

How academic librarians use evidence in their decision making:

A grounded theory study to determine the applicability of the evidence based practice model.

Denise Koufogiannakis, MA, MLIS, PhD candidate

INTRODUCTION

Evidence based library and information practice (EBLIP) is “an approach to information science that promotes the collection, interpretation and integration of valid, important and applicable user-reported, librarian observed, and research-derived evidence. The best available evidence, moderated by user needs and preferences, is applied to improve the quality of professional judgements” (Booth 2000).

Based in the vein of evidence based medicine, a model began to emerge for evidence based librarianship (now referred to generally as evidence based library and information practice). The model for evidence based practice follows 5 steps, as is illustrated in the following diagram (Figure 1).

To date, there is no research evidence about the EBLIP model itself. Only one study (currently ongoing) has begun to research how library and information professionals experience evidence based practice. The initial findings of the in-progress work by Thorpe, Partridge and Edwards aims to “establish the first model of evidence based practice as understood by the library and information practitioner” (2008). Otherwise, the model has not been tested.

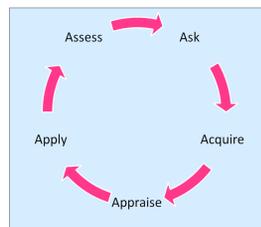


Figure 1: Model for evidence based practice

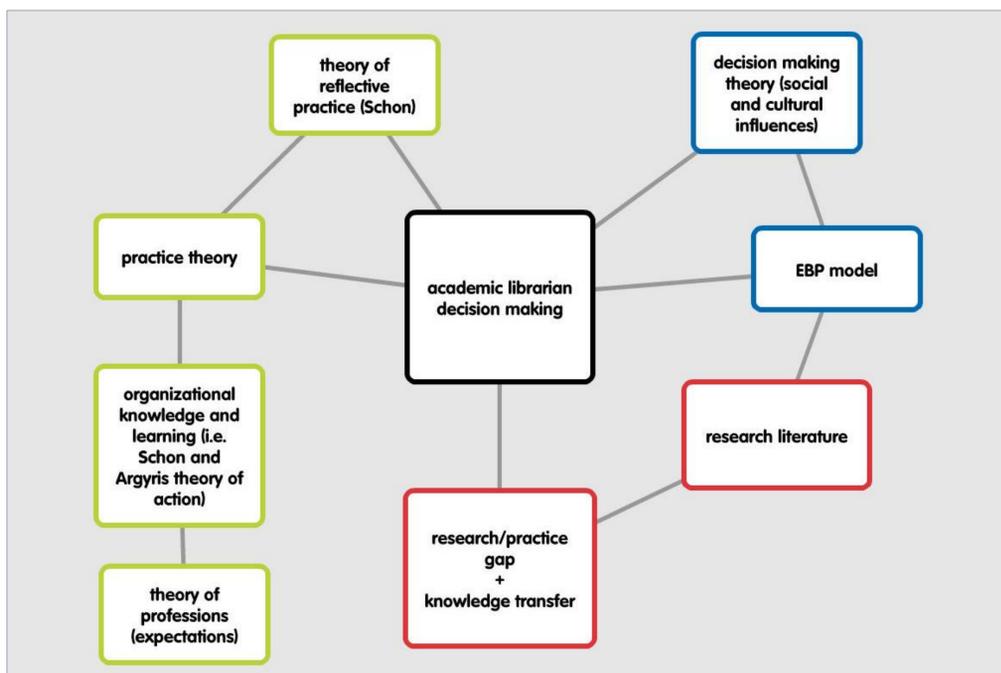
The EBLIP movement has embraced this model as a good way to improve practice, but we do not know if that is actually the case. As per some of the criticisms, the current model may be alienating some librarians who feel that the forms of evidence they are using are not being recognised as important. The model may also be too cumbersome and prescriptive for librarians to embrace. This study will test the model of EBLIP itself and determine if the model works for academic librarians, or if it should be fundamentally altered.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this research is guided by several key concepts. First is the **evidence based practice (EBP) model**, which began in medicine and has since been embraced by disciplines in the social sciences, including library and information studies. The EBP model embraces a practitioner’s use of research in decision making. Related to evidence based practice, the concept of a **research-practice “gap”** and how this gap seems to distance theory and research from the practitioners who actually embody a profession, must be considered as a potential barrier to librarians’ decision making. These two concepts situate my research within a current mode of practice and potential dilemmas therein.

Additionally, I am guided in this research by the concepts that are not so overt or well-known within the LIS community. These are **practice theory** and decision making theory, which come from fields of sociology, psychology and business. Practice theory considers how groups of people have shared practical understandings which are based on actions and must be considered within a specific context. This includes elements of tacit knowledge, practical judgement, and societal agreement. Practice theory exposes additional factors beyond research and scientific knowledge that must be considered to fully understand a librarian’s way of practicing and arriving at decisions related to professional practice. I am especially guided by **Schön’s (1983) Theory of Reflective Practice**, and his ideas on reflection-in-action, which let us look differently at how a practitioner does research within their practice.

Finally, elements of **decision making theory** guide my research, as I strive to determine the factors that impact academic librarians in their decision making. Specifically, I draw upon social and cultural influences that are likely to impact upon decision making of individuals, who also work within institutions that require group decision making.



AIMS OF THE STUDY and RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research study proposes to examine the foundation of evidence based library and information practice (EBLIP) by exploring how librarians use evidence in their practice, and by determining whether the decision making model upon which EBLIP is based fits with how academic librarians actually incorporate research. It is my goal to study librarians within an academic setting in order to determine how they make decisions in their practice and what role evidence plays in those decisions. These findings can then be compared with and applied to the existing EBLIP model. It is hoped that, where necessary, the model can be refined and made more useful. I am attempting to create new theory about academic librarians’ use of evidence/research, and determine how that theory fits with the current EBLIP model.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do academic librarians incorporate research into their professional decision making?
- What forms of evidence do academic librarians use when making professional decisions? Why do they use these types of evidence?
- Do academic librarians use the EBLIP process when trying to make evidence based decisions?
- What aspects of the EBLIP process need to be changed in order to better account for the needs of academic librarians in the decision making process?

METHODS

The research is qualitative, using a **grounded theory** approach. The study will use a purposeful sample of Canadian academic librarians who have some interest in incorporating evidence and research to help support their decision making. It is estimated that approximately 20 Canadian academic librarians will be recruited to participate in the study. The study will aim for depth and richness of information rather than higher numbers of participants, as the data is not meant to be generalized, but rather to understand how the participants studied may provide insights that aid in the development of evidence based approaches in librarianship. Participants will be solicited via mailing lists and personal contact.

Diaries

Participants will be asked to keep an online diary noting questions or problems that relate to their professional decision making and judgement. They will be asked to record their thoughts and experiences in the diary on a daily basis, if possible, over the period of one month. The diary keeping will take place using *WordPress.com* online blogging software. *WordPress.com* allows for blogs to be kept private, and the researcher can create individual blogs for each participant in the study.

Interviews

Follow-up interviews will be conducted with each participant. This will allow the participant to look holistically at their experience and comment on the process as whole, as well as for the researcher to clarify specific examples that a participant may have noted in the diary. Interviews will be open ended, prompting the further exploration of themes or critical incidents that emerged from the participant’s diary entries. As well, broad questions related to the participant’s understanding of research, evidence, and associated issues of these concepts in practice, will be asked. The interviews will probe deeper into any key incidents or issues that were raised over the course of diary keeping.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the diaries will begin as they are completed. The method outlined by **Corbin and Strauss** will be used to closely analyse the text and discover and group concepts. As additional diaries are completed, the information gained from the earlier data will be used to refine concepts, and discover new ones. As the interviewing begins, the same process will be carried out, adding that text to each participant’s overall information. Likewise, the transcript of the interview will be analysed in a systematic way, coding for concepts that emerge. The interview text will further supplement what was found in the participant’s diary entries, and will also potentially reveal more concepts and the importance of those concepts. As I engage with these texts, concepts will begin to emerge that reveal academic librarians’ approaches to decision making and their attitudes toward using evidence in aiding their decision making. I will use memo-writing to keep a reflective record of how I have approached the research, as well as my thoughts at the varying points in the process.

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