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16 Lessons from a Research Trip to Mexico

Abstract: As practitioners who work closely with international students, the researchers sought to understand the information literacy (IL) preparation that students coming from Mexico may have experienced prior to studying at US institutions. US researchers have done some work with Mexican information professionals related to collection development and cultural exchange, but less is known about their current training for and attitudes toward IL instruction. The researchers designed a cross-cultural and cross-national study to interview library and information professionals in Mexico to learn how they teach IL. On the surface, this seemed like a straightforward project: develop a research instrument, apply for IRB, and go. The reality proved more challenging as the researchers navigated the nuances of conducting research in another country. Throughout the project, the researchers engaged with questions about logistics, institutional review board requirements, their own positionality, cultural appropriateness and appropriation, and emotional labour. This chapter will detail the lessons learned about conducting research internationally, giving insights to other researchers who want to work in a similar context, suggest additional methods and approaches to avoid some of their pitfalls, and discuss the rewards of engaging with peers in another country.

Keywords: Information literacy—Study and teaching (Higher)—Spanish; Academic librarians—Mexico; Focus groups

Introduction

Librarians working with international students will, no doubt, come across different perspectives about how these students understand the library and its role in their academic careers. Cultural competency is of utmost importance in developing relationships and working well with those populations. In a previous study focused on Spanish speaking international students, the researchers realised they had gaps in their knowledge regarding their students' experiences with and education in IL (Reyes, Hicks, and Maxson 2018). The logical next step was to engage IL librarians in these students' home countries to get a better understanding of their work and experiences. As current and former Latin American Studies librarians, the researchers selected Mexico for the site of their recent study, because of the large number of international students that this country sends to school in the US (Hicks, Maxson, and Reyes 2021). For logistical reasons, the researchers narrowed the scope to only Mexico City for holding focus groups. In the summer of 2018, and with the financial support of the [Dan C. Hazen SALALM Fellowship](#)¹, two of the researchers travelled to Mexico City to interview IL librarians in five institutions of higher education in Mexico City. This project sought to learn from colleagues there and lay the groundwork for potential future collaborations. Further, this project was the first international research trip for the authors. The discussion that follows is a selection of lessons learned during this process of planning and carrying out their study. The authors hope this can aid others wishing to engage in international research, especially in Mexico.

Lessons and Recommendations

Institutional Research Board

¹ The Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials: <https://salalm.org/scholarships-and-awards/dan-c-hazen-salalm-fellowship/>

A cornerstone of academic research in the United States is the office of Institutional Research Board (IRB), which are administered by the [Office for Human Research Protections](#) (OHRP). “The purpose of IRB review is to assure, both in advance and by periodic review, that appropriate steps are taken to protect the rights and welfare of humans participating as subjects in the research” (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, et al. 1998). Given the importance of this step in the research process, the researchers met a few challenges during this study: 1) varying standards or requirements from different institutions, 2) lack of Spanish language skills in the IRB office, and 3) lack of clarity regarding international research.

Adding another layer of complexity, this research project involved three researchers in three different institutions. Only two of the researchers (the authors) were going to gather data so the researchers sought IRB approval from two of the institutions, ensuring the protocol included the third researcher. After the initial submission to IRB office No. 1, institution No. 2 needed additional information, which meant the researchers had to prepare two separate protocols, the second one requiring more details and documentation. Typically, multi-institutional studies require just one protocol from the first institution and a reliance agreement from the second institution delegating IRB oversight to the first institution (NIH Office of Management Assessment 2022). One would think that since all researchers rely on the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative² for research, ethics, and compliance training, reliance agreements would be a simpler process, but in this case one institution was more stringent than another. IRB approval is of utmost importance in research involving human participants, and more complex requirements in this process from one of the institutions can affect the data collection timeline. The authors recommend submitting documents as early as possible to give

² CITI Program: <https://about.citiprogram.org/>

the IRB time to process the documents and avoid any delays and the stress that can cause. Due to these complexities, it may be helpful to review the protocols of all institutions to ensure researchers are prepared to address all requirements. Planning ahead can save time in case one of the institutions asks further questions or requires additional documentation.

The second challenge presented itself in the form of the lack of Spanish language skills in the IRB office. The research goal was to gather data from Spanish speakers which requires all forms used in the project to be in Spanish. The researchers translated the forms into the local variety of Spanish and submitted them along with their English language counterparts as part of the IRB protocol. However, no certification of translation is required for submission, putting the onus on the researchers to be ethical in the translations of materials.

Thirdly, the IRB process required a Foreign Local Review Letter from someone in Mexico who was qualified to review the research process and affirm that local research norms would be followed. Online searches retrieved details on how to apply for permits to collect specimens or how to transport them back to the US but little if anything at all on how to conduct social science research. Because of this, the researchers felt unsure if this letter would be sufficient to comply with equivalent IRB norms in Mexico. The IRB office was not able to advise or direct that inquiry and instead, passed on the burden to the researchers. After locating a template online in English, one author translated the letter to Spanish and gave it to their main contact in Mexico to review and sign. The IRB office accepted the signed letter with the English original. If no one on the research team has the necessary language skills, this additional requirement will cost both time and the expense of a professional translator. There is further discussion of language considerations in a later section of this chapter.

Despite these obstacles, the IRB protocols can be a great exercise that allows anyone embarking on a new research project to clearly articulate its goals as the application forces researchers to write for a reader outside of their field of work. In fact, for one of the researchers, the IRB protocols is their favourite part of a research project.

Positionality

When the researchers chose the location for their study, the project became more personal. Researchers began considering the language they would use, the colleagues they might know there, and the perception of their project among librarians and information professionals in Mexico. The researchers realised the need to consider their positionality.

One researcher had been to a workplace training on positionality, giving her an opportunity to consider how others perceived her in terms of her outward expressions of gender, class, race, or ethnic traits, among others. The training involved writing a brief description of one's own positionality, a practice that many social sciences researchers now incorporate into their work. According to the *Encyclopedia of Diversity and Social Justice*, "Positionality provides a space to critically interrogate the researcher's motivations, assumptions, and decisions at each and every stage of the research process" (García, Myrna 2014). As a result of this training, the researcher realised the ways participants perceived her and the other researchers could affect their engagement and disclosures in the focus groups. It could also affect the ways the resulting study was interpreted by readers, so the researchers decided to include information about their positionality in their paper.

In addition, the researchers would be likely to encounter peers and colleagues in Mexico who were members of the same professional organisation, SALALM. This realisation led them to have a conversation about insider and outsider research. "Interlocking socially constructed

categories—including race, class, gender, and sexuality—all work together to disrupt the narrow designation of insider researcher. Moreover, the dynamic nature of community can reposition a researcher from insider to outsider or vice versa” (García, Myrna 2014). The researchers realised they had traits of both insiders and outsiders they would have to navigate.

Language and Local Population

The researchers were not explicitly engaged in research with ethnocultural or ethnographic goals, however their study touched on some of those considerations. One of the considerations related to participants’ language.

The high number of students that come to the US from Mexico (Institute of International Education 2020), coupled with the large number of professional librarians, made that country an ideal location for the research project. At first, the task seems straightforward: three Latin American Studies librarians will conduct research in Mexico. While language is a great unifying cultural element, in the case of Spanish, *“El español no es idéntico en todos los lugares en que se habla. En cada país, e incluso en cada zona geográfica y culturalmente delimitada dentro de cada país, las preferencias lingüísticas de sus habitantes son distintas, en algún aspecto, de las preferencias de los hablantes de otras zonas y países* (Spanish is not identical in all the places that it is spoken. In every country, even in each geographical and culturally delimited area within each country, the linguistic preferences of each speaker is distinct, in some aspect, to that of other speakers in other areas or countries)” (Real Academia Española “RAE” 2005).

The researchers knew they should consider language varieties when using Spanish to be sensitive and respectful of local linguistic norms within the country of Mexico. This was key when designing the recruitment documents and survey instrument for this project. To eliminate this potential barrier, the researchers sought the input of Spanish speaking colleagues to review

the documentation. As an additional layer of review, they contacted Mexican colleagues to further hone-in on the language variety used in Mexico City. As a result of this exercise and to demonstrate cultural competency, the researchers changed the phrase *profesionales de la información* to *profesionistas de la información*. According to the RAE, the use of the word *profesionista* is exclusive to Mexico³, and is also translated as professional.

If researchers do not have the necessary language skills, the authors suggest the research team consider hiring a professional translator for preparing written research instruments and a local professional interpreter for any research methods requiring speaking to research participants. This expense should be included in the budget.

Research Methods & Sampling

The researchers developed their methodology after articulating the two research questions for their study:

1) How do library and information professionals understand and teach for academic IL in a Mexican context? and 2) What are the implications of these findings for teaching librarians who work with Mexican international students? The researchers belong to the population indicated in the second question, teaching librarians, and the target of this study was the population indicated in the first, information professionals in Mexico. The researchers used two approaches, a mixed method survey and a qualitative approach, focus groups.

To gather initial data, the researchers selected a survey that used a purposeful⁴ sampling method. “Purposeful sampling means that the researcher is looking for participants who possess certain traits or qualities” (Koerber and McMichael 2008), and “...to produce a sample that can be logically assumed to be representative of the population” (Battaglia 2008). To reach the intended sample populations, the researchers sent an online questionnaire out to two major library professional organisations through a

³ RAE stands for the Real Academia Española or the Royal Spanish Academy [of Language]. The RAE considers itself to be the authority on normative uses of Castilian Spanish.

⁴ Also called purposive, judgmental, expert, or selective sampling in some fields.

known academic librarian in Mexico and posted the survey to a related Facebook group. The questionnaire had a survey termination element that separated academic librarians who teach from non-academic librarians and those who don't teach. The survey results provided some general context to IL teaching in Mexico.

Originally intended to help researchers identify focus group participants from the entire country to interview in person and over the phone or a call via video conferencing software, time constraints forced the researchers to pivot from the survey to recruit instead through local professional contacts. As Galletta points out, qualitative research involves making choices in sampling and issues related to the constraints of "time, cost, and other practicalities" (2013). Because of established travel plans and the demands of this project on personal and work time, the researchers opted to carry out focus groups only in Mexico City. The sampling for the focus groups was also based on a purposeful sampling method, meaning the researchers applied their "expert knowledge" to select a sample that represents a "cross-section of the population" (Courser, Matthew 2008). Thus, given the participants were known within the professional community and recommended by peers, they were the most likely to provide insights to the research questions. The researchers were also aware of ethical considerations related to the power dynamics of coming from a dominant country. The fact that the focus groups allowed participants to have a conversation with the researchers and themselves, gave the questions and the responses more nuance and clarity and mitigated the risk that participants may have felt coerced to participate. Given research that points to IL being sociocultural, the researchers felt the full group-constructed knowledge would be most appropriate (See Hicks 2018).

Professional contacts were essential to this research, but also presented an added layer of complexity. These contacts enabled the researchers to show up to pre-arranged meeting times and locations with the convenience of knowing the participants were all instructors of IL in higher education. The researchers, once in Mexico, realised if they had recruited the participants themselves, they might have built up some prior rapport. Worth mentioning too, the participants of the focus group were peers, not removed subjects.

Navigating this relationship was less complex given their familiarity with the nature and processes of research in general.

Although the researchers initially hoped to deepen their understandings of the IL contexts that Latin American students experience, they found that even studying just one country, Mexico, presented logistical challenges. Given the general understanding that qualitative research findings are not usually generalisable, the findings in this study “can only be said to be representative of sampling units that have actually been observed” (Latpate et al. 2021). Therefore, the authors suggest the need to be flexible if research goals change and aware of the need to avoid making broad cultural assumptions. The researchers chose the title “*Hay muchos Méxicos*” from a longer published quotation to reflect the idea that there is a great diversity within the country of Mexico and the teaching practices of those who live and work there, and of course, more research is needed to explore these questions.

Sharing findings

To avoid being extractive with the research, the researchers felt it imperative to allow participants to review the drafted manuscript. This professional courtesy gave participants an opportunity to review how their contributions were interpreted by researchers as well as a chance to provide feedback on the interpretation, which in turn helped ensure the credibility of the research. Touching back to the brief discussion of ethnocultural research, Nagata, Suzuki, and Kohn-Wood point out the importance of relationship: “Without attention to relationship the researcher’s findings may be tainted, superficial, and inaccurate” (2012). One of the goals of this research project was to have a two-way conversation about the pedagogical praxis of librarians across borders, and this member-checking process allowed this conversation to continue.

Due to the transnational nature of this research, however, there are a few barriers that persisted. Firstly, the researchers wrote the manuscript in English which meant that not all research participants could read the document and understand it in the same way if it had been written in Spanish. Second, providing an opportunity for input does not guarantee that one would

receive the desired response. Nevertheless, the authors strengthened ties with professional contacts and opened the possibility for future collaborations. They also published their accepted manuscript in an open access institutional repository in order that readers around the globe could access it freely.

Engagement at the Feria internacional de libro (FIL)

In late 2021, one of the researchers was asked to speak about the topic of *Desafíos de la comunicación científica: el papel de las bibliotecas y los bibliotecarios* (Challenges in scholarly communications: the role of libraries and librarians) during the 25th annual Colloquium of Librarians at the FIL (or international book fair) in Guadalajara, Mexico. She chose the topic of designing IL instruction for scholarly communication so she could speak about findings from the study and implications for librarians who teach. This was an opportunity to share the findings more broadly and with the community whom she studies, and this time she prepared slides that were exclusively in Spanish.

In the room were a few of the participants in the original focus groups and other professional contacts familiar with the study. The moderator of the panel remarked that this study filled in a gap in the sense that most of the research in IL in Mexico to date used quantitative not qualitative methods. Those contacts and participants at the colloquium embraced the study and expressed further interest in continued collaboration. This effort was another way the researchers tried to mitigate power dynamics and resist being extractive, while also providing a chance for further contact, conversation, and collaboration.

Discussion

For those on tenure-track or continuing appointment type of positions, research can seem like being in constant motion where one is unable to stop and reflect on a project before moving on to the next one. Writing this chapter has been an opportunity for the two authors to revisit the project, reflect on it and

evaluate their own growth as researchers. Working with a third author on this study allowed the authors to rely on and defer to their expertise with research study design and methodology. Both authors developed in their understanding of research by discussing and even at times questioning the process together. Writing down the lessons learned is also an opportunity to revisit the generosity of the Mexican librarians and their continuous commitment to strive for a better society through their work with individuals and communities. A lesson that seems distant from how IL is often centred in the US.

At the 2022 SALALM conference, the authors learned of a large collaborative project to create open access IL tutorials with one US and 20 Mexican librarians at five different institutions. The presentation, “Alfin sin fronteras: Un proyecto colaborativo e interinstitucional para brindar una herramienta pedagógica para toda América Latina (Information literacy beyond borders: An interinstitutional collaborative project to share a pedagogical tool across Latin America.)” was given by Camelia Romero Millán (Colegio de México), Leticia Hernández (Universidad de Guadalajara), José Martínez (Universidad Veracruzana), Alfredo Avendaño (Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla), and Anne C. Barnhart (University of West Georgia).⁵ It builds on and expands Anne Barnhart’s work with LibraryDen, for which she won the 2021 ALA Library Instruction Round Table (LIRT) Innovation in Instruction Award.⁶ For additional discussion about collaborating with librarians in Mexico, please refer to the published article, “‘Hay Muchos Méxicos’: A New Approach to Designing International Information Literacy Instruction” published in *portal: Libraries and the Academy*.

Conclusion

Conducting research in another country, especially in another language brings on a new set of considerations that should be carefully evaluated. Cultural and language knowledge will certainly facilitate the project, but one should be prepared to encounter more similarities, perhaps a result of the globalised world, than expected. Nevertheless, the efforts are worthwhile, especially if the aim is to move

⁵ SALALM 2022 Conference Schedule, available at <https://salalm.org/schedule/>

⁶ <https://www.ala.org/rt/lirt/innovation-in-instruction-award>

away from a deficit-based model and instead work to de-centre the US experience as the basis for lesson planning in IL. This project left the researchers feeling like they were building bridges with colleagues and learning from them rather than being extractive of their work.

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