



Commentary

The Changing Nature of Evidence for EBLIP

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It has been an honour and a pleasure to have been involved in the EBLIP journal in so many roles over the past 10 years. I was a peer reviewer for the first issue, then Associate Editor Articles, Editor in Chief, and now an Editorial advisor. Time has flown very quickly. Over recent months fewer editorial duties have enabled me to be involved in a wider range of EBLIP related projects. This has given me chance to reflect on the changing nature of evidence over the years.

My initial experiences of evidence based practice took place before the terms evidence based libraries, evidence based information practice, or evidence based library and information practice were coined. In 1993, fresh out of library school, I worked in a health research unit that specialized in outcome measurement, just as evidence based medicine was being discussed

and taken up within the United Kingdom. My manager at the time, a strong advocate for librarians who saw them as essential components in evidence based practice, encouraged me to do research and apply that evidence to my own information practice. We went on to develop and move forward a project that examined the feasibility of taking an evidence based approach to social care (Long et al. 2002a). Here, we found that it was possible to “be evidence based” but the nature of evidence wasn’t as clear cut as in medicine. Questions were complex and difficult to focus, quantitative research methods weren’t always appropriate, the literature was scattered, and we needed to develop techniques and approaches for searching and appraising more diverse evidence (Brettle & Long, 2001; Long et al. 2002 a, b, c, d). To me this always had many parallels with the

evidence base in library and information science (LIS) and the challenges of EBLIP.

Common definitions of EBLIP (e.g., Booth, 2000) did not stress research evidence over professional knowledge or user preferences; however research evidence (and in particular quantitative designs) has seemed to take priority within professional discourses (Eldredge, 2002) about EBLIP. This has long been problematic within LIS, as the evidence base doesn't lend itself to such an emphasis. The questions that librarians ask may not always lend themselves to quantitative research designs and if they do there is unlikely to be the funding to conduct large scale rigorous studies. Throughout all my roles within the *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice (EBLIP)* journal, my ethos has been to publish "best evidence". This may be about the "best" type of evidence for a particular question or it may be the "best" type of evidence that can be collected by a particular library at a particular time. For example, *EBLIP* has published systematic reviews (Koufogiannakis & Weibe, 2006), correlational studies (Eng & Stadler, 2015), quantitative analysis (Newell, 2010), and qualitative studies (Rankin, 2012). Over time as a profession we can look at our evidence base and seek to improve it, but the evidence needs to fit the question and the context and, in the meantime, we need to use the best evidence we can find to help professional decision making.

One of my early EBLIP related projects was to conduct a systematic review on information skills training in health libraries (Brettle, 2003). One of the key findings was a lack of rigorous studies on which to draw conclusions about effectiveness. Reviews conducted around the same time about clinical librarians had similar findings (Winning and Beverley, 2003; Cimpl & Wagner, 2003) and not much changed over the next few years with more systematic reviews noting a lack of rigorous studies about health libraries and their services (Weightman & Williamson, 2005; Brettle et al, 2011). More recently, however, I have begun to sense a

change. I have just completed a systematic scoping review of the evidence for professionally trained and qualified library, information and knowledge professionals (Brettle & Maden, 2015). Looking across all library sectors we found evidence of effectiveness, impact, and value for health librarians, school librarians, academic librarians, and public libraries. The evidence came from a wide range of study designs, with some sectors favouring particular approaches. For example the return on investment method was popular within public libraries; school and academic libraries favoured correlational or mixed method studies; and health libraries had the largest number of systematic reviews and randomized controlled trials. These types of evidence may be problematic for those who follow a traditional medical hierarchy of evidence, but these studies undoubtedly provide evidence. As well as the wide variety of study designs, what was particularly heartening was that quite a number of studies were published either as primary research or as evidence summaries in the *EBLIP* journal. There is still some way to go, however. For many library sectors we found no evidence, and there are still relatively few systematic reviews (Koufogiannakis & Brettle, 2015). We also noticed much evidence in the grey literature that is difficult to find and appraise. These issues are a challenge for researchers – but even more so for practitioners who want to use evidence to help them make decisions.

I recently co-edited a book with *EBLIP* journal colleague, Denise Koufogiannakis that takes a wider view of the evidence that librarians use (Koufogiannakis & Brettle, in press). The EBLIP model put forward in the book emphasizes all types of evidence, whether research evidence, local evidence or the practitioners' knowledge (Koufogiannakis, 2013). The second part of the book examines evidence based practice and the evidence base in different library sectors. EBLIP has developed in different ways across sectors, and as found in our scoping review (Brettle & Maden, 2015), different sectors favour different

types of evidence and study designs. For example in school libraries, action research has been a key feature, and in special and public libraries the concept of EBLIP is not so well known, but the need to use evidence to demonstrate value and impact to stakeholders is key.

In the future I'm looking forward to seeing the evidence base in LIS develop further and seeing librarians learn from each other in finding new ways of approaching evidence based practice and using evidence in their practice. I'm sure that the *EBLIP* journal will play a key role in this for the next 10 years and beyond. Happy 10th birthday *EBLIP* journal!

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