



Commentary

Transforming the Profession: Reflections on Evidence Based Library and Information Practice, 4th International Conference

Alison Brettle

Research Fellow/Associate Editor Evidence Based Library and Information Practice
Salford Centre for Nursing, Midwifery and Collaborative Research
Institute of Health and Social Care
University of Salford, Salford, UK
E-mail: a.brettle@salford.ac.uk

© 2007 Brettle. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Transforming the Profession was the 4th International Evidence Based Library and Practice (EBLIP) Conference and promised a varied and inspiring mix of presentations and keynote speakers together with opportunities for meeting like-minded colleagues from across the world. It was my 4th EBLIP conference and for me, also offered a chance to hear people speak whose work I have admired for some time, catch up with colleagues and friends from previous EBLIP and other conferences, and most importantly, meet members of the EBLIP journal team face to face for the first time.

The program offered something for all types of libraries and librarians. It covered the use of evidence based library and information practice for a wide range of themes including management, user needs, building the evidence base, outcomes assessment, collection development, decision making, instruction, special libraries, finding evidence, education

and professional development and research in progress. Criticism of previous EBLIP conferences is that it has been dominated by health library representation. This should not be surprising, given that the paradigm originated in the health field, but this time the number of presentations from other sectors provided evidence of the spread of the paradigm across the profession. As a speaker in two sessions and moderator of two more, I did not always get to the slots I would have chosen. This was not necessarily a bad thing as it provided the chance for me to step outside my comfort zone and listen to interesting speakers in different areas. Some of these are highlighted below.

The conference opened with an inspiring and thought provoking keynote speech from Margaret Haines on Professionalism and Evidence Based Practice: Reflections of a University Librarian. Margaret has had a varied

career both in the United Kingdom and Canada and suggested that for her, EBP is a means of ensuring that what is being done is worthwhile and is being done in the best possible way. She provided examples of attempts she had made to implement evidence based practice at a national and local level and described how, worryingly, efforts that had appeared successful in one post disappeared when she left. This highlighted a potential problem for evidence based library and information practice in that it is of little use leaving things to the “early adopters” or champions if their efforts are going to be wasted when they move on. To be sustainable rather than a passing fad, evidence based library and information practice needs to be embedded and recognised at all levels.

“Choices in chaos”, a presentation by Michelynn McKnight, describing a project examining the library services provided in community wide disasters, is a good demonstration of an expansion of the paradigm outside health. It also opened my eyes in that I had never anticipated a need for library services in the aftermath of hurricanes and other community disasters, let alone considered there was a need for an evidence base. Michelynn presented cases where librarians provided support to members of the public by establishing mobile library services that allowed people left homeless after disasters to use the Internet to sort out their lives. Her research will use a grounded theory approach to study cases such as these to provide an evidence based training package for librarians who may need to provide such services.

Examining the outcomes of services was a welcomed theme in a number of the presentations I attended. Examining, monitoring or assessing outcomes are key if librarians are to truly measure the impact of their services. There were a number of examples of outcome measurement in academic library settings including Ngata, Toda and Kytomaki (Students patterns of library use and their learning outcomes), Eric Ackermann

(LibQUAL and the evolution of library as a place) and Byrd and Squires (The readiness of the library director community to measure outcomes rather than inputs and outputs). Rowena Cullen, Associate Professor at Victoria University, New Zealand, and one of the keynote speakers, also visited this theme in her talk about evidence and e-government. She suggested that the use of online technology in government has expanded rapidly but measuring and evaluating whether this technology has actually worked or made a difference has lagged behind. Commenting that it was difficult to measure effectiveness in e-government (but noting that this was not an excuse for not trying) she suggested that the traditional hierarchy of evidence approach was unlikely to be relevant – or at least the methodologies at the top of the evidence hierarchy. Methods such as policy or program evaluation or descriptive and formative evaluation may be more appropriate. One of the issues that can be problematic is the issue of attribution: if you apply evidence or changes to e-government how do you know which bit is making the impact? This is not a problem unique to e-government; however, it is an issue relevant to outcome measurement in many areas. She suggested that in policy evaluation it is necessary to look at what is being measured and examine whether the program is doing what it is intended to do. Confounding variables need to be eliminated, all impacts need to be followed through, measured and evaluated individually. Again, this is not unique to policy evaluation but is a problem faced by any researcher trying to carry out an evaluation. For evidence based librarians perhaps its good news as it means there should be many examples in a range of sectors upon which we can draw.

But what does it mean to be an evidence based librarian? This is a question under examination by a team of librarians from the University of Queensland in Australia, led by Helen Partridge and presented by Gillian Hallam. They are carrying out a qualitative study to examine how practitioners experience and conceive EBLIP.

To date, pilot interviews with a small number of librarians have led to four categories of evidence based librarians: those who believe EBL is a professional accident, that EBL is learning from and using research, that EBL improves what the librarian does or what the library offers, and those who believe that EBL is integral to their job – EBL is what they do. Other presentations provided good examples of librarians implementing an evidence based approach to answer questions in their library or service (perhaps they would fit in the third category above!). These included Frank Cervone, who used an evidence based approach to make changes to the design of the academic library website; Lisa Toner, who examined why some students made little or no use of the academic library and the services offered to them in order to provide an equitable service to users; and Matthew Trekson, who used citation analysis to determine whether the databases provided by an agricultural library service met the needs of the researchers using the library.

But is evidence based library and information practice clear and simple or wrong? This was the topic debated by two eminent speakers: Andrew Booth and T. Scott Plutchak. Andrew Booth, Chair of the International Program Committee, not surprisingly argued that the EBLIP approach was useful for evaluating many questions faced by the profession. For those who have read Andrew's work or seen him speak at other conferences, it would have been worrying to see him argue in any other way. T. Scott Plutchak, from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, on the other hand argued that the evidence based model was inappropriate for answering the "big questions" facing librarianship. Once thrown open to the floor the debate became quite heated to some who argued that EBLIP was not new: it was something that, as professionals, all librarians did as a matter of course. Others clearly disagreed that searching for evidence and applying it to their practice was not happening and should be embedded within everyday practice. The final vote was split between the "fors" and the "againsts" with

a fair number of abstentions. As one of the abstainers I could see both sides of the argument: evidence based library and information practice is a useful tool and something that all librarians should be involved in but sometimes it does not appear possible to implement it.

For me, the conference lacked actual evidence that librarians could take away and use in their own practice. This may be a reflection of the presentations I attended and further examination of all the presentations on the conference website <http://www.eblip4.unc.edu/> may prove me wrong. Overall there was a positive shift away from discussions of definitions of evidence based library and information practice and its progress (which have featured at previous EBLIP conferences) to a demonstration that EBLIP is operational in a wide range of sectors in many parts of the world. However I would like to have seen more good quality, generalisable research studies which would help to build the evidence base for practitioners. I appreciate that finding time and money to undertake research studies is a key issue and barrier to research and one which I am not sure how to overcome, but perhaps as Rowena Cullen pointed out, "being difficult is not an excuse for not doing". I would also like to have seen more systematic reviews. As author and team member of a range of systematic reviews, I am undoubtedly biased in this area. Some may argue that there is insufficient evidence to review, however reviews in LIS exist and Andrew Booth spoke about the potential role of qualitative systematic reviews in EBLIP. I also believe librarians have a major role to play in systematic reviews. They are not only in a position to provide the information expertise for systematic reviews, as many librarians are doing in the health and social science fields, but their skills put them in a good position to undertake systematic reviews in their own field. Systematic reviews involve refining questions, undertaking systematic and comprehensive literature searches, critical appraisal of the evidence and synthesising the results. A large unspoken part of systematic

reviewing includes managing the results obtained often using reference management packages. Systematic reviews are frequently carried out in teams. Librarians can refine questions, many have in-depth searching skills, knowledge of resources, and knowledge of reference management and already work in teams. Some already have critical appraisal skills, and there were opportunities at the post conference workshops to develop these together with skills in data synthesis. If librarians teamed up and pooled their skills and knowledge it would be possible, and hopefully not too difficult, to undertake more systematic reviews. It would be great to see them presented at EBLIP5 in Stockholm!