



Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Commentary

On Evidence Based Practice and Innovation

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Since the EBLIP4 conference, held in North Carolina in May 2007, I've been thinking a lot about innovation. Innovation is "new knowledge incorporated into products, processes and services" (Afuah cited in Popadiuk and Choo 303). I heard innovation mentioned a few times at the conference, and it was always noted as being at odds with evidence based practice. People were asking how does innovation fit into the world of EBP, when decisions are supposed to be based on existing research evidence? How can anything new ever be accomplished and still fit within this model as it has been presented to date? I had never really heard this expressed in such a way before, so it somewhat caught me off-guard. I have always thought that innovation and evidence based practice go hand-in-hand, complementing one another for the betterment of our profession. It is time to ensure that we address this question within evidence based practice to quell some of the

criticism that EBP deters innovation, and to find better ways of incorporating innovation into the EBLIP model of practice.

To date, evidence based library and information practice has focused upon a process of asking relevant questions, finding research information, critically appraising the quality of what exists, and implementing that knowledge into practice. This focus has been a necessary one, and still requires much work in order to be fully used and implemented in a practical way. The current gap between research and practice requires that EBLIP-minded folks ask these questions, find the best available answers and try to implement them. To my mind, this is an essential part of being a well-informed practitioner.

But what about when there are no answers to be found? What about when you have an idea that has not been tried or tested before? When you have no evidence on which to

base your practice? Do you simply stop and decide that there is not enough evidence to move forward? Wait until someone else figures it out and tests it? Of course not!

Only a couple of published papers have looked at innovation and how it fits with evidence based library and information practice. Five years ago, Booth advocated caution when adopting innovative projects. He noted that the very newness of a project creates a bias that leads to favourable outcomes and so we should look at positive results with a sceptical eye. Booth's caution is not that we shouldn't move ahead with innovative projects, but that "the impact of a project over a comparatively short period [should not be] viewed too favourably in comparison with the longer-term sustainability of an established service" (240).

In contrast, Smith, in a paper for the 2003 IFLA conference in Berlin, takes the viewpoint that being too cautious may stifle innovation. He writes, "If there is over-reliance on the evidence of proven solutions, there is an inherent risk of closing off considerations of alternative approaches. Constraining innovation may be a low-risk strategy but it is also a constricting one; falling back on the tested can quickly become a slippery slope to relying on the comfortable" (2).

I propose that we can be innovative while at the same time being evidence based practitioners. Innovation is an essential part of what moves our profession forward. When there is a problem and someone thinks of a way that the problem could be solved, or a process be made more efficient, or a patron better served, these are times when we make progress. This is not at odds with being an evidence based practitioner. Deiss notes that "the practice of observing customers' information-seeking behaviours, for instance, is likely to yield information

about where an innovation might really have value" (22). Knowledge gained from research is crucial to understanding when and why we should propose new innovations that are appropriate and will be embraced. The two concepts are not at odds with one another, but rather are mutually beneficial.

What *is* at odds with being an evidence based practitioner is moving ahead with innovative services blindly. It is not enough to just implement a new service without first determining whether another library has done something similar and how it worked for them. If no research studies exist, are there any case reports that may provide guidance? By reviewing what has gone before, one obtains a sense of the evidence base for that particular area of our profession. Other fields beyond librarianship may also yield relevant research studies and be transferable to our environment. If the evidence is lacking, then one can still move ahead even though there is no directly relevant previous research. This is generally where innovative practitioners will find themselves, since it is unlikely that evidence already exists for something that is a new solution.

A next step would be to plan an innovative project with research and assessment in mind. From the outset of a new service, think about what the intended outcomes are and implement measures to determine success. At the University of Alberta, I ensured that assessment measures were in place from the start of our new Patron's Choice project, an initiative to purchase books requested via Interlibrary Loan in order to fill gaps in our collection based on user-need (Koufogiannakis 2007). This project was innovative for our institution, but we were able to find a small body of literature to better inform our decision making at the outset, while incorporating data collection in order to track variables

such as goals for turn-around time, use of the materials ordered, and subject areas of books purchased. This project will be evaluated in the fall and winter of 2007-08 as it reaches the first full year of implementation.

In implementing a new service, evidence based practitioners should view it as their responsibility to check the research evidence for ideas, document and test the service being implemented, then provide that information to the wider library community. In some cases you may be able to test a new service alongside a traditional service, with a comparative research project. Combining an innovative idea with a research project, whenever possible, will allow for testing of the new innovation and contribute to the evidence-base of the profession so that others can learn from such successes or failures. Both successes and failures need to be highlighted, so that a fuller picture can emerge. We cannot be afraid to report when a new innovation fails. I am confident that I practice what I preach in this respect. The University of Alberta Libraries' attempt at integrating librarians into first year medical students' problem based learning groups was shown by our research not to have an impact (Koufogiannakis et al. 2005), so we stopped the practice and published our less than positive results!

Smith challenged the profession of librarianship, "to ensure that commendable risk-aversion does not lead inexorably to a retreat into the comfort zone which will become marginalized because of the scale of the external context of change" (3). Clearly we live in times of tremendous change, and innovative solutions are required for managing the impact of that change upon our libraries. Our need for good proof upon which to base our decisions may not easily be found. We cannot sit back and wait for evidence to fall into our lap, but we can move ahead while at the same time

incorporating the collection of evidence so that others can make more informed decisions in the future.

Librarians who move their organizations forward will be evidence based innovators, combining innovative ideas with evidence based principles. They will draw upon the research knowledge of the profession, integrate that knowledge into their own local circumstances and needs, and find innovative solutions to problems where no good solution exists. The critical appraisal skills which allow an evidence based practitioner to read the literature with a questioning mind also bring them to question the way things currently work at their institution. An inquiring mind will always be learning, questioning and problem-solving, only to go through the entire process again when a better solution is possible. Innovation, together with evidence based practice, can guide us through whatever the future may hold for our profession.

A colleague of mine always says "Don't throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater." Let's be innovative, but not to the point of getting rid of or damaging what we know is good. This is really common sense that brings risk and evidence together in a balanced way.

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