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Yes, but what is it that you do?

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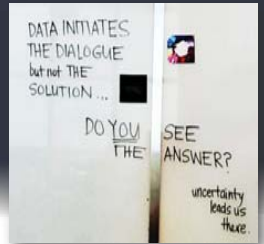
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"Yes, but what is it that you do?"

Reflections from the front-line of E-Science/Data Librarianship

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Introduction

Despite carefully crafted job descriptions, e-science or data librarians find that there is little consensus on position responsibilities and required competencies^{1,2}. Consequently, these librarians tend to customize their positions around what their clientele require. Indeed, data "Curation Service Models [are] driven by user requirements"³. Therefore, it's not just about the data – it's about the people. Specifically, it's about the different cultures of user groups and librarians and how to communicate effectively across these groups. The "elevator speech"⁴ for a scientist might be quite different from the one for your librarian colleague. It's no wonder that a recent survey of e-science librarian job advertisements found that communication is the most frequently cited personal skill⁵. While each librarian, researcher and student may have different needs, there are usually broad disciplinary cultures that can guide interactions. Understanding some of these broadly-defined disciplinary characteristics can promote successful communication.



Day of Data

Brown University's Day of Data featured twenty researchers from different disciplines. As each researcher spoke about their data, the audience drew or wrote comments that were transferred to a central whiteboard. It was an innovative (and non-digital) method of illustrating anonymous feedback. These images spoke eloquently about the relationship between the researcher and their data, and some are included here.

The first conversation:

Me: "Hi, I'm your new E-science/Data Librarian."

Busy colleague, nodding vaguely: "oh, yes...what is that you do again?"

Me: "I ...[insert the elevator speech specific to that person's discipline]"

Librarians

Librarians are champions at describing, organizing, and providing access to information, whether it's in a book, a spreadsheet, a video, or other format. Regardless of format or content, we have the same goals.

Social Scientists

Locating existing data and sharing is common practice. Their challenges may be technology support, de-identification, metadata, etc. Who are their campus resources? Where are good guidelines? Hint: ICPSR is your new go-to resource⁶.

Scientists

Coming from a science background, it was no surprise to me that a data management plan mandate from the National Science Foundation might not be welcomed. But new to librarianship, it did come as a surprise that librarians seemed to think that they would be handed science data just because they'd asked. As the image to the left illustrates, data is *personal*.

Digital Humanists

The data they analyze is often the metadata that the librarian helps them create. As well, they may be working with valuable library material, may view the library as their laboratory, and will tend to value the library and librarians.

Data Librarian

Lessons learned

Take a hike – go to their office!

Just because we work in the digital world doesn't mean that an e-mail will make that all-important connection. Collaborate with the subject librarian and make an appointment. Face time really pays off.

Eureka! – look for the 'aha!' moment.

Ask what it is they need: data location? Data archiving? Help with a data management plan? Look for their eyes to light up and then offer to help find answers on that topic, no matter if it's in your job description or not.

Under-promise - then over-deliver.

Researchers understand about experiments and beta testing, so don't be afraid to say that you are at the beginning of the process.

Admit ignorance – It's OK not to know.

Admitting ignorance, while outlining the process for finding out the answer, engenders trust. The importance of generating credibility cannot be understated.

Draw me a picture - Communicate any way you can.

Verbally, visually, digitally, in print. If there is an opportunity to get up for five minutes in a meeting, take it. If there are the funds to distribute a brochure, make one. Since the first conversation is always absorbed by developing a common language, plan on following up.



Conclusion

No researcher can speak about their data without speaking about their research – the two are inseparable. So how can we handle the data without getting into very technical discussions? Just like we can catalog books without reading every one. We work with disciplines to develop processes and standards to meet their needs. We provide researchers with a structure where they are comfortable. We do this by acknowledging the intimacy of working with their data, listening to them, and designing our solutions accordingly. It's about the people, not just the data.

¹ Alvaro, E., Brooks, H., Poegel, S., & Rosencrans, S. (2011). E-Science Librarianship: Field Undefined. *Issues In Science & Technology Librarianship* (66), 28-43.

² Creamer, Andrew; Morales, Myrna E.; Crespo, Javier; Kafel, Donna; and Martin, Elaine R. (2012). "An Assessment of Needed Competencies to Promote the Data Curation and Management Librarianship of Health Sciences and Science and Technology Librarians in New England," *Journal of eScience Librarianship*, 1(1) Article 4. Available at: <http://escholarship.umassmed.edu/jeslib/vol1/iss1/4>.

³ Moore, R. (2012). RDAP Summary: Topics that drive future digital libraries. Research Data Access and Preservation Summit, New Orleans, LA

⁴ Pincus, A. (June 18, 2007). The Perfect (Elevator) Pitch. *BloombergBusinessWeek: Companies and Industries*. Retrieved from <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2007-06-18/the-perfect-elevator-pitchbusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice>

⁵ The Digital Society. Day of Data : May 18th. Retrieved from <http://brown.edu/research/projects/digital-society/about/digital-society-conference>

⁶ ICPSR. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Retrieved from <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/landing.jsp>