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Evidence based library and information practice: whose responsibility is it anyway?

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Introduction

Increasingly, the library and information sector (LIS) is challenged to engage in research in order to “create new knowledge and thereby contribute to the growth of LIS as a profession or discipline. If research is absent, non-existent or even scarce, there is no profession, but only an occupation grounded in techniques, routine and common sense” (Juznic & Urbanija, 2003, p.325). In the United Kingdom in 2001, the Centre for Information Research was commissioned by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) to conduct an examination into the research landscape for library and information science. The examination concluded that the value of research in the LIS discipline can be experienced on both the professional and personal levels. At the professional level, research can inform practice, assist in the future planning of the profession, and raise the profile of both the discipline and the library and information service itself. At the personal level, research can “broaden horizons and offer individuals development opportunities” (McNicol & Nankivell, 2001, p.77). It is felt, however, that evidence based library and information practice is currently a minority interest, rather than mainstream, as shown by McNicol and Nankivell when they write: “work is needed to stimulate greater interest in, and respect for, research within the LIS community” (2001, p.82). It was recommended that “research should be promoted as a valuable professional activity for practitioners to engage in” (McNicol & Nankivell, 2001, p.82). The study by CILIP concluded that for this to occur, there must be an “obligation on the part of library schools, employers and professional bodies to ensure the practitioners have the necessary skills to be able to conduct research effectively” (McNicol & Nankivell, 2001, p.82).

As LIS educators, we can obviously focus on the role that library schools can play to foster a research culture within the profession. We can introduce specific teaching and learning models that can help develop student awareness, understanding and skills in evidence based information practice. But our big challenge is to encourage the other stakeholders – individual professionals, employers and the professional association – to play a role in working collaboratively with us to develop the culture of evidence based practice that, ideally, should pervade our profession. In this article we review some of our own ideas and experiences that have contributed to our own goals to shift the professional horizons.

The need for engagement

There is a certain degree of irony inherent in our professional shortcomings, our lack of focus on research within the discipline. Crumley and Koufogiannakis (2002) have observed that “in our profession we help our patrons make decisions by leading them to

research evidence. It is vital that we follow the same model: we should consult our own literature when we have questions about best practices in our field” (2002, p.112). Ritchie also noted that, given our role as managers of the literature of research, library and information professionals are uniquely placed “to model the principles of evidence based practice, not only as they apply to other disciplines which we serve, but also as they apply to our own professional practice...’if you are not modelling what you are teaching you are teaching something else” (1999, para. 6). Library and information professionals should indeed ‘practice what they preach’. In the context of teaching, library schools undoubtedly have a critical role to play to foster an appreciation of research and its relationship to the growth of the profession as a whole. Brice et al propose that “lobbying educational institutions to increase research and appraisal skills teaching in the curriculum” (2004, p.289) is one of several short term priorities required to both sustain the current interest in and to engage new activists in the evidence based phenomenon.

At the 2nd International Evidence Based Librarianship Conference held in 2003, Schrader commented on the incongruity between the prominence of research in the ALA Standards for Accreditation of Masters programs in Library and Information Studies and the reality of current library education in the US. Schrader made the following lament: “Why research training is not a mandatory component of every accredited program remains a mystery to me, and why deficient programs are able to get and continue their accredited status is an even bigger mystery” (2003, p.171). These concerns may indeed echo across the educational institutions in other countries; both LIS educators and the accrediting bodies should heed the need to take action. In addition, as the call for certification of practicing librarians becomes more strident, then the potential for professionals to demonstrate knowledge and skills in research moves beyond the campus, into the workplace.

Identifying the stakeholders

Booth (2002) has observed that one of the main assumptions in fostering a culture of evidence based practice is that “practitioners are enlightened enough to *want* to practice evidence based practice”. For evidence based library and information practice (EBLIP) to succeed therefore, library and information professionals need to be willing to develop the skills and knowledge essential for evidence based practice and to be motivated to use these within the context of their day-to-day work. Whilst current LIS education can help to foster the birth of a new breed of evidence based information professional, ultimately it is up to the new professional working in industry to put into place the skills they have learned during their academic studies. It is also the responsibility of those professionals who have been in industry for some time, and who have not had the opportunity to learn about evidence based practice (EBP) via their formal library studies, to develop the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding of EBP by undertaking professional development activities.

However, the individual professional clearly cannot succeed in developing a culture of evidence based practice without the support of both their employer and their professional association. Employers have a responsibility to provide an environment that encourages and rewards EBP and to provide access to the resources and training needed to implement EBP within the work context. Professional associations have a responsibility to encourage, enable and reward the development of EBP skills and knowledge within the profession as well as developing and articulating the profession’s EBP policies and future directions.

These views suggest that, whilst formal LIS education can commence the process, success will only be achieved when all stakeholders in the profession actively work together to build the desired culture. For the LIS profession this means cooperation and collaboration between professionals, educators, employers and the professional associations. We have developed a matrix (Table 1) that seeks to identify the contribution that could feasibly be made by each of the different stakeholders in pursuing the EBP goal.

| Stakeholders | Roles or Responsibilities |
|---------------------|--|
| Professionals | <p><i>Individuals have a responsibility to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have the motivation to be an evidence based information professional. • Ensure that they acquire and maintain the knowledge and skills necessary for evidence based practice by completing professional development programs. • Undertake work-based or higher degree research and actively take a role in establishing a clearer and stronger link between theory and practice within the profession. |
| Educators | <p><i>Educators have a responsibility to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide and promote educational courses and qualifications necessary for developing the skills required of evidence based information professionals. • Seek opportunities for updating own practical skills and knowledge to ensure relevancy and currency of curriculum. • Provide and promote research degrees such as Masters by Research and PhDs to the profession. • Develop and deliver professional development courses in the area of evidence based practice. • Actively pursue research activities to generate new theoretical knowledge. • Seek opportunities for cooperative research and development activities. |
| Employers | <p><i>Employers have a responsibility to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide the opportunities and resources for professionals to engage in evidence based practice, including dissemination of findings to the profession. • Encourage and allow their staff to engage in ongoing learning and professional development necessary for maintaining skills and knowledge in evidence based practice. • Provide opportunities for LIS students to learn about evidence based practice in situ through fieldwork and project work. • Participate in LIS course advisory work. • Serve as guest lecturer/tutors within LIS education programs. • Include evidence based practice activities as part of the staff appraisal program. • Encourage mentoring of evidence based practice for novice or inexperienced research-professionals. • Provide opportunities for collaboration with academic researchers and other industry employers on research project and funding. |
| Professional bodies | <p><i>The professional association has a responsibility to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage, enable and reward the learning and development of skill, and knowledge in evidence based practice within the profession. • Determine and articulate a policy position on the role of evidence based practice for the profession as a whole and in the education for library and information professionals specifically. • Encourage employers to support evidence based information practice by recognising institutional members' involvement in, and dissemination of, evidence based projects as eligible for individual's professional development points. • Ensure that the profession's research agenda, priorities, values and expectations are heard in government and by other key policy and decision makers. • Offer research awards and funding opportunities. • Facilitate forums for sharing and dissemination of evidence based practice knowledge. • Arrange partnerships with training providers to provide training courses in evidence based practice tailored to the specific needs of diverse contexts (i.e. public libraries, law libraries etc). |

Table 1: Stakeholders' roles and responsibilities

Strategies to engage all stakeholders

As LIS educators in the Masters of Information Management program at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), we feel that we can encourage professional discussion at the local level through our involvement with industry professionals, employers and the professional association, both in and beyond the classroom. Central to our teaching philosophy is the belief in a holistic approach to student learning where the personal and professional dimensions are intertwined (Partridge & Hallam, 2004). We propose that this holistic focus in LIS education can help the twenty first century library and information professional to learn about the diverse research methodologies that can be applied in the workplace, to gather, review, evaluate and disseminate key research data. The student is given the opportunity to develop into a 'reflective practitioner', as proposed by Booth, with the ability to "critically analyse [and] make informed judgements" (2003, p.70), drawing on a 'toolbox' of skills and knowledge which will include evidence based practice. To train the 'new evidence based information professional', LIS education must therefore focus on developing students' skills as 'reflective practitioners' who are not only discipline savvy but are also equipped with a rich portfolio of generic capabilities, including communication skills, teamwork, problem solving and critical thinking.

Critical reflection is increasingly identified as a core skill required by all professionals. For many students entering the Masters course, reflective practice is a novel and unexplored – and often challenging – domain. Taking this into consideration the program has been designed to provide students the opportunity, over the three semesters of study, to progressively gain both theoretical understanding and practical experience in reflective practice. Four units over the three semester program have been developed to provide the context for the students to learn about and to experience reflective practice first hand. Students are encouraged to use reflective practice as a tool both for self evaluation and for the review of team processes, to compose a reflective learning journal to support the construction of their own understanding and knowledge development, and to conclude their studies with the creation of a professional portfolio which presents their reflections on their own role as an information professional.

In addition to the blend of discipline knowledge and generic capabilities, the Masters program includes authentic learning activities and the direct involvement of industry professionals. The involvement of industry professionals contributes significantly to the success of our holistic model of LIS education. Industry professionals provide the authentic context from which students can directly learn about discipline knowledge and generic capabilities within the profession. They contribute to the LIS program through three vital roles: as guest speakers, as mentors and as industry partners in the learning activities. It is through the direct involvement of professionals that students grasp the amazing diversity of information problems and the range of possible approaches to solve them. Through the learning tasks developed collaboratively with industry professionals and employers, students are offered a fertile context to apply the skills and knowledge they acquire within the academic confines of their studies.

Fieldwork placements and industry based projects are an invaluable source of linking theory to practice within an authentic learning environment. Increasingly, libraries and information agencies in the region are contacting us to initiate interesting and challenging project work that not only enables students to become directly involved in authentic research activities, but it also encourages the cross-fertilisation of ideas and skills between the students and the professionals. Such opportunities help students – and professionals – begin to think critically about the skills, knowledge and attributes, and the conceptual

structures and thinking processes that they need as working information professionals. Ideally, it will also see industry professionals inspired to enrol in masters by research courses, to help build a research culture and to increase the capacity for knowledge development with the LIS discipline.

In our roles as Joint-Chairs of the 3rd Evidence Based Librarianship Conference held in Brisbane, Australia, in October 2005, we were able to involve the national professional association as the host for the event. The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) has consequently played an important role in encouraging professional debate, resulting in a better understanding of the issues, thereby inviting a stronger degree of commitment on the part of both professionals and employers. Whilst LIS education can adopt a proactive stance in fostering EBP within the profession by including relevant and necessary skills within the LIS curriculum, an evidence based culture within the library and information profession will not be achieved unless all stakeholders are actively and proactively engaged with the process.

Conclusion

Our own teaching and learning model is just one possible approach to embedding EBP within LIS education. We do believe that fostering a culture of evidence based practice requires LIS education to serve as the cornerstone to equip library and information professionals with the necessary skills and understanding to become reflective practitioners in an evidence based industry, with the aim of progressing professional knowledge. Accordingly, we strive to develop a curriculum which focuses on content that is topical and relevant, but which at the same time helps develop the individual dimensions of the students so that they graduate with a sound understanding of the full spectrum of professional and personal attributes that they will need for successful careers as LIS professionals. It would be beneficial for LIS education, and for the future of the library and information profession in general, if other teaching and learning models were presented and critically discussed. This profession requires an informed discussion at both the national and international levels about the specific skills and knowledge required by the evidence based library professional, about the best teaching and learning approaches that will help to prepare and educate future evidence based professionals, and about ways to firmly establish an evidence based culture within the profession, so that the profession itself truly has a future.

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