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Commentary

Time to Move EBLIP Forward with an Organizational Lens

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Introduction

For more than two decades, the library and information science (LIS) profession has considered the ways that “evidence based practice,” a decision-making framework that has its origins in medicine, applies to our own practice. Empirical research and conceptual discussion has evolved our understanding, and yet so far, this understanding has only captured the individual practitioner experience of evidence based library and information practice (EBLIP). It is time to move our understanding forward from being evidence-based practitioners to becoming evidence-based libraries.

If library and information services are to truly embrace a culture of evidence based practice as a “[way] of being,” we need to apply what we know about EBLIP to a whole-of-organization

level (Partridge, Edwards, & Thorpe, 2010, p. 282). This commentary will highlight the current gap in our understanding about EBLIP but also an opportunity, to enable evidence based practice to serve at a strategic level. This review will be followed by a ‘lens’ or model that is used at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) Library to promote a shared understanding of how evidence-based practice is applied throughout the organization.

Understanding evidence based practice in the LIS professional context

Empirical research has helped us refine our understanding about how evidence based practice applies to professional practice and service delivery. Studies in a variety of contexts such as academic libraries, teacher librarianship, public and special libraries have explored conceptualizations and lived experiences of

evidence based practice by LIS professionals. LIS professionals identify and use a variety of evidence types, beyond the research literature (Gillespie, Miller, Partridge, Bruce, & Howlett, 2017; Koufogiannakis, 2012). Koufogiannakis grouped sources of evidence into either “hard” or “soft,” where “hard” included sources that could be easily shared, were “written, concrete information” that was generally accepted as evidence, and “soft” included sources that focused on experience or knowledge or others that allowed a “real-life connection” to context (2012, p. 11). This broad interpretation of “evidence” was consistent with findings reported by Gillespie et al. (2017), which included observations, feedback and statistics recognised as evidence by practitioners. Experiences of evidence based practice have been found to not always be a straight-forward or linear process, but “holistic” in *being* evidence based LIS professionals (Gillespie, 2014; Koufogiannakis, 2013; Koufogiannakis, 2015; Luo, 2018; Miller, Partridge, Bruce, Yates, & Howlett, 2017). One of the first empirical studies of evidence based practice in LIS used a phenomenographic approach to identify five different ways that practitioners experience evidence based practice (Partridge et al., 2010). Findings of this study captured “dimensions of variation” that influenced how evidence based practice was conceptualised, including the practitioners’ working environment, approaches to evidence based practice and decision making (Partridge et al., 2010, p. 283). More recently, researchers have categorized academic librarians’ experiences of evidence based practice into six categories: “[e]mpowering; [i]ntuiting; [a]ffirming; [c]onnecting; [n]oticing; and, [i]mpacting” (Miller et al., 2017, p. 126). The model developed by Miller et al. (2017) raises awareness of how these different experiences of evidence based practice contribute to LIS professional practice.

Experiences of evidence-based practice are highly contextual, and are influenced by workplace dynamics such as accessibility, availability, time, and organizational culture

(Howlett & Howard, 2015; Koufogiannakis, 2015; Luo, 2018). Exploring evidence use in practice, Koufogiannakis (2013, p. 1) found “convincing” was the main way in which academic librarians use evidence. How evidence is used, whether to confirm existing knowledge or a way forward, or to influence a decision is dependent on the working environment, including how much decision-making power individual academic librarians held to make improvements to practice (Koufogiannakis, 2013). The biggest challenges and influences faced by academic librarians in using evidence in practice are in the ‘organisational dynamics’ (2015, p. 104). Collaboration, support from colleagues and a culture that values evidence were enablers found to help overcome obstacles in the working environment (Koufogiannakis, 2015, p. 109). Findings from Koufogiannakis’ study begin to describe a complex picture of the day-to-day realities of applying evidence-based practice. A better understanding of workplace dynamics would assist libraries to effectively nurture a culture of evidence based practice.

Decisions in libraries are often made as a group or team, and some decisions may require approval from outside the library or information service (Booth, 2009, p. 342; Koufogiannakis, 2013, p. 9; Koufogiannakis & Brettle, 2016, p. 10). The revised EBLIP process model, known as the 5 A’s – Articulate, Assemble, Assess, Agree and Adapt, goes some way to address practical realities of decision making in library team contexts (Koufogiannakis & Brettle, 2016, p. 14). However, this model continues to promote EBLIP as an approach to specific situations or problems that arise from professional practice, and not explicitly as a habitual or cultural way of being. The model also sustains that EBLIP be implemented or pursued by individual practitioners or small teams, and by doing so, leaves being evidence based to a handful of LIS professionals in an organization who are inclined to practice in this way. Library leaders and managers have a responsibility to cultivate evidence based approaches that make use of a variety of evidence sources when making

decisions around service improvements (Koufogiannakis & Brett, 2016, p. 17). Being evidence based as practitioners, organizations, and as a profession should not be up to the few individuals with the capacity to do so.

As Koufogiannakis has previously stated, thus far our understanding of evidence based practice in the LIS professional context captures and describes the experience of individual practitioners, but not the organization (2013, p. 9). Our existing understanding of EBLIP comes from a need to improve professional practice and service delivery, driven by curiosity, reflection, evaluation, professional responsibility, and a desire to keep up to date. But what about the need for an organization to be evidence based to achieve strategic success? We haven't really addressed this question. Little is known about how a collective group of LIS practitioners becomes evidence based at a whole-of-organization level. It is time to take what we know and pave a way forward for library and information service organizations to truly embrace a culture of evidence based practice at an organizational level.

Evidence based practice in the library and information service organization

There has been little research into experiences of evidence based practice in an organizational setting, within libraries or other industries and domains. An Australian ethnographical study into library and information professional experiences of evidence based practice in a public library found four "interconnected and interdependent cultural orientations" which together represent a culture of evidence based practice:

1. A culture of valuing: evidence based practice involves being valued and valuing each other.
2. A culture of being: evidence based practice involves being and becoming a professional.
3. A culture of learning: evidence based practice involves being a

learner and supporting the learning of others.

4. A culture of leading: evidence-based practice involves leadership at many levels and leading towards one shared vision (Gillespie et al., 2016, para. 19).

Findings of this study suggest that these four cultural elements need to be present to enable and support evidence based practice at an organizational level. Further research is needed to better understand how a culture of evidence based practice manifests, in order to develop approaches to build organizational capability so that library services as a whole, rather than a handful of individuals, can readily respond to an ever-changing environment and demonstrate value to stakeholders.

At the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) Library, we have made evidence-based practice a primary focus by creating a role dedicated to fostering and supporting a whole of library culture of evidence-based practice. The role of Coordinator, Evidence Based Practice was created to engage with library staff to understand their business, and the evidence needed to support business improvement for the library; and to advise and support staff to engage in evidence based practice (Howlett & Thorpe, 2018, p. 1-2). The Coordinator has a broad mandate to go beyond data collection, performance measurement, and reporting requirements in order to build capacity for evidence based practice across USQ Library. The position exists to ensure that not only is the right evidence identified and gathered, that evidence is critically appraised, interpreted, applied and tells the story of how the library contributes to student and institutional success.

A conceptualisation of evidence based practice at an organizational level

Given the little guidance that exists to apply evidence based practice to a whole-of-organization level, understanding and

generating impact with the newly created Coordinator role has involved applying what is known about EBLIP with a “ripple effect” – promoting, mentoring, coaching, consulting with individuals and teams across USQ Library, to enable and influence an evidence based practice culture. With this approach, the Coordinator role enables and supports the library, both individual staff and collectively as an organization, to operate consistently in an evidence based way.

An academic library needs to deliver services and programs that are aligned with and accountable to the broader institution. Particularly, academic libraries, library directors, and library stakeholders are seeking and using evidence from a variety of sources to address complex decisions and communicate the value the library contributes to their university (Harland, Stewart & Bruce, 2017; Lembinen, 2018; Newton Miller, 2018). Like many library and information service organizations, an academic library has the added layer of needing to be strategically aligned and accountable to its institution’s purpose and direction. The academic library’s strategic alignment with the parent institution needs to be reviewed and adapted where necessary, as a continuous cycle that involves a series of coordinated and interrelated activities.

At USQ Library, we have created a visualization or “lens” which applies existing EBLIP models to demonstrate how the library can implement evidence based practice as a “way of being.” This lens (Figure 1) assists conversations about evidence based practice throughout USQ Library, promoting its relevance to the various roles and functions.

Existing evidence based practice literature and observations made in professional practice have

informed the design. The lens is particularly applicable to library and information services where they either have a parent organization or are accountable to a broader purpose. The lens outlines a process that reflects this accountability and recognises the realities of daily professional practice and experience, such as that the process is not always linear. The lens does not replace any existing EBLIP processes or models, but demonstrates an organizational perspective to applying evidence in practice.

Each step in the lens describes how evidence is used and what results. Each step informs the connected segments. The lens also depicts the relationship that the Coordinator has between the library leadership and teams, as a facilitator and conduit, relating the library’s strategy through the teams in order to effectively communicate the library’s contribution and value to the university. The cycle is multi-directional and iterative, reflecting the interplay between the various stages and messiness that sometimes accompanies evidence based practice.

There are four elements, or steps to the model – interpret, apply, measure and communicate. Firstly, the library needs to interpret its landscape and context. As an academic library, this means examining what is happening in the higher education sector, in other libraries and information services, the LIS profession, learning and teaching trends, digital learning and research environments and other related areas. The strategic direction of the university must also be considered, as well as the needs and wants of the library’s clients - students, staff and our community. These sources of evidence enable the library to develop its strategy, priorities and goals.

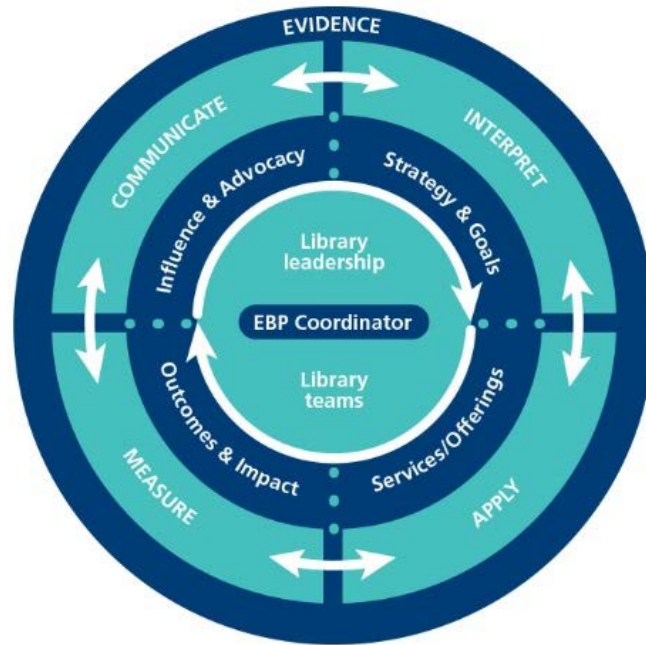


Figure 1
A lens for evidence based library in an organizational context.

Applying the library’s strategy involves delivering services and programs through the completion of procedures, workflows and service models. Professional knowledge and experience, either individual or collective, is applied alongside other evidence needed for day-to-day decision-making and service improvements. Measures of outputs, such as usage statistics, are gathered, evaluated, analysed, and made sense of to identify and understand the library’s outcomes, value and impacts on the clients’ experiences.

Stories of the library’s contribution to the institution’s strategic goals and objectives need then be communicated and shared, using both statistics and narratives that are relevant to stakeholders. Story telling is important to “close the loop” and communicating with stakeholders the results of the library’s efforts and resources. Sharing what has been learned adds to the evidence base, both within the institution and the broader LIS profession (Howard & Davis,

2011, p. 19). The communication step, if all others are done effectively, generates influence and advocates for what the library is, and what it achieves for the university. A check back to the interpretation of the context completes the cycle and ensures that what the library offers, delivers and measures remains relevant and strategically aligned. Through these steps, evidence based practice can become a conscious and deliberate process of how the library operates.

Future research

An illustration of how a library can be evidence based as a “way of being” is only one step towards applying existing EBLIP understanding to a collective, or whole-of-organization context. Further research can help clarify the steps, strategies, or initiatives needed to build evidence based organizational capability. What does an evidence based library look like? How can library leaders determine the extent to

which their organization is practicing and delivering services in an evidence based way? A research project is currently underway to help answer these questions by exploring evidence based practice maturity at different levels. The aim of this project is to develop a maturity model for Australian academic libraries that describes characteristics of evidence based practice at different levels of maturity, and identifies strategies, initiatives, or activities that library leaders can implement to progress maturity on a whole-of-organization level. This research will rely upon well established discourse in the literature about the development and use of maturity models in higher education and libraries. Maturity models from related areas will also inform this research. Though initially limited in scope, it is envisioned that the proposed maturity model may be applied to, or help inform, evidence based practice maturity in other LIS contexts.

Conclusion

So far, our understanding of EBLIP has captured and interpreted the individual practitioner experience. This understanding reveals that workplace context heavily influences the extent to which a library implements evidence based practice. However, a library and information service should not allow the responsibility of implementing evidence based practice to fall on the few LIS professionals at the institution who possess the knowledge and skills. Organizations need approaches that enable and build the capacity and culture of evidence based practice through all staff, if they are readily respond to changes and opportunities, financial or otherwise.

USQ Library is working to harness the potential of the local evidence base to support the university's strategic goals and objectives. Creating the Coordinator role signals an explicit and deliberate commitment to evidence based practice and acknowledges the need to apply it at a whole-of-organizational level. The lens presented in this commentary is a step taken by

USQ Library to increase our collective, shared understanding and application of EBLIP as we seek to become an evidence based library.

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