Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Commentary

Evidence Based Librarianship and Open Access

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Introduction

Booth defines evidence based librarianship as "an approach to information science that promotes the collection, interpretation, and integration of valid, important and applicable user-reported, librarian-observed, and research-derived evidence. The best available evidence, moderated by user needs and preferences, is applied to improve the quality of professional judgments" (6).

Evidence based practice, in librarianship or any other profession, depends upon access – access to the evidence gathered by others (published or unpublished literature), and access to opportunities to publish the results of one's own research. There are several aspects that make access an important issue for Library and Information Science (LIS) literature:

- Inequities in access that were the norm until fairly recently;

- Expansion of access made possible by the Internet; and

- Optimum access - represented by open access.

Suber draws on the three major defining statements of open access (the Budapest Open Access Initiative, the Bethesda Statement on Open Access Publishing, and the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities), in his definition of open access (OA) literature as "digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions." The focus of the open access movement is the literature that scholars have traditionally given away without expectation of reward, particularly in peer-reviewed journal literature.

There are two major approaches to open access: open access publishing, also called the 'gold road', and open access archiving, known as the "green road". Whatever road one chooses to travel, LIS literature is well on its way.

Access to the LIS literature

Print collections of LIS literature have never resulted in equitable access. The largest and best collections of LIS literature are found in the largest research libraries, especially those attached to universities with LIS programs. The smallest libraries, by contrast, might be fortunate to have a subscription to a single LIS journal. It follows that access to the LIS literature is far from equitable, with the best access enjoyed by librarians at the libraries with the largest collections.

Even at the largest research libraries, access has never been perfect, or equitable, despite the best efforts of the libraries involved. When materials are available only in print, they are not always there when we would like to access them. They may be out at the bindery, lost, sitting in the in-basket of a colleague, misshelved, or sitting in a stack of materials to be shelved.

Even when the item is right there on the shelves, it is not equally accessible to everyone. Many universities have always welcomed the public as walk-in users, and have offered generous access to colleagues through interlibrary loans programs. Walk-in use of print materials offers a means to keep up with professional reading, which is a great deal more accessible for those who live and work close to the large university libraries than for those in more remote locations. Even amongst the large university library's own staff, access is not quite equitable. The librarian who works in the branch that houses the LIS literature can easily slip to the stacks to keep up with reading during a lunch hour. This is not true for colleagues in the branch library across campus, never mind the branch library in another community.

Access has also varied depending on the type, size, and location of the library.

Academic libraries are more likely to subscribe to more LIS journals than public, special or school libraries. Large libraries are more likely to be able to support LIS subscriptions than are small libraries. Wealthier libraries are more likely to be able to afford LIS journals then poor libraries. Rural libraries and libraries in developing countries, tend to be smaller, less wealthy, less likely to be situated near large research libraries, and less likely to have financial support for LIS journals in their collections.

Libraries vary in their ability to support interlibrary loans programs; some libraries are able to offer patrons, including librarians, free interlibrary loans, while others are obligated to charge patrons for this service. Even where interlibrary loans are free, my experience is that librarians are very sensitive to the costs of providing this service, and hence are somewhat reluctant to make full use of this service to meet their own needs.

With a move toward online access, the electronic medium has increased equity in access. General, aggregated journal packages such as those offered by Gale Group and EBSCO, include a selection of LIS journals. For example, as of March 25, 2006, there are 15 LIS journals in Gale's *Expanded Academic Index*, many of which are full-text, and a total of 84 LIS journals indexed in EBSCO's *Academic Search Elite*, of which 55 are full-text. For many smaller libraries, subscribing to one of these packages means a huge increase in access to LIS journals.

This increase in electronic access, however, does not equal open access. Many of the journals in these packages come with embargoes or delayed access, and not all libraries can afford these packages.

One example from my own experience may help to illustrate just how much difference

open access makes. I am a Project Coordinator for the British Columbia Electronic Library Network (BC ELN), a consortium of publicly funded post-secondary libraries across British Columbia and the Yukon. BC ELN partner libraries span a wide range of sizes – from the one-person library to the University of British Columbia, types – from vocational / technical colleges to research libraries, and locations, from Vancouver to the Arctic.

In the summer of 2005, I was writing an article for *BC ELN Connect*, the quarterly communiqué of the BC ELN, explaining a new approach to communications at BC ELN, involving qualitative research (stories). An article by Jinx Watson, published in the *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, explained this approach beautifully. A search of *ELN Serials*, the province's union serials list, showed that 2 of BC ELN's partner libraries owned this title. I contacted the author and asked if she would consider depositing her article in E-LIS, the Open Archive for Library and Information Science, which she did – with the result that the *BC ELN Connect* article included a citation to an article equally accessible to everyone.

In contrast with the embargoed and limited-to-subscribers access of traditional journals and aggregated packages, the 59 LIS journals listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) http://www.doaj.org/ljbs?cpid=129 (as of April 10, 2006), are peer-reviewed and fully open access, with articles immediately available to everyone, as soon as they are published.

A quick glance at the titles available provides an indication of the quality and relevance of what is available in DOAJ. Along with traditional journals such as Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, many

of the new open access journal titles are focused on emerging areas of librarianship, such as D-Lib Magazine, First Monday, and, of course, Evidence Based Library and Information Practice.

The DOAJ titles not only provide increased access, but they also present a more inclusive, global collection, than can be found in our aggregated collections, which often reflect an English-language and Western civilization bias. While many of the DOAJ titles are in English, some are in Spanish, French, Portuguese, German, and Italian. Browsing through DOAJ not only provides us with a great deal of information about LIS, but also brings a greater diversity of viewpoints than is available through our aggregated packages.

This diversity of perspectives and languages is even more striking in E-LIS, the Open Archive for Library and Information Science. E-LIS supports documents in more than 20 languages and is coordinated by an all-volunteer editorial board composed of editors from more than 50 countries.

Open access archives make it possible to share not only peer-reviewed literature published in subscription journals, but also forms of literature that, until recently, were relatively inaccessible, often even at the very largest research libraries.

Technical reports, theses, and other publications are all forms of literature once readily accessible only to the few, and are now often widely and freely available. For example, the Proceedings of the 68th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIST) can be found in E-LIS. The Council of Prairie and Pacific University Libraries (COPPUL) is using an institutional repository approach to share animated tutorials.

Open access journals and archives are creating enhanced opportunities for librarians to share their own work and research, enabling more to become participants – not merely readers - of research.

It is important to note that, while open access and electronic access in general mean very greatly expanded access to research, this is dependent on Internet access, which is still an issue in many parts of the world, including regions of Canada. According to the Telus / British Columbia partnership site, 89 % of British Columbia's citizens live in communities that are connected to high-speed Internet, yet citizens in 151 communities in British Columbia lack any Internet access. Of these remote communities, 76 are First Nations communities. Many of the communities without high-speed Internet access also lack basic telephone service.

Conclusion

Open Access and evidence-based librarianship are a natural combination. We can enhance our practice by taking advantage of research that is already available to us, whether it be found in the LIS OA journals in the Directory of Open Access Journals, or the self-archived articles in open access institutional archives or disciplinary repositories. Let us share what we have, and as we practice evidence based librarianship and expand our research literature, let us openly share all of what we create in the future as well.

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