



Commentary

A Voyage of Discovery: Identifying Barriers to EBLIP in the Caribbean

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*In fourteen hundred and ninety two
Columbus sailed the ocean blue*

When Christopher Columbus first arrived in Santo Domingo, now the Dominican Republic, he encountered an already diverse and vibrant local culture. As successive waves of Europeans have journeyed to the Caribbean they too have come to recognise the value of a fusion of cultures, of a unity in diversity. Clearly there are lessons for any sphere of practice, including librarianship, regarding the pitfalls of attempting to impose models, albeit those proved successful elsewhere, on local inhabitants within their existing Dutch, English, French or Spanish traditions. Such attempts not only face the likelihood of limited success, but also carry the risk of missed

opportunities in failing to engage with a wealth of skills, expertise, experience and cultural heritage.

*In twenty hund-er-ed and ten
A voyage of discovery took place again*

Thus it was that invited plenary speakers at the 40th Association of Caribbean University, Research and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL) Conference 2010, Joanne Marshall, Jonathan Eldredge and Andrew Booth came to recognise that it would not simply be enough to present existing models of evidence based library and information practice, albeit successfully employed elsewhere across the globe. It would be equally important to engage with the richness of Caribbean library

culture with all its diverse traditions, origins, and language groups. Furthermore, after more than three days of presentations and workshops outlining the current state of EBLIP thinking, it was opportune for 300 plus participants from across the region to vocalise and share their reactions to this potential new addition to an already weighty library and information sciences agenda.

For a Friday morning session, designed to feature a joint “conversatorio” between Jonathan Eldredge and Andrew Booth, we decided to initiate an interactive process with the conference delegates. We sought to provide delegates with an opportunity to share, in a non-threatening environment, their personal responses to the featured EBLIP process. Furthermore, we wanted to derive a unique picture of the barriers and constraints facing Caribbean librarians when seeking to implement EBLIP within their own contexts. This would be both for the particular, i.e., the Caribbean region, and, given that this context features language, skills, and resource constraints, as an exemplar for such issues more generally (Booth, 2008). In this sense we could contribute further to the conference by facilitating, whilst in our turn benefiting individually from, this interactive process. Finally, we believed, and this was confirmed through consultation with members of the ACURIL Executive, that such interaction would provide a valuable snapshot within which to tackle EBLIP implementation issues.

After a brief explanation of the intended purpose and schedule for the session we invited participants to complete their response to the following statement: “EBLIP would be easier in MY Library if...”. The emphasis on “MY” was intentional, with this process being aimed at local level implementation and not on issues removed from day-to-day experience. This statement was simultaneously translated into both French and Spanish. Participants were requested to record two copies of their response; the first for their personal use in the subsequent discussion and the second on cumulative data collection sheets for our subsequent analysis

and use by ACURIL. Once participants had been given time to record their responses they were invited to form small groupings by language in order to share their issues with one another. Separate language activities are not generally a feature of the cosmopolitan ACURIL activities. Rather, we made this particular decision based upon practical considerations, such as the limited availability of translators for small group activity, and in recognition that, notwithstanding significant diversity, there was greater commonality between groups sharing the same language.

The resultant buzz groups were very lively and largely self-directing. The two facilitators employed “light touch” monitoring and guidance, the latter only when requested by the groups, to ensure that there were no difficulties with understanding of either instructions or process. After between fifteen and twenty minutes the facilitators encouraged the groups to share at least one issue that had arisen within their discussion, with anonymity being preserved through use of a single rapporteur for each group. Simultaneous translation was again provided for this plenary activity. The facilitators then invited the groups to reconvene and to engage in a brief solution-generating activity (8-10 minutes) to provide a degree of resolution to the issues that had been raised and shared. The intention was very much that “a problem shared is a problem halved” with colleagues often being able to suggest potential solutions that were not within the immediate view of the one generating the original issue. Finally Jonathan Eldredge shared with participants published examples, from the Research Section of the Medical Library Association (Eldredge et al, 2009) and the Swedish Library Association (Maceviciute & Wilson, 2009), of recent Delphi exercises on research priorities. It was suggested that similar methods might be usefully transferred and adopted, while recognising that the focus of the exercise in the Caribbean had been on impediments to evidence based library and information practice (i.e., related to implementation) and not on research priorities *per se*.

A Flavour of the Caribbean

The authors intend to work with members of ACURIL in formally recording and analysing all responses, following grouping and verification, and to publish a more complete report, with French and Spanish language versions as appendices. For the present we feel that it is useful not only to share some initial data from the exercise in this commentary, but also to describe this process to the readership of *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*. We believe that this process is feasible and practical for a wide range of library interest groups, especially those facing particular constraints to the spread of EBLIP.

What did we find? Our informal survey elicited 83 separate responses, with 44 in Spanish, 33 in English, and 6 in French. While many concerns, particularly those relating to constraints of time and the need to acquire the technical skills of evidence based practice, are common to other areas of the library world, delegates identified particular issues of perceived importance within the region. The paramount concern, receiving greater emphasis than in other parts of the library world, related to the need for the support from managers and the institution as a whole. There appeared to be the perception that managers would not be familiar with the evidence based process and so a major task would be to educate managers and to get them to provide a supportive framework within which staff could bring about changes:

[EBLIP would be easier in MY Library if...] those responsible for the service give latitude to those who propose to do projects within an agreed framework. [French]

[EBLIP would be easier in MY Library if...] in my library on a day to day basis we take decisions based on evidence for our actions, we have clear policies and, above all, we have the support of management. [Spanish]

Related to this was the fact that, unlike in other parts of the world where there is major “buy in” to the evidence based decision-making model, this new way of doing things would need to compete with, and survive against, well-established alternative models for decision-making (such as existing project management methodologies and programmed budgeting):

[EBLIP would be easier in MY Library if...] the professional staff agree that it is the common approach to problem solving or project management. [English]

Uptake and widespread adoption of the evidence based practice model is, therefore, by no means a certainty. Another concern receiving particular emphasis was that existing roles of professional staff members, and perceptions of what were and what were not their areas of influence, would place unwelcome constraints on the initiation and promotion of new projects and programmes of change:

EBLIP would be easier in MY Library if... I received the support of my superiors to carry out all activities that promote the library with my labours. [Spanish]

Throughout the week the three keynote speakers emphasized the need to work in teams. They also incorporated small group work activities within their sessions. Participants’ responses, perhaps expectedly, reflected this perspective. Yet, it could be that such a perspective also reflects a particular reality in this region of the world. In other words, the various components of the evidence based process, such as knowledge of research processes, familiarity with English language literature and depth of professional experience, were unlikely to be possessed by a single individual and, therefore, team work, rather than being an optimal feature, was very much a necessity:

EBLIP would be easier in MY Library if...] we form permanent teams of librarians to implement the [EBLIP] methodology. [Spanish]

Finally we encountered a perception, commonly repeated in other parts of the world but particularly acute in this region, that a lack of resources and qualified staff make it a considerable challenge to deliver even a minimal standard of service:

Our fundamental problem is the lack of qualified personnel and economic resources. [Spanish]

[EBLIP would be easier in MY Library if...] we have an adequate budget to cover acquisition of library material, technologies, personnel, maintenance of the physical area, and everything to do with the information unit. [Spanish]

Under such circumstances evidence based library and information practice might be considered a patently unattainable, or even unwelcome, distraction. Such a perception may need to be addressed in a similar way to that utilised by the Cochrane Collaboration with a focus on “quick wins” using low-level accessible technologies and services. Only once such an approach has addressed the “primary” issues of concern, in terms of urgency, severity and coverage, can one proceed to more technocentric secondary concerns:

It is promoted (e.g. examples of success stories). [English]

These are significant and serious challenges. An emerging consensus from the comments suggests that through education and continued dialogue, such challenges might be overcome. Other comments suggest that the three keynote speakers’ own voyages of discovery coincided with the prospect of a new hope and vision for others in attendance:

We have previously used EBLIP informally, but now we have the methodology to more easily formalize and apply this process. [Spanish]

We encourage experimental research in our libraries. [Spanish]

We need to be trained more deeply in using the tools... to address problems and situations on a day to day basis. [Spanish]

This last comment particularly suggests future voyages for collaboration and mutual benefits in advancing this newly shared vision.

More to Be Discovered

The main activities of the conference took place, appropriately enough, in rooms named after the ships of Christopher Columbus. For example the venue for the above process was the main Santa Maria auditorium. For the invited speakers, as for the assembled participants, this was equally a voyage of discovery.

For the speakers this conference presented an opportunity to gain valuable insights into constraints for EBLIP in, what were for them, previously unexplored territories of the library world. For the conference participants this represented an initial foray into hitherto uncharted realms of the EBLIP method. This rich fusion of shared experience *and* expertise, of method *and* context, will thus benefit speakers, participants and, indeed, future readers of the resultant outputs alike.

The foyer of the hotel venue displays a large picture with the caption “It appears that more yet remains to be discovered”. Though celebrating the discovery of a *physical* “new world” this caption possesses even greater relevance when applied to the professional development of individual attendees at the conference: the subsequent pursuit of EBLIP across the entire Caribbean region and, indeed, for the advancement of the EBLIP movement as a whole!

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