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Situated storywalks: A participant-led elicitation method

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Abstract

Introduction. Information behaviour research has traditionally relied on researcher-led methods such as interviews, surveys, or experiments. While these approaches provide control and comparability, they often limit the potential to observe unexpected or situated information behaviour.

Method. This paper introduces situated storywalks, a participant-led method developed by the authors, integrating elements of guided tours, observations, participatory research, and touchstone tours. In situated storywalks, storytellers guide researchers through physical or virtual spaces while narrating their experiences, expectations and interactions.

Analysis. The approach was developed and applied in a case study at a large German library, where storytellers with diverse accessibility needs were invited to share their experiences through storywalks. The collected data, including audio recordings, field notes, and photographs, were analyzed qualitatively, identifying emergent patterns in spatial and affective engagement.

Results. Findings demonstrate that situated storywalks help uncover dimensions and nuances of information behaviour that may remain hidden in more traditional, researcher-controlled methods.

Conclusion. Situated storywalks expand the methodological repertoire of information behaviour research, enabling richer, context-sensitive, and co-constructed understandings of how people interact with information in everyday-life environments.

Introduction

Information behaviour research has a history of employing diverse methods including interviews, focus groups, observations and surveys, guided tours, think-aloud-protocols, and experimental designs. Several studies examine the most prevalent methods, revealing interviews and surveys as the most widely used (Lund, 2022; Greifeneder, 2014; Julien et al., 2011), reiterating methods guided and controlled by the researcher, and further reinforcing power imbalances (e.g., an interviewer asking questions and steering the conversation or a structured survey with predefined questions, both resulting in more control on the researcher's end). Even less formalised approaches, such as think-aloud protocols and other researcher-led techniques, designate predefined tasks for participants, limiting their natural and organic tendencies.

Researcher-led methodological approaches have clear advantages. First, circumstances are comparable because participants complete the same tasks or answer the same guided questions. Second, elicitations are clearly directed towards answering a research question and the chances of deviations from the topic under study are minimal. These approaches also have disadvantages such as failing to encourage unexpected information behaviours and yield unforeseen results, further highlighting the importance of a carefully planned research design. While analytic methods such as abductive analysis (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) endorse the discovery of the unexpected, if the research design does not support and encourage unanticipated information use situations, data analysis may also not emanate surprising results. Therefore, this paper introduces a method, created by the authors, addressing the limitations and highlighting strengths of several of the aforementioned methods used in information behaviour research, supporting a more open-minded approach.

Developed by the authors, this paper introduces a new method called situated storywalks, a participant-led method highlighting the significance of participants' environments and settings (e.g., spatial aspects), based on an amalgamation of guided tours, observations, storytelling, participatory approaches, and touchstone tours. The paper begins by defining and discussing related methods before situated storywalks are delineated and defined. Next, the authors introduce an exemplary information behaviour study at a large library in Germany before delving into the research design of the situated storywalk, and selected study results are presented.

Background

This section positions situated storywalks within a broader methodological context by examining related approaches. Various methods, including observations, think-aloud protocols, guided tours, participatory approaches, and touchstone tours, are employed to explore situated and experiential forms of engagement. Each method offers distinct perspectives on how participants interact with their environment and construct meaning through experience. Lastly, abductive analysis is introduced as an alternative analytical framework complementing these methods.

Observations

Observational studies focus on the present status of the phenomenon as it occurs, using observations—or watching attentively—rather than asking (Connaway & Radford, 2021). In information behaviour research, observation is seldom used as an independent method, with only a few studies adopting it as their sole means of data collection. Oestreich (2017), for example, used observations to examine patrons' reaction to sound masking in libraries as an acoustic compromise for conflicting usage requirements. Greifeneder & Gäde (2020) conducted 99 non-participatory observations of information seeking in a local bookstore. In interactive information retrieval studies, however, observations have been applied as main data collection approaches when working with special user groups (e.g., Bircanin et al., 2020).

More commonly, observations are integrated with interviews, wherein the observational phase explores *what* takes place within a given context, and the interview phase follows to investigate *why* these events, or behaviours, occur (e.g., Kampen, 2025). In other words, what people say and what people do are not always the same (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014); interviews and observations are often used as means of triangulation. In a recent German library study, Wildermuth et al. (2025) and Menzel et al. (2025) conducted nearly 15,000 campus observations combined with 1,068 interviews, exploring why students study outside university libraries. While observations showed extensive learning activity across hallways, cafeterias, and classrooms, the methodological combination with interviews revealed that 78% of these students also use the library.

Think-aloud protocols

Think-aloud protocols are a foundational method in user experience research, allowing researchers to capture users' cognitive processes, usability challenges, and decision-making strategies while interacting with library systems, interfaces, and services (Wildermuth & Freund, 2012; Komlodi et al., 2007). The method is grounded in theories of system usability and user interaction, aiming to identify both effective design elements and pain points in use. Think-aloud protocols typically involve two key components: first, participants perform a predefined set of tasks while researchers observe their ability to complete them efficiently and effectively; second, participants verbalise their thoughts and actions throughout the process, providing insight into their reasoning and experiences. Within information behaviour research, think-aloud protocols are mostly used in libraries or digital tool accessibility. However, Al-Moteri's (2023) examination of nurses' information seeking behaviours and Cole et al.'s (2022) study of dyslexic undergraduates' information behaviours are recent indicators that think-aloud protocols are gaining ground in information behaviour research.

Think-aloud protocols are similar to observations because researchers observe human information behaviours. Instead of complementing the observations with follow-up interview questions guided by the researcher, think-aloud protocol observations are supplemented with participant-led observations. Participants decide what they want to explain. At least, in theory, the researcher is tasked to continuously probe throughout the process as the participant takes the lead.

Despite its strengths, think-aloud protocols have limitations. Participants may alter their natural behaviours when verbalising their thoughts, leading to reactivity effects that can influence task performance or information seeking strategies (Komlodi et al., 2007; Wildermuth & Freund, 2012). Additionally, not all cognitive processes are easily verbalised, such as tacit actions, resulting in incomplete or biased data (Branch, 2000).

Guided tours

Space and environment are becoming increasingly more important to holistically understand information behaviour (Cox & Fulton, 2021). As such, Thomson (2018) articulates the guided tour as a participant-led, spatially grounded qualitative method in which researchers accompany participants as they move through meaningful settings (physical, digital, or hybrid) and think aloud about how they interact, interpret, and navigate that environment (Thomson 2018). At the same time, researchers are asked to guide the tour with direct but open-ended requests. The guided tour hybridises aspects of observation and less-structured interviews which involves a co-creation between the researcher, in conjunction with the participant, of important details and aspects of daily life (Thomson, 2018). The guided tour is especially beneficial for exploring and uncovering embodied, material, and spatial dimensions of information behaviour that would remain hidden in static interviews (see Hartel, 2006; Solhjoo, 2022).

Ferguson et al. (2025) conducted guided tours to posit a revised model of transition theory including reframing personal information management as an information behaviour helping people navigate life changes while Hellmich and Dinneen (2023) utilised guided tours about the personal

information management of visual artists. Virtual guided tours were used to document and analyse faculty members' organisational activities by exploring participants' digital workspaces (Jacques et al., 2021). Physical spaces (i.e. participants' vehicles) were also explored through virtual guided tours via Zoom to understand vehicle residents' information practices (Montague, 2023), and later, in-person guided tours were used in a larger study of vehicle residents' information practices (Montague, 2025). Information behaviour studies also used guided tours in domestic and everyday settings such as culinary hobbyists and undergraduate students. Across these contexts, the guided tour method surfaces tacit, embodied, and spatially embedded practices often missed in interviews or surveys, making it an effective tool for illuminating the lived, situated dimensions of information behaviour research.

While guided tours are theoretically conceptualised to embrace participant-led tours, most guided tour studies follow a researcher-led approach. For example, Ferguson et al. (2025) used predefined prompts and tasks that guided participants, creating more of a think-aloud study setting than a guided-by-the-participant design. Similarly, Alon (2025) used guided tours as part of the interview process, as the guiding element served as a modification of the interview. Similarly, participants were given clear tasks to complete.

While guided tours are valuable for uncovering embodied and spatial aspects of information behaviour, they can be limited by their performative nature, as participants may selectively present spaces or practices they consider appropriate or meaningful for the researcher, potentially leading to curated, rather than more natural, accounts (Thomson, 2018; Hartel, 2010). The method also requires the participant to have a previous or expert knowledge of the space through which the tour is taking place. Additionally, guided tours rely heavily on participants' ability to articulate their actions and interpretations in real time, which may result in uneven data quality depending on participants' communicative skills and comfort levels (Mizrachi, 2011; Kwasnik, 1991).

Touchstone tours

Touchstone tours originate from user experience research and represent qualitative research, inviting participants to take the researcher on a tour of a physical item or physical space, during which they perform a series of tasks and are prompted to reflect aloud on their experiences and thought processes as they proceed with the aim of evaluating and improving the item or space (Garg, 2022). Unlike think-aloud protocols, where researchers guide the participants, touchstone tours reverse roles: the user leads the exploration. The researchers gently guide conversation but remain flexible, allowing participants to highlight elements of personal relevance while the researcher observes attentively and follows emerging themes (Priestner, 2019). Touchstone tours serve as a contextual method immersing researchers in their participants' environment. This immersion facilitates an understanding of how individuals organise information, systems, and spatial arrangements through their use of cognitive and physical artifacts (Hanington & Martin, 2019). Touchstone tours are employed primarily within professional or practitioner-oriented contexts—for instance, in a library user experience study conducted at the University of Guelph (McLaughlin & Rayment, 2019)—rather than within formal academic research settings.

Conceptually, touchstone tours are a participant-led method. Although observations can make inferences about participants' environments and allow insights into behaviours, touchstone tours extend these insights through the element of a tour, offering additional insights into thought processes. However, touchstone tours possess a highly evaluative element, conflicting with the more neutral attitude of information behaviour research.

Participatory design

Moving further into participant-led methods, participatory approaches give participants a more active voice. Participatory design is a collaborative research and design methodology actively involving users and community members in shaping technologies, services, and spaces (Bødker et

al., 2022). Emerging from Scandinavian design traditions, participatory design emphasises democratic participation and shared decision-making between researchers, practitioners, and users (Bødker, 1996). Within Library and Information Science (LIS), participatory design has evolved beyond user consultation toward meaningful involvement of participants as co-researchers, recognizing their situated expertise and lived experiences (Foster, 2012; Senteio et al., 2021). Participants contribute to defining research problems, co-creating design ideas, and evaluating outcomes through workshops, prototyping sessions, and iterative feedback cycles (Dalsgaard & Halskov, 2010). This shift reframes users not merely as data sources but as active collaborators whose insights shape both the research process and its outputs, aligning with LIS commitments to inclusivity, community engagement, and user-centered service design (Pettigrew et al., 2001).

Participatory design has been employed in diverse LIS contexts to co-develop digital tools, physical spaces, and information services. For example, Dalsgaard and Halskov (2010) applied participatory design methods to reimagine public library spaces, incorporating iterative prototyping and user feedback to create more participatory, flexible environments. Similarly, Starostka et al. (2023) employed participatory design to develop community-based library services, positioning participants as co-creators in service planning and delivery. More recently, Lu et al. (2024), drew on participatory speculative design to explore how communities negotiate in shared design spaces.

While fostering inclusivity and collaboration, participatory design can be limited by power imbalances between researchers and participants, influencing which voices are prioritised and shaping the design outcomes in subtle ways (Bødker et al., 2022). Additionally, participatory design projects often require significant time, resources, and sustained engagement, making them challenging to implement in institutional contexts with limited capacity or where long-term participant involvement is difficult to maintain (Dalsgaard & Halskov, 2010).

Storytelling

Storytelling has increasingly been recognised as a valuable qualitative method in LIS for exploring how individuals make sense of their information landscapes (Lloyd et al., 2013). Rather than focusing solely on discrete behaviours or system interactions, storytelling foregrounds narrative as a mode through which people structure experience, convey values, and articulate relationships with information (Savolainen, 1995). Methodologically, storytelling allows participants to shape the research encounter, producing richer, more nuanced accounts than structured interviews (Frandsen et al., 2021). LIS scholars have employed narrative and storytelling approaches to examine phenomena such as everyday life seeking, professional identity formation, and community memory work (Hartel & Savolainen, 2016; Olsson, 2013). Olsson's (2013) work with performing artists demonstrated how personal stories reveal networks of trust and informal information flows that remain invisible in formal communication channels. More recently, storytelling has been integrated with participatory and decolonizing methodologies, emphasizing the co-creation of knowledge and community agency (McDowell, 2021). Storytelling not only functions as a data collection tool, but as an epistemological stance honoring participants' meaning-making processes and highlighting the narrative nature of information practices.

While storytelling offers rich, situated insights into information practices, it can be limited by participants' selective memory and self-presentation, leading to narratives emphasizing coherence or idealised versions of experience rather than capturing messy or contradictory practices (Savolainen, 2014).

Abductive analysis

Abductive analysis is a qualitative reasoning strategy beginning with *surprising* observations and moves iteratively between data and theory to develop the most plausible explanations (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Unlike deduction, testing existing theories, or induction, building

generalisations from the ground up, abduction focuses on anomalies—treating them as analytical leverage points for new theorizing (Timmermans & Tavory, 2014). Tavory and Timmermans (2014) define abductive analysis as a back-and-forth process between the research evidence and considerations of theory. It is a ‘reciprocal coming-in-close and backing-off-to-a-distance’ in terms of researcher exploration of situations and evidence (Earl Rinehart, 2021, p. 305). The approach emphasises maintaining theoretical sensitivity, moving between multiple casings of the data, and actively cultivating surprise rather than smoothing it away (Thompson, 2022). This makes abductive analysis particularly useful in LIS, where researchers often encounter complex, situated practices that defy neat categorisation.

Within LIS, abductive analysis has been employed to reveal unexpected patterns in information practices. Ekström (2022) used an abductive approach in studies of biodiversity and citizen science, showing how contributors developed heterogeneous niches of practice and locally specific credibility strategies—challenging prevailing assumptions that volunteer information behaviour is uniform or error-prone. In a companion piece, Ekström (2022) highlighted how credibility and authority were negotiated through situated, informal practices rather than formal scientific validation. Montague (2025) used abductive analysis to explain how information practices are organised around human needs; surprising findings shifted focus away from purely technological access issues. Collectively, these studies illustrate how abductive analysis enables LIS researchers to treat anomalies in the field as clues, leading to richer and more situated explanations of human information behaviour.

Although abductive analysis is valuable for generating novel theoretical insights, it can be limited by its interpretive ambiguity, making it challenging to determine which interpretations are most compelling (Timmermans & Tavory, 2014). Abductive approaches also demand a high level of theoretical sensitivity and reflexivity, which can be unsustainable and difficult to navigate, particularly when unexpected findings emerge in complex settings (Ekström, 2022).

Research questions

Drawing from both the strengths and limitations of the aforementioned methods, the following research questions guided this method’s design and implementation:

What are situated storywalks and what are their benefits for information behaviour studies?

Situated storywalks

This paper introduces *situated storywalks* as a novel methodological approach designed to address several of the limitations identified in the previous sections. Situated storywalks are participant-led guided tours in which storytellers lead researchers through a particular situation, thereby positioning storytellers as primary knowledge bearers. Throughout this process, participants illuminate place-based practices, interpretations, and perspectives.

Conceptualising situated storywalks as *situated* builds on information behaviour scholarship, understanding information practices as inherently embodied and spatially embedded, where information practices encompass a range of activities including and exceeding seeking, evaluation, and sharing information (Bonner & Lloyd, 2011). From this perspective, information behaviour is not limited to cognitive decision-making but is enacted through bodies moving through time and space while interacting with material objects and responding to environmental affordances and constraints (Lloyd, 2010; Cox & Fulton, 2021). For instance, information seeking and sense-making unfold in place and are shaped by how individuals orient themselves physically, inhabiting different environments, while negotiating spatial arrangements that both enable or limit access to information (Savolainen, 2008; Thomson, 2018). Including embodiment foregrounds sensory perspective and understanding, and physical movement and action, as integral to meaning-making, while attention to space and time emphasises how information practices are produced

through relationships between people, places, and objects (Lloyd, 2017). By explicitly centring embodiment and space, situated storywalks capture information behaviour as it is lived and enacted within real-world environments.

The following sections define storytellers and provide a detailed account of the methodological procedures of situated storywalks.

Storytellers as participants

In situated storywalks, we describe the people who guide researchers through spaces as storytellers. Information behaviour studies employ a variety of terms to refer to the humans involved in research. The most common designation is *participants*, followed by *human subjects* or *users*. In some cases, individuals are identified according to the social or demographic groups to which they belong, such as students, older adults, unemployed individuals, or immigrants. In these examples, the participant/researcher relationship is a one-directional exchange where humans serve as input providers to researchers.

Situated storywalks deliberately avoid referring to storytellers as *participants* or *human subjects*. Unlike traditional research settings, storytellers are not engaging in pre-designed tasks or responding to researcher-imposed questions; rather, it is the researchers who participate in the storytellers' situated experiences. Moreover, the detached stance implied by the term *human subject* is fundamentally at odds with the relational and immersive nature of storytelling. Since the professional term is participant-led research, this term is nevertheless used to describe the relationship between researcher and storytellers within situated storywalks.

In participatory research, the collaborative ethos of the approach is reflected in the terminology used to describe those involved, with terms such as *co-researcher*, *peer researcher*, and *citizen scientist* being common. Co-researchers work in partnership with academic researchers, actively contributing to the formulation of research questions, as well as to data collection, analysis, and coding. The aim of this approach is to promote genuine collaboration and shared ownership of the research process, rather than tokenistic involvement.

While this participatory approach aligns more closely with the role of storytellers in situated storywalks, storytellers provide a singular, situated insight into their thoughts and experiences rather than engaging in an ongoing collaboration with researchers. Situated storywalks are therefore not designed as a tool for sustained co-creation. In this respect, storytellers resemble participants or human subjects in offering one-directional input; however, the key distinction lies in the storytellers' agency—they determine the nature and scope of the insights they choose to share.

The design of situated storywalks

Situated storywalks constitute a participant-led qualitative elicitation method designed to generate in-depth insights into storytellers' information behaviours within a given situation. The approach comprises two main components: a brief preliminary interview and a subsequent, more extensive (walking) tour.

The short pre-interview aims to establish a trustful relationship between the storyteller and the researchers and to provide an understanding of the storyteller's context, which shapes their information experiences. It is not intended as a primary means of data collection for information behaviour; rather, it seeks to minimise researcher influence and avoid directing storytellers toward specific topics. Nevertheless, as in other qualitative interviews, if storytellers spontaneously begin to discuss lived experiences, such accounts may also be considered relevant data, even when they emerge outside the formal tour. The guiding principle is that, as long as storytellers retain agency over their narratives and decide which stories to share, the integrity of the method is maintained. The short interview is an inherent part of the situated storywalks.

The central component of a situated storywalk is the joint tour. In the present case study, this tour was conducted within a physical environment; however, situated storywalks are not inherently restricted to physical spaces. Unlike guided tours, situated storywalks do not require storytellers to have a prior relationship with the setting or object of the tour. The primary objective is to accompany storytellers as they engage in their information experiences and interactions. Such tours may take place in environments that storytellers are intimately familiar with—where their specific information practices have evolved—or in spaces they are encountering for the first time.

At the beginning of the storywalk, researchers explain to storytellers that there are no right or wrong actions or statements—similar to the approach used in think-aloud protocol studies—and that, from this point onward, they are free to decide where to go and what to share with the researchers. When storytellers encounter a setting or service for the first time, they are encouraged to act as they would in the absence of researchers. As in guided tours or think-aloud protocol studies, storytellers are invited to comment on their observations and feelings. However, unlike think-aloud protocols, they are not expected to verbalise every single action, in order to avoid creating the impression that they must continuously report back.

Throughout the process, storytellers retain full agency over what they choose to share. For some storytellers, this situation may initially feel unfamiliar, as it positions them as the primary speaker. In such cases, researchers may engage in gentle conversational prompts—not to probe for explanations or justifications, but rather to maintain a natural, comfortable exchange and to express empathy.

It is recommended to define a clear end point for the tour. Approximately five minutes before the scheduled conclusion, researchers should inform storytellers that the agreed-upon time commitment is approaching its end and that the session will soon be concluded.

As in guided tours, observation studies, or touchstone tours, multiple forms of data are collected during situated storywalks. Researchers are advised to take brief field notes during the storywalk and expand these into detailed, structured memos immediately afterward, consistent with qualitative research best practices. Permission to make audio recordings should be obtained prior to the session. When feasible, photographs can further enrich the data. Photographs may serve both to document elements discussed by the storyteller (e.g., barriers or spatial features) and to facilitate gentle follow-up questions that confirm whether the captured images accurately reflect the storyteller's descriptions or perceptions.

Each situated storywalk involves one storyteller and at least one researcher, who conducts the pre-interview and who explains the tour at the beginning. However, it is advisable for two researchers to accompany the storyteller, as managing interview interactions, active listening, timekeeping, note-taking, photography, and audio recording simultaneously can be demanding for a single individual.

The analysis and interpretation of situated storywalks follow procedures common to qualitative research, with abductive analysis being particularly well suited to this approach. Data interpretation can be challenging due to the inherent openness of situated storywalks, which may result in less distinct thematic patterns compared to more structured methods. Furthermore, the analytic process may reveal emergent themes that shift the focus of the original research question toward previously unanticipated areas of inquiry. While such developments are not uncommon in qualitative research, they may occur more prominently in situated storywalks because of the method's participant-led nature.

By granting storytellers a high degree of agency, situated storywalks enable the uncovering of previously hidden or unarticulated information experiences, contributing novel insights to the field of information behaviour.

Case study: visible and invisible barriers in a library

This section introduces a case study that both motivated the development and tested implementation of situated storywalks. Investigating how people with disabilities experience the library space, we conducted a situated storywalk at the Berlin State Library during a two-week period in 2025. The aim was to identify visible and invisible barriers to participation and to develop recommendations for a more inclusive library environment. The study design consisted of short interviews directly prior to situated storywalks in the library.

The library's objective was to investigate the perceived low use of the Berlin State Library by individuals with disabilities. Although general barriers were already documented by our local collaborator responsible for inclusion, the study aimed to identify previously unrecognized or anticipated barriers that may have deterred current or potential users.

We recruited 10 storytellers by using snowball sampling and by engaging gatekeepers within disability networks, inclusion representatives from Berlin universities, social media channels, and at special events for inclusion. The storytellers came with very diverse and complex backgrounds including ADHD, autism, blindness, hearing impairment, emotional regulation, hyperactivity disorder, hypersensitivity, social anxiety, difficulty understanding complex language, as well as combinations of the above. All storytellers were offered an incentive of 30 EUR, which many of them chose to donate to an association for supporting inclusion.

We initially designed touchstone tours alongside separate qualitative interviews, but quickly recognised that the evaluative focus of touchstone tours was not well-suited to our storytellers, as our goal was explicitly not to judge how they did or did not use the library. We also began our research design planning in a researcher-led mode of a guided tour by assigning specific rooms for storytellers to visit during the tour, but realised prior to the first session that, given the diversity of disabilities, each participant would naturally gravitate toward different spaces. For instance, a person with visual impairments might prioritise the special reading area for the blind, whereas someone with social anxiety might prefer quiet study spaces. Imposing a predetermined route based on our assumptions about relevance risked undermining the richness of the data. Ultimately, we decided to define only a single joint starting point and a fixed end time, leaving the remainder of the tour entirely under the storyteller's control.

We initially planned to conduct qualitative interviews prior to the tour, either onsite or online, structured as guided interviews in which barriers and experiences would be discussed. Each interview was originally scheduled to last approximately 60 minutes. This approach would have allowed us to tailor the subsequent tour based on participants' input and to design tasks suited to each storyteller. In practice, all participants preferred onsite interviews immediately preceding the tour, eliminating the opportunity to prepare individualised tasks. For some, this timing was more convenient, while others were limited to a maximum of 90 minutes for participation as the study was conducted during their work hours. Consequently, we conducted shorter interviews immediately before the situated storywalks. These interviews gathered background information on each storyteller's self-perceived and labeled limitations, previous library use, experiences, expectations, and needs. They also allowed participants and researchers to become acquainted and provided an opportunity to identify any necessary assistance or special requirements for the upcoming tour. The interviews lasted an average of 20 minutes.

The core component of the study was an individual tour of the library, guided by the storyteller. Each situated storywalk began outside the library, where participants received instructions emphasising that they could freely decide what to show and where to lead the tour. There was one formal limitation to this openness: in accordance with library policy, jackets and umbrellas had to be stored in the wardrobe lockers before entering. All tours passed through the locker area and the security checkpoint prior to entry.

The maximum duration of a tour was set to one hour, although we did not limit storytellers if they were still experiencing new things. Therefore, the different tours lasted from 20 minutes to almost 1.5 hours in total. The tour group included three student researchers with distinct roles: one served as walking-partner and asked clarifying questions if needed, one documented the experience through photographs and field notes, and one created an audio recording to capture the storyteller's comments and interactions. In one situated storywalk, the storyteller was accompanied by a support person who did not lead the tour but contributed to the discussion. This arrangement was permitted to preserve a natural and comfortable environment for the storyteller.

During the walk, we recorded both verbal accounts and nonverbal aspects of how storytellers engaged with the library space, including their movement, pauses, and interactions with the environment and library staff. All groups used a tour protocol and the same templates for notes and photo documentation. In order to be able to contextualise the photos later on, the protocol included information about the photo number, place, reason/observation impulse, and relation to the observation. For notes, the storyteller ID, place, situation or room, comments or quotes from the storyteller and necessary contextual information were written down. All audio recordings were transcribed using a secure-server version of Whisper and subsequently manually proofread for accuracy. The interview and tour data were both analysed with MAXQDA using an open thematic coding scheme that was agreed on within the group of researchers. This multi-layered design enabled us to combine pre-interviews and in-situ observations, creating a holistic, situated understanding of library use from the perspective of people with disabilities.

This article reports only selected findings from the study. Many of the barriers identified would likely have been detected using alternative methods. For instance, storytellers reported broken or concealed elevators, inaccessible assistive workstations, and unreliable booking information. Physical barriers included architectural and functional challenges such as insufficient lighting on stairways, unmarked edges, incomplete handrails, and the absence of touch-free sensors in accessible restrooms. Equipment such as rolling stools also posed safety risks for users with visual or motor impairments.

Some barriers were only identified due to the use of situated storytelling, such as those mentioned above. Even among barriers that may appear straightforward to identify, some only became visible throughout the situated storywalks due to the storytellers' control over what they chose to show and discuss. For example, one storyteller guided us to the braille and tactile information display and remarked: 'Touch it. Do you feel how dirty that is?' She needed the information on the display but did not want to touch it. This demonstrates how situated storywalks support elicitation of embodied information.

Researcher-led methods may reinforce stereotypes by focusing on what is already known or expected. For instance, it is commonly assumed that neurodivergent patrons prefer quiet areas for work. While this was true for our storytellers, they also emphasised the importance of sitting near a window to allow their gaze to wander, linking this to enhanced creativity. A standard silent reading room may be quiet, but they perceived its cramped environment as limiting creativity, and, over time, concentration.

Situated storywalks proved particularly effective at uncovering invisible or unspoken barriers. For example, storytellers frequently described difficulties upon entering the library due to missing or unclear orientation information, such as maps, signage, or explanations of registration procedures. One blind storyteller needed a key to access the workspace for visually impaired users and approached the reference desk. The librarian stepped away during the conversation, seemingly unaware that the storyteller could not see her departure. The storyteller later described how this interaction made her feel marginalised in the conversation.

The most unexpected findings concerned indirect or non-visible psychological barriers reported by storytellers—barriers that likely would not have been identified without the open, participant-led nature of the situated storywalks method. For instance, access to the Berlin State Library is monitored by security personnel. This entrance was frequently described as intimidating, and the lack of clear social cues or rules generated a sense of uncertainty. In the original guided tour design, we had planned to begin inside the library, starting at the lockers and using a special pass to bypass security. This approach would have overlooked one of the study's most significant insights. Nearly all storytellers paused outside the security checkpoint. Some attempted to discern the entry procedures and behavioural expectations. Because the situated storywalks were not evaluative, the goal was not whether participants succeeded in entering, but rather how they experienced the situation. Several storytellers stood silently for a time, observing other patrons to infer the rules for entry. They later explained that, despite watching multiple people enter, each following different behaviours and all being admitted, they could not determine the correct protocol. Some noted that, under normal circumstances, they would likely have chosen not to enter the library at all, given the ambiguity and discomfort associated with the entry process.

Despite these obstacles, most storytellers also expressed appreciation for several aspects of the library: helpful staff, informative pictograms indicating noise levels in different areas, generous spatial layout, and a calm, welcoming atmosphere. By leaving control with the storyteller, they felt less forced to evaluate and criticize as much as possible and opened the conversation for more positive stories.

Conclusion

This paper introduced situated storywalks as a novel method for research on information behaviour. The approach draws on elements from several established methods, including touchstone tours, guided tours, observational studies, participatory design, storytelling, and think-aloud protocols. What distinguishes situated storywalks as a distinct method—rather than merely a variation or technique within existing approaches (see Pickard, 2009; Greifeneder & Bressel, 2022)—is its strong participant-led orientation, granting storytellers substantial agency over which aspects of their information behaviour they choose to share and the absence of any evaluative character. The method consists of two core components: a brief pre-interview and the storywalk itself. Following the tradition of storytelling, participants are called storytellers.

The method is relatively easy to implement and does not require extensive training. What is essential is a respectful attitude toward the storytellers, openness to the directions the storywalks may take, and the researcher's ability to relinquish control, step back, and allow storytellers' voices to take precedence.

The situated storywalks method was developed and empirically validated through a case study at the Berlin State Library. The case study demonstrates the value of participant-led, situated approaches in information behaviour research. Traditional researcher-driven methods often fail to capture the nuances of spatial experience and affective response. In contrast, the situated storywalks allow participants to narrate their interactions while moving through the environment, revealing aspects that might remain unnoticed in classical observations or researcher-led guided tours. The study also illustrates how participant-led methods can yield unexpected insights that challenge researcher assumptions. For instance, while the research team anticipated physical barriers as the dominant theme, many storytellers emphasised psychological and communicative aspects, shifting the analytical focus toward emotional and symbolic dimensions of access.

The openness of the situated storywalks approach and the strong agency granted to storytellers may, however, result in outcomes that do not directly align with the researchers' original research questions. Additionally, identifying consistent patterns can be challenging, as storytellers determine what aspects of their experiences they choose to share. Despite these challenges, the

situated storywalk sets itself apart by granting storytellers a high degree of agency as the method is especially well-suited to enable the deeper exploration of previously hidden or implicit information experiences, contributing innovative insights to the field of information behaviour.

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