The Mixed-Method Library: Qualitative Research and the Future of Assessment in Higher Education.

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I have been working as the library ethnographer at UNC Charlotte since 2009. I was hired as a full-time employee, and report directly to the university librarian. What I was hired to do was never initially described to me as "assessment." I am an anthropologist, and have always framed my work as an exploration and analysis of the thoughts and behaviors that are involved in academic work. Assessment, in the sense of collecting information that can be used to improve and transform the work we do in the library, turns out to be at the heart of what I do, as a policy-directed social scientist. I want address here the broader implications of committing full-time work to qualitative research in a library policy context.

The use of words like "disruptive" and "provocative" within library policy discussions, and in and higher education generally, has become cliché, but I find those words useful in trying to frame the role for anthropologists and other social scientists on the staff of academic libraries. Positions like mine are a provocation, not just to library-land, but to higher education as a whole.

Full-time or part-time, qualitative projects initiate and facilitate scholarly as well as policy discussions about the nature of information, the configuration of digital and physical spaces in academia, and the changing state of academic work and scholarly communication in the 21st century. Qualitative researchers employed in academic libraries are often positioned as so-called"native ethnographers," as we are tasked with observing and analyzing the thoughts and

behaviors of our own communities: the students, faculty, and staff in the practical, everyday spaces of academia. Our anthropological eye is valuable in pinpointing not just ways that academic institutions and libraries can reshape themselves for that "future of libraries" we keep hearing and talking about, but also in illuminating the current nature of scholarly work, and the relationship of that work to the world outside of academia.

The idea is not to thumb our noses at current practice, but to provide a place for the new to emerge. Bronislaw Malinowski (1929, 1960[1929]), one of the original long-term fieldworkers, framed anthropology as fundamentally about making exotic familiar, and the familiar exotic. Margaret Mead (1961, 1963, 1968) was particularly adept at this in her work on sexuality, adolescence, and childhood. Effective work in anthropology can tap the power of cross-cultural insights allowing fresh eyes on our own society, the practices of others helping us think critically about our own practices.

Higher education is quantitative in part because of a policy orientation where evaluation is seen as equivalent to counting and measuring. Evaluation and analytics are descriptive, and by themselves do not necessarily allow for an eye to change. Assessment should be about collecting and using information that can lead to changes, and ideally, improvements. A reasonable question to ask is to what extent the massive amounts of quantitative data libraries collect every year has led to improvements? For example, UNC Charlotte participated in the Measuring Information Service Outcomes survey[1]. Some of the bar charts we can generate from this data look like this:

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[1] http://www.misosurvey.org/

Figure 1: Satisfaction Charts

We have all of these numbers, what do they mean? What does "satisfied with the library" mean, anyway? Can graphs like these tell us anything? It is just not enough. "It's complicated!" And really, we need to be looking at the stuff that is difficult to get and complicated to understand. Qualitative data can move library improvements in a way that traditional treatment of quantitative data has not. This is the power of insights, of epiphany, to go beyond description. Qualitative methods need explanations and defense in part because they are not the norm in library-land, and remain contested outside of qualitative-centric fields like anthropology and sociology. We hear increasing amounts about individual qualitative projects in libraries in the UK and the US, but I challenge you to think of a widespread movement to have qualitative approaches be an embedded, full-time part of an institution's assessment agenda.

While I do not want us to get rid of quantitative measures, I do want them to be surrounded and informed by the context provided by qualitative approaches. It is not just possible, but

tremendously important to work to transform our approaches to quantitative data with considered uses of qualitative data and approaches in libraries.

Anthropologists are fundamentally searching for insights into why. Anthropology assumes that there is a logic to people's behavior. It will never be enough to describe or count the things people do, interact with, own, or use. Furthermore, there are things that we observe to be important that we cannot count, as well as things we should be counting that we do not know are important. Institutions need multiple ways of representing what is happening; a holistic approach can include counting, but needs to incorporate other ways of observing and describing. Ethnographic practices can provide such a thing-- a look at the #CUNYLib2014 program indicates that there are many people in libraries who agree.

I would argue that ethnographic practices are most effectively deployed as a part of a full-time qualitative agenda, not just carved out of already existing jobs, or brought in short-term. Think of individual projects that characterize themselves as "mixed-method." Imagine a "mixed-method." library, drawing on both sorts of information.

What does that look like?

It can look like me: the Anthropologist in the Stacks[2]. The permanent staff presence of a qualitative researcher can (and should) mean non-LIS people working within the library. Bringing disciplinary knowledge and perspectives from outside of LIS can help illuminate policies not just within library, but across the university. I argue therefore not just in favor of a

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[2] http://atkinsanthro.blogspot.com/

mixed-methods library, but an interdisciplinary one. This is the case not just at UNC Charlotte,

but has been written about by Hank Delcore (2009) and the interdisciplinary team that worked at

CSU Fresno[3], and is evident in the presence of Andrew Asher, anthropologist and head of

assessment at Bloomington, and Anna Tuckett's hire by Martin Reid at the London School of

Economics, to conduct an anthropological investigation of the library there[4]. All of us who work

as social scientists within institutions, be they commercial or academic, use a range of methods,

including mapping, time logs, drawings, photo diaries, and research process interviews.
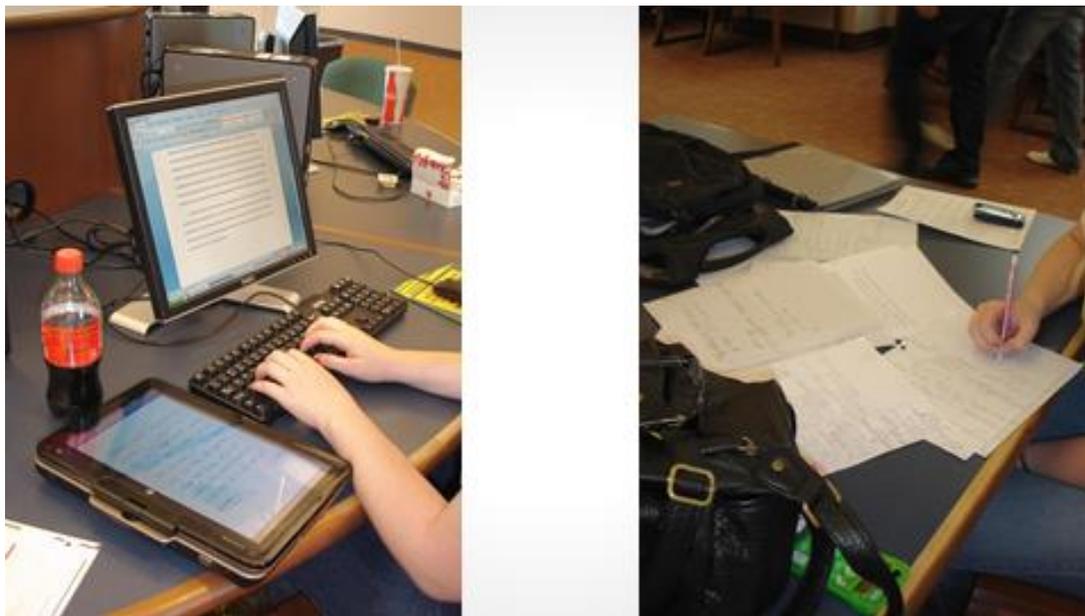
At UNC Charlotte, having collected and analyzed student academic behavior and practices

allowed us to make the case for funding for new students spaces in our building (cf.

http://atkinsanthro.blogspot.com/ for discussions of the work as it happened). The ground floor

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[3] http://myweb.cwpost.liu.edu/hchu/NJUST2014/Readings/DelcoreEtAl2009-TheLibraryStudyAtFresno-Ethnography.pdf

[4] https://storify.com/senorcthulhu/spaces-places-and-practices-ucl-ioe-joint-library

of Atkins used to be primarily staff space, with a hallway connecting the Library cafe with the stairwell going up to the first floor. In that hallway were study carrels. Observations of student study spaces throughout the library, and photo diary evidence collected from classes of applied anthropology students indicated the sorts of spaces they were drawn to, and how they used the spaces we currently provided in Atkins.

We took the desire for different kinds of seating (indicated by all of the pictures of couches and beds in the photo diaries), the need to spread out, and the clear requirement of access to technology and writable surfaces, and transformed our ground floor corridor into an experimental group study space.

Figure 3: the experimental ground floor at Atkins, photo by M. McGregor.

One architecture MA student spent his thesis research manipulating the space by putting a screen in alongside the couches and whiteboards (McGregor 2012). We used the jump in use of that particular space to make the argument for much more of that sort of comfortable, technology-rich, accessible academic work spaces within the library.

The generous support of our office for Academic Affairs resulted in our new ground floor space, with a variety of configurable furniture arrangements, many writable surfaces, and computing throughout. The idea was to provide spaces where we did not have to try to predict what students would be doing, but rather offer flexible, effective spaces that could accommodate a wide range of academic work.

Figure 4: Glass-walled, bookable study rooms with configurable tables and rolling task chairs. Photo by C. Lansford.

We continue to use qualitative data to get a sense of how successful that space is, and to make changes where necessary. A different architecture graduate student observed and mapped the use of the ground floor space not long after it opened (Schaefer 2013).
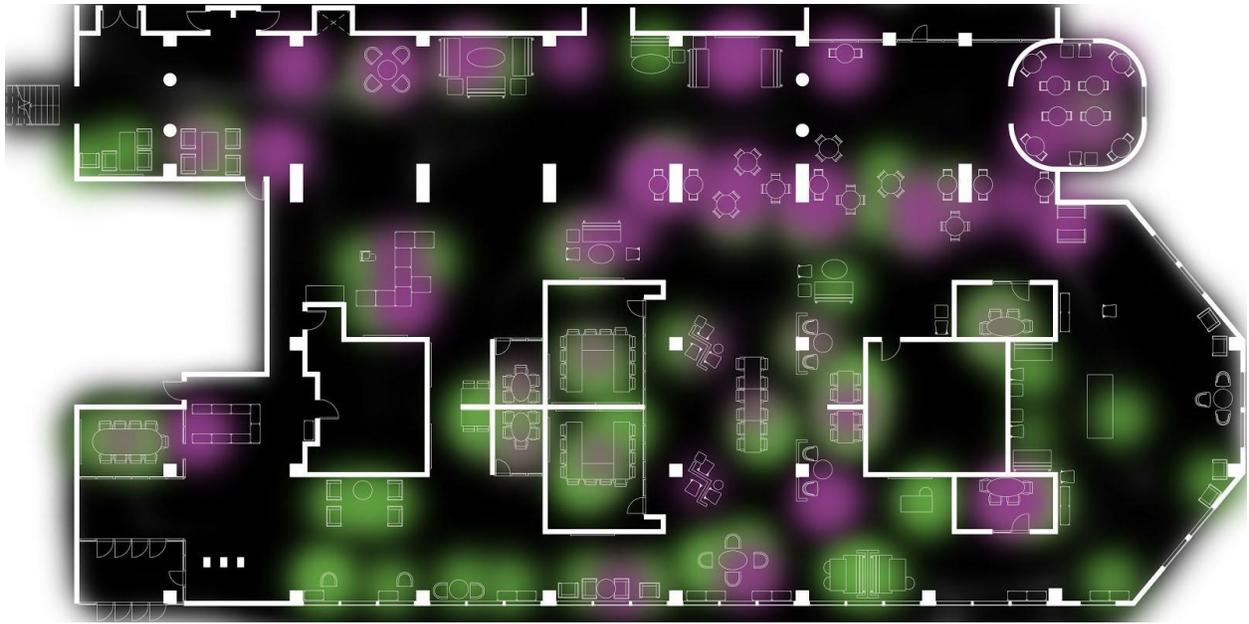
Figure 6: activity map showing overlap in studying (green) and talking (purple).
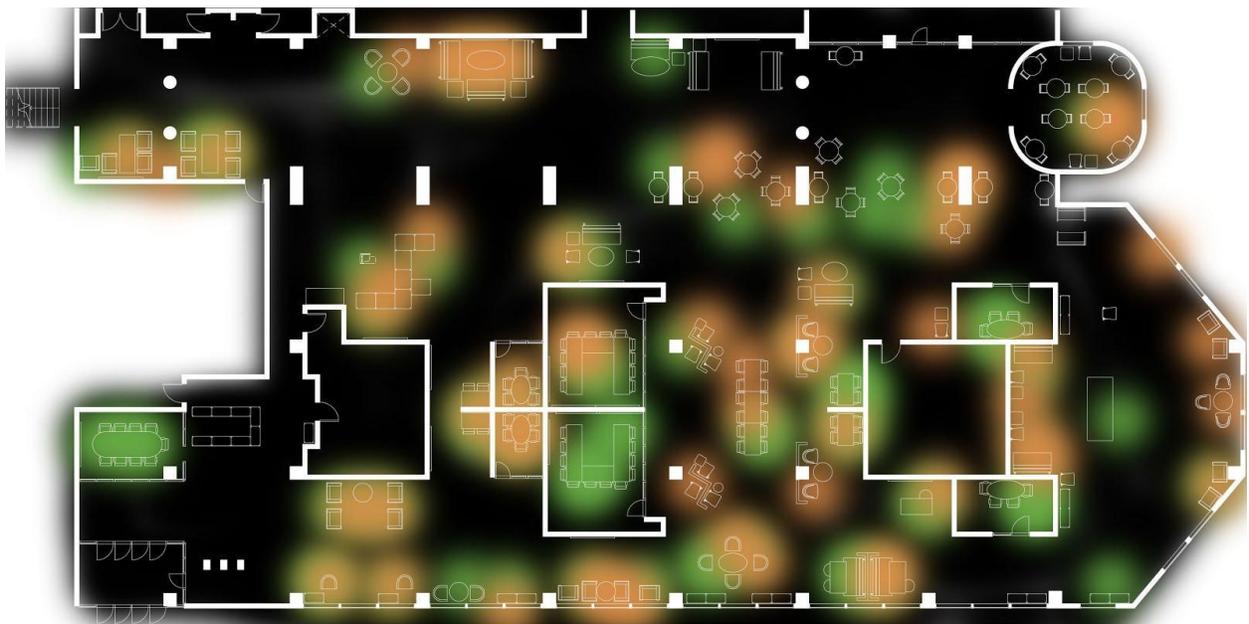

Figure 7: activity map showing overlap in laptop use (orange) and studying (green).

We have used these and other observations to make successful arguments for more furniture in particular places, and to help us think about activities in the rest of the library, given what we know about what is happening on the ground floor. The library building is a system, and

changes in one part ripple through the entire building.

I am also using cognitive mapping at UNC Charlotte, and in my research at University College, London, to reveal the position of libraries within the larger learning landscape of students and faculty--again, we get a holistic narrative of behavior that allows us to look at what we see erupt in the library in a broader context.
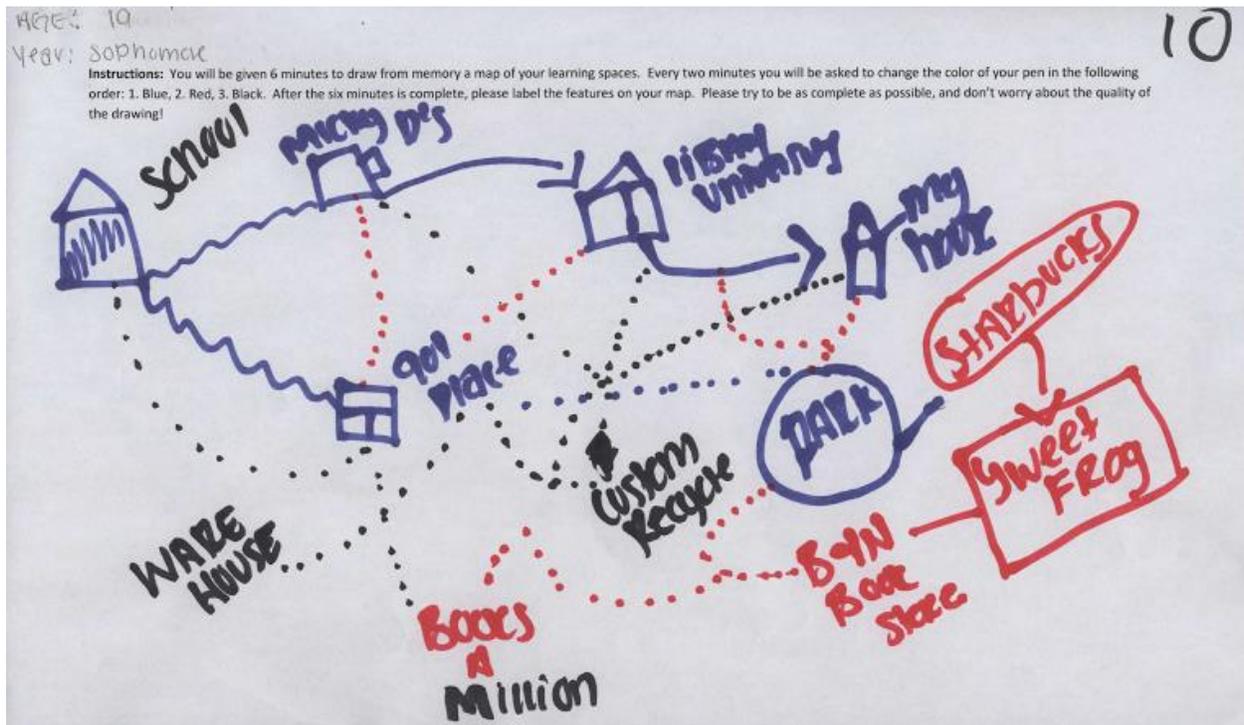

Figure 8: This UNC Charlotte second-year student travels all over Charlotte and into South Carolina to do her academic work.

Among the things these maps reveal is the relatively small place that physical library places can inhabit within the learning landscapes of our students. If all we do is ask questions that are library-specific, we lose the ability to access all of these other things, all of these other places. These maps also help think about the importance of digital tools people use and digital places they inhabit, and how the digital is shot through the physical places in which people dwell. It is crucial to think carefully about engagement with library and other learning spaces (on and off of

university campuses), and the potential transformation of spaces via digital practices. For

example the nearly universally expressed need for Wi Fi points to a "post-digital" learning

landscape (52Group), where the digital is ubiquitous, taken for granted, and so is not consistently

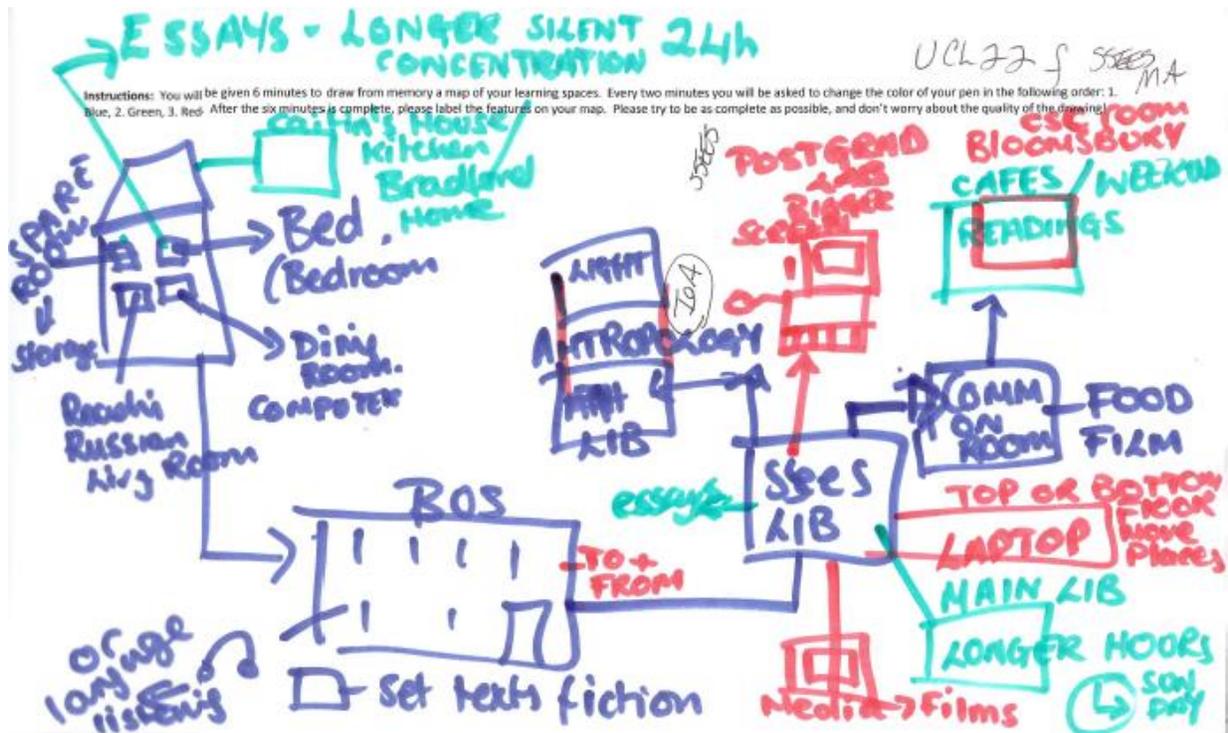represented as a separate element on the cognitive maps.

Figure 9: This MA student at UCL identifies several branch libraries, as well as cafes, home spaces, and the bus, as significant places in her learning landscape.

The production of qualitative research, and the relationship-building that engaging in that sort of

research entails, positions us to effectively challenge narratives of assessment that privilege

numbers over narratives. Social scientists embedded in academia leverage our research to bring

underrepresented voices (students, and sometimes faculty, too) to higher education policy

discussions. We can provide for policy discussions a grounding in what people actually do. For

example, Atkins library now contributes two members (me, and our head of Instruction in the

library, Stephanie Otis) to a university committee on student success. Part of why were initially

invited to participate in that committee's work is because of our administration's awareness (and

approval) of our qualitative research agenda. Our studies produce data that may be brought to

bear on university-wide policy decisions, and which has the potential to positively impact

academic success. The fact that these studies come out of the Library has significant

implications for the role academic libraries can play in higher education generally. Engaging in

full-time qualitative research agendas can potentially transform the voice libraries have in

university policy, centering libraries within the processes of educating our students, and

producing scholarly research.

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