Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Article

Have the Most Relevant and Answerable Research Questions Facing Librarians Changed Between 2001 and 2006?

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Abstract

Objective - To examine the similarities and differences between research questions asked by librarians in 2001 to those posed in 2006, and to explore to what extent the published research supports the questions being asked.

Methods - Questions collected in 2001 by members of the Evidence-Based Librarianship Implementation Committee (EBLIC) of the MLA Research Section were compared with questions collected in 2006 at a cross-sectoral seminar introducing evidence based library and information practice to Australian librarians. Questions from each list were categorized using the domains of librarianship proposed by Crumley and Koufogiannakis in 2001, and examined with reference to a content analysis of the library and information studies (LIS) research published in 2001 by Koufogiannakis, Slater, and Crumley in 2004.

Results - In 2001 and 2006 the most commonly asked questions were in the domain of management (29%, 33%), followed by education (24%, 18.5%). In 2001 questions in the marketing/promotion category ranked lowest (1%), however representation was much greater in 2006 (18.5%) ranking an equal second with education. Questions in the lowest ranked domain in 2006 (collections, 6%) had been more common in 2001 where collections ranked third, representing 19% of the questions. Koufogiannakis, Slater, and Crumley's content analysis of LIS research published in 2001 revealed that the most popular domain for research was information access and retrieval (38%) followed by collections (24%). Only 1% of published LIS research (seven articles) was in the domain of marketing/promotion. In contrast, 36 articles originally assigned to one of the six established domains could more appropriately have been included in a proposed new domain of professional issues.

Conclusion - The disparity between questions being asked by practitioners and the evidence being generated by researchers suggests that the research-practice gap is still an issue. A content analysis of more recently published LIS research would be a useful comparison to Koufogiannakis, Slater, and Crumley's analysis of research published in 2001.

Introduction

In June 2006 librarians at Northern Sydney Central Coast Health, Australia, and The University of Newcastle, Australia, organized an event entitled Evidence-Based Librarianship (EBL) in Practice: A Seminar with Andrew Booth. One of the seminar exercises resulted in the production of a list of focused and answerable questions representing current workplace issues reported by the seminar delegates. The process of compiling the questions for distribution to participants after the seminar inspired the authors to subject the list to further scrutiny. To identify trends in the kinds of questions asked by librarians, this paper examines similarities and differences between research questions asked by this group of Australian librarians in 2006 with questions asked by health librarians and solicited via discussion lists in 2001. To explore the extent to which published LIS research supports the questions being asked and to identify research-practice gaps, both sets of questions were compared with the results of a content analysis of LIS research articles published in 2001.

Methods

A total of 87 librarians attended two seminars conducted in Sydney and Gosford,

representing all types of libraries including special, health, law, government, school, public, technical college, and university libraries. One of the exercises conducted during each seminar required participants to document a current, relevant workplace issue they faced in SPICE (Setting, Perspective, Intervention, Comparison, Evaluation) format on a Post-It note. The notes were then stuck to the wall to share with the group. After the seminars, the SPICE breakdowns of relevant issues facing practicing librarians were transformed into focused and answerable questions (Cotter and Lewis). The 49 questions were grouped according to the six domains of librarianship proposed by Crumley and Koufogiannakis in 2001: reference/enquiries, education, collections, management, information access and retrieval, and marketing/promotion (9). These questions are presented in Appendix A.

Permission to publish the questions was not sought, although participants were advised the questions would be documented and shared. Participation in the exercise was voluntary, and the questions reported did not contain details that could be used to identify the persons asking the question. When the list of questions was forwarded to

participants, the report included advice that the authors intended to further analyze the list of questions. No feedback was received.

The questions asked by Australian librarians in 2006 were then compared to 114 questions asked by health librarians worldwide in 2001, collected by members of the Evidence-Based Librarianship Implementation Committee (EBLIC) of the MLA Research Section (Eldredge). These questions were collected by canvassing various international medical librarian groups. Questions came from the US, Estonia, Sweden, and Australia. Details of the person asking the question and the EBLIC mentor who received the question are given.

Eldredge organized these questions within the categories of resources, library skills education, searching, clinical librarians, role/impact of the medical librarian, and management; two of which are specific to health librarianship. For the purposes of comparison, Eldredge's questions were recategorized according to Crumley and Koufogiannakis' six domains which are applicable to librarians across all sectors. Where Eldredge's categories and Crumley and Koufogiannakis' domains coincided – for example, education, management, and

resources (Eldredge)/collections (Crumley) – the process of recategorizing was straightforward. However questions from 2001 reported under the headings of clinical librarians and role/impact of the medical librarian were assigned to a range of domains.

This study's two researchers categorized both sets of questions into domains independently. They then discussed their results and resolved discrepancies through discussion and consultation with colleagues. This process involved some professional judgments in relation to questions that could have been assigned to more than one domain.

Finally, the questions asked in 2001 and 2006 were examined in relation to a content analysis of LIS literature carried out in 2004 (Koufogiannakis, Slater, and Crumley). This study surveyed the LIS research published in 2001 and tested the six EBLIP domains proposed by Crumley and Koufogiannakis.

Results

A comparison of the most commonly asked questions in 2001 and 2006 arranged by domain is provided in Table 1. In both years, the most commonly asked questions were in the domain of management followed by education. However, in 2006

Domain	Eldredge 2001	Ranking	Cotter & Lewis 2006	Ranking
Management	**33 (29%)**	**1**	**16 (33%)**	**1**
Education	27 (24%)	2	9 (18.5%)	2/3
Collections	22 (19%)	3	3 (6%)	6
Reference/enquiries	20 (17.5%)	4	8 (16%)	4
Information access & retrieval	11 (9.5%)	5	4 (8%)	5
Marketing/promotion	1 (1%)	6	9 (18.5%)	2/3
Total	**114 (100%)**		**49 (100%)**	

Table 1. Comparison by Domain of Questions Asked by Librarians in 2001 (Eldredge) and 2006 (Cotter and Lewis)

Domain	Number of articles	Ranking
Information access & retrieval	314 (38%)	1
Collections	193 (24%)	2
Management	135 (16%)	3
Education	95 (12%)	4
Reference/enquiries	77 (9%)	5
*Professional issues**	*36*	*6*
Marketing/promotion	7 (1%)	7

Table 2. LIS Research Articles Published in 2001. *Professional issues domain has been excluded from comparative analysis in this paper.*

marketing and promotion scored an equal number of questions as education, whereas in 2001 only one question fell in this domain. The percentage of questions asked about collections fell from 19% in 2001 to only 6% in 2006, while the percentage of questions about reference/enquiries (17.5% in 2001, 16% in 2006) and information access and retrieval (9.5% in 2001, 8% in 2006) remained steady.

In the content analysis of LIS research published in 2001, 807 articles published in 91 journals were examined by three independent reviewers and classified by study type and domain. The number of articles identified for each domain is presented in Table 2.
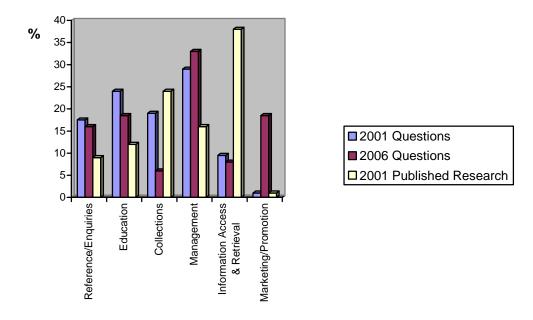

Figure 1. Comparison by Domain of Questions Asked and Research Published

Questions asked in both years were compared to the published research of 2001 by domain and can be seen in Figure 1. This shows a wide gap between research and practice in the library and information science field. This is most apparent in the area of Information Access and Retrieval, where a large amount of research was published in comparison to few questions in both 2001 and 2006.

Discussion

Koufogiannakis, Slater, and Crumley suggest that the results of their content analysis of LIS research published in 2001 support replacing the domain of marketing/promotion with one of professional issues. However, they acknowledge that further studies analyzing LIS research over additional years are required to determine whether the marketing/promotion domain should be retained or incorporated into the management domain and a new domain of professional issues added. For this reason, the present study uses the original six domains proposed in 2001.

In the set of questions from 2001, up to 19 could have been appropriately categorized in a professional issues domain. For example, the question "What's the role of the librarian in a world awash with print and digital information, with publishers wanting to connect directly to non-users, and authors wanting to bypass publishers?" (Eldredge) has been allocated to the domain of management, but would fit equally well into a domain of professional issues, or even into the collections domain. In contrast, in 2006 only one question dealt with professional issues.

Therefore, the 2001 set of questions and the content analysis of LIS research published in 2001 both indicate a need for a new domain of professional issues, whereas the 2006 set of questions does not. The jury is still out on

this question, but a new content analysis of more recent LIS research using the same methodology as Koufogiannakis, Slater, and Crumley would provide further evidence to arrive at a consensual set of domains.

The marked difference in the number of questions dealing with professional issues between 2001 and 2006 may be an artifact attributable to the way in which the questions were asked. In 2001 the Evidence-Based Librarianship Implementation Committee (EBLIC) called on medical librarian groups to "identify the most important contemporary research questions facing our profession" (Eldredge), thus prompting librarians to think broadly about their role as well as their practice. In contrast, during the Evidence-Based Librarianship Seminar in 2006, Andrew Booth asked participants to analyze a workplace issue they faced, thereby directing them to examine what librarians do rather than who they are.

The fact that the 2001 questions were solicited via a discussion list is a potential source of bias. Booth warns that such a sample methodology "may attract those with polarized views rather than the 'silent majority'" ("Clear" 359). The 2006 questions also constitute a sample of convenience and since not all workshop participants volunteered questions, those who did are not necessarily representative of the group. Participants in the 2006 seminar had no prior warning of the exercise and only about ten minutes in which to formulate their questions. It is safe to assume that respondents to the call for questions in 2001 had more time in which to consider the most important and relevant questions. The authors observe, however, that use of SPICE in the seminar exercise has resulted in a set of more refined and answerable questions in 2006. This became evident when the researchers were allocating the questions in each set to the EBLIP domains. Difficulties

were encountered categorizing the 2001 questions as the focus of some questions was ambiguous.

Neither sample is representative of the profession as a whole. The 2001 sample spans several countries but consists largely of health librarians, whereas the 2006 sample is drawn only from Australia but is multi-sectoral (health, academic, school, public, and special libraries being represented). The 2006 sample is less than half the size of the 2001 sample (49 compared to 114 questions). Although the 2006 questions provide an example of relevant and better-formulated questions facing librarians across sectors today, it remains difficult to tell if these are truly representative of those questions facing all librarians internationally.

Despite the limitations of the samples and methodology noted above, broad analysis of the two groups of questions separated by a period of five years reveals some interesting trends. For example, the hard copy versus online collections debate was clearly evident in 2001, but in 2006 was the subject of only one collections question. In 2006 the hard copy/online debate had shifted to the different but related issue of providing current awareness services with librarians asking whether it was more effective to provide tables of contents online, by email, or in hard copy. Questions about the effectiveness of library skills education were prominent in both 2001 and 2006, suggesting that this is one area where library practitioners have not found the answers to their questions.

What does this all mean? Do management questions lead the field in both years because usually the decision to introduce new services or discontinue old ones has to be justified in some way, or because there is little research in this field to date? Why has the percentage of education questions not

decreased between 2001 and 2006, given the large amount of time and money that most libraries devote to information skills education? Of the 49 questions asked by Australian librarians in 2006, 8 (16%) dealt with the question of whether face to face or online delivery of training was more effective.

It is generally accepted that the research base for library and information science is still small (Marshall) compared to other disciplines such as health where evidence based practice is well established. A survey of UK librarians across all sectors carried out in 2003 by the University of Central England found that around half the responding libraries across all sectors had been involved in some form of research in the previous two years but that research findings were not being widely disseminated (McNicol, "Is Research" 125). A similar survey was completed in 2006 by the same researcher, this time on behalf of Evidence Base (see www.ebase.uce.ac.uk). There was evidence that sharing of research findings by the surveyed librarians had improved since 2003 (McNicol, "Overview" 7). However these results should be interpreted cautiously, because both surveys included statistics collection as a research activity, whereas many library practitioners would regard this not as research but simply as standard library management practice. The word "research" can be interpreted in varying ways:

> To some people, research is simply a carefully conducted investigation of a subject or a situation. To others it is the discovery of previously unknown facts. To still others, it implies a highly specific approach to designing and conducting research studies in keeping with externally determined guidelines or methods. (Special Libraries

Association quoted in
Koufogiannakis and Crumley 325)

Why is there a gap between research and practice as demonstrated by the comparison of questions asked with research published (Figure 1)? Librarians may continue to ask questions about management and education because relatively little research is published within these domains in the LIS literature. Also, research in these domains is spread across databases covering the disciplines of business and education, as well as library and information science, and therefore is more difficult to find. In contrast, a relatively large amount of research in information access and retrieval is being published in the LIS literature. However, the findings of this study show that practitioners are asking relatively few questions in this domain.

The research-practice gap has been the subject of considerable discussion in the LIS literature. Andrew Booth has observed:

> The research-practice gap is usually discussed with reference to the failure of practitioners to implement the findings of research. A less commonly explored, yet nevertheless equally important manifestation of this same gap is the failure of researchers to address questions of direct relevance to practitioners ("Turning" 130).

The results of this study - particularly the fact that information access and retrieval accounted for 38% of the published LIS research in 2001 but only 9.5% and 8% of questions asked by librarians in 2001 and 2006 respectively - illustrate just such a discrepancy between the questions practitioners are asking and the issues researchers are examining.

In fact, it has been claimed that "there is not just a gap between research and practice in LIS, but a 'communication chasm'" (K. Turner quoted in Haddow and Klobas 30). If researchers and practitioners in LIS were communicating well, research would inform practice and practice would be based on research evidence and, in turn, generate more questions for future research. Instead, as this study demonstrates, researchers are focusing their activities in the domains of information access and retrieval and collections while practitioners are looking for answers to questions in the domains of management and education, specifically information literacy skills training. Therefore, this study is further evidence of the "relevance gap" between practice and research identified by Haddow and Klobas in which "researchers and practitioners value investigation of different types of problem" (31).

Kim's study of the perceived barriers to use of research in practice by university librarians also reported that communication barriers affected the utilization of research. Such barriers included "a lack of clarity with respect to the implications of the research in practice, an inability to demonstrate the relevance of the research to practice, and a lack of readable research" (444). Lack of "readable" research was highlighted as a problem for librarians of a non-English speaking background.

Crumley and Koufogiannakis have identified the traditional hierarchy of evidence as a potential barrier to librarians finding the research that will answer their questions ("Developing 2002" 65). Librarians, particularly those working in the health field, may feel that anything less than a randomized controlled trial is not sufficient evidence to answer their questions or change their practice. Yet, out of the 807 articles identified as research articles published in 91 library and information

studies journals in 2001, only 12 articles could be described as systematic reviews, meta-analyses, randomized controlled trials, or controlled trials – the recognized higher levels of evidence (Koufogiannakis, Slater and Crumley). Librarians must be prepared to locate, critically appraise, and use other kinds of research, including qualitative research, to inform decision-making. That is, "finding *usable* research for *practical* situations" (Bayley and McKibbon 320).

A further reason why librarians are not finding the research to answer their questions may be that they are prevented from looking by factors such as time constraints, difficulties in accessing the relevant databases, or unsupportive management. Certainly there is discussion, if not conclusive answers, in the recent literature addressing delivery of information skills training – consistently ranked highly in the questions of both 2001 and 2006. Although education accounted for only 12% of articles identified in the content analysis of literature published in 2001, it is the subject of recent high quality research. Several papers were presented in this area at the 3rd International Evidence Based Librarianship Conference in 2005. A systematic review of the literature on information skills training was published in 2003 (Brettle). A systematic review to identify the most effective methods of teaching information literacy skills has been published (Koufogiannakis and Wiebe), and has also yielded the ReLIANT tool for use by library practitioners when appraising published reports of education and training interventions (Koufogiannakis, Booth, and Brettle). In the same issue as the systematic review, a randomized controlled trial comparing e-learning and a taught workshop for teaching literature search skills to health professionals is also reported (Pearce-Smith). It seems that research is now being done in the EBLIP domain of education to investigate at least some of the

questions of relevance to LIS practitioners. The authors support Koufogiannakis and Crumley's (329) call for a review of which practitioner questions have been answered in published LIS research, and which remain in need of answering.

Conclusion

This study builds upon the list of relevant and answerable research questions facing health librarians published by Eldredge in 2001 by providing a more recent set of questions facing librarians from a wider range of library sectors. The results show that the most commonly asked questions by librarians are about management or education issues. However the disparity between questions being asked by practitioners and the evidence being generated by researchers suggests the research-practice gap is still an issue. Researchers need to be aware that practitioners are consistently asking questions falling into the domains of management and education. Practitioners must be prepared to look beyond the LIS literature for evidence to answer their questions – particularly those relating to management and marketing/promotion.

Further content analysis of the LIS literature is required to identify any changes since Koufogiannakis et al examined the literature published in 2001. A content analysis of literature published in 2005 would be of great interest to compare with the questions asked by Australian librarians in June 2006.

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Appendix A
SPICE Questions by Domain

Reference/Enquiries

When do our customers use the helpdesk rather than the website and why?

Is an SDI service more effective when delivered electronically, or manually?

Has electronic delivery to hospital staff of TOCs resulted in increased requests for articles, compared to requests generated by paper delivery?

Is it more effective to provide a weekly current awareness bulletin comprising journal contents pages in hard copy or electronic format to health service staff without physical access to the library?

Do clinical staff regard literature searches carried out by librarians as successful in locating best practice information?

What aspects of the technical library intranet site needs to be redesigned to increase usability and level of usage by technical library staff and students?

To what extent do literature searches supplied to researchers and health professionals meet their information needs?

In a university library, is instant messaging, email, or chat most effective in providing a virtual reference service to staff and students of the university in terms of level of use, customer satisfaction, and impact on library staff rosters?

Education

Are compulsory core units in information literacy, voluntary sign-up sessions, or online tutorials more effective at positively affecting the quality (as assessed by academics) of bibliographies in the assignments of 1st year undergraduate students?

Is face-to-face training by a librarian or provision of a self-paced online tutorial more effective at improving the database searching skills of nursing staff?

Will provision of training and support in database searching for night duty nurses result in them performing more searches?

Is information skills training for staff and students of the Building & Construction Department of a regional university more effective when delivered in the library or when delivered either online or in the department as measured by resource usage and assignment results?

Does delivery of a motivational library seminar to a group of postgraduate health students with a range of information skills result in more effective use of the library and its resources compared to a traditional, skill-based educational session?

Will more academic staff and students attend academic requested library skills sessions than currently attend the open access pre-scheduled sessions?

In a college library is face-to-face library skills training more effective in increasing students' use of the library than delivering the same training online?

Are small group practical sessions or small group seminars more effective in teaching first year nursing students how to search online databases, as measured by user knowledge of database searching and user satisfaction?

Does an interactive online tutorial increase university students', staff, and researchers' skill and satisfaction in using EndNote more than face-to-face training?

Collections

Does a current awareness service that involves posting a list of new material on a library website result in more requests for the promoted material, compared to a service that emails the list to library patrons?

In an academic library, would making readings available on the web or only maintaining hard copy readings lead to higher usage statistics, increased satisfaction of students, and be more cost effective for staff to manage?

How can non-fiction resources be purchased or donations secured for the non-fiction collection of a private library?

Management

Does the effort, time taken, and cost-benefits required by hospital library staff to manage duplicates lists (compiling and searching) outweigh the effort/time taken to retrieve articles from missing issues via interlibrary services?

How often should news items be updated on a hospital library intranet site to best serve the current awareness needs of hospital staff?

Does our website provide useful information for library managers related to performance indicators?

In a hospital library with 24 hour client access, but only staffed 4 hours per week, is it cost effective to install a theft prevention system, compared to the losses incurred without a security system?

Is it more effective to provide outreach library services and resources via branch libraries and an intranet site, or via a mobile library unit and increased electronic resources?

What service innovations could be implemented in a public library to better meet the needs of young adults in the community?

Is desk skills training for library staff working on a specialised information desk more effective when delivered online or using training worksheets?

Does having a liaison librarian located in the faculty offices rather than in the library increase academic staff's satisfaction with and use of the library?

Can the cost of operating a library be justified to staff of its organisation in terms of client satisfaction and cost effectiveness when compared to a model of service that provides unsupported access to electronic resources?

Would participation by staff of a multi-site, inter-region, academic library in an online journal club be more effective than participation in a face-to-face journal club with respect to the quantity/quality of innovative workplace ideas or developments initiated by library staff?

Do usage statistics of a hospital library's trial period of weekend opening justify the library permanently extending its hours to include weekend opening?

Would automation of the library registration process improve customer satisfaction and reduce the number of data input errors, as opposed to manual registration of borrowers by lending services staff?

From the point of view of clinicians, what are the necessary conditions for introducing a clinical librarian service?

In an academic library what services could be developed to support improvement in work practices of non-academic staff?

How should an academic library make optimal use of existing space (physical collection footprint, study space available) to meet student priorities for library facilities and services?

Does a 3-day course (involving hands on demonstrations/tasks) result in better-trained Information Commons support staff than self-paced online delivery training?

Information Access and Retrieval

How does the provision of federated search software in a virtual library service affect clients' use of the online services, help desk, and online articles, and the volume of document delivery requests?

Would Area health employees prefer to access online information resources via the library's online catalogue or via CIAP and other internet sites?

Does teaching students in stages 4, 5, and 6 to search the library catalogue using subject headings rather than keywords only result in them retrieving more relevant resources for a specific assignment?

What alternative ILL systems could be implemented to improve customer satisfaction with the current service of requesting/supplying ILLs?

Marketing/Promotion

Will marketing of the library service to government departments and their agencies result in increased revenue for the library?

Is provision of a college library website a more effective communication mechanism than traditional methods such as mail-outs, hard copy documentation, face-to-face meetings, and the helpdesk in terms of user satisfaction and usage of the site?

Does distribution of library service brochures at corporate orientation sessions for new hospital employees lead to increased knowledge or use of the library service?

Does a listing of library services on the library intranet site satisfy client needs for information about those services?

Does a presentation by library staff at induction sessions have a measurable impact on library usage by new junior medical officers?

Will notifying library clients by email of release of the current library newsletter increase readership as measured by hits on the newsletter page?

Does marketing an interlibrary service to health service staff increase usage of and satisfaction with the service?

Will a marketing campaign or information literacy program be more effective at increasing the number of new, active users of a special library?

In a law library does posting the library bulletin on a website result in increased usage of the library and/or greater user satisfaction with the service than emailing the bulletin to staff of the organisation?