

CORE NIHR Jan 2025 15 min lightning talk script

Hello, my name is Cheryl Francis and I'm the Librarian for Medicine at the university of Sunderland.

I'm here to talk about my first step into a systematic review as part of a research team.

Librarians with subject librarian roles like myself and my colleagues here are often asked to support researchers and teach systematic searching techniques but are rarely offered an opportunity to be part of a research team conducting a systematic review.

I temporarily became part of the health literacy research team, which is part of the school of medicine at the university of Sunderland after a few months of supporting the researcher in some 121 sessions.

It had been clear through the 121 sessions that the search was complicated.

But what if, after 24 years as a qualified librarian, which has included conducting evidence searches in the NHS and teaching literature searching and systematic searching in universities for the past 10 years....

What if.... joining a research team undertaking a systematic review wasn't quite what I'd imagined?

Well, the short answer is: I asked.

The longer answer is that I had built close relationships with the school of medicine since I became their librarian in July 2019, 2 months before it opened its doors to the first cohort of 50 students.

The School was very small at this time and open to making connections across other departments for much needed support, and crucially I was afforded the flexibility by my manager to volunteer for capacity, "calls for backup" from the School for things like invigilating, testing equipment and helping with student interviews. So I was often seen outside the library setting and became a familiar face. I was invited to work in the SoM offices when they moved to a new building in 2023, and I now work there one a day a week.

As the School has grown its research capacity I have been asked to advise on searching for systematic and scoping reviews.

The more I assisted the more I wanted to be a bigger part of that research element of my role.

I couldn't think of how to get involved, and then someone suggested that I ASK about opportunities, which hadn't even occurred to me!

So, I asked one of the senior researchers in the Health Literacy team and a week later I was invited to join the team conducting THIS systematic review that I had been supporting.

I was aware of certain challenges I was going to be facing right from the outset.

The most obvious of those was TIME both my available time because I was doing it alongside my full-time role

and the project time scale as it was already well underway.

I joined the research team around 6 months into the year-long project. It consisted of a Systematic Review and 2 pieces of qualitative research along with 2 scoping reviews. The searches for the systematic review needed to be completed and into Covidence by 14th June, I had 3 days spread over 7 weeks.

The next challenge was responsibility

Once I'd attended the first Health literacy research meeting, I immediately felt the difference between being an advisor to a researcher in the library, and the librarian within a research team with the responsibility of making that search, which would be published, as good as it could be.

The other growing challenge was.... The search itself!

I can't go into all of the challenges of the search here, especially because some of it I didn't document and I wish now that in those times when we were hammering out how to best create that final search that I had more thoroughly recorded the process.

The Search

In a nutshell my biggest stumbling block was this: the intervention was making things "easier to read" "simplifying text" and the outcome was "things being easier to read" and "increased understanding or readability" but there were some words around those two concepts where it really wasn't clear where they sat. And paring down to just two concepts, the P with a joined I and O exploded the search hugely, so I did need that 3rd concept to keep the number of papers manageable.

An example of one of those terms that seemed to fit into both the I and O concepts was "readability". This was because some papers described what they were doing was increasing readability so that was the outcome, but they didn't name an intervention, they were doing an intervention or set of interventions to increase readability.

After testing out various search iterations and screening sections of papers from them, we decided to include readability in the outcome and then to add the word "intervention" into the intervention part of the search.

So that was one thing that I've told students time and time again not to do but I ended up doing it in this real-world search!

Where did I find support to help bridge my knowledge gap?

I found help and advice by joining and networking in online communities, reading, and feedback on the search from colleagues in both the librarian and research teams.

The most important reading I did was the platform help pages to make sure I was certain how the different platforms were searching, and the Cochrane Handbook's searching pages.

Lancaster University's systematic review conversations were excellent, the speakers shared lots of great tips, and just as importantly a sense of camaraderie and honesty around the challenges of conducting a search for a systematic review.

From those online sessions I heard about a couple of online forums on Discord called "Self Taught SRs" and "Medlibs-land" which were an absolute gift of information from well seasoned searchers.

One example of the things I learned from those forums was MedSyntax which helps identify errors in the syntax of your search,

Self-reflection was another way I bridged the gap.

This was about being honest with myself about how out of my depth I felt and sharing that with selected others. I was amazed when those who I think are utterly brilliant would reflect back their own uncertainties,

and just as helpful as I talked to others was the growing realization of this being part of the natural process of doing something out of my comfort zone.

The search was completed and into Covidence by 14th June, and I DID put more of my own time into completing it. I also became one of people screening the papers which was even further out of my comfort zone, but it gave me a valuable insight into the practicalities of inclusion and exclusion criteria and how so many abstracts are poorly written and that article titles don't always clearly summarise its contents. These practical insights have helped me in my everyday work. I did the screening exclusively in my own time to gain the experience.

The benefits of being part of the research team are many and varied, and I think that's because it had a deep impact on developing my confidence and resilience.

I've listed a number of other benefits I found. One of the main impacts was on my teaching. I'll always have my well thought through examples, but on a number of occasions since doing the systematic review I've asked for search ideas from students

and worked with those as a live and evolving research question in the classroom, inviting them to explore the iterative properties of searching with me in the session.

The experience of connecting differently and working WITHIN a team in the School I usually work ALONGSIDE means I've been able to develop closer relationships - and not only with those in the team, but across the School as a whole.

and this was reflected in this feedback from a member of the research team:

And opportunities lead to more opportunities.

I've been part of helping students undertaking INSPIRE and NIHR student research projects with their searching. A number of students presenting their work mentioned the support they had received from me, raising the profile of the library as partners in research to the audience of undergraduate medical students and academic and clinical staff.

The profile and reputation of the Library team has also been raised through word of mouth.

Engineering academics have been in touch with their librarian asking for support for their first systematic review.

The team is also looking to get the review published and I'll be a named author.

Again this is reflected in feedback from another member of the research team:

If you love searching and want to get more involved in conducting searches my suggestions would be to

These are my tips.

I was able to build key relationships with the School by offering help outside the library and regularly being visible in the offices and break out spaces, It makes such a difference to be able to connect informally over coffee and lunch - so make connections in the way best for you.

ASK for future opportunities to work with a research team.

It may mean you using your own time to get the experience, and for me it was only possible because of the support from my manager and the School's senior management Team.

When you're doing a project like this do what I didn't but will do next time: Take notes, keep records and write reflections during the process to be able to...

Talk about your experience... at a conference!