

Abstract

This talk reflects on a liaison librarian's first experience as an embedded member of a systematic review research team. It explores how established relationships with the School of Medicine enabled research involvement, and examines the practical, professional and emotional challenges of contributing to a complex health literacy review. The presentation considers how confidence, reflective practice, peer support and continuing professional development helped bridge knowledge gaps. It concludes by highlighting the wider impact on teaching, professional identity, research engagement and the visibility of library expertise within academic research partnerships.

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

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

*So the overview of this session is: I am going to give context of how I got to work in the research team.

I'm then going to talk about the challenges I faced; how I overcame those challenges (or bridged the gap) and the benefits and outcomes of being part of the research team and finally, I'll share a bit about the future and how being in the research team has made me think differently about the direction of my career.

*This is the Team I work with; we are the subject librarians for the Faculty of Health Sciences & Wellbeing.

Librarians with subject roles like myself and my colleagues, are often asked to support researchers and teach systematic searching techniques but at our university have not been offered an opportunity to be embedded into a research team conducting a systematic review.

I know that some of you here are undertaking these kinds of partnerships with faculty, or have roles specifically to support systematic reviews, but that isn't the case at Sunderland.

I became a member of the health literacy research team, which is part of the School of Medicine after a few months of supporting the researcher with the search in some 121 sessions.

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

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 over 14 years....

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

This is the health literacy research team – when I joined them I was pretty confident that I would be able to resolve the issues with the search quite quickly.

I don't exactly remember what I thought that meant time-wise – but my manager had given me 3 days over 7 weeks and I thought that was do-able.

Before I go on to talk about my experience, I wanted to go into more detail on HOW I become part of this team

*Well, the short answer is: I asked.

The longer answer is that I had built close relationships with the school of medicine over the last 5 years, which enabled me to feel asking wasn't overstepping a line.

And I'm just going to cover what that looked like so if you want to "ask" a similar question you can see the path I took.

*I started in this role in 2019, two months before the School opened. This is the whole school team, professional and academic back in February 2020, at this time we had 50 students. We now have approximately 140 members of staff who work across the University and 5 placement NHS Trusts and 523 students.

The point I'm making here is that I've been there during the Schools rapid growth, Which has afforded me great opportunities to make connections with new staff as they arrive, some of whom have since become senior members of staff since.

Because of the small size of the school they would often put out "calls for back-up" and... Iwas..... afforded the flexibility by my manager to volunteer for these "calls". I started helping out, with invigilating, student admission interviewing, testing exam equipment and GMC visit panels. So I'm regularly seen outside the library setting and I became a familiar face. I am often mistaken as part of the School of Medicine team, and people are surprised when I say I work in a different department. I also started to be invited to "school milestone celebration meals" and to staff leaving dos. Sometimes I have felt awkward, like I'm stepping into territory where I don't belong - but that's my fear, not the reality.

Because of this close relationship in 2023 when the school moved to larger offices **I was invited to work there**, and my manager agreed I could for one a day a week.

As the School has rapidly grown its research capacity I have been asked to **advise** on searching for a number of systematic and scoping reviews, these usually being completed by an experienced researcher who wanted some guidance and sense-checking.

...the more I assisted these researchers, the more I wanted to be a bigger part of that research element of my role, as I love searching, but I couldn't think of how to get involved,

At this time I was also part of the universities mentoring scheme and when I mentioned to my mentor that I wanted to do more of the research aspect of my role **she** suggested that I **ask** about opportunities... and this hadn't even occurred to me!

During my career I have felt inhibited to ask for what I really want , so this was a revelation!

As I mentioned I now work one day a week in the School and my desk is in an office where a number of lead researchers work. Because I have been able to build friendly relationships I felt able to ask one of the lead researchers, Jo, if I could be part of a research project in the future.

Jo as it happens was leading the project where I was already advising on the search I mentioned earlier which was proving tricky, and a few days after having that conversation, she asked me to be part of the Health Literacy research Team so I would have a better understanding of the work they were undertaking to be able to support the search.

*...and this is it: **A narrative systematic review of effectiveness and acceptability of interventions to improve readability of patient healthcare materials**

It's looking at the ways patient healthcare materials have been altered or newly created specifically to make them easier to read

*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 in early May 2024, 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 which I was also advising on. The searches for the systematic review needed to be completed and into Covidence by 14th June, as I mentioned I had been given 3 days spread over 7 weeks by my manager.

The next challenge was responsibility

Once I had 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. I was surprised how different that felt – I was now expected to make the searching decisions instead of offering up options!

And I think part of that feeling of difference was coming in halfway through the project and making decisions when everyone was already well established in the team, and the other part was that it was genuinely a different experience.

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

When I looked at the searches the early career researcher had undertaken it was clear that they hadn't grasped how to create a systematic search, they hadn't undertaken one before, so although we were months into the project we had to start the search again. There were obviously a lot of subject headings and keywords that the researcher had found, so that element was mostly done. It was the combining of these keywords which actually presented a much bigger challenge than I anticipated. However, I really enjoyed the challenge of working out how to best undertake the search.

Here is the title of our systematic review.

As I mentioned before it was looking at the ways patient healthcare materials have been altered or newly created specifically to make them easier to read.

We decided:

The problem was “patient healthcare materials”

that there would be various “interventions” which we would find mentioned in the literature

and that the outcome was “improved readability”

I can't go into all of the challenges 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 recorded that process in detail.

The Search

In a nutshell the biggest stumbling block was this: In our PIO framework the intervention and the outcome had quite a lot of crossover.

And 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 Problem with a joined Intervention and Outcome exploded the search hugely, and also didn't make sense when relating it back to the question. So we really did all 3 concepts.

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 as “increasing the readability of documents” so that was the outcome, but they didn't

name a specific intervention, they only mentioned that they were conducting “an intervention or set of interventions to increase readability”. So that word readability seemed to fit into both the intervention and outcome.

After testing out various search iterations and screening sections of papers from them, which is what I really wish I documented properly! We decided to include **readability in the outcome** and then to actually add the word “intervention” into the intervention part of the search to do our best to include every possible type of intervention.

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!

When the search was peer reviewed by my librarian colleague the first thing she said was “why have you got the word intervention in the intervention?!”

I really wasn't expecting to have to grapple and think so much about a search when I had done so much searching previously. I really needed help and advice so where did I find that support? And bridge my knowledge gap?

I found it in free cpd opportunities, joining online communities, reading, and feedback on the search from colleagues in both the librarian and research teams.

Lancaster University's systematic review conversations are free and 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.

I asked a number of questions on this platform and got some really helpful replies.

One example of the things I learned about from those Discord forums was MedSyntax. It is a free OPEN-SOURCE TOOL which helps identify errors in the syntax of your search and is compatible with major medical databases.

I've since passed this on to a number of researchers too.

Another way I bridged the gap was self reflection because a lot of the gap was my confidence.

This was about being honest with myself about how out of my depth I felt, and sharing that with trusted people, including some of those in the research team. I was amazed when those who I think of as utterly brilliant would reflect back their own uncertainties, and as I talked to others I had a growing realization of this uncertainty **being part of the natural process of doing something out of my comfort zone** and try to lean into that discomfort, so I could embrace this experience as the opportunity for growth it really was.

The search was completed and into Covidence by 14th June, and I DID put a more of my own time into completing it. I also became one of people screening the 4410 papers we retrieved, 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 a reminder that article titles don't always clearly summarize 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.

Here is the prisma,

6147 document retrieved

After deduplications screened 4410

89 sought for retrieval

30 were included in the review

Which according to google (as my maths is not great) is 0.68% of the records screened were included in the review. Very sensitive search, not very precise! But I kinda think that's systematic review searches in a nutshell?!

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I had a look in coincidence as I realised that 2 of these should have been in our results and they were! They had been discarded as irrelevant in the screening.

And the last one we did miss in the search as it is in Embase, but the only term in the title/abstract which covered the type of "problem" (eg letter, pamphlet etc) was "Literacy-Informed", which I'll keep for another day, but I felt ok that we didn't discover this term.

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.

It's definitely helped with my teaching. I'll always have my well thought though 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.

It's helped with job satisfaction. I have a renewed sense of love for my job and a reinvigorated ambition around my career.

And I really enjoyed taking on more responsibility even though it did feel scary. Again this built my confidence in my ability to do more.

I felt the utter joy of being fully immersed in a search over a long period of time and really being able to use and hone my expertise in searching.

It gave me the push and the opportunity to finally do that reading around Cochrane and help pages that cemented knowledge as a definite rather than a "is that right?".

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 Health Literacy research team, but across the School as a whole.

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

And opportunities lead to more opportunities.

After my time in the research team I was asked to be 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 Health Literacy team has submitted the systematic review for publishing, and I'm a named author.

I'm currently involved in 2 more review teams and have been invited to be named on those papers too.

The original systematic review was commissioned by our local NHS Trust so the first write up (the cover that I've shown you) was as a report.

The review has now been submitted to a journal and in order to do that the piece of work had to be rewritten. I was involved in the writing up process and that really boosted my confidence because I rewrote the section on searching and contributed throughout the paper with suggestions. My input was encouraged and taken on board and I really felt like an equal at this point.

I decided as part of that process to get me an orcid. It's also been fascinating to be part of the submission process.

Here's feedback from another member of the research team: read quote

If you love searching and want to get more involved in conducting searches

These are my tips.

I was able to build key relationships with the School by offering help outside the library and being visible in the offices and break out spaces. Make connections in the way best for you then you can find out the people who can take those decisions.

ASK. ASK about future opportunities to work with a research team.

Managers: this experience was only possible for me because of the support from both my manager and the School of medicine's senior management Team. I'd advocate where possible to give liaison and subject librarians a wide scope to connect with Schools.

However, even with support I did have to use my own time to get the experience of screening papers.

Taking notes

This was something that was really important because one of the researchers left and they were doing the recording of the searches and they left before any of the write ups were done, so there were definitely gaps when it came to writing up around what we'd done and the decisions that we've made - I hadn't written them down because I was relying on the researcher to do that and what I've realised is that I need to take responsibility for my own part and be able to evidence that.

So I have started to write in detail about any systematic searching conversations if im in a review team, such as the decisions we make and how that affects the search for subsequent searches.

At the moment I'm doing that using Word and I've create a template for that through learning during the last two that I've done, and then I send that to the lead researcher and at the end of the document I now add a paragraph about the search that they can add to any write-up they do.

Reflection I found it to be really so useful to make opportunities to reflect.

I find the only way I can do that adequately because I KNOW I will make the time to do it is if I offer to present.

I find that deciding to not just do a project but then to offer that as a learning opportunity for others means it's a tool to for self reflection.

It also means I keep notes – perhaps for a publication somewhere.

Being in the health literacy research team has been such a great searching and learning experience.

As a result I've widened my career path into doing more research

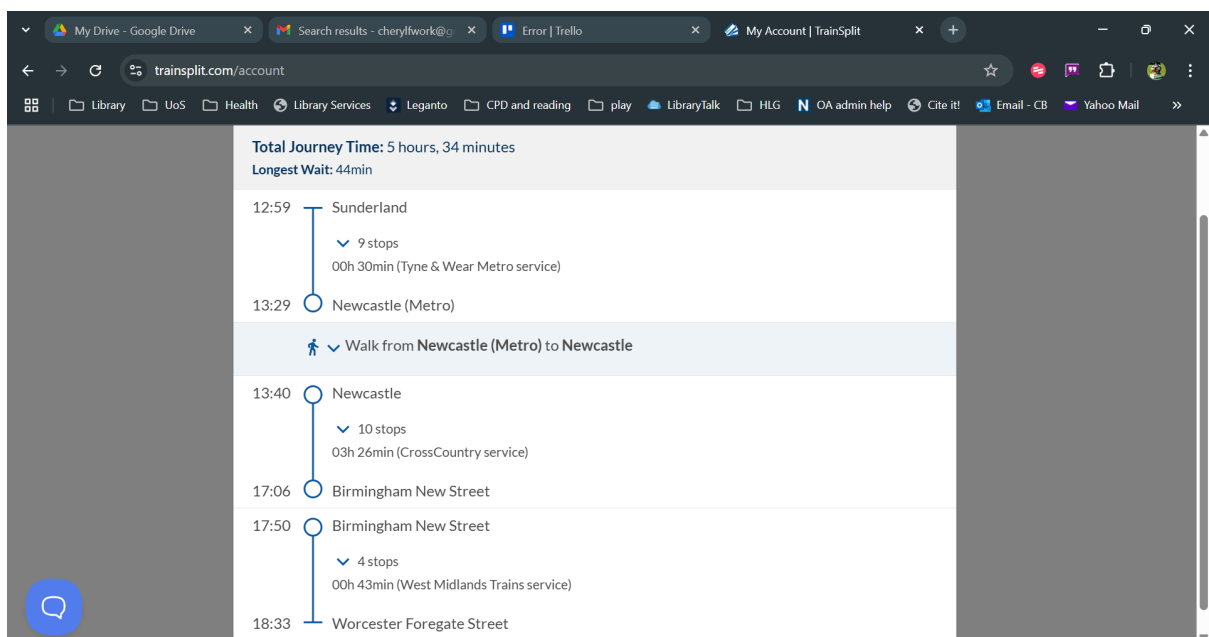
As a direct consequence of being part of the research team and having the experience I have decided to become more research active.

This is something I've been pursuing this year I applied for a bursary with CILIP Northeast to attend darts9, I was awarded the bursary and attended that conference last month where I heard a lot of inspiring stories and listened to how other librarians have undertaken research.

As part of that bursary application I created a research action plan, which is helping me to focus my next steps into research.

I've also started working with colleagues and the School of Medicine with a research idea I have around some teaching changes we're going to implement in the next academic year.

And I've also applied for the research catalyst cohort for 2025/26, the application went in yesterday.



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Journey Summary

Total Journey Time: 5 hours, 41 minutes
Longest Wait: 54min

14:24 Worcester Foregate Street
4 stops
00h 45min (West Midlands Trains service)

15:09 Birmingham New Street

16:03 Birmingham New Street
10 stops
03h 27min (CrossCountry service)

19:30 Newcastle

19:45 Newcastle
2 stops
00h 20min (Northern service)

20:05 Sunderland

Collecting your tickets
This booking contains tickets for collection. Collect your tickets from the machine at your...