

Diverse Knowledges, Diverse Methodologies: Artists Research

Sandra Cowan, Religious Studies, Modern Languages, English and Fine Arts Librarian, University of Lethbridge.

Research methodology plays a key role in the discovery and sharing of new knowledge. Along with other parts of the scholarly communication cycle, research methodology is of primary interest to librarians. The scholarly works that libraries collect, assess, maintain, share openly, navigate, and teach are normally based on research, and underlying any research is some kind of research methodology. Librarians are in a unique position in relation to research methods, as we need to understand a wide range of methods across disciplines in order to find our place in the communication of the scholarly literature of any discipline, yet we do not have a clearly defined methodology for our own research. This liminal position regarding research methods puts librarians in an excellent position to understand methods from all disciplines, to explore their relative strengths and weaknesses, and to practice them. Rather than claiming an absence of research methods in librarianship, we may claim them all, and legitimately practice and study the methods of any discipline that our libraries support.

Some research methods are better understood and rewarded in academia than others – these are the ones that tend to earn more grant funding and institutional acknowledgement. As a Fine Arts librarian and an instructor of graduate students in the Fine Arts, I have noticed that artists' research methods and creative activity do not fit into the standard models of research and scholarly communication that most academic institutions use to understand and evaluate scholarly work. However, under-recognized methods, such as those in the fine arts, also lead to important new knowledge and insight. Like librarians, artists borrow and adapt from a wide and cross-disciplinary range of methods in their research. Studying research methods of artists can broaden our understanding of research and give us insight into the creative process, and at the same time question some of the cultural and institutional assumptions about more privileged methodologies. In light of this, we will discuss the results of a study about the creative research of several well-known Canadian artists.