

# IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) — Three Kinds of “Research” and Two Kinds of Researcher

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An English professor I once knew had an exercise that he used with all of his classes at the beginning of each semester. He stood at the front of the room and wrote the word “dog” on the chalkboard, then asked the class what the word meant. As the discussion unfolded, wildly varying (yet all equally valid) definitions would be offered: “dog” is a noun that denotes a canine animal; it’s a verb meaning “to follow obsessively;” it’s an adverb (as in “dog-tired”); it’s a metaphor for failure; and so on and on.

His point, obviously, was that words are slippery. Sometimes two people use the same word in the same conversation to mean completely different things, and end up wasting a lot of time arguing — each of them thinking the other has utterly lost his mind — before they finally realize that they actually agree on the substantive issue. But that’s not actually the worst-case scenario. Much worse is when the conversation continues without either party realizing that they’re talking past each other — or when everyone in a group simply goes along happily using the same word to mean fundamentally different things, not arguing or contending, but also not making much progress because all are unwittingly pulling the project in slightly different directions.

I’d like to suggest that this is exactly where we are in the library profession regarding the word “research,” and that this state of affairs is holding us back from realizing our potential for good in a recently and radically changed information marketplace.

All of us agree that we’re here to support research, and that our patrons need good research skills in order to function well as scholars and citizens. But what do we mean when we say “research”?

As I understand it, that word can be used equally well to refer to three very different activities (and maybe more, but for our purposes I think these three are the most relevant). The first is what happens in a laboratory or in field investigation: scientists test hypotheses against the observed properties of the physical world, or against the actual behavior of animals and people. Obviously, this type of research doesn’t really happen in a library, though a library may support it in various ways. Of more relevance to us as librarians are the two general types of research that remain: first, the process of identifying, locating and gathering materials that you need to master (which I’m going to refer to as Finding/Gathering), and second, the process of

actually exploring the content of those materials: reading, evaluating, selecting, rejecting, absorbing, and synthesizing their content (a process I’ll call Reading). The problem is that we use the word “research” to refer to both activities, despite the fact that they’re fundamentally different activities.

But wait — aren’t Finding/Gathering and Reading just two sides of the same intellectual coin? There’s a reason we use the word “research” to describe both of them — isn’t it because both are an important and integral part of the learning process?

No. In fact, I would argue that the Finding/Gathering process is little more than a necessary evil, a process that is unavoidable but not especially beneficial in itself. I think it’s much like the process of gathering wood for a campfire. There’s not much benefit to be had from the gathering itself; the benefit isn’t realized until the wood is piled up and the fire is started. That’s not to say that there’s no benefit *whatsoever* to the process of wood-gathering (it does involve some physical exercise, after all, and you’re out walking around in the fresh air, which is nice), but real, useful heat isn’t generated until the wood is gathered and you start burning it. No rational person would walk farther than necessary to find the needed firewood, or fell a tree when a pile of usable logs is already on the ground nearby, or gather a month’s worth of fuel to feed a one-night campfire. The fire, not the gathering of wood, is the point.

The same is true, I think, of education and the research process. Finding/Gathering — one of the activities that we commonly call “research” — may have some small intellectual benefit (you’re thinking about your topic, you’re out walking around in the literature), and in some disciplines it may yield more direct benefits than it does in others. But compared to the benefit that comes from actually *reading* those resources, the benefit is minimal. It seems to me that an hour spent Finding/Gathering yields far less intellectual growth than an hour spent Reading. Education is about reading, evaluating, selecting, rejecting, absorbing, and synthesizing content; it’s not about walking across campus, checking the sorting shelves, photocopying articles, or learning how to use the **OPAC** or some other user-hostile search interface. The Reading, not the Searching/Gathering, is the point.

What makes this whole question even more

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interesting, and maybe a bit more vexing for us as librarians, is that in addition to there being three different kinds of research, there are also two different kinds of researcher that want to see the Searching/Gathering process made as simple and fast as possible. First, there's the Lazy Researcher: the one who is simply unwilling to do even the most basic work to gain access to the resources he needs. For him, using **Google** or some other quick and easy online utility isn't really a carefully considered economic decision, but rather the reflexive use of the most convenient, least demanding tool. At the other end of the spectrum is the Busy Researcher. This is a highly motivated, but extremely busy student or faculty member. Researchers in this category have to carve study time out of schedules crowded with classes, work, writing deadlines and other projects; they budget their time carefully, and know what their time is worth. They use **Google** or some other quick and easy online utility because their time is leveraged, and they can't afford to invest one hour out of a carefully budgeted three-hour study period in the process of simply locating the articles or books they need.

I believe that it's our job to tailor our services to the needs of the Busy Researchers. We do these patrons absolutely no favors by forcing them to spend large chunks of their time engaged in Finding/Gathering before they can start Reading. Of course, by so doing we'll also be letting Lazy Researchers off the hook. They'll

get spoiled! We'll be making it easy for them to get the materials they need for their classes, and they won't even make good use of the extra time we've freed up for them! If we make things as easy as possible for researchers, the Busy Researchers will reinvest the extra time in Reading, but the Lazy Researchers will simply spend less time engaged in any kind of academic work and more time watching TV and drinking beer. I say, fine; that's up to them. We're not their parents. If they choose to slack off, we're not going to try to stop them — and we're certainly not going to try to stop them at the expense of the Busy Researchers who genuinely need us to help them cut down on Searching/Gathering time.

This leaves one small problem — well, not small for us, but small for our patrons. The problem is that the Finding/Gathering activity is the one that actually involves librarians. Once patrons get to the Reading part, they're pretty much out of our sphere of influence; none of the hard work we invest in collection development, cataloging, bibliographic instruction, etc. has much effect on them once they've finished the Searching/Gathering process and begun Reading. To suggest that we should do our best to minimize our patrons' investment in Searching/Gathering so that they can maximize their investment in Reading is to suggest that we should make ourselves less important to our patrons.

Or is it? Maybe, instead, it means that we need to simply focus more of our energy on making the products of our work more transparent and less intrusive on the Searching/Gathering process. The fact is that minimizing the

amount of time patrons need for Searching/Gathering will mean maximizing the amount of time we librarians invest in making our services faster, cleaner, and more intuitive. Maybe it will mean worrying less about how perfect and complete our **MARC** records are, and thinking more about how (and whether) our patrons make use of **MARC** records. Maybe it will mean being less irritated about patrons who "aren't interested unless it's online" and figuring out more ways to get our collections online.

I think the bottom line is this: our libraries should be places (virtual and physical) where as little searching as possible has to take place. Making libraries easier to use doesn't undermine intellectual development — on the contrary, it makes more intellectual development possible because it lets our patrons spend more time with the resources and less time with the interfaces. And really, what could be better than that? 