Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Applicability: What Is It? How Do You Find It?

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We've come a long way over the past year in this column. There's been the formulation of the well-built question, the seeking and finding of evidence in the published literature, the consideration of conducting research yourself, and the appraisal of research evidence. Now that you have some valid evidence, you need to determine its applicability to the situation at hand.

Applicability "relates to the extent to which the results are likely to impact on practice" (Booth & Brice, 2004). Whether or not a particular research study is applicable to your situation is subjective. What works for one person's situation, may not work for another because "libraries show considerable variation with regard to environment, context and institutional values" (Booth, 2009). Determining applicability is an essential step in evidence based practice, and it is important to note that there are different levels of applicability to look for.

The evidence you find that is relevant to your situation will usually be one of four things:

1. Directly applicable
2. Needs to be locally validated (i.e. replicate the study at the local level)
3. Needs to be adapted (derivation)

4. Improves your understanding of the situation (Koufogiannakis & Crumley, 2004 (1, 2 and 4), and Booth, 2004 (3))

Ideally, a piece of research evidence you find will match all or many of the particulars of your situation, so you can apply it directly and move on to evaluating the results. How do you decide if evidence is directly applicable? There are several variables to consider:

*   User group: Does the user group in the study compare to your user group?
*   Timeliness: Is the research current enough? Technology research, for example, should be the most current research available, while research on collections can be somewhat older.
*   Cost: Is it fiscally feasible to apply the evidence in your current environment?
*   Politics: Is there resistance to change in your work environment? Will the new concept be accepted? Will an adversarial relationship be created?
*   Severity: How critical is it that a solution to your situation be found, and quickly? (Koufogiannakis and Crumley, 2004)

With a bit of thought, you can determine whether or not the research evidence you have found can be directly applied to the decision you need to make or the problem that needs to be solved in your practice.

Because, at present, the body of evidence for library and information studies is smaller than, for example, medicine, finding research that is directly applicable can be difficult. You will more likely find evidence that resembles your situation, but that needs to be replicated and validated at the local level. Koufogiannakis and Crumley state that "when librarians locally validate existing evidence, they are building the evidence base" (2004). It is worthwhile keeping in mind that if you go the route of validating the evidence you have found by replicating it at your level, the greater LIS community will benefit if you write up your

efforts and find a way to disseminate the information. Similarly, taking evidence that illustrates larger issues and applying it at a local level can result in rich and useful material with which to work and can be used as an example by other libraries.

Additionally, part of the evidence you find could be adaptable to your own situation. Booth (2004) calls this derivation. Derivation is possible when "some aspect of the methodology or perhaps the instrument (questionnaire or interview schedule) can be adapted to your own practice, though different" (Booth, 2004). In other words, to avoid reinventing the wheel you can borrow a part or parts of a research study to construct your own. As an added benefit, "deviation from a reported intervention, tailoring it according to detailed knowledge of the library's clientele, may lead to an enhanced chance of success" (Booth, 2009).

The most common form of evidence found is evidence that helps to improve a librarian's understanding of a situation. While not directly applicable to what is going on, this kind of evidence can be applied in ways that increase knowledge and provide a larger context. Keeping up with issues important to your practice is a central part of evidence based practice, and reading widely is a good habit to develop.

Evidence-Based Practice for Information Professionals: A Handbook contains an excellent chapter on applicability (chapter 10). The book is currently out of print but a PDF of the pre-publication manuscript has recent been made available at http://ebliptext.pbworks.com/. Also useful is an applicability checklist compiled by librarians at the University of Newcastle in Australia. The checklist contains questions about user group, timeliness, cost, politics, and severity that will help to determine the applicability of research evidence. You can find the checklist here: http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/library/gosford/ebl/toolkit

Only you can decide if a piece of research is applicable to your situation. With these tools, categorizing the research should be straightforward, and you will be well on your way to applying the evidence you have found. In the next issue, *EBL 101* will focus on evaluating the results of the research application.

References

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