The impact of Italian academic library consortia for full-text electronic resources activities on the job of library staff: a study of Ca'Foscari University branch libraries

Dissertation Proposal

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MODULE BP 101

CONTENTS

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1.1 Introduction

The activity of academic library consortia in Italy has had noteworthy consequences, one of the main ones being that advantageous deals have made available a massive quantity of information for academic library users. The availability of all these resources has raised many new activities within academic library systems, and it has stimulated libraries to adopt tools to facilitate information towards end users about the presence of these resources.
This phenomenon reflects the international situation, where since years the massive advent in the academic libraries of electronic full text resources coming from consortial deals has reinforced the potentials of available information, compelling organizations to find the best way to manage it so that it can reach relevant users, when needed.

1.2 Background

The Information age

The framework within which this phenomenon is inserted is the Information age. Through the synergy of telecommunications and computers (Messerschmitt 1996, p. 68), information technology allows people to handle more information, more easily and swiftly, and provides people with new tools to face the dramatically changing professional and everyday world. A rich debate in library literature has developed around the complex and multi-faceted key issues regarding information age and its impact on academic libraries.

Organizational aspects for libraries

As Lynch puts it, information technology has radically changed the academic library: at this time libraries are living a phase of "transformation : a basic alteration in the activities of the academic library as an organization as a result of the new technological capabilities and the shifting context of higher education and scholarship" (Lynch 2000).
To support this transformation libraries have to identify the new organizational needs and the new roles coming from the context of electronic information (Lougee 2002).

Disintermediation and the role for librarians

Moreover, the apparently easiness to reach and assess information, also without human intermediaries, has proved false. As far as disintermediation is concerned, even if some researchers support the thesis that human gatekeepers are neither desirable nor practical (Nardi and O'Day 1996), others argue that end user access does not make the intermediary services unnecessary, they simply add to other means to the accessing and getting information (Ehrlich and Cash 1999). To reinforce this thesis, some others contradict the idea that the intermediary is a barrier between the information and the user and that its function is outdated

(Adams 1999) and reclaim the intermediary role of librarians (Rice-Livey and Racine 1997; Burke 2001). In addition, reports coming from libraries give evidence to a permanent user disorientation in front of what has been defined the "information glut"(Basili and Pettenati 1994), which drives them use more frequently general search engines than "reliable" information tools such as library catalogues (EDNER 2002). As a matter of fact, high-quality information electronic resources are relatively under-used (Wise 2003).

This situation emphasizes the need for libraries, since always gatekeepers for independent information, to take on more intermediary roles, transforming themselves again, discussing again their organization and adopting relevant, friendly tools for an easy access to information. Libraries, as "learning organizations" (Rowley 1997) should transform themselves and adapt, realizing their services through their staff who, more than ever, has to be "a reflective information practitioner"(Dixon 2000).

Human factors

The changes in the distribution of information and the technological advancements, which have been considered great opportunities to improve services to the academic community, may fail in their aims, owing to a scarce attention to human factors, as the lack of involvement of library staff (Morgan 1996; Morgan 2001; Ray 2001). Human factors, instead, are essential to a complete development of electronic library services (McDonald 1999). Even if for true the jurisdiction of librarians in scholarly communication is strongly under discussion and the boundaries among different professions blur with the librarian role (Ray 2001), what remains essential for libraries to fulfil their intermediation function is the motivation, the commitment of library staff (Green, Chivers and Mynott 2000).

Considerable investments are made on technology and electronic resources. The same attention, if not more, should be granted to the reorganization of activities, and in particular to library staff (Rockman 2004).

2.1 Purpose of the study

Even if in Italy library literature has faced the main issues concerning this research (new technologies, electronic resources, library organization change, library staff training) few empirical studies have been carried out on the specific topic regarding all this four aspects. Recent case study research points out how in specific University contexts communication about e-journals represents a critical issue, especially when these resources come from central purchasing and management, without an adequate involvement of library staff and faculty (Bevilacqua 2003).

Starting from these premises, the purpose of this research is to investigate how library staff has been involved in the planning and promotion of electronic full text sources at University Ca' Foscari of Venice, and to explore the relationship between staff involvement and electronic resources use.

The **focus** of the research will be on people, that is academic library staff within their job environment.

2.2 The research questions

As the research purpose regards library staff involvement and training in the planning of electronic library services a identified the academic context, the main questions are:

- o How does the massive presence of new electronic resources impact on the daily job of library staff?
- o How does it impact on their training?
- o Are they motivated to explore them and make readers use them, as a part of the library patrimony?

2.3 The research aims

The research will be conducted with the following aims:

- o To provide information on the library staff work environment, facing the new context of electronic information
- o To gain more insight on library staff needs in terms of training
- o To provide evidence of the importance of library staff involvement for effective and successful library projects

2.4 The research objectives

The research will be conducted in the pursue of the following objectives:

- o Identify organizational changes within Ca' Foscari library system, if any, due to the development of the new electronic information context
- o Identify whether and how the library staff analysed have been involved in the choice, management and use of e-resources (have they have been efficiently informed and instructed in the use of e-resources, so that they are able to propose them to the appropriate users?)
- o Explore the motivations that drive them to change and make a further effort within their job, to learn how to use new tools

2.5 The research limitations: setting and time frame

The "unit of analysis" (Patton 1990; Yin 2003) of the case study is constituted by two Library Departments of the Faculty of Foreign Languages within the Library System of Ca' Foscari University: the Library of European Postcolonial Literature Studies Department and the Library of Sinology and Nippon Department.

At this stage, I have individuated 9 people potentially involved in the research:

4 cataloguer librarians
3 librarians for public services
2 key informants (the Chief of the Library System; the IT responsible for libraries)

I expect that during the research more key informants emerge.

I have chosen the libraries from the Faculty of Foreign Languages as setting for my research for diverse reasons:

- o This area is currently not affected in the reorganization of library services within the Library System; for the scopes of the research it is important to avoid the risk to conduct the research in a setting where activities may be reduced, modified or altered due to heavy organizational transformations
- o These libraries are similar in structure, but dissimilar with reference to types of materials used (texts in occidental or oriental languages): I hope that these two parallel but diverse situations may enrich the results of the research
- o The area is narrow enough to let me conduct a small research, dimensioned to my Master student experience

The research lasts 8 months, within which I intend to develop the research design and proposal, the data collection and analysis, and draft the research report (*see annex 1*).

3.1 The methodology

The research I intend to conduct demands a qualitative approach, in respect of the humanistic values peculiar of qualitative research (Patton 1990). Qualitative research aims at understanding a particular social event, situation, group or interaction (Locke, Spirduso and Silverman 2000) and adopts various techniques to analyse and comprehend phenomena in context-specific environment. My same aim is to gain insight, find meaning investigating the defined setting with flexible, open ended techniques to allow people, narrated events and behaviours talk by themselves. My research is based on an inductive process, with the aim to produce "findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or means of quantification" (Strauss and Corbin 1998, p. 10).
Among other key points, the inductive method offers (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2003):

- a close understanding of the research question
- a more flexible structure to permit changes of research emphasis as the research progresses
- a realisation that the researcher is part of the research process
- less concern with the need to generalise

Rossman and Rallis (1998) identify a range of characteristics that summarize both traditional perspectives and newer participatory, self-reflective perspectives of qualitative inquiry (Creswell 2003). Qualitative research:

- is conducted in a natural setting
- uses interactive and humanistic multiple methods
- is emergent
- is fundamentally interpretive
- has an holistic approach
- induces in the researcher an introspective and reflective attitude towards his/her bias and values
- requires multi-faceted, iterative and simultaneous reasoning, that provokes an iterative thinking process

All these characteristics seem very suitable for my research: I intend to conduct it within the real work setting, using data collection techniques such as in-depth interviews and focus group interviews, which respect respondents' viewpoints and opinions. The flexibility claimed for qualitative research facilitates the development of an emergent research, in which I, as a lively part of the research process, through a reflective process can better comprehend and interpolate the meanings of the collected data.

Besides, I hope that this methodology, by fostering introspection and reflective attitude, helps me manage possible biases, which are one of my concerns, since the research fieldwork is also my work setting, and I know directly most of the key participants.

3.2 The research strategy

Many are the strategies that can be associated with the qualitative research. Creswell (Creswell 2003) summarizes the most used explaining the context in which to apply to them:

- o Ethnographies, which focus on describing and interpreting the "lived realities encountered in the field setting"
- o Grounded theory, which focuses on the derivation of a general theory on a process grounded in the views of participant in the study
- o Case studies, which focus on an in-depth exploration of an event, a process, or one or more persons, in a limited range of time and through a variety of data collection methods
- o Phenomenological research, which focuses on generating meanings and gaining insights into the studied phenomena
- o Narrative research, which focuses on the "narration" of the individuals who take part to the research, retold then by the researcher into a narrative chronology

The nature and scopes of the research drive me to adopt the *case study* as a research strategy, as it "allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin 2003, p. 10). The case study is " a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence" (Robson 2002, p. 178). Moreover, it is considered a complete method : "the case study as a research strategy comprises an all-encompassing method – covering the logic of design, data collection techniques, and specific approaches to data analysis". (Yin 2003, p.14).

3.3 Collecting data techniques

The chosen case study strategy "relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion" (Yin 2003, p. 14). Since diverse and multiple collection data methods enrich the findings and open new hypotheses during the research, it is very important to identify the appropriate techniques, which are   strictly depending on the research questions (Patton 1990; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2003; Yin 2003).

Among the listed sources of evidence proposed by Yin (Yin 2003), I mainly intend to use, individual interviews, focus group interviews and research observations.

Data will be collected from January to April 2005, and will include at least:

2 recorded interviews to key informants (45 minutes to 1 hour each)
2 recorded focus groups (1 hour and a half to 2 hours)
4 direct observations of the two job setting (2 hours each)

Individual interviews to key informants

To gather diverse viewpoints that express also the political position of the organization (The University Ca' Foscari of Venice) I intend to interview the Chief of the Library System and the Chief of the IT services. The interview is intended to be in-depth, with open-end questions also in the hope that it leads to unfold aspects previously not considered, which can help me to address my research question and objectives (Creswell 2003), and with the purpose to be allowed to enter into their perspectives (Patton 1990).

Focus groups with library staff

To explore the views of library staff on the research questions, I intend to prepare a small list of themes on which to focus the interview. These themes will be hints for discussion.
My plan foresees the creation of two focus groups:

- o Focus Group A involving the librarians who mostly work in back office (reference librarians employed also in ordering and cataloguing activities)

- o Focus Group B involving the librarians who mostly work for public services (information, loan service, first level reference)

The aim for these focus groups is "to get high quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others" (Patton 1990, p. 335) and to take advantage from the technique potentials, as in group interviews participants comments tend to balance and remove extreme views; furthermore the group's dynamics help focusing on the central issues in the research (Patton 1990).
Two diverse focus groups allow each group participants speak freely of themselves and of the setting within which they act.

Observations

In qualitative research, direct observation of the physical setting and the behaviour of the people involved has the scope to allow "the reader [of the research] to enter into and understand the situation described" (Patton 1990, p. 202). Data retrieved from observations can enrich and complete the data obtained through interviews and focus groups; gathering these data is possible through the descriptive account, a diary of observations that accompanies the researcher over time.
I intend to use this technique collecting data technique to keep trace of the fresh impressions received; besides I shall use these data to triangulate them with the diverse sources, to enhance the credibility of my research (Patton 1990).

In observations, I shall collect and analyse data in parallel, as parts of the same process (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2003) also to provoke analytic induction and to define hypotheses.

4 Data recording procedures and analysis of the collected data

In order to record the data gathered, I shall use a protocol for each collecting data technique used (Creswell 2003):

For *observations* I shall maintain an observational protocol, distinguishing *descriptive notes* which refer to places, people involved in the research, etc., from *reflective notes*, that is my personal thoughts, feelings and concerns.

For *interviews* and *focus groups* I shall use an interview protocol: I intend to use a tape recorder, in each interview I record a heading (time, place and field setting, people interviewed); the complete interview will be recorded, from the key research questions, to the answers and comments.

To report the research status, to track the research evolution and my attitudes about the research, I intend to compile a *research journal*, as an analytical aid, during all the research period.

In order to obtain a "thick description" that allows others reading the results draw their own interpretation from the data (Patton 1990) both observational data and focus groups and interviews contents shall be completely and accurately transcribed. All the transcriptions shall be coded, to facilitate the identification and search for themes and patterns within the research. These themes and categories should become the findings of the research process, which display multiple viewpoints from individuals, through the construction of the case record and then the writing of the case study narrative (Patton 1990).

5 The credibility of the research

Among the strategies suggested by Creswell to ensure credibility and guarantee the accuracy of findings, the most suitable ones for my research are:

- o *Triangulation* of data sources of information in order to build a coherent justification for themes
- o Clarification of the *bias* I can bring to the study: self-reflection enhances the openness and transparency of narrative
- o *Thick description* to communicate the findings, which allows readers enter the setting and get nearer the presented experience

Besides, to give evidence to my research I shall maintain the materials gathered (tapes, transcriptions, communications to people involved) so that they can be checked by the readers, if necessary.

6 The role of the researcher

In qualitative research the researcher is deeply involved in the process. This is also my case, since it has been my personal experiences within Ca' Foscari University that have stimulated the questions of this research; I am conscious of my emotional involvement and of the risk of bias, but I am also conscious that taking this chance may give the people involved the occasion to unfold their real feeling and give me a deeper comprehension of the work setting. For this reason, to ensure objectivity in my data collection style, and not to be influenced in the comprehension and interpretation of the data collected I intend to have informants feedback after submission of interviews and focus group reports. Besides, as a researcher (even if an "absolute beginner") I am expected through the practice of qualitative enquiry to reach the necessary reflective attitude that fosters an iterative thinking process. I hope that the development of this attitude supports the quality of my research.

7 Anticipated outcomes

As the scope of this case study proposed is to describe a situation within in a particular setting, and many will be the limitations of the research, due to time and energy limitations as a I am single and inexperienced investigator, the results of the research cannot be generalised nor produce a theory generalised to diverse situations. Nevertheless, it is hopeful that it can produce more insight on the work setting on the few explored setting of Ca' Foscari University library system.

My hope that the experience of the research can enrich me, developing also a reflective attitude towards the external reality, and become a moment of confrontation and growth also for all the colleagues involved; the results of the research may emphasize issues on which to work for a better establishment of good communication within librarians and for the identification of stimuli and motivations that support all of us librarians who share this changing work setting.

Moreover, this study may open interest for future studies, and draw other researchers to explore further issues regarding the relationship between the involvement of library staff in the choice, management and use of e-resources and their actual use.

Annex 1

Research time scaling (from October 2004 to June 2005)									
	October	November	December	January	February	March	April	May	June
Research proposal									
Literature Review	███								
Research questions		███							
Methods		███	███						
Planning			███						
Research design, collection and analysis of data									
Research Journal				███	███	███	███	███	███
Study access aspects, prepare communications				███					
Design interviews				███					
Individual interviews to key informants				███					
Data analysis				███	███				
Observations				███	███				
Data analysis				███	███				
Focus Group A				███					
Data analysis				███	███				
Focus Group B					███				
Data analysis					███	███			
Data elaboration							███	███	
Dissertation drafting								███	███

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Further readings

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