Evidence Based Library and Information Practice .

Counting What Cannot be Counted: Bringing the Humanities to EBLIP

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Introduction

Evidence based practice in librarianship (EBLIP) has evolved since its beginnings in 1997 (Eldredge, 1997) when the model was closely based on evidence based medicine, which itself had only begun as a movement five years earlier (Evidence-Based Medicine Working Group, 1992). The focus of EBLIP at that time was on using research for decision making, and within that focus, quantitative research was privileged within a hierarchy that positioned certain types of research as more rigorous, reliable, and valid (Eldredge, 2000).

Such a model for evidence based practice diminished the importance of qualitative research and other forms of evidence frequently used by librarians in their practice. Criticism (Banks, 2008; Given, 2006; Hjørland, 2011; Hunsucker, 2007) led to a rethinking of the model within librarianship, and new approaches and ways of thinking about the value of different types of evidence for use in decision making within librarianship were proposed (Booth, 2009; Howard and Davis, 2011; Koufogiannakis, 2013). The conversation about what constitutes evidence in the context of librarianship has broadened as a result, but still

requires further discussion, debate, and examination.

One area that has not yet been noted, or really even questioned, is the absence of dialogue regarding the place of humanities research within an evidence based approach to practice. Although widely regarded as a social science, librarianship is closely aligned with humanities; many librarians have humanities backgrounds, and many questions related to libraries and librarianship have roots in humanities thinking. It is somewhat perplexing that the absence of humanities research in EBLIP has not been raised as an issue.

The absence of humanities research in EBLIP could be explained by the fact that many librarians with humanities backgrounds have felt that the evidence based approach does not recognize or include them because the forms of evidence humanists use "are not being recognized as important" (Koufogiannakis, 2012, p. 6). Overlooking or ignoring the kind of evidence humanists value may have led librarian scholars with humanities backgrounds to ignore or drop out of the EBLIP conversation because it does not seem open to their work, ideas, or approaches.

This commentary attempts to redress this real or perceived exclusion by exploring how humanities research fits within evidence based practice in librarianship. Does humanities research have a place within a model using evidence for practice-based decision making? Can the humanities' forms of evidence—theory and reflection—be useful in librarian decision making? Can theory and reflection as forms of evidence push EBLIP in new directions by asking different questions and by asking questions differently?

Since one cannot quantify theoretical thoughts or measure reflective practice, some researchers might view the kind of evidence humanists value as soft at best, inadmissible at worst. In this commentary we will provide an overview of humanities research, consider the properties of humanities research, and argue that humanities research not only fits within EBLIP, it offers a much needed approach to our decision making processes.

Humanities research

If one asked 100 humanists "what exactly are the humanities?" most scholars would likely begin by mentioning the connections to disciplines such as English Literature, Philosophy, History, Modern Languages, Classics, and so on. Likely, this is where the commonalities would end and 100 different answers would then emerge regarding research topics, approach, or methodologies. For most, if not all, humanists, the discipline's open-endedness in terms of subject, approach, methodology, and forms of "evidence" is what is appealing to them. It is this openness or flexibility, however, which makes humanities research seem suspicious, non-rigorous, and conjectural to those outside the discipline. Most humanities research *is* different from most social science research. We must remember though that the word "different" should be used as a descriptor not a value judgment. It is because humanities research is different from social science research that it has so much to offer EBLIP.

For most scholars working in the humanities, it is not the quest for a single or definitive answer that fuels their work but rather the process of asking difficult and complex questions and working through those questions. Perhaps this is why it is so difficult to find a single, stable definition of the humanities: those working in humanities tend to be suspicious of any answer that tries to be absolute or definitive. This is not to say that humanities scholars do not consider, problematize, or theorize their field of study: they do, often in great length and detail. However, when humanities scholars set out to consider their field of study, they tend to do so at a disciplinary level rather than a categorical level: what *is* philosophical research? What drives literary scholarship? Nevertheless,

through describing their specific fields, humanities scholars often reveal key elements of humanities research.

Jordanova (2000), for example, provides what could be read more broadly as an excellent overview of humanities research. She writes:

> Historians study human nature in operation. They do not observe this directly as anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists have the chance to do, but mediated through sources. They are interested in both the abstract and the concrete features of past societies, and in the connections between them . . . history involves intricate dialogues between the specific and the general. Any given text, image, activity or experience is set in context*s*—the plural is important since historians typically consider a range of contexts, including those in which their sources were produced, received, and used and those in which complex phenomena take place and are given. Customarily, such contexts involve structural elements, that is, the systems through which a given society functions—the distribution of wealth and of power, forms of social difference, institutions, administrations, governance and so on. (p. 197)

Literature scholar Graff's (2007) description of literary theory is similarly useful in understanding humanities research. He contends that we must think of literary theory not "as a set of systematic principles necessarily, or a founding philosophy, but simply as an inquiry into assumptions, premises and legitimizing principles and concepts" (p. 252). Literary theory, he goes on to argue:

> treats literature in some respects as a problem and seeks to formulate that problem in general terms. Theory is generated when some aspect of

literature, its nature, its history, its place in society, its conditions of production and reception, its meaning in general, or the meanings of particular works, ceases to be given and it becomes a question to be argued in a general way. Theory is what inevitably arises when literary conventions and critical definitions once taken for granted have become objects of generalized discussion and dispute. (p. 252)

Jordanova's and Graff's descriptions of their fields offer us several key concepts that are worth keeping in mind as we ponder what the humanities are about and what humanists do in their research. Humanists tend to explore connections between the abstract and concrete, create dialogues between the specific and general, consider context, engage with complex phenomena and structural elements, and investigate assumptions and premises we often take for granted.

Much of humanities research is also about synthesizing, by pulling diverse elements together, placing them in dialogue, looking for relationships, and articulating a cohesive, well-argued narrative about those elements and relationships. To go back to Jordanova's description of her field, historical research involves:

> using historical materials and ideas in a coherent argument, showing their significance, especially in the light of other accounts, making convincing, plausible claims based upon research findings, and employing concepts, theories, frameworks appropriately. These are dependent on other skills: clear, logical and evocative writing, critical reading, making connections, and the ability to see patterns and links, that is, to think laterally, integrating different kinds of materials. (pp. 185-186)

Key components of humanities research are questions and the act of questioning. Jordanova describes the role of questions in historical research thusly:

> the way into any historical work—whether undergraduate essays or the most advanced research—must be through a question, a puzzle, a conundrum, an anomaly, a surprise, a hypothesis. These can take many different forms, but most often they involve some kind of comparison, which provides a context for the question. (p. 174)

By foregrounding questions as the starting place of research, the humanities are no different from any other discipline; every discipline uses questions as their starting point for research. However, what distinguishes the humanities from other disciplines are the ways questions are approached and the role "answers" play within the scholarly process. Finite answers are rarely the goal within most humanities research. Instead, what is important is the process of working through questions and posing new questions.

As Graff has pointed out about the teaching of literature, "[t]he assumption has been that students should be exposed to the *results* of the disagreements between their instructors—results presumably representing settled knowledge not the debates that produced them" (p. vii). Instead of showing students the results of scholarly debates, Graff argues we need to teach the controversies:

> controversial issues are not tangential to academic knowledge but part of that knowledge. That is, controversy is integral to the subject matter of subjects or disciplines – it is the object of knowledge or is inseparable from it. Debates about what a literary work means, or whether it deserves classic status or not are internal to the study of

that work, if only because such debates are part of the awareness of literate readers. (p. xv)

Questions such as what does Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18" mean, or does Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* deserve "classic status," are questions that cannot be proved definitively and they are not intended to be proved. Instead, they are questions that ask us to consider issues such as: where does meaning come from? How do we make meaning or arrive at meaning from reading a poem? Or, what makes a literary text worthy of classic status? What qualities should that work possess? Who decides what is a classic or not a classic? As these brief examples suggest, humanities research often answers questions with other questions, and it values the process of working through questions perhaps more than arriving at an answer.

As noted above, answers in humanities research are rarely finite, fixed, or definitive: rather, the answers are always contextual, open to further synthesis and interpretation, and demanding of new questions. As Graff reflects:

> The better historians never forget that any reconstruction of the past is always problematic and open to challenge, that historical interpretation is not simply a matter of accumulating facts but a hermeneutical weighing of inferences and hypotheses whose results are conjectural, tentative, and subject to refutation. (pp. 203-204)

As Graff's quotation suggests, questions are not asked for the sake of asking questions: questions are asked as a way to further knowledge, interrogate controversies, understand the complexities within a particular topic or issue, and synthesize different, differing and often contradictory forms of evidence.

One final aspect of some humanities research we would like to draw attention to is the articulation of explicit or implicit connections

with the world outside of the discipline. Frequently, humanities research has elements of social justice or social change within the research question. Some progressive humanities researchers view their work as Ammons (2010) describes:

> Our task (as progressive humanists) is to open young people's eyes to oppressive systems of human power, how they work, and how we are all involved in them. We expose the injustices and the ideologies driving them…. We help others to see the importance of interrogating the bases of contemporary thought in order to understand destructive forces in the world today such as racism, environmental devastation, and economic imperialism. (pp. 11-12)

A progressive humanistic approach, she further argues, should not only show "what's wrong in the world but also *how we might fix it*—what actions, personal and collective, we might take to change the world for the better" (p. 14). In progressive humanities research, we are reminded that the work we do, the research we conduct can—and indeed *should*—make a difference in the world. Certainly, there are similar social justice elements within librarianship and within our individual and collective practice. Humanities research could help us nurture and further develop work in the areas of progressive librarianship. Even if we do not work with students in the ways that Ammons describes, it is worth considering if there are ways we can ask critical questions of ourselves and our profession regarding the ways we do our work and run our libraries in relation to the "systems of human power" (p. 11).

While some scholars have attempted to pin down humanities research methodologies (Ochsner, Hug, & Daniel, 2013), one inherent merit of the humanities is its flexibility and openness depending on what a particular question or situation requires. Jordanova calls this flexibility "eclecticism," a word she hastens to note is "sometimes treated as a dirty word" (p. 198). "At the very least," she continues:

> it sounds untidy—just so: if historians treat the past in too tidy a manner they lose a great deal. … It is precisely the ability to embrace complexities while making sense of them, and to think flexibly about diverse phenomenon at distinct analytical levels that characterises historians' purchase on the past. (p. 198)

Certainly, the humanities' methodological openness can, from the outside, seem soft, questionable, and hardly rigorous. However, it is important to remember that humanities research uses a different set of critical paradigms and asks different questions. As William Bruce Cameron (1963) writes, "not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted" (p. 13). If humanities scholarship asks us to "count" different things, what might those different things be and how might they contribute to our practice in librarianship, and more specifically, evidence based practice?

Incorporating humanities research into evidence based practice

As a movement within librarianship, EBLIP is focused on the practical integration of the best sources of evidence to answer questions that arise in practice within our profession. EBLIP provides a model for librarians to use as a guide in order to more thoroughly adapt and be successful with such an approach to decision making. The stages within a revised EBLIP model are:

- *Articulate* – come to an understanding of the problem and articulate it.
- *Assemble* – assemble evidence from multiple sources that are most appropriate to the problem at hand.

- *Assess* – place the evidence against all components of the wider overarching problem. Assess the evidence for its quantity and quality.
- *Agree* – determine the best way forward and if working with a group, try to achieve consensus based on the evidence and organisational goals.
- *Adapt* –revisit goals and needs. Reflect on the success of the implementation. (Booth, 2009, p. 342; Koufogiannakis, 2013, pp. 189-190)

Throughout these stages there is not only room for humanities research, there is a distinct need for a humanities approach to be incorporated. In the beginning stage of *Articulate*, one asks, "what do I already know" and places the question or problem in a wider context. While there may be a very specific question to be answered at this point in time, it is valuable to explore the wider issues and understand the many other questions that arise in conjunction with the problem to be addressed. It is here where we may incorporate professional knowledge and the wider concerns and principles of the profession into our thinking about the problem. We need, as Graff (2007) might argue, to engage with the controversies of our profession. A humanities approach at this stage would push us to seek wider understandings of the various issues arising, and urge us to go into problems with knowledge that answers may not be easy or tidy. Humanities research will also remind us that the absence of definitiveness is not only to be expected but also acceptable.

Questioning what we do in practice ultimately leads us to determine what kind of practice we collectively want to have as librarians, strengthening our knowledge of what we believe in, how we progress in changing times, and where we ultimately set our priorities and goals. Within this questioning process, humanities approaches will remind us that the very notion of "best" is highly contextual and extremely subjective. We need to remember that

words like "good" or "best" are words that we have come to take for granted and not problematize: we must make words like these "objects of generalized discussion and dispute" (Graff, 2007, p. 252). In so doing, we remember that whatever is "best" is highly subjective, extremely context-dependent, and very likely to change.

When *Assembling* evidence to answer the question or problem at hand, humanities thinking reminds us to use whatever evidence we need to answer the question. It also asks us to be flexible and incorporate the many sources of evidence into our desire to come to a "good" decision, rather than rigidly following a hierarchy or set path. Further, it demands that we evaluate and critically think about all pieces of evidence and all kinds of evidence with an open mind. As we *Assess* the various forms of evidence, we draw upon the humanities' skills of synthesizing and drawing together connections between differing pieces of evidence in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the evidence than we could if we isolated individual sources. This type of consideration of evidence would facilitate dialogue leading to the *Agree* stage of the process, wherein the group would consider all elements and appreciate what all members bring to the table. By taking the time to consider the whole of what is presented and how it fits together—or does not fit together—we rigorously evaluate what the "best" way forward might be at this particular point in time. We understand that whatever answer we arrive at is not final, but is sufficient for the time being and changeable in the future.

The final stage in the cyclical EBLIP process is *Adapt*, and this stage calls for reflection upon one's role and actions within the decision making process, paying attention to new questions or problems arising. It encourages immediate questioning and placement of the process back into the wider context surrounding the decision. The EBLIP process does not simply end when a decision is made, but encourages

openness and curiosity: a humanities perspective reminds us there are always more questions than answers. A humanities perspective invites open, innovative, and creative thought, while loosening rigidity and static absolutes.

For EBLIP to be successful, librarians must acknowledge that uncertainty is acceptable and that questioning practice is a healthy part of growth and, as such, is a valid form of research inquiry. A humanities approach to research helps us see questioning as the norm and understand that any decision does not need to be closed or made final in order for it to be a "successful" decision. As practitioners we need to know that changing a decision based on new evidence is not a failure, but rather a successful progression that shows adaptability and growth. If we focus, as humanists do, on continually questioning, we will understand why we are moving in a certain direction and better understand what makes a "good" decision. Perhaps rather than thinking that EBLIP will lead us to a "best" and final answer to a particular practice question, we need to acknowledge that EBLIP will help us to make the best answer in a particular context, at a particular point in time.

Humanities research may not fit into a tidy checklist regarding validity and reliability of method, but it is perhaps best suited to answer the bigger, most important questions within librarianship. Questions such as "What do we mean by 'best'?", or "For whom does this 'best' solution best serve?", are questions that make us think differently about our processes, practices, and decisions. Further, questions such as, "What are the unstated principles or assumptions that we are operating under?", or "How are these practices or decisions responding to larger institutional, cultural, economic, or global initiatives?", help us to locate our decision making within a broader context. These types of questions need to draw upon processes that synthesize and contextualize evidence, place concrete and abstract in dialogue with each

other, and problematize the accepted and given assumptions and practices: these are processes that are central to humanities research. We need to remember that asking and seeking answers to these types of questions is also part of being an evidence based practitioner. Without considering the bigger picture and questioning the core values that inform our practices and decisions, we will lose sight of the potentials within our profession. Humanities research can help us pull new kinds of evidence into our practice and to think about evidence in new ways. In so doing, humanities research can help us articulate complex readings of issues within our profession and the role these issues play in our profession as a whole.

If we use humanities research in EBLIP, we need to be able to accept that theory and reflection *are* valid and reliable forms of evidence. Certainly most theories or reflections cannot be empirically proved or quantified, but that is not to say that they are not rigorous or reliable forms of evidence. To revisit Jordanova and Graff, theoretical and reflective thinking requires a range of rigorous modes of thinking, analysis, and evaluation as they explore the connections between the abstract and the concrete, the specific and the general and consider how context, complex phenomena and structural elements work together. In their inquiry into "assumptions and premises we often take for granted" (Graff, 2007, p. 252), humanities researchers synthesize diverse and often contradictory forms of information and evidence and put them into dialogue with each other and with broader social, political, economic, cultural, or disciplinary contexts. Finally, humanities researchers present their "findings" in carefully constructed, well-argued, well-supported, logical, compelling written arguments. As Jordanova writes, "these are complex and subtle skills" (2000, p.186). To understand what humanities research can contribute to EBLIP and studies of the profession, we need to count these "complex and subtle" skills as valuable, rigorous, reliable, and intellectually useful. Additionally, we need

to count the questions humanities research raises as useful ways to consider our practice and to inform our decision-making process.

A practical example of what humanities research could contribute to decision making processes can be drawn from the broad topic of open access (OA). OA possesses a wide-ranging complexity and is of concern to librarians, as well as faculty, publishers, funding bodies, and the public. It is an issue that some librarians have embraced as one that is core to our profession, and one for which they want to play a role in shaping future development. If we look at OA from an evidence based perspective, we would start with the problem we are facing or trying to solve, and pose that problem as a question. There are probably thousands of questions one could ask in relation to OA, but let us consider the example related to OA author fees that might arise in practice:

- What is the most efficient way to manage an open access author's fund at my institution?
- What do faculty think about paying author fees, and would they welcome library support?
- Should libraries be paying author fees?

An EBLIP approach asks that you consider what evidence would be the best to answer the question at hand. The question about efficiency would probably be best answered by quantitative research study that can be applied to your own situation, or lacking that, an examination of how others have been managing their author funds. Through comparison, you could determine what would work best at your own institution. The question related to what faculty think about paying author fees would likely look to qualitative studies already published, and be supplemented with local information to obtain a better understanding of local needs and the library's role within the larger organizational context.

On the surface, the question "should libraries be paying author fees" could be examined qualitatively or quantitatively through surveys or interviews asking for librarian, faculty, and administrators' opinions on the topic. However, this question could also be approached as a humanities question. Instead of treating it as a "yes or no" question that aims to find out what most people think, it would take a broader approach dealing with principles and sub-questions relating to the library's role and support of OA and the broader nature and context of OA. If we begin thinking further about libraries' roles related to OA, additional questions would emerge such as: why is OA important to libraries? From where does that commitment emerge? With what values of librarianship does OA connect? What are the broader social, professional, economic, cultural contexts for the OA movement? Humanities research would, in this instance, push us to interrogate some of the principles behind OA.

Within librarianship today there is an overwhelming consensus that OA is, overall, a "good" thing and that libraries should be involved in OA. However, there are multiple nuances and implications to OA that we urgently need to take into account and assumptions we need to examine and unpack. OA has become something unquestionably "good" to our profession and as such it has become something we take for granted and often do not question or problematize. Because librarianship has so actively endorsed OA, there have been very few critics of OA as a concept, principle, or practice. Even though there are infinitely more reasons to support OA than to reject it, we still need to question our trust of it and ask the difficult questions so that we are confident we are making the "best" possible decisions locally, nationally, and globally. We need to consider questions like: are there downsides to OA? Have we considered what OA does or might do to the economies of scholarly publishing or university presses? Who benefits from OA? Do our notions of OA take into account the economies of scholarly

publishing? Could OA become undemocratic or oppressive in other ways? Who pays for OA journals? Are OA journals staffed by volunteers or paid employees? If unpaid labour, what does OA do to the de-professionalization of trained and skilled copyeditors, editors, and production staff? If paid labour, who is paying? If authors are expected to pay to be published in a particular journal, there are questions we need to ask about scholars' abilities to pay. Would scholars have to pay fees themselves, or would their universities cover these fees? What about sessional faculty or graduate students? Could author payments mean that someday only scholars from elite institutions could afford to publish in the top journals? Are there ethical issues related to paying to be published in a scholarly forum? Further, we could also ask questions of a progressive humanities nature: how could (or does) OA make a difference in the world in terms of power, equity, and equality? Are there ways that OA could contribute to larger social justice issues?

None of the above mentioned questions are easy but they are questions we need to ask of ourselves, of our practice, and of our profession. We need to ask these questions to work through all aspects of OA and understand how it fits in with broader contexts. We may not arrive at a single answer or a definitive answer, but the process of asking these tough questions makes us confident that, whatever decisions we arrive at, we have considered all of the nuances of the question and that our decisions our decisions are solid, rigorously considered, thoroughly contextualized, and forward looking.

Conclusion

In 2013, Horgan published a blog post on the *Scientific American* site called "Why Study Humanities? What I Tell Engineering Freshman." Horgan tells his students that the humanities are subversive. They undermine the claims of all authorities, whether political, religious or scientific. ... The humanities are more about questions than answers, and we're

going to wrestle with some ridiculously big questions in this class" (n.p).

Horgan's phrase "wrestle with some ridiculously big questions" summarizes much humanities research. It is possible that wrestling with ridiculously big questions may be the best definition of humanities research we can find. Humanities research is crucial to an evidence based approach to practice because the humanities can wrestle with those ridiculously big questions in librarianship. The type of evidence used in research always depends on the question at hand, and humanities research will help us navigate and consider some of the larger issues that inform, contextualize, problematize, and develop questions about our profession and practice which EBLIP, in its current approach, cannot. Answers to questions about how we move forward within our profession and what directions we should take must be guided by principles that have been questioned, interrogated, theorized, problematized, and reflected upon using a wide spectrum of evidence and critical approaches.

As scholars and practitioners, it is unlikely we will ever be able to provide answers to the ridiculously big questions our profession asks of us. However, we must see this open-endedness as not only acceptable but necessary. If we limit our research inquiries to questions that can be answered definitively, we scale back the kinds of questions we ask about our practice and our profession. In so doing, we miss some of the major issues, controversies, and ideas that make our profession engaging and vital. Further, if we only rely on evidence that is countable or quantifiable, we are excluding a whole segment of evidence that can help us think critically, creatively, and innovatively about our profession and our practice both today and in the future.

Horgan concludes by arguing the point of the humanities is that they "keep us from being trapped by our own desire for certainty" (n.p.). Librarianship is at a point in time where we are

bombarded by some ridiculously big questions and we need all manner of thinking and all manner of thinkers working on these questions. The quest for certainty through uncertainty and an ability to count what cannot be counted are the types of contradictions that EBLIP should embrace. Bringing the humanities to EBLIP is not only possible – it is necessary.

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