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Learning from Each Other: Results from the first year of a peer-reviewed literature searching project

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System Library Services

A centralized library department with a single budget & collection serving all of Providence including 52+ acute care hospitals and the University of Providence School of Health Professions. Our team of 12 library professionals mix remote work with staffing 8 library spaces.



Background

Due to shrinking staffing levels and expanding business, we decided to develop a **peer-learning program** to build literature **search capacity** and **self-efficacy** amongst librarians and library support staff.

We hoped this would also serve as a **team building** exercise for colleagues who may not have the opportunity to work together directly.

Methods

Library staff partner and rotate each month. Goal is a monthly search practice and peer review debrief.

- librarian : librarian, sends one another a search and debrief on TWO searches
- library specialist : librarian, the librarian shares a search and they both debrief on that ONE search

For accountability, teams send a brief email to the Library Director by month's end with 2-3 learnings or challenges encountered.

Staff were administered Search Self Efficacy survey pre- and post-project, no validated tool found in literature to assess search confidence

REDCap Survey Questions pre-project (December 2022)

Comfort with Searching Health Sciences Literature

"This survey is designed to gather information about your experience and comfort with performing literature searches in the health sciences. All effort is made to keep the survey anonymous, but we are a small group so it cannot be guaranteed."

1. What is your role? Librarian / Specialist
2. How confident are you in your literature search / PubMed skills? (Likert 1-5)
3. How comfortable are you asking library colleagues for help with searches? (Likert 1-5)
4. How often do you ask library colleagues for help with searches? (Likert 1-5)
5. What might encourage you to ask for colleagues' help with a literature search? (free text entry)
6. What might prevent you from asking for colleagues' help with a literature search? (free text entry)

REDCap Initial Survey Results

Respondents: librarians = 9 | specialists = 2 | Years of experience = 1-27

1. *How confident are you in your literature search/PubMed skills?*

Librarians: Very confident = 2 | **Confident = 5** | Somewhat confident = 2 | A little confident = 0 | Not at all confident = 0

Specialists: Very confident = 0 | Confident = 0 | **Somewhat confident = 1 | A little confident = 1** | Not at all confident = 0

2. *How comfortable are you asking library colleagues for help with searches?*

Very comfortable = 4 | Comfortable = 4 | Somewhat comfortable = 1 | A little comfortable = 0 | Not at all comfortable = 0

3. *How often do you ask library colleagues for help with searches?*

More than once a month = 0 | Once a month = 2 | **Three to four times a year = 3 | Once or twice a year = 3** | Never = 1

Initial Survey Results...

4. What might encourage you to ask for colleagues' help with a literature search?

“I ask for help when I think I might be missing something. Sometimes I just get a gut feeling there should be something out there. Maybe I need **another set of eyes** to approach search differently.”

“I typically ask if I can't find articles or **I think there should be more**. If we do peer-review on a regular basis, everyone will feel more comfortable, I think.”

“When I **feel stuck**”

5. What might prevent you from asking for colleagues' help with a literature search?

“The assumption that colleagues **may not have the time** to help and may be occupied with their own workload.”

“I **don't want to impose** on anyone's time. Sometimes it's **embarrassing** to let other's see my convoluted strategies.”

“Worry about **overburdening** colleagues, search is urgent - not enough time to wait for a reply, feeling like I should be able to figure it out myself”

Feedback from staff

- Concerns about spending **additional time** on this - one additional search plus meeting with a colleague each month
- Questions from Specialists that don't conduct searches as part of their job: **what was the point** of this exercise, confidence levels, nervous about task
- Misunderstanding project instructions
- Not everyone saw the team-building opportunity that was intended

Feedback after several rounds of searches

Many people mentioned that it was a nice opportunity to get to work with library staff that they wouldn't have otherwise, and that after the first time the intimidation went away.

- From Specialist, "I took an entirely different approach than [Librarian] – and I think my approach was not the best – but the beauty of this is that I learned a LOT from [Librarian]'s advancement in this process. This was the most challenging example of a literature search so far for me – but I appreciated this one the MOST because it taught me a lot! And it encourages me to browse our options available (such as [policy repository])."
- "It was helpful to discuss the way you built your search, and how it gathered relevant results. Glad we took a look at CINAHL together."
- "This was a very fun exercise!"
- "I love that [Librarian] didn't "go easy" on me – as a student, I want these kinds of challenges, because it will help me learn the most!"
- "It was really nice to talk to [Librarian] and see her approach – I sent a search request with a lot of parts that may or may not have been entirely connected to each other. [Librarian] and I took it in different directions and got different results, which made me realize some things I missed and should follow up on."
- "I've been loving this project! I've been learning a lot about MeSH terms and different interfaces (OVID vs PubMed). I have something to learn from everybody on our team."

REDCap Survey Questions, post-project (January 2023)

Comfort with Searching Health Sciences Literature

"This survey is designed to gather information about your experience and comfort with performing literature searches in the health sciences. All effort is made to keep the survey anonymous, but we are a small group so it cannot be guaranteed."

1. How confident are you in your literature search / PubMed skills? (Likert 1-5)
2. How comfortable are you asking library colleagues for help with searches? (Likert 1-5)
3. How often do you ask library colleagues for help with searches? (Likert 1-5, n/a option)

We removed *What is your role?* question to preserve anonymity, only one specialist at time of post-project survey

REDCap Survey Questions post-project (January 2023)

Comfort with Searching Health Sciences Literature

"This survey is designed to gather information about your experience and comfort with performing literature searches in the health sciences. All effort is made to keep the survey anonymous, but we are a small group so it cannot be guaranteed."

4. What might encourage you to ask for colleagues' help with a literature search? (free text entry)
5. What might prevent you from asking for colleagues' help with a literature search? (free text entry)
6. Any other comments? (NEW for post-project survey)
7. Would you like to continue monthly search peer reviews? (yes/no)

REDCap Survey Results post-project (January 2023)

1. How confident are you in your literature search / PubMed skills?

Very confident = 3 | **Confident = 4** | Somewhat confident = 3 | A little confident = 0 | Not at all confident = 0

2. How comfortable are you asking library colleagues for help with searches?

Very comfortable = 5 | Comfortable = 4 | Somewhat comfortable = 1 | A little comfortable = 0 | Not at all comfortable = 0

3. How often do you ask library colleagues for help with searches?

More than once a month = 1 | **Once a month = 3** | **Three to four times a year = 3** | Once or twice a year = 1 | Never = 1 | n/a – I don't do searches as a regular part of my job = 1

Would you like to continue monthly search peer reviews? **Yes = 6** | **No = 4**

Post-project survey comments (January 2023)

Nearly all respondents expressed concern about asking for help with searches and overburdening colleagues, especially as our team continues to shrink.

"I like the **team attitude** we have and there isn't ever a negative feeling or response from anyone. Often others respond that they have done something similar and struggled as well - or knew of a resource that wasn't in the standard research lit that was helpful."

"I'm always **encouraged by reciprocal requests**. The more colleagues ask for my help, the more comfortable it is asking for theirs. I'm more likely to ask for help if the search seems particularly important/essential to get right (i.e. patient care, for a senior administrator, etc)"

"Peer search review is a great way to learn how to see questions from a **different perspective** and learn new tricks. I like it!"

"Sometimes, it did **feel like I was being compared** to a far more experienced colleague with a master's degree when we would share our results with our manager. I think I would have benefitted by it being more of a coaching experience, i.e., colleagues showing and telling me how I could have improved, or pinpointing where I was on the right track, etc."

Positive outcomes

- Many staff agreed this was a great team building opportunity. Geographically dispersed staff, and in different job roles, got to know each other better and work with folks they might not have otherwise.
- Search confidence gained by at least one member of team ↑
- Comfort asking colleagues for help increased ↑
- Frequency of asking colleagues for help increased ↑↑
- Expert searchers commented that it was fun to strategize and think in new ways, break out of a rut.
- From a Manager's perspective - provided insight into direct reports' search skills & areas for professional development needs

Learning from our experience

- Be OVERLY specific about what is expected and provide very detailed instructions. Asking for exact search strings and results, databases searched, can be particularly useful especially when doing peer-review with less experienced searchers.
- One librarian crafted a table for noting databases used, keyword / subject headings used, search combinations. A table such as this, provided at the start of project could have been a useful tool for setting debriefing expectations. Many pairs used the debrief time as a conversation about the search as opposed to a technical debrief
- Have clearer guidelines about how far in advance to send searches.
- When sending search examples from real patron searches, be sure to have taken careful notes/exact search string or be prepared to re-do in order to compare with partner.

What's next? Could it work for you?

- Current state, 40% of team preferred not to continue
- Team lost 3 staff members since start of project leading to even greater workload strain on remaining staff
- Organizational priorities / climate changes means that the time commitment required may no longer make sense

- Comments from prior presentations:
 - Can this be replicated at the chapter or MLA level?

Thank you

Questions or comments:

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