Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Editorial

Evidence Based Practice: Science? Or Art?

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Evidence based library and information practice (EBLIP) is a strategy to bridge research and practice. Generally EBLIP is seen as a movement to encourage and give practitioners the means to incorporate research into their practice, where it previously may have been lacking. The widely accepted definition of EBLIP (Booth, 2000) stresses three aspects that contribute to a practice that is evidence based: 1) "the best available evidence;" 2) "moderated by user needs and preferences;" 3) "applied to improve the quality of professional judgements." The area that the EBLIP movement has focused on is how to create and understand the best available research evidence. CE courses, critical appraisal checklists, and many articles have been written to address a need for librarian education in this area, and it seems that strides have been made.

But very little in the EBLIP literature talks about how we make professional judgements, or moderate evidence based on our user needs and preferences. Likewise, how do we make good evidence based decisions when our evidence base is weak. These things seem to be elements we just take for granted or can't translate into words. It is in keeping with tacit knowledge that librarians just seem to have or acquire skills with education and on the job experience. Tacit knowledge is "knowledge that is not easily articulated, and frequently involves knowledge of how to do things. We can infer its existence only by observing behaviour and determining that this sort of knowledge is a precondition for effective performance" (Patel, Arocha, & Kaufman, 1999, p.78). It is something that is difficult to translate into an article or guideline for how we work. I think of this area as the "art" of evidence based practice. And the art is crucial to being an evidence based practitioner.

> Science = systematized knowledge, explicit research, methodological examination, investigation, data
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> Art = professional knowledge of your craft, intuition, experience, tacit knowledge, reflection, creativity, values, people-skills

Both science and art are important and I hope we do not measure their worth against one another. Rather, we need to recognize that both elements contribute to good decision making and practice improvement. Without taking research evidence into consideration, we would be lacking scientific knowledge that helps us gain a deeper understanding of our profession. This needs to be continually renewed and paid attention. However, without the art side of the equation, meaning and context may easily be lost. Someone can gather all the best evidence, but not know how to effectively implement it. Or if you are overly reliant on perfect evidence before you make a decision that is in the best interest of your community, you will likely lag behind and not serve people's needs. No research study, no matter how perfectly conducted is going to provide all the answers for what we do in practice.

We need to embrace both the science and the art of evidence based practice – otherwise, we will overlook important elements of the whole situation that practitioners work within. Doing so is not neat and tidy, but does that really matter? LIS is a social science, and the "social" implies "messy" because people and real-life situations are not easily controlled. The art of our craft allows us to embrace the messy situation, find ways to be creative, put our professional judgements to use and find the best solutions to meet the needs of individual users by applying the best of what we find in the research literature together with the best of what we know is likely to help this person. My purely unscientific judgement as a practitioner is that LIS practice is probably 30% science and 70% art (more or less depending upon the specific topic). As such, I think that we cannot ignore the art of evidence based practice, and in fact should begin thinking about ways to be better artists as well as better scientists.

Within this journal, the *Using Evidence in Practice* section brings together the science and art of evidence based practice. In this section, practitioners recount how they used evidence to assist with their practice decisions. They also provide details of non-research evidence or situations that impact their judgements, and at the end of the piece they reflect on the overall process and how their practice may be improved in the future. I hope these experiences inspire readers, and make the connections between science and art more obvious.

References

Booth, A. (2000, July 2-5). Librarian heal thyself: Evidence based librarianship, useful, practical, desirable? *Proceedings from the 8th International Congress on Medical Librarianship*. London, UK.

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