Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Commentary

EBL and Library Assessment: Two Solitudes?

Pam Ryan
Interim Head, Science and Technology Library
University of Alberta Libraries
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
E-mail: pam.ryan@ualberta.ca

Introduction

As Booth notes in a recent commentary on the conceptual and practical links between performance measurement and evidence-based library and information practice (EBLIP), there has been a discernable creep among segments of the library community that seemingly existed as two solitudes: those in evidence based librarianship (EBL) circles and those in the library assessment practitioners group ("Counting What Counts" 63). Beginning in 2005, individuals from one group have been showing up at the others' conferences and events to discuss their methods, frameworks and processes. Are these separate movements within librarianship forming theoretical bridges? Is some sort of merger, fusion or takeover in the future? Or are these simply collegial discussions about our evidence-based leanings in librarianship? Is all evidence-based practice in librarianship, that is, some form of research-derived data guiding the decision-making of practitioners, subject to the theoretical framework proposed by the EBL movement? If so, are the tools and practices of library assessment rigorous enough, by EBL theory standards, to afford equal participation in these evidence-based practice circles or will assessment practitioners forever be relegated to wallow as devotees of the lowest cells of Eldredge's (2002) exploratory research evidence chart? If we are just now coming to understand our similarities, will our differences be enough that we wish never to be one movement and therefore forever remain as two solitudes in evidence-based practice?

Background

The EBL and library assessment movements grew up separately but at approximately the same time, with EBL first appearing in the literature in 1995 in an editorial by Margaret Haines (Booth Evidence Based Practice for Information Professionals 8) and the initial

calls for a "culture of assessment" in academic libraries appeared in articles by Stoffle in 1996 and Lakos in 1999. Library assessment has its roots in the need for academic libraries to redefine measures to show the library's real contributions to the communities they serve and to develop collections and services based on user needs and preferences. This user-centred movement shares many of the research tools and methodologies of Marketing, Business, and other disciplines of the social sciences. Evidence Based Librarianship developed out of the practice of health librarians' participation in evidence based medicine (EBM) initiatives and turning that experience to a reflective review of the use of research evidence in their own professional decision-making practices.

Definitions and Differences

Even though the definition of EBL has evolved since the earliest of EBM-influence days, the core of EBL practice still rests on finding in the research literature the best evidence to answer a question or problem and then appraising, applying and evaluating specific interventions. The most recent definition of EBL, where the name of the movement is currently proposed as Evidence Based Library and Information Practice (EBLIP), is that it:

> "…."seeks to improve library and information services and practice by bringing together the best available evidence and insights derived from working experience, moderated by user needs and preferences. EBLIP involves asking answerable questions, finding, critically appraising and then utilizing research evidence from relevant disciplines in daily practice. It thus attempts to integrate user-reported, practitioner-observed and research-derived evidence as an explicit basis for decision-making." (Booth "Counting What Counts" 65)

The assumption is that an answer is available in the research literature of librarianship or related fields and that knowing how to evaluate research literature will guide the practitioner to the best answer. Looking to the literature is the first source when a question is formed. However, the understanding in the EBLIP process that evidence is to be "moderated by user needs and preferences" shows some common ground with the library assessment approach, even though the definition doesn't explicitly speak to how those needs are determined, evaluated or assessed.

A definition of library assessment work that the assessment community of practitioners adheres to is elusive. There appears to be no standing definition in common use. A helpful, although broad, definition used to describe the topics of interest for the *libraryassessment.info* community discussion blog is:

> "…any activities that seek to measure the library's impact on teaching, learning, and research, as well as initiatives that seek to identify user needs or gauge user perceptions or satisfaction. The overall goal is data-based and user-centered continuous improvement of library collections and services." (Kyrillidou and Ryan)

While Booth's recent article ("Counting What Counts") focuses on the links between performance measurement and evidence-based library and information practice, it should be noted that performance measurement is just one evaluative approach of the many evaluative methods available in the library assessment toolkit. Bertot provides a good summary of selected approaches to evaluative research, assessment's parallel to Eldgredge's levels

of evidence chart, if you will, with examples of where the contact with library users is made.

In library assessment, there is a reliance on the literature for understanding best practices in qualitative methodology processes (i.e. usability testing, focus groups) and the use and sharing of tested, reliable, and standardized tools (i.e. questionnaires, tests, evaluation forms). However, there is no expectation of answers in the literature. In assessment work, evidence can only be local. The nature of assessment work is that it circles around what users are experiencing, so the appropriate study design is frequently a qualitiative, user-engaging method. Only your users, or the usage trails they leave behind in your systems, can tell you where your web site isn't up to snuff, that your Philosophy collection isn't being used, how your study space is insufficient, or how your staff are perceived. While it is still the role of the practitioner to determine how to fix problems, library assessment practice dictates that problem-identification and service satisfaction measures can only come from your library's community of users.

Common Ground and Work Ahead

One area where those involved in EBL and library assessment could work collaboratively would be in defining areas where the EBL model and library assessment practices are best suited, where they overlap, and where differences excel or fall short. For example, an issue that needs further discussion is how the EBL literature-immersion process of "Formulate, Search, Appraise, Assess, Evaluate" (Eldredge 2006 342) fits into the innovation cycle of new service development. With continuous improvement at the core of library assessment work, more often than not, practitioners are working on new service development or new ways of providing access to collections based on their systematic work in determining user satisfaction and local user needs. This is where library assessment work excels and where its methods are tightly integrated into the new service development process. With the time lag of the research lifecycle, is the EBL process relevant in today's dynamic Web 2.0-influenced service environment? If so, what does that process model look like? Where does the Google-esque service development model of rapid, imperfect development, beta launch, user-engagement in evaluation, and then modification based on user take-up and feedback, fit within the EBL theoretical framework? Is EBL, so reliant on research literature results for decision, only relevant in traditional or pedagogical areas of librarianship where change might wait for the research cycle? To date, progress in the EBL movement has been made by a group of innovative, like-minded individuals mustering early-adopting, like-minded and interested individuals. This is where individuals in EBL are meeting with individuals in library assessment. Our discussions on all aspects of librarianship that include using evidence, data, evaluation and research methods in our practice need to continue as many questions remain. We need not expect or hope that the outcome is one theoretical, evidence-based practice umbrella. A good start is already underway in the acknowledgment that we need awareness and understanding of each others' methods, frameworks and processes and that there is keen interest in working together to move forward.

Acknowledgement

This commentary is based, in part, on material previously presented at the 2006 Canadian Library Association Conference:

Ryan, Pam. "Good Libraries Use Evidence: Cultivating a Culture of Assessment and

Evidence-Based Decision-Making in Academic Libraries." Canadian Library Association Conference. Ottawa, Ontario. June 2006 <http://www.cla.ca/resources/cla2006/Presentations/CLA_EBL.pdf>.

Works Cited

Bertot, John Carlo. "Assessing Digital Library Services: Approaches, Issues, and Considerations." International Symposium on Digital Libraries and Knowledge Communities in Networked Information Society (DLKC'04). University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba, Ibaraki, Japan. March 2004. 3 November 2006 <http://www.kc.tsukuba.ac.jp/dlkc/e-proceedings/papers/dlkc04pp72.pdf>.

Booth, Andrew. "Counting What Counts: The Link Between Performance Measurement and Evidence Based Information Practice." Performance Measurement and Metrics 7.2 (2006): 63-74.

Booth, Andrew, and Anne Brice, Editors. Evidence-Based Practice for Information Professionals: a Handbook. London: Facet Publishing, 2004.

Eldredge, Jonathan. "Evidence-Based Librarianship: The EBL Process." Library Hi Tech 24.3 (2006): 341-54.

Eldredge, Jonathan. "Evidence-Based Librarianship: Levels of Evidence." Hypothesis 16.3 (2002): 10-13.

Lakos, Amos. "The Missing Ingredient: Culture of Assessment in Libraries." Performance Measurement and Metrics 1.1 (1999): 3-7.

Kyrillidou, Martha, and Pam Ryan. libraryassessment.info. 3 November 2006 < http://libraryassessment.info/?page_id=7>.

Stoffle, Carla, Robert Renaud and Jerilyn R. Veldof. "Choosing Our Future." College and Research Libraries 57.3 (1996): 213-25.