



Commentary

Reflections of a Practitioner in an Evidence Based World: 4th International Evidence Based Library & Information Practice Conference

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The 4th International Evidence Based Library & Information Practice Conference (EBLIP4) was a wonderful experience on many fronts. Our hosts, Joanne Gard Marshall and School of Information and Library Science (SLIS) at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, were friendly and gracious. The setting was lush and green (appreciated by this Canadian who, at the time of the conference, was still waiting for the leaves to come out); the scale intimate and conducive to building relationships; the content thought-provoking, and the debate friendly. It was gratifying to see so many professional librarians in one room who were interested and dedicated to evidence based library and information practice in a variety of settings.

I work in a non-academic, non-traditional library environment in a library service

(emphasis on service) for three district health authorities in rural Nova Scotia. Evidence based practice is something that my colleagues and I try to do. My entire purpose for coming to this conference was to see what other practitioners were doing, and what could be translated to my own practice setting.

The conference is biased towards academic health science library settings for a host of reasons. This is not a criticism. Evidence based practice started in medicine, and it was perhaps natural that health sciences librarians would be exposed to its ideas and rationales given the librarian's role in that movement. That being said, there was plenty in the program for those working in other contexts. The report of a journal club in a Swedish library, evidence based project management tools, the investigation of the

usage of library databases offsite, and the use of rubrics as a tool for assessing information literacy were just some of the posters and presentations that could be applied in a variety of library settings, both traditional and non-traditional.

From my perspective, one of the highlights of this conference was the opening speaker, Margaret Haines. Her “three R’s” of professional practice should be some sort of mantra at LIS schools: reflective practice, or learning from one’s own practice; retrieving evidence in order to learn from others; and researching key questions to learn about changes in practice (Haines). I was particularly gratified by the first of the “R’s”. Among the charges laid at the door of evidence based practice is that it ignores both experience and tacit knowledge of one’s environment. The act of reflection, which was highlighted repeatedly by Andrew Booth and others, is a key cornerstone of professional practice. I would suggest, very humbly, that it is also a marker of wisdom. It highlights not only what one knows, but acknowledges gaps in one’s knowledge as well.

Another high point was Andrew Booth’s passionate defense of evidence based practice, both in his keynote as well as in his excellent debate with T. Scott Plutchak. Acknowledging that EBLIP will have a different research base from the EBM gold standard and different types of evidence available does not excuse it from having none at all. His work with Anne Brice on qualitative systematic reviews and the SPICE (Setting, Population, Intervention, Comparison and Evaluation) model provides useful tools that practitioners in a wide variety of settings, from public libraries to corporate intranets, can harness to sharpen their practice.(Booth and Brice)

If reflective practice is a cornerstone of professional practice, EBLIP⁴ was a great

platform for opening participants up to introspection. I found this in a number of unexpected places, and frankly, it was refreshing. There are times when I feel that librarians have bought and nurtured the stereotypes of selflessness and giving to the user/patron without truly looking at what is actually happening. Are we as a profession as user-focused as we like to think?

This idea that librarians are not as patron-centred as we perhaps assume came up several times in the course of the conference. Another highlight of the conference was Jon Eldredge’s paper “Cognitive Biases as an Obstacle to Effective Decision Making in EBLIP.” His results, although preliminary, suggest that librarians have two primary cognitive biases in their practice: status quo, preferring things as they are, and deformation professionelle, or seeing the world through the eyes and biases of one’s profession (Eldredge). This theme was also underscored by several speakers in the final lunch panel, “Library Leaders Discuss the Pros and Cons of Evidence-Based Practice.” Jean Wilkins, the former head of the Illinois State Library, and Patricia Thibodeau of Duke University Medical Center were particularly candid about the challenges associated with changing attitudes about practicing by actually listening to what our patrons are telling us they want from us (Thibodeau et al.). In a small discussion over lunch with colleagues at my table, this subject came up again: when patrons are going around, over and through us, creating their own information products and using them, what does that say about our relevance or our ability to listen to what our clients want from us? EBLIP from a user-centered approach is vital to our relevance as professional librarians.

The schism between research and practice was well noted at the conference. As a practitioner not attached to an academic institution, I was in the minority at EBLIP⁴.

Further complicating EBLIP is that when research is done, it is usually done in academic settings, which is of limited use to someone in my particular practice. Bridging this gap between research and practice – something I noted very early in my grad school days – is going to take some interesting partnerships between academic and non-academic institutions, and better support and continuing education to build the skills required to do EBLIP.

Another issue that arose during the conference was the lack of strong, accessible professional literature. There was some contention at the conference about whether EBLIP is actually new, or an old tie in a new box. I think that if it is something librarians have been doing all along, the profession has done a remarkably poor job translating research into practice. In many ways the key here is accessibility. As a librarian who is not attached to a research institute of any kind, I have no access to the literature save what a search of *PubMed* or Google might bring. This is, I think, an issue that LIS schools and associations must consider to better support practitioners.

If we are going to take Margaret Haines' advice and reflect on our practice, we must acknowledge these shortcomings. If EBLIP will improve our practice in a way that is genuinely useful to our clients, regardless of the setting, we should welcome it. EBLIP4 was an excellent platform to look at these important professional issues, and it is my hope that in the coming years professional librarians from a broader field of practice settings will see the relevance in attending future EBLIP conferences. This would make the conference an even richer experience for everyone, and give further life to EBLIP.

Works Cited

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