us to employ LINQ’s unique inquiry-based approach to convening LIS pre-service and full professionals together to ask practice-based questions in order to explore, resolve, and grow from them, together.

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