



Commentary

Provocative and Stimulating – but EBLIP (and Information Literacy) are Moving Targets!<sup>1</sup>

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Recent years have seen several commentators, including myself, complain that the EBLIP movement is in danger of becoming too “comfortable” (Booth & Brice, 2007). Indeed it can seem like a family where you try to be polite to each other today in the knowledge that you will still have to get on with each other on the next day, and the next, *ad infinitum*. The International Programme Committee for the 5<sup>th</sup> International EBLIP Conference in Stockholm faithfully discharged their commission to make the plenary content more provocative and controversial. Focus for such a session was Ola Pilerot, a spokesman for the Information Literacy movement (2006a, 2006b), asked to bring a welcome outsider’s view to the conference. Certainly, from

comments made in the conference evaluation, Ola seems to have fitted the bill.

Starting with a description of the process of information literacy from the Association of College and Research Libraries, *Information Literacy Competency Standards* (2000), no doubt like many in the audience, I was struck with similarities with the process of evidence based practice (Table 1).

Of course, it is differences between the two processes that are most illuminating. Evidence based practice includes the closing of the cycle with “Assess”. Information literacy includes a stage of incorporating new (incident) knowledge with previous (prevalent)

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<sup>1</sup>Response to the Keynote Address by Ola Pilerot at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference for Evidence Based Library and Information Practice, Stockholm, Sweden, July 2009. All interpretations are the author’s own. Ola Pilerot declined the opportunity to write his own commentary but positively welcomed someone else’s commentary on his presentation.

Table 1  
Similarities and Differences between Information Literacy and Evidence Based Practice (EBP)

Information Literacy Competency	Corresponding Steps in EBP Process
Determine the extent of information needed	Ask
Access the needed information effectively and efficiently	Acquire
Evaluate information and its sources critically	Appraise
Incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base	[Assimilate?]
Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose	Act
	Assess
Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally	

knowledge (Mills & Gray, 2007) – in attributing a new “A” to this stage of the evidence based process we might settle on “Assimilate”. However, the most telling addition from information literacy is the final item, “Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally”. This made me realise that the “instrumentality” of information (i.e. information as a tool) when used in evidence based practice, perhaps neglects sufficient acknowledgement of the economic, legal, and social context. It is true that Koufogiannakis and Crumley (2004) include such considerations in their examination of “Apply” as embodied in the Libraries Using Evidence instrument (*Applicability checklist*, n.d.), but evidence based practice carries the implicit, almost naïve, assumption that information, providing that it is good enough, can simply be re-used. Ola Pilerot thus provokes me to plead for “EBLIP in context”.

Indeed this theme of context is picked up with Pilerot's (2009) subsequent definition of information literacy:

To learn information literacy means to develop a discursive understanding of the practice in which one is active. Information literacy thus comprises an understanding of and a familiarity

with how information is sought and used in a [certain social context]. (p. 65)

Furthermore, the problematising of information behaviour as a rational and individual behaviour, stimulated by consideration of context and advocated by Pilerot, is particularly welcome. We have frequent cause to question the “information deficit model” (Marteau, Sowden, & Armstrong, 2002) with its arrogant assumption that “if you build a digital library [the users] will come.” Indeed much evidence based practice seems to be based more on the concept of how little information literacy the busy practitioner can manage to get away with, rather than realistic achievement of some black belt standard of “information mastery” (Ebell & Shaughnessy, 2003, p. S.53). Why, even the original proponents of evidence based practice lowered their aspiration, at least to “brown belt”, when faced with the practical realities of following the entire evidence based practice process.

My own views of evidence based practice have been shaped, even transformed, by a recurring theme from Pilerot and other plenary speakers at the conference who see information behaviour as a collective and collaborative activity. If other EBLIP conferences have focused on the role of the individual library practitioner then EBLIP5

(Stockholm) may well be remembered as the Conference of the EBLIP team. This underpinning theme was nicely embodied in Pilerot's quotation from Hakkarainen, Palonen, Paavola, and Lehtinen (2004):

The idea of producing knowledge in one place and simply installing it for use in another may not be valid. It requires at least a partially or completely shared frame of reference, and has to become an object of collective inquiry. Knowledge, as opposed to information, cannot be disseminated as such without shared practices or frames... (p. 73)

Pilerot does well to remember, however, that enhanced appreciation of the complexity of a particular approach does not *per se* invalidate that approach. Indeed such complexity can be viewed as a necessary prerequisite of the evolution of an approach, paradigm or movement.

There is a certain irony that, typically, when a speaker prefaces his remarks with "I am now going to be controversial," what follows usually appears less controversial than was anticipated. Indeed much of what Ola Pilerot had to say was both welcome and congruent with current thinking within EBLIP. The corollary, equally ironic, is that unintentional controversy can be more controversial than even the presenter intended. Nevertheless, such controversy is still to be welcomed – no lesser a proponent of evidence based practice than Muir Gray attests to the value of "irritants" as the grains of sand that may result in a pearl.

So what were my particular irritants from this presentation? Certainly neither the causes of information literacy and evidence based practice were advanced by his espousal of the narrative review of a decade ago:

...when one is attempting to link together many studies on different topics, either for purposes of reinterpretation or interconnection. As such, narrative literature reviewing is a valuable theory building technique, and it may also serve hypothesis-generating functions (Baumeister & Leary, 1997, p. 312).

Narrative review is a flawed product that enshrines subjective author opinion, opaque findings and non-auditable conclusions as Mulrow (1987), among others, ably demonstrates. If narrative literature review was apparent state of the art in 1997, we now have a toolkit of more sophisticated methodologies (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009), such as meta-ethnography and meta-theory, that are equally valuable, and methodologically more mature, for theory-building and hypothesis-generating. The difference is that these methodologies systematically and explicitly capture insights from multiple studies employing the reviewer as a filter rather than a curtain.

#### Throwing out the baby...

Perhaps my biggest irritant was reserved for Pilerot's conclusion. His final slide (Table 2) sacrificed conceptual clarity for rhetorical contrast. In dichotomously ranging EBLIP and "research use" as antagonists he favoured both caricature and anachronism.

Checking one of Pilerot's original sources, I found that McIntyre (2005) states, within a similar context of debate :

I do want to emphasise, however, that this is a continuum. In practice, a good deal of knowledge and thinking will fall between the points identified on the continuum. And many other distinctions might fruitfully be made for other purposes, distinctions that would involve highlighting additional points on the continuum. (p. 3)

Table 2  
A Manufactured Dichotomy between EBLIP and Research Use (Pilerot, 2009)

EBLIP	Research use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Evidence</li> <li>•Question –answer</li> <li>–Knowledge transfer</li> <li>•Gap-metaphor</li> <li>•Epistemologically</li> <li>–Quantitative</li> <li>–Sciences</li> <li>•Instruction</li> <li>•Process/source approach</li> <li>•Rational information use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Learning</li> <li>•Exploration</li> <li>–Shared references</li> <li>•Continuum-metaphor</li> <li>•Epistemologically</li> <li>–Qualitative</li> <li>–Social sciences</li> <li>•Conversation</li> <li>•Communicative approach</li> <li>•Problematizing rational information use</li> </ul>

This was exactly the point made in a follow up question to the plenary presentation. Creating a false dichotomy is destructive and exaggerates tension and conflict. A more constructive approach recognises that both ends of the continuum or spectrum have something valuable to contribute. Certainly the addition of context, perversely ignored by Pilerot in his use of a quotation in isolation (incidentally, one danger of narrative approaches to review!), is something from which evidence based practice might learn and benefit. Similarly we welcome the addition of evidence based practice conceived as a collective endeavour.

The version of evidence based practice characterised by Pilerot is not one that I find easy to recognise. While EBP 1.0 might have been criticised for an excessive reliance on the quantitative paradigm, the movement of subsequent versions into the social sciences and education, as heralded at previous EBLIP conferences, signals the paradigm’s increasing maturity (Given, 2006). Recognition is now afforded to qualitative research while mixed methods approaches are frequently articulated, if less frequently practised. Pilerot targets the “baby” when the movement itself approaches adolescence (Booth & Brice, 2007).

**Conclusion**

Leaving the plenary hall, I found myself

drawing an analogy with shooting ducks at a fairground. Instead of shooting directly at the target, a proficient marksman allows for the distance travelled and thus shoots ahead of the swift moving duck. Evidence based practice in general, and certainly in its variant EBLIP form, has moved on. Indeed Pilerot himself has been an actor, unwitting or otherwise, in this very evolution and development. I suspect, and I am on less certain ground here, that information literacy is an equally rapidly moving field. Indeed it is already starting to embrace some mechanisms and tools of the evidence based practice movement (Partridge & Hallam, 2007; Koufogiannakis & Wiebe, 2006; Brett, 2007, 2003).

An advert for a UK variant of wood varnish espouses the virtue “it does exactly what it says on the tin.” While this presentation on information literacy aspired less to varnish and more to paint stripper we can confidently affirm that in being provocative, controversial, and (in the precise sense used above) “irritating” Pilerot toiled industriously to justify his label.

*Implications for Practice*

- Evidence based practitioners may find it helpful to make explicit connections between the process of evidence based practice and competencies required for information literacy.

- Consideration of context has the potential to enhance interpretation and application of evidence within a library setting.
- Research use, and by implication evidence based practice, is a collective endeavour. In reality these labels represent designated points on a wider continuum or spectrum.

#### Implications for Research

- Information literacy may benefit from use of evidence based approaches and tools in addressing longstanding research questions.
- Exploration of information literacy usefully employs a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches.
- Information literacy and evidence based practice are rapidly moving fields and necessitate clear recognition of the journey already travelled and the challenges that lie ahead.

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