Exploring the Complexities of Information Practices through Arts-Based Research

Lisa M. Given  
School of Information Studies & RIPPLE  
Charles Sturt University  
Wagga Wagga, Australia  
lgiven@csu.edu.au

Heather O'Brien  
iSchool, University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada  
h.obrien@ubc.ca

Rafa Absar  
iSchool, University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada  
r.absar@ubc.ca

Devon Greyson  
Interdisciplinary Studies Graduate Program,  
University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada  
devon.greyson@alumni.ubc.ca

ABSTRACT
Within and beyond Library and Information Science (LIS), researchers are employing participatory, arts-based research as one way of extending traditional research methods. The use of creative methods can enrich our understanding of complex information practices, particularly in multimedia information environments. This panel will provide an overview of arts-involved practices of data collection, data analysis and knowledge exchange, including examples of specific applications within LIS research projects. We will discuss the ways creative arts may function socially and psychologically among researchers and research participants, as well as topics and populations with which arts-involved methods may be especially enriching.

Keywords
Research methods, arts-based elicitation activities, information practices

INTRODUCTION
Although popularized by anthropology and sociology, arts-based elicitation methods are becoming established modes of inquiry in education, psychology, and LIS (Banks, 2001; Given et al., 2011). Arts-based research utilizes photographs, drawings, videos, drama, and digital or multimedia (Hogan, 2012) in the collection, analysis, and/or dissemination of research data. In the conduct of arts-based research, the unit of analysis may be the media object (e.g., how does a film embody social or political values?), or the process of creating art (e.g., what aspects of identity are expressed in the creation of a self-portrait?).

LIS researchers may benefit from using arts-based methods to complement more traditional data collection and analysis (such as interviews and questionnaires). Social, historical, and cultural contexts manifest in LIS research problems, and the use of arts-based methods provides a unique lens through which to communicate, depict, view and document both digital and non-digital information practices.

The purpose of this panel is to explore the utility of arts-based research for addressing complex research problems and contexts in LIS. We will accomplish this by describing research studies where we have used arts-based activities, focusing on why these methods were selected, how they were implemented, and their contribution to our research programs. In addition to providing background and examples of specific arts-based activities, we will encourage a broader methodological discussion with the audience around the value and fit of these methods in LIS research.

ARTS-INVOLVED ELICITATION ACTIVITIES
Arts-based research methods may draw upon any of a variety of visual or performing arts, in digital or analog form. On one end of the spectrum of arts-based methods are studies conducted almost entirely in artistic format, with sculpture, film, music, etc. constituting the end product rather than a traditional written research report. At the other end lies research that integrates arts-based activities or artifacts within a more traditional research process, e.g., including a drawing activity as part of an interview. Some studies use existing artifacts, such as images, to analyze historical and present day phenomena, while others ask research participants to create their own artistic outputs for the project. Studies may also focus on the creative process itself, i.e., the meaning of the arts in people’s lives and as tools of self-expression. The inherent value of arts-based activities is that they may facilitate the elicitation of information from participants about social relationships and life experiences (c.f., Bagnoli, 2010), tapping into “deeper elements of human consciousness” that cannot be expressed in words (Harper, 2002, p. 13).

In LIS, arts-based approaches may lend themselves to projects involving web design, web usability or research that examines multimedia spaces, such as social media. In such environments, where information is presented in a variety of formats, trying to capture the complexity of these
media-rich interactions using only text-based methods may be limiting. Indeed, Banks refers to visual images as “an omnipresent aspect of almost all human social relations” (2001, p. 177). Thus, whether we are investigating digital or non-digital information practices, arts-based methods are more encompassing of the ways in which we interact with information in the world. Furthermore, the ubiquity of mobile devices means that people are recording their interactions with information in new ways – snapping pictures with their mobile phones, sharing links, etc. These actions lead to an assortment of text and non-text based digital artifacts; as researchers we are tasked with how to use these objects to reconstruct the narratives of information experiences.

The focus of this panel is on participatory arts-based activities that are used as elicitation devices for research data collection and analysis, whether created by researchers, other members of society, or participants themselves. Both in-person and web-based examples will be discussed.

**PANEL PROPOSAL**

In this panel, we demonstrate the ways that participatory, arts-involved elicitation methods can:

- Augment traditional research methods, and
- Enrich our understanding of information practices in the virtual and physical contexts in which information seeking and use take place.

To accomplish this, we will provide an interdisciplinary overview of arts-based elicitation methods, including examples from our research where we have employed stories, drawing, and photographs in experimental or field settings. We will discuss why these methods were selected and the benefits and drawbacks in their implementation. We will also involve audience members in an interactive, brainstorming session by presenting LIS research scenarios and asking audience members to envision how arts-based techniques may be employed in these situations, and to critically evaluate their contribution to the phenomenon of interest. We will reflect upon the value of arts-based elicitation, and propose future avenues for research and application in LIS.

**PANELISTS**

Each panelist contributes unique insights to the proposed panel discussion. In addition to using a variety of arts-based elicitation methods, each researcher has applied these methods in the investigation of different phenomena.

**Lisa M. Given** is a Professor of Information Studies in the School of Information Studies and a member of the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education at Charles Sturt University. She serves on the College of the Australian Research Council and is an Adjunct Professor in Humanities Computing and Educational Policy Studies at University of Alberta. A former Director of the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology, Lisa has received numerous research grants and awards and has published widely on topics related to individuals’ information behaviors and qualitative inquiry. Lisa is Editor of the 2-volume set, *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (2008), which includes numerous entries on arts-based research practices.

Lisa has used participatory design methods in her studies of health consumers’ web practices (e.g., Given et al., 2007), through the use of existing websites and newly created web mock-ups to prompt participant engagement in research. By combining task-based searching activities with qualitative interviews, participants provided real-time feedback on the design of the search interface within the context of their personal health needs. Given’s research with university undergraduates has also used photographic techniques for many years. In a study of undergraduates’ use of campus spaces, for example, she documented students’ favorite and least-desired study and computing spaces (Given, 2007). Most recently, she used photovoice techniques (Julien et al., in press) to engage undergraduates in discussions of their information literacy practices. By giving students a camera and asking them to document their information seeking activities in the first year of university study, Given and her colleagues documented these activities through the eyes of the participants. These photos were used as prompts during in-depth qualitative interviews, providing deeper engagement with the research topic and unique points of assessment for later analysis.

**Heather O’Brien** is Assistant Professor at the iSchool, University of British Columbia. She investigates user engagement with digital media, specifically how to understand and measure this phenomenon. Her work focuses on users’ self-reported experiences as measured through the User Engagement Scale (O’Brien & Toms, 2010), interviews, and think-after protocols. She was an invited speaker at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Convening, “Engagement and Academic Tenacity: Making the Invisible Salient and Actionable” in October 2012, which focused on the measurement of engagement in education. Most recently, she conducted a tutorial (with Mounia Lalmas and Elad Yom-Tov) at the WWW 2013 conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on Measuring User Engagement that encompassed a variety of qualitative and quantitative techniques; a book on this topic is forthcoming.

In this panel, O’Brien will share recent work (with Rafa Absar) that employed photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) to investigate information search engagement with mobile devices. Participants are constructing text and photo diary entries with their smartphones to record instances of mobile information interaction. These diary entries are being used in conjunction with pre- and post-study interviews. The value of images in the data collection process is twofold. Firstly, Carter and Mankoff (2005) found that photos triggered more specific recall for participants during interviews, compared to other media objects. Secondly,
photo-taking behavior is often influenced by the presence of other people, which may ‘prompt’ richer reports of social awareness. Participants’ representations of their mobile information experiences through text and images will provide a rich picture of the social and contextual factors that constitute mobile information seeking and use, allowing us to construct a broader understanding of engagement on-the-go in everyday life situations.

Rafa Absar is a post-doctoral research fellow in the iSchool, University of British Columbia. She completed her doctoral work at the School of Information Studies, McGill University. She created a use scenario that drew upon “story” to design auditory feedback for an information visualization system (Absar and Guastavino, 2011). Rather than relying solely on the designers’ ideas, the participation of users during the sound design process led to the design and selection of sounds closer to what end-users preferred and were able to interpret in meaningful ways. A “rich use scenario”, comparable to a story or a radio play of a character using the system, in which the wider context of the sounds to be designed are taken into account, was presented to a panel of participants (Pirhonen and Murphy, 2008). The participants used the story as a tool to trigger creative sound ideas. Erickson (1995) previously outlined methods in which stories could be used as a tool for designing human-computer interactions, since they provide a natural way of initiating and continuing dialog with users. Barrass (1996) also explored the use of stories to design auditory interfaces. As Barrass describes, stories can convey principles and methods in a concrete manner, which is easy to understand, assimilate and emulate, hence facilitating knowledge transfer through examples, in this case, between the user and the designer. Similar approaches using stories and narrative techniques can be extended to the design of information interactions in various contexts, where such participatory approaches would be beneficial.

Devon Greyson is a doctoral candidate in the Interdisciplinary Studies Graduate Program at the University of British Columbia. Her research focuses on the intersection between information practices and health behavior, particularly related to issues of social and health equity. She is keenly interested in the potential for arts to foster creative problem-solving, and the developmental fit between arts-involved methods and youth in particular. Greyson is currently using a novel research participant drawing exercise, Information World Mapping, to augment traditional semi-structured and critical incident technique interview methods with pregnant and parenting youth. Information World Mapping aims to enable creative communication about the concept of interest, which in this case is the information world of the research participant as it relates to health decision-making. Information World Mapping draws on elements of photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), relational mapping (Radford & Neke, 2000), and information horizons (Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, & Harmon, 2001). The method asks participants to generate drawings or maps of their personal information worlds, including key interpersonal and institutional relationships. These drawings are then used to facilitate and prompt participants’ own stories about their information practices. Additionally, Greyson will be using interactive theatre for end-of-project knowledge sharing and the generation of policy recommendations related to key issues identified in the study. The Theatre for Living approach (Diamond, 2007) builds on Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre exercises (Boal, 1993) to foster community dialogue around issues and problems related to social systems and social justice.

STRUCTURE OF THE PANEL
The proposed structure of the panel is as follows:

- The Moderator (Lisa Given) will introduce the panel and provide an overview of key trends in arts-based research methods within and beyond LIS (15 minutes);
- Each of the remaining panelists will provide an overview of the arts-based elicitation method they are using or have used. Each will focus on why this particular method was chosen to investigate the phenomenon of interest; the benefits and drawbacks of employing the method with an emphasis on the implications for researchers, participants; and the ability of the method to capture complex information practices (10 minutes each);
- The panelists will facilitate an interactive discussion with the audience. In this portion of the panel, we will pose research scenarios typically encountered in LIS research and ask the audience, in small groups, to discuss the appropriateness of arts-involved activities in each scenario, i.e., how various arts-based techniques might be employed to address the research problem, and how such methods “fit” in the specified context. For example, one research scenario might involve understanding the everyday life information needs of people with special needs. Following time for discussion, we will reunite the audience to reflect upon the value that arts-based research may add to LIS, and how these methods may or may not facilitate the ability to capture the complexity of information practices (30 minutes);
- The Moderator will bring together the methodological challenges and opportunities that emerge during the panelists’ presentations and discussion session, with the goal of suggesting avenues for future research in LIS that utilizes these approaches (10 minutes).

CONCLUSION
Although research questions in LIS can be addressed adequately without arts-based approaches, we see inherent value in incorporating these methods, where and when appropriate. This panel will discuss the value-added aspects of using art-based activities to engage participants. In doing so, we illuminate opportunities for participants to express
their information practices in multimodal ways, and for researchers to expand the objects used in data collection, analyses and dissemination. Most importantly, we contend that arts-based methods enhance our understanding of the complex information practices that people engage in to arrive at a more holistic picture of information worlds.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
Thank you to the three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and encouragement to share this panel at the conference. Given’s research is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR), Networks of Centres of Excellence (NCE) and the Australian Research Council. O’Brien’s research is supported by the Graphics, Animation and New Media Project, GRAND NCE, and SSHRC. Absar’s doctoral research was supported by Fonds de Recherche Nature et Technologies Quebec, and her post-doctoral research by GRAND NCE and SSHRC. Greyson is supported by a Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship; her research is funded through CIHR and the Women’s Health Research Institute.

REFERENCES


