Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Asking the Right Question

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For librarians, the idea of "asking the right question" is nothing new. As information professionals, we know that the *real* question is not the same as the first thing a patron asks at the outset of the reference encounter. Similarly, those teaching information literacy recognize the importance of understanding one's information needs as one of the first steps in the research process.

The first step in the evidence based librarianship (EBL) process is to formulate an answerable question. Eldredge draws a parallel between this step and the first step of problem based learning, in which learners are encouraged to express their uncertainties as precise information needs that can be answered using the literature. In the same way, even though you often begin with vague uncertainties regarding your information practice, EBL requires that you turn those uncertainties into more refined questions.

For a question to be answerable, it must be precise or detailed enough to be conceivably answered by research. Of course, it is easier to create a detailed question if you are familiar with the subject area, and formulating answerable question takes practice. The benefit to creating a precise, answerable question is that you will be more likely to make a decision based on the answer, should you find one.

Another benefit to formulating an answerable question is that it also enables efficient retrieval. As librarians, we all know the value of retrieving a set of literature that is not only high in recall, but high in precision as well. In other words, the concepts present in a detailed question will enable you to develop a search strategy that retrieves only very relevant results.

Formulating an answerable question, though, does not always mean that an answer will be available. Lewis and Cotter

found a gap between the topics of questions asked by practitioners (mostly management and education) and those addressed by researchers (mostly information access and retrieval, and collections).

In evidence based medicine and other health disciplines, the formulation of clinical questions is guided by the PICO structure (for person or problem, intervention, comparison, and outcome). This structure, proposed by Richardson and colleagues, was meant to be helpful in guiding physicians to formulate precise clinical questions. The PICO structure, which allows for flexibility (some of the elements cab be omitted) continues to be employed by many health professionals. In library and information practice, the SPICE structure has been proposed by Booth:

- Setting: the context (e.g., an academic library, law firm)
- Perspective: the stakeholder (group or individual) interested (e.g., graduate student, manager)
- Intervention: the service being offered (e.g., chat reference, library instruction workshop)
- Comparison: the service to which it is being compared (note that there may be no comparison)
- Evaluation: the measure used to determine success (e.g., usage statistics, visit to the reference desk after regular hours)

As an example, an academic librarian work in a health sciences library may want to know if there are any disadvantages to staffing a chat reference service with paraprofessionals. In order to refine this question into a detailed, answerable question, the librarian can use the SPICE structure:

- Setting: academic health sciences library

- Perspective: students, faculty members
- Intervention: chat reference offered by professional librarian
- Comparison: chat reference offered by a paraprofessional
- Evaluation: user satisfaction

Using this example, the question can be restated as follows: In an academic health sciences library, does staffing a chat reference service with a librarian instead of a paraprofessional result in greater user satisfaction?

Keep in mind that asking questions is an iterative process, as librarians will recognize from the reference interview. It is a necessary and worthwhile endeavour to continually refine and reframe a question until it captures precisely the uncertainty you wish to resolve. This process takes some time and thought, and it is a good idea to make sure you, and if applicable, your colleagues, are in agreement on what exactly is the question before attempting to find an answer, otherwise you risk wasting time looking for, appraising, and applying evidence that is not even relevant to your original uncertainty!

Once you have formulated an answerable question, the next step is to identify the appropriate level of evidence for answering it. The next EBL 101 column will focus on *matching question types to study designs*.

Works Cited

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