

The Evolving Model of EBLIP in Research and Practice

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In our 2016 book, *Being Evidence Based in Library and Information Practice*, we outlined a revised model for evidence-based library and information practice (EBLIP) across different types of libraries. This model focused on flexible aspects that could guide library and information professionals toward being evidence based. The model was grounded in research and further informed by specific examples arising in practice. We posited that *being* evidence based is a mindset in which librarians actively reflect on their practice. The model involves questioning our practice, gathering or creating evidence where needed, and continually striving to improve practice by thoughtfully and critically incorporating evidence into decision-making.

The 2016 EBLIP model brings together elements of research evidence, local evidence, and professional knowledge with a goal of taking a holistic approach to evidence. Each of these elements serves an important role in evidence-based decision-making. Good research evidence provides rigorous study of a problem or topic that advances a body of knowledge. Local evidence is likely to be more relevant to the specific circumstances librarians face because it will pertain to local needs and preferences. Professional knowledge

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allows a practitioner to understand the value and importance of various forms of evidence as well as interpret and apply it within a specific context.

Our book provides a detailed analysis of aspects of the EBLIP model, often referred to as the 5As process. We consider it to be cyclical and applicable to both individual and group decision-making. Without going into detail, the process helps you think through questions and an approach to decision-making in an evidence-based manner (see Figure 1.1).

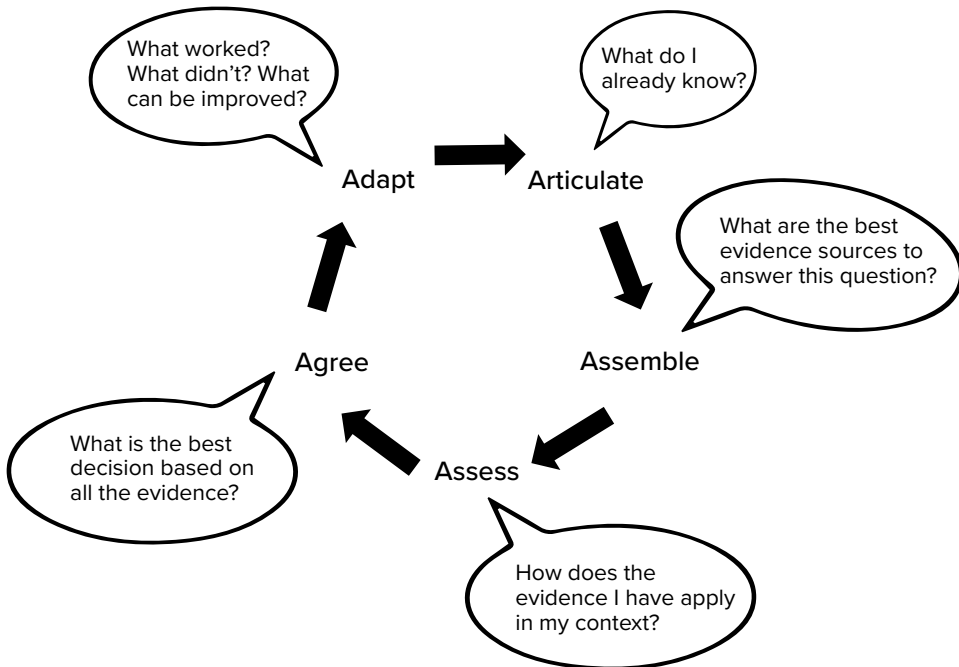


Figure 1.1

Key questions a practitioner should ask (Koufogiannakis & Brettle, 2016, p. 16).

While these aspects can help guide librarians toward being evidence based, we feel that there is no perfect formula because the process is situational. On the whole, one needs to be thoughtful and reflective, continue to build a body of professional knowledge, and work toward linking research and practice. We have tried to put the individual practitioner or group of practitioners at the center, taking control of their decision-making and use of the best evidence depending on the situation.

Further Development of the EBLIP Model

Since the publication of our book, the conversation about EBLIP as a model has continued to evolve and the body of research evidence has grown. A pair of connected studies out of Australia used qualitative research methods within academic and public library settings in order to better understand how library and information professionals experience evidence

(Gillespie et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2017; Gillespie et al., 2017). This research found six categories of experience pertaining to EBLIP in the academic context: empowering, intuiting, affirming, connecting, noticing, and impacting. The findings point to EBLIP as a “complex and highly contextualised phenomenon” (Miller et al., 2017, p. 126). It was also found that both academic and public librarians recognized six types of evidence: observations, feedback, professional colleagues, research literature, statistics, and intuition. This, along with Luo’s 2018 study of academic library staff’s use of evidence in supporting decision-making, confirms findings from earlier studies from Koufogiannakis (2012) and Gillespie (2014) that librarians draw on many different types of evidence to inform their decision-making. Luo’s findings also reveal that academic librarians’ use of evidence primarily serves an “instrumental” purpose, meaning it is used to influence a specific decision or find a solution to a problem—such a notion fits with the existing literature up to this point in which a primary focus has been EBLIP as an individual responsibility for practitioners.

In a pivotal step that shifted the discussion of the EBLIP model from a focus on individual practitioners toward that of organizations, Howlett (2018) published a commentary proposing “a way forward for library and information service organizations to truly embrace a culture of evidence-based practice at an organizational level” (p. 76). The focus shifts to how the library as an entity moves forward in an evidence-based way to contribute to the strategic goals of the organization and allows leaders to advocate for the library’s role. Thorpe and Howlett (2020) further built upon the idea of viewing EBLIP through an organizational lens in their qualitative research study that proposed an EBLIP capability maturity model for organizations. They specifically look at the characteristics present at five different levels of evidence-based practice maturity within organizations (see Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.2

The EBLIP Capability Maturity Model (Thorpe & Howlett, 2020, p. 95).

Within an organization that is most mature, at the *Transforming* stage, “evidence based practice underpins the day-to-day activity of the library” (p. 96). Staff have an EBLIP mindset and work to develop a strong evidence base in alignment with the organization’s strategic goals. Leaders are able to communicate with influence, and the organization becomes more responsive and creative (Thorpe & Howlett, 2020). For leaders in organizations that wish to embrace EBLIP more fully, this model provides a way forward in developing capacity and depth for advancing EBLIP.

In keeping with the finding that organizations with mature EBLIP capability focus on communication, Thorpe (2021) then subsequently proposed that the current 5As of the EBLIP model should be amended to include a sixth A, *Announcing/Advocating* (see Figure 1.3). Thorpe notes the benefits include being able to advocate and influence, contribute to the evidence base, demonstrate professional expertise, and build organizational maturity.

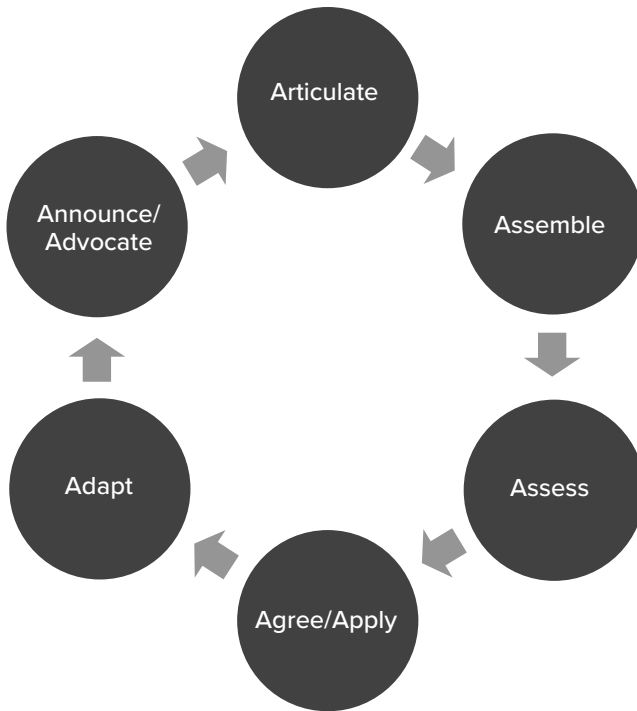


Figure 1.3

The Proposed Evolution of the EBLIP Model (Thorpe, 2021).

She argues for the need to make *Announcing/Advocating* an explicit part of the EBLIP model: “If a generation of LIS professionals learn to engage in EBLIP without announcing, advocating, and communicating their work, then criticisms of the validity of the profession’s evidence base will endure. Communicating in an evidence-based way should be an explicit part of the EBLIP professional identity” (p. 123).

In summary, since *Being Evidence Based* was published in 2016, research continues to confirm many core findings related to the types of evidence librarians use, how they use evidence, and how they experience it. A new stream of research has begun exploring EBLIP at an organizational level. We encourage readers to

take these new findings into account when they consider how to go about EBLIP within their practice or how to apply it within their organization.

Practical Implementation of EBLIP and Use of Everyday Evidence in Academic Libraries

There are a growing number of examples related to how academic librarians are implementing EBLIP in their practice. The journal *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* has a section dedicated to *Using Evidence in Practice* where practitioners can publish concrete examples of how they are doing this in their everyday practice using a variety of types of evidence. Academic examples include topics such as improving a new virtual reality space and service (Rossman & Young, 2020), identifying terminology to use on the library website for users seeking librarian assistance (Matthews, 2018), determining the viability of 24/7 library access (Breakenridge, 2017), and redesigning in-person reference service (Everall & Logan, 2017).

Somerville and Kloda (2016) note that academic librarians use many different types of evidence in their practice and these vary based on the setting and circumstances of the decision-making. This could include examples such as redesigning facility spaces by using a collaborative design process that included various viewpoints and existing knowledge (Tevaniemi, Poutanen & Lahdemaki, 2015), aligning change management with professional development of staff (Leong & Anderson, 2021), or using a systems-informed approach to creating a workplace that is evidence based (Somerville, 2009). Being intentional about what methods work best in a given situation is key to success.

There are many cases of EBLIP in practice by individual practitioners or for specific situations within an academic library context. What is not so common is to see an entire library approach their work through an EBLIP lens and have this supported by all levels of the organization. Thinking about how the organization itself is situated and ready to embrace and embed EBLIP in a way that permeates throughout the organization is an important aspect that could potentially lead to more fulsome change.

One example of organizational implementation of EBLIP comes out of the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) where the library has made the implementation of evidence-based practice a core component of their organization. Thorpe (2018) explains the EBP framework that was adopted there (Howlett & Thorpe, 2018) for individual, team, and overall organization levels. The framework “is used to explain and apply evidence-based practice in our day-to-day work. The lens is particularly applicable to libraries that have a parent organization or are accountable to a broader purpose. It recognises the realities of daily professional practice and experience” (p. 90). To facilitate this culture shift, the library created the position of Coordinator, Evidence Based Practice, to help guide and develop expertise in staff on EBLIP approaches to their work, with the goal of supporting the university’s strategic goals and initiatives. A supplementary paper (Thorpe & Howlett, 2020) further describes the approach of USQ which led to an environment where

Evidence-based practice is acknowledged as an iterative or cyclical process when applied in the academic library context through a series of interrelated activities. As Library staff interpret, apply, measure and communicate evidence, our services become better aligned with our strategy and goals and our outcomes and impact lead to greater influence and advocacy on behalf of our clients. Evidence underpins all our work and our staff are central to our success (pp. 4–5).

This work at USQ illustrates theory (the maturity model noted previously) and practice coming together, enabling EBLIP to be foregrounded as an approach to librarianship in an academic organizational context. This strategic type of position is rare and has led to a greater understanding of what can be done at an organizational level. Thanks to those involved and how they have communicated this work, there is much for others to now consider and build on going forward (Howlett, 2021). Organizations may also be attempting to incorporate evidence-based decision-making through strategic planning, such as at the University of Queensland Library (n.d.), which notes a team that “provides advice on strategic development for the Library using evidence-based practice and data-driven insights” or within ongoing assessment positions which are much more established in many academic libraries.

Building Skills

Research skills are fundamental to “being evidence based.” This may be at various levels as part of the evidence-based cycle or process—for example, *acquiring* evidence or information (a skill that should be familiar to all librarians) or understanding research methods as part of *assessing* the validity, reliability, and applicability of evidence which can be applied to practice or as part of *evaluating* the impact of any changes made following any decision to *adapt* services. Librarians may also be involved in undertaking research to create an evidence base to underpin library services or the profession. In the early days of EBLIP, some of the main objections or barriers to adoption were cited as a poor research evidence base to underpin librarianship or the lack of skills for practitioners to support or practice EBLIP (Booth & Brice, 2004). More recently, it has been suggested that “leaders and managers are responsible for developing an organizational culture that is research-minded and evidence-oriented” (Lou, 2018, p. 565), and providing institutional support is one of three factors (alongside individual attributes and peer and community interaction) to promote research productivity (Hoffman, Berg, & Koufogiannakis, 2017). Building research skills within library organizations will help evidence-based practice flourish at an organizational level as librarians develop confidence in their own research skills.

Over the last few years, a number of countries have developed initiatives to develop the research culture in library and information practice, thus helping to tackle this barrier regarding research skills. Some of these have adopted an evidence-based approach to their design by basing their content on surveys of the librarian population and basing their programs on the results (Kennedy & Brancolini, 2012), then adapting over the years following subsequent surveys and evaluations of the impact of the program (Brancolini & Kennedy 2017; Kennedy & Brancolini, 2018).

In the United States, the Institute for Research Design in Librarianship (IRDL) was established in 2015 as a continuing education program for academic and research librarians with an aim of growing a community of confident librarian-researchers. The annual, year-long program begins with a Summer Research Workshop, which provides novice librarian researchers with social science research training, followed by a year of peer and formal mentor support to complete their own research projects. Evaluations of the program over a number of cohorts have demonstrated the effectiveness of the program in increasing research self-efficacy (Kennedy & Brancolini, 2018). As the program has progressed, members (or scholars) are incorporated into the community of researchers and encouraged to support and mentor those in subsequent cohorts. Currently, the program is grant-funded, free to participants (available to librarians in the US and Canada), and has moved to an online model.

A similar continuing education program is in place for health sciences librarians via the Research Training Institute for Health Sciences Librarians (RTI) of the Medical Library Association (MLA). This is also now run online as a continuing education program that provides advanced research methods training and an intensive level of support for health sciences librarians to design, conduct, and successfully disseminate a research project. Similar to the IRDL model and the initiatives in other countries described below, the

program runs for a year and provides research training, mentoring and peer support, and a community of practice, with encouragement to disseminate their research at the MLA annual meeting. Annual evaluations of the program demonstrate that it meets its goals in increasing research skills and confidence of participants as well as improving the quality and quantity of health information research produced by health sciences librarians. One recent participant whose interest in EBLIP sparked her application to the program examined whether conference participation led to publication of papers following the conference and whether this biases the evidence that library practitioners use (Hinrichs, 2021). The project found that less than a quarter of abstracts presented at the MLA 2014 conference were published as journal papers, leading to recommendations for the MLA regarding dissemination of research and non-research publications.

Although there may be initiatives occurring across the world, other similar examples from Western countries include the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) Librarians' Research Institute, the Australian Library and Information Science Research Australia (LISRA) research project, and programmes in the UK originating from a joint action plan by Research Libraries UK (RLUK) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) (Evidence Base, 2021). All of these programs take a similar approach by providing programs of research training, research funding to encourage individual projects, and mentoring to support those in the program. These research programmes are important. We need the research skills as they are fundamental to EBLIP—practitioners need to understand and feel confident about research to incorporate it into their practice; without this knowledge and understanding, EBLIP will not flourish and the evidence base for the profession will not grow.

Where We Are Today: Firmly Planted and Continuing to Grow

It has been 25 years since Jonathan Eldredge (1997) first published the article that promoted evidence-based librarianship and began this movement that librarians now generally refer to as EBLIP. EBLIP has gone from an idea to a concept; it has shifted from following a medical model to one that makes sense for libraries and librarians; it has grounded itself in research; it has continued to evolve from a focus that was only on individual practitioners to tackling organizational levels of engagement and responsibility. Today we have a wide body of research pertaining to EBLIP, and in 2022, the *EBLIP* journal reached 17 years of open access as a quarterly publication with a worldwide audience and contributors. The biennial EBLIP conference that started in 2001 was paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic but is poised to restart in the near future.

The shift toward considering EBLIP at an organizational level is a good one that has taken time to emerge and will likely continue to be refined, but it is a needed move for EBLIP to thrive and be fully integrated into what academic librarians do within their organizations. If there is support at the organizational level, it will be easier to work with an evidence-based mindset and to implement changes based on the best evidence. At this point in time, a rich research base about evidence-based practice has come to fruition and

we understand much more about how librarians use evidence, different types of evidence within our field, and the barriers to EBLIP.

Professional associations have embedded EBLIP values within their missions and goals. In the UK, CILIP has provided a strong commitment to EBLIP within its new five-year strategy and action plan (CILIP, 2022) which places evidence-based practice alongside intellectual freedom and social justice as a value that will be actively championed by the professional community. In Canada, two of the competencies for librarians in academic research libraries include an evidence-based practice focus, pointing to the need for librarians to have the ability to conduct quality research and be able to use evidence-based assessment strategies to connect with their user communities (Canadian Association of Research Libraries' Competencies Working Group, 2020).

This recognition of the importance of EBLIP from organizations and professional bodies will become ever more important as the world adapts to sustainability issues and an increased shift to digital service delivery post-pandemic. Providing evidence about new library service developments and building this into decision-making will ensure that libraries and the library profession make necessary changes and remain a viable and valued profession within our organizations and communities. An important part of our thinking around *Being Evidence Based*, was the idea of using evidence to demonstrate the value of our services; this has been taken a step further by Thorpe (2021) who has proposed advocacy (or announcing) as a sixth step in the EBLIP model, as communicating findings is key for change to occur. Indeed, this is what the authors hope to achieve with this book—to bring about change in academic libraries by demonstrating that the process and framework of EBLIP are achievable across all academic library functions.

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