

Barriers to Evidence-Based Library and Information Practice

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The idea of evidence-based library and information practice (EBLIP) has been around for about 10 years now. In 1998, Anne McKibbin was one of the first to define evidence-based practice for the library world in an article in the *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*. EBLIP was first defined for *Feliciter* readers by Koufogiannakis and Crumley: “EBL focuses on methods for resolving daily problems in the profession through the integration of experience and research. It involves asking questions, finding information to answer them (or conducting one’s own research) and applying that knowledge to our practice.”

Health sciences librarians began implementing EBL as a logical application of the evidence-based practice approach they observed within medicine to their own library and information practice. Although EBLIP has caught on relatively well within health sciences librarianship, it has met with several barriers to implementation in the larger library and information practice community. Some of the barriers mentioned in the literature include a lack of time or a heavy workload, the apparent effectiveness of existing practice, a continued lack of understanding of what EBLIP is and how it can improve librarianship, a small

evidence base or the poor quality of available evidence, a lack of critical appraisal skills essential to the practice of EBL, and a “research-practice gap” (Crumley and Koufogiannakis 2002; Grant 2003; Booth and Brice 2004).

What is EBLIP? In addition to the definition above, the cornerstone of EBLIP is in following the six-step process of evidence-based practice:

- Define the problem
- Find evidence
- Appraise evidence
- Apply results of appraisal
- Evaluate change
- Redefine the problem (Booth and Brice 2004)

This six-step process is a way to systematically approach problem solving by locating and appraising evidence, which can then lead either to improvements to – or validation of – existing practice. Barriers to implementation of EBLIP tend to occur in the first four steps. Of course, lack of time and a heavy workload negates the entire process, as does simply believing in the apparent effectiveness of existing practice. A small evidence base creates barriers to finding evidence, and a lack of skills in critical appraisal leads to frustration when appraising the results of a search and determining how to apply evidence to practice.

The pressure from a lack of time and a heavy workload is no doubt familiar to most librarians. The argument from Booth and Brice against these two factors as a barrier to EBLIP is that when people say they don’t have time or their workload is too heavy, what is likely meant is that an item is not high enough on their priority list (2004). At the same time, they also argue against maintaining current practice because of its apparent effectiveness when they point out that “any form of service evaluation takes time... the alternative is to run the risk of wasting valuable time by persevering with some intervention that the evidence might demonstrate to be ineffective” (2004). In order to save time in the future, it is prudent to put in a little extra time at present.

A narrow evidence base?

Another barrier to the practice of EBLIP is the complaint that there is not a large enough evidence base and that what evidence is available is of poor quality (Booth and Brice 2004). Genoni, Haddow and Ritchie note that because research in librarianship tends to be done by individuals with little funding rather than larger teams, it “leads to disparate research activities with few opportunities to share and

compare research findings" (2004). In addition to the scarcity of research being done, it might appear there is a small evidence base because librarianship is a field that crosses over with many others such as the "social, behavioural, education, or management sciences" (Eldredge 2004). A thorough search of the library literature should not only include databases such as Library Literature and Library and Information Science Abstracts, but also MEDLINE, CINAHL, Health Management Information Consortium, INSPEC and Social Sciences Citation Index (Beverly 2004). When one stops to consider the breadth of databases that include studies pertinent to library and information practice, the evidence base suddenly appears a lot larger. Indeed, Booth and Brice note that despite a seeming lack of research in the library literature, "a practitioner will usually find some item of research that may be used to address a specific focused question" (2004).

Determining the quality of the evidence base leads directly into the barrier of critical appraisal skills. Simply put, once a librarian has found studies pertaining to a problem, how does he or she know that the results of the study are valid, that the study was well executed and the results are pertinent outside the study environment? In 2003, Booth and Brice developed an evaluation method called Critical Skills Training in Appraisal for Librarians (CriSTAL). For user studies and information needs analyses, CriSTAL provides 12 questions based on three

broad areas to evaluate each type of study:

- Is the study a close representation of the truth?
- Are the results credible and repeatable?
- Will the results help me in my own information practice? (2003)

Booth and Brice found that the appraisal tool and the workshop setting "helped participants improve their understanding of research methods and their ability to use research to aid their decision making" (2003). Although the results of the CriSTAL project are promising for teaching librarians about critical appraisal, in her study Laurel Anne Clyde reviewed CriSTAL and describes one of its key problems. She found that although it and another similar evaluation method have value "in the context of developing research evaluation skills" they are "complex evaluation instruments" and "cumbersome as tools for day-to-day decision-making" (2006). Most recently, Lindsay Glynn developed a critical appraisal tool for library and information research (2006). Being more of a tool than a checklist, it allows for straightforward, detailed, step-by-step appraisal, followed by simple calculations to determine the validity of a study. With such evaluation tools at our disposal, this step of evidence-based practice is becoming less daunting to the average practitioner.

Changing the way we work

Booth often discusses EBLIP in terms of a paradigm shift. EBLIP, when thought of in this way, is a

change in the overall approach to the practice of librarianship. A shorter definition of EBLIP than the one at the beginning of this article is that it is a way "to incorporate research as a means to improve the quality of our day-to-day decision making" (Booth 2006). Or even shorter still: EBLIP is the daily application of research to practice. At the moment, incorporation of research into practice might take extra time from our schedules in the form of journal clubs, increased reading, or taking time to search the library literature for answers to questions that come up during day-to-day practice. However, once EBLIP is implemented, once the paradigm shift is complete, the barrier of time will not be an issue any more because it will be the nature of our practice, not another task we try to add on at the end of the week.

The research-practice gap, which is a barrier to the use of research in many fields, may actually be the gateway to wider implementation of EBLIP. Booth summarizes the situation very well:

Librarianship has had a long preoccupation with the research-practice gap. Practitioner-led research is criticised for its lack of rigour, academic research for its lack of relevance. Evidence based practice is a pragmatic approach to bridging this gap (Booth 2003).

He goes on to state that changing the way that librarians and information professionals work, changing the way we think about integrating

research into practice, “achieving a real difference requires a paradigm shift.” And in order for there to be a paradigm shift – in order for EBLIP to be successful – “there needs to be some co-ordinated attempt to develop a climate within which such a project... can thrive” (Booth 2003).

An excellent example of a climate where EBLIP can thrive is the one created by the new website eblip.net.au, detailed in the latest issue of the e-journal *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*. Among other things, this site provides “a directory of current evidence-based research projects and activities, a current awareness feed, a gateway to support from the international evidence based library and information practice community, and pathways to help put the theory into practice including the EBLIP Toolkit” (Cotter and Lewis 2006). By bringing together so many resources, eblip.net.au provides a valuable tool for the new and the experienced evidence-based practitioner.

This website, along with the new critical appraisal tool and a steady increase of the evidence base, will help librarians and information professionals get a better sense of what EBLIP looks like in action, and overcome whatever barriers they might face in the implementation of EBLIP in their own libraries. 🌱

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