



Small Projects Add Up:

Doing Research as a Sessional Librarian

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INTRODUCTION

Scrawled haphazardly into the margins of one of my research journals is a reminder to myself: “Every project needs to be good—not every project needs to be big.” Perhaps this is not a reminder that every librarian needs to hear, but it is one I require. I was hired into an outreach unit housed in the University of Manitoba Neil John Maclean Health Sciences Library fresh out of library school, where I had chosen not only to conduct a thesis but also to conduct one of such a scale that it was almost certainly inappropriate for a master’s degree. I had also been a research assistant on several large-scale research initiatives. Big projects were what I was used to. But big research projects were not in the cards at my new institution; my position there was sessional—a six-month term, with no clear indication of what would occur when those six months elapsed. Ultimately, the term was extended by two months, then extended for another two months, and, finally, extended by one month before I transferred to another unit in the university with a more robust term. In each case, the extensions of my sessional position were not confirmed until very near the close of my term.

At the time of my hiring, sessional positions were common for librarians at the University of Manitoba. The university is no exception to the rule; sessional positions have become increasingly common in universities in recent years.¹ Sessional positions fall into a broader category of temporary or otherwise non-standard academic positions that exist at academic institutions. These positions include adjuncts, contingent academic staff, and those on short-term contracts. Sessional positions represent possibly the shortest-term contracts, often corresponding only to the length of a single semester.² A great deal has been written about the impact of sessional and contract hiring for teaching faculty, though less has been written about its impact on sessional librarianship. Sessional positions often

lack the expectation of and formal support for conducting research. This is true of sessional teaching positions, and it was true of my sessional librarian position at the University of Manitoba as well. While sessional positions usually do not require research, research is often expected or required of academic librarians in longer contract, permanent, or tenure-track positions at academic institutions. Research is indeed expected of librarians in such positions at the University of Manitoba. Having a robust research portfolio is important for the long-term career goals of academic librarians, and building that portfolio while holding sessional positions that do not support research may be necessary. But more important for me was that I *wanted* to conduct research. However, desire alone will not ensure that I am able to conduct research.

While I was employed in the full-time sessional librarian position, I also worked part-time as a library technician at a different institution in order to ensure that my ability to pay rent did not vaporize at the end of my sessional term. Between the extra hours devoted to that second job, my tendency to dream up large scale projects, and the aforementioned realities of sessional positions, I was left struggling to figure out how to do research effectively. I might have been tempted to do research outside of work hours in my spare time, but as I did not have any spare time, this possibility was out of the question. Obviously, I needed to reconsider my approach.

SETTING A RESEARCH AGENDA

Though my initial contract was only for six months, my ultimate goal was, and still is, to pursue a lifelong career in academic librarianship, and to engage in the research expected thereof. Unsure where to begin with my ambitious research dreams, especially while holding a brief appointment with no spare time to speak of, I realized I needed to prioritize. Moreover, I realized I needed to plan beyond my immediate situation; six months is no time at all, and attempting to fit my plans into a six-month increment with an uncertain end date would be both unproductive and stressful. By the same token, though, it would be foolhardy to plan as though my employment was guaranteed beyond that six-month mark.

I began by building a research agenda that was broad in scope. It was a plan not for individual research *projects*, as those details could come later, but rather, for focusing my research interests. Which areas did I want to be working on in the coming years? Where did I want my work to go? Developing this broad outline allowed me to be selective about the projects I wished to work on, to keep a ready eye out for projects that might match my interests, and allowed me to put projects away until I was in a position to work on them effectively. More than that, however, it allowed me to think of my research as working toward something larger: each individual project did not need to be big, because it contributed to something more. Each individual project would only be one part of many in a grander research scheme. This overarching view of my research trajectory was new to me, as I suspect it would be for many librarians just exiting graduate school. The ability to view research projects as piecemeal things working towards something greater conferred another benefit of particular importance to sessional librarians; small, piecemeal research is portable. Or, if it is not mobile, it is quick to wrap up. As a sessional librarian,

my future was in flux. I might not be in the same institution, the same province, or even the same country at the same time next year. Having research projects that could move with me, or were of a small enough scale that they could be finished with relative speed, were essential. My research agenda and long-term research goals would still come along with me wherever I went next.

One of the broad areas of focus that I highlighted in my research agenda was the concept of misinformation, with particular attention to deliberate misinformation for propaganda purposes and misinformation in the academic record. It should not come as a surprise, then, that the relatively recent and hotly contested topic of predatory journals is one that had piqued my interest. So-called predatory journals, also referred to as deceptive journals or pseudo-journals, are journals that mimic legitimate scholarly journals but forgo key elements of scholarly publication, such as peer review.³ There has been limited exploration done on the reach and effects of predatory journals; the vast majority of content written about these journals has been of an editorial or opinion-based variety.⁴ Identifying relevant projects I wanted to complete on the topic was therefore not challenging, as so much has not yet been done. Identifying projects that fit into the constraints of a six-month sessional position? That was a different matter entirely.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Serendipity plays a critical role in academic pursuits, as does catching opportunities when they arise. While contemplating my newly formed research agenda and considering which of the multitude of projects I would—and could—begin while in my sessional role, I was also working closely with my colleague, Orvie Dingwall, an exuberant and driven librarian, on a series of instruction sessions. These sessions were broadly focused on information literacy and critical assessment and were developed for the clients of our outreach unit that provides library service to health professionals throughout the province. Our clients range from doctors, nurses, and others in clinical practice to those creating and developing health policy, rather than the faculty and students served by the rest of the university library. The education sessions were a brand new element of the library service and were being piloted in the summer of 2017, with a few sessions to gauge interest in and to work out the bugs of the larger education program. One of these flagship sessions helped participants hone their Google skills and assess the information they found using Google. Orvie and I delivered the session together. This education session was particularly popular, drawing more than 100 attendees from across the province of Manitoba. A section of the session was devoted to Google Scholar, wherein we briefly mentioned predatory journals to remind attendees to assess the quality of the material they found using the search engine.

It was immediately obvious that the vast majority of attendees at the session had no knowledge of predatory journals whatsoever. Perhaps because the topic has been discussed so heavily in academia and academic librarianship in recent years, we were surprised at the degree to which our patrons simply did not know about predatory journals, even though health professionals regularly consult and publish in the academic

literature. This surprise prompted me to suggest to Orvie an addition to our education session curriculum. Originally, clients of our outreach unit had been polled on which education session topics would be of interest to them from a select list. That list did not include any topics on misinformation. Our plan for the education sessions had been built based on those results. After a brief discussion, Orvie and I agreed that a session devoted to predatory journals was called for and would be included in our upcoming sessions. I would take point on developing the session, which Orvie and I would present together in November 2017.

Beyond the need for an education session, I felt there was a research opportunity here. That awareness of predatory journals appeared to be so low in our client base seemed significant to me. I wondered how widespread knowledge of predatory journals was and how much that awareness had been studied. I dove into the literature, both to explore the extent to which this question had been studied and to ensure that I had sufficient background to develop the new education session on predatory journals. I soon learned that there had been almost nothing written on the general awareness of predatory journals and that the bulk of the material written on them had been editorial or opinion-based in nature. This cemented in my mind that there was room for work in this area. As I built the education session, I conducted an extensive literature search on predatory journals generally and on awareness of and education about predatory journals specifically. Once I was certain of the unexplored nature of awareness about predatory journals, I approached Orvie with the idea of exploring health professionals' awareness of predatory journals and asked her to be a co-investigator on any associated project, to which she agreed.

The reasons for asking Orvie to participate in the project were twofold: first, and most important, Orvie would be involved in the education session about predatory journals, which was a mechanism through which an exploration of health professionals' awareness of predatory journals could be made. But second, the education session was scheduled for November—a point beyond the bounds of my six-month contract. Ultimately, my contract was extended and I was able to present the education session, but at the time, I had no guarantees. Orvie, by contrast, has a permanent position. Her interest in the project would ensure that the project would not stall if I were no longer able to be involved directly. Having Orvie on board, a co-investigator whose future was more certain than mine, allowed me to push ahead with confidence.

THE PROJECT

Even with the assurance of Orvie's involvement, the constraints of my position remained a reality. I wanted to explore how aware health professionals were of the phenomenon of predatory journals. An ideal study of this topic would include a large sample, would involve a comprehensive survey, and would take a great deal of time. Such a luxurious project was well beyond the capacity of my sessional appointment, even leaving aside the fact that as a sessional librarian, research was not a part of my mandate, and I could not reasonably expect to be accommodated if I tried to develop a project of such scale. So the specifics of the project needed to fit not only into the timeframe of my contract but

also into the structure of my existing work. I was unsure if a research project developed from scratch and independent of my day-to-day duties would be met with a positive response—but I suspected it would not be. The project that began to coalesce as an idea in my mind, then, was one that, aside from synthesizing small amounts of data, writing up the findings, and disseminating it, would require very little work beyond that which I was already going to be doing.

The instruction session itself was an ideal way to explore the question of health professionals' awareness of predatory journals. The necessary literature review would inform both the project and the education session itself. Relevant data collection had either already been done or would be done regardless during the course of the education session. We had already asked in the popular Google session about attendees' familiarity with predatory journals, and through our assessment survey distributed post-session, we did have some concrete information about the subject already, which could be looked at retrospectively. Typically, our education sessions, usually presented both in person and online, included in-session questions and polls as well as post-session assessment surveys regarding session value and efficiency, in order to improve our education sessions in the future. For the predatory journals session, we had already planned to incorporate such questions—in this case, an in-session question inquiring about previous familiarity with predatory journals, post-session assessment questions that asked again about previous familiarity, and questions about how much they had learned from the session, how confident they were in their ability to identify predatory journals, and how the knowledge they obtained during the sessions would impact their work going forward. There was also an open-ended question that allowed them to provide any additional comments. Polling represented an effective and familiar way to interact with our session audience and to gauge their perspectives in a straightforward manner. As a technique, polls are possible both in person, tallied with a show of hands, and in a webinar, where attempts to engage attendees in more complex conversation over chat often flounder and break up the flow of the webinar. The polls in our webinar were conducted using the polling tool built into GoToWebinar, our presentation software of choice. The poll question was simple and straightforward: "Are you familiar with predatory publishers or journals?" Answer options ranged from "very familiar" to "never heard of them." Though we always recorded in-session poll results for sessions presented as online webinars, we made a special consideration to record the poll results from the in-person version of the education session as well.

The predatory journals education session was delivered twice: once in person and once online. The session was moderately popular, with six people attending the session in-person version, seventeen attending the live webinar, and ten watching a recording of the session later. Unfortunately, those who watched the recording could not reply to in-session polls. Ultimately, there was a small amount of data gathered regarding health professional awareness of predatory journals between the predatory journal session and the earlier Google session.

Was the project small-scale? Absolutely. Only twenty-one participants between both sessions replied to the polls, only seven to the assessment survey for the predatory journals session, and only forty-nine for the retroactively explored Google session assessment.

The small scale of the project concerned me at the time. Was it at all useful? Valuable? At times like this, it helped to recall that I had started the project precisely *because* I had thought it important to discuss. And besides, I had already started and it fit comfortably into my duties as a sessional librarian. I might as well finish. The techniques outlined above provided some data, however limited, on a topic that had not been addressed in the scholarly literature and demonstrated that education sessions such as ours appeared to be an effective means of increasing awareness of predatory journals. Most importantly, the project provided a direction for future studies; findings indicated that health professional awareness of predatory journals was an area that needs to be explored in greater depth in the future.

REFLECTIONS

In the time since the project I have described in this chapter, I have managed to move from a sessional to a longer contract position at the University of Manitoba. The contract position includes increased research expectations but also increased opportunities for research, including the ability to work on longer-term and larger-scale projects—projects building upon the work I have already done.

It is hard to do research as a sessional librarian, and nothing I have said here will make it easy (sorry!). Research projects, if they are to exist for sessionals, must by necessity be small—and even then they may not end up looking like you imagined them. At the outset of this project, for example, I had hoped to be able to produce a more traditional research paper at the end of it, rather than the program description Orvie and I ultimately wrote. Sometimes, especially as a sessional without the luxury of time and support needed to revise a project or start over, you need to adjust your course and arrive at a slightly different destination. It is important to remember that the work was not wasted, and just because the end product is not what you intended, it does not mean you failed. The project had multiple outputs: a conference presentation, a poster, and a peer-reviewed paper.⁵ More important, however, is that the work on this project contributed to my larger research agenda. It helped me identify and articulate areas of interest or concern and to plot which projects I could focus on next. It even provided me with a robust literature search relevant to my larger research agenda, which I can continue to update with newer information. Making this kind of forward motion is critical in research, and sessional employment can work against it, so for that motion alone, the project was important to my research goals. Such forward motion would have been more difficult, if not impossible, without my collaboration with Orvie. The importance of collaborative research for sessional librarians cannot be understated.

It can be difficult, sometimes, to see the value of small projects, and becoming discouraged is easy. Push through. You began your project because you thought it was important. The project matters, and the work you do on it will be beneficial and only one part of a greater body of work. It is important to remember this because research done as a sessional librarian will have to be manageable and may need to fit seamlessly into your regular librarian duties. Researching as a sessional librarian is challenging but not impossible, and

completing research while in a sessional role can affect your long-term career in academic librarianship. The following tips may be helpful to you. Good luck!

- Keep your research projects small and manageable. Bear in mind that they are part of your bigger research agenda.
- As a sessional, try to fit your research into work you are already doing, as time for research can be difficult to access.
- Partner with colleagues you respect and work well with for increased security and motivation; it can keep your research project alive.
- Have a research agenda and career goals and know how your research project fits into both. Recognize that work already done on one project may give you a solid base on which to build your next project.
- Talk about your research. Work out the kinks, share it with colleagues and at conferences, and get others interested.
- Do not be discouraged if your project does not turn out exactly as you anticipated, and do not stop partway through.

NOTES

1. Karen Foster and Louise Birdsell Bauer, *Out of the Shadows: Experiences of Contract Academic Staff*, Canadian Association of University Teachers (2018), https://www.caut.ca/sites/default/files/cas_report.pdf.
2. Cynthia C. Field and Glen A. Jones, *A Survey of Sessional Faculty in Ontario Publicly-Funded Universities*, Centre for the Study of Canadian and International Higher Education at OISE-University of Toronto (2016).
3. Monica Berger, “Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Predatory Publishing but Were Afraid to Ask,” conference paper, Association of College and Research Libraries, Baltimore, MD, March 22–25, 2017.
4. Kelly D. Cobey et al, “What is a Predatory Journal? A Scoping Review,” *F1000Research* 7 (1001) (2018), doi: 10.12688/f1000research.15256.2.
5. Maureen Nicole Babb and Orvie Dingwall, “An Education Session Developed in Response to Low Health Professional Awareness of Predatory Journals,” *Journal of the Canadian Health Libraries Association/Journal de l’Association des bibliothèques de la santé du Canada* 40, no. 3 (2019): 99-110, doi: <https://doi.org/10.29173/jchla29389>.

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