Evidence-Based Practice: Evaluating Our Collections and Services

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, evidence-based practice and its application to library and information science has been an evolving focus of discussion, experimentation and application among researchers and practitioners. This paper will discuss opportunities for theological libraries to apply evidence-based practice in evaluating collections and services in order to better demonstrate value to stakeholders, gain a deeper understanding of client needs and experiences, promote robust decision-making and improve service delivery.

Defining Evidence-Based Practice in Library and Information Science

Evidence-based librarianship first appeared as a term two decades ago (Eldredge, 2000) emerging from the experiences of health librarians who were providing services to clinicians practising evidence-based medicine. As a decision-making framework, it evolved and was applied to a variety of library and information services. Many other disciplines have also adopted the 'evidence-based' tag, including health care, management, executive coaching, career development, public policy and education (Miller, Partridge, Bruce, Yates, & Howlett, 2017). Evidence-based library
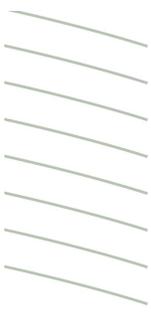
and information services was adopted early on as a more inclusive description of library and information services and practices in all their diverse forms.

What evidence-based practice is not is perhaps easier to define than what it is. Evidence-based practice is not just about gathering data and statistics or using key performance indicators in annual reports. It is not just about one-off events or decision-making. Rather, it is an approach to continuous service improvement and professional practice that is ongoing, iterative and reflective in nature. Evidence-based practice is a structured process of articulating questions or problems, collecting, interpreting and applying valid and reliable evidence to support decision making and continuous service improvement in professional practice (Howlett & Thorpe, 2018). In libraries, it is a structured and deliberate way of improving professional practice by individuals, in organisations and more widely across the profession.

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To understand evidence-based practice in libraries, research shifted a decade ago to explore what it means to be an evidence-based librarian. Kougiannakis and Brettle (2016) argued that evidence-based practice is more than just "doing", it is a way of being. By being evidenced-based, librarians can question their practice, gather or create evidence and use evidence wisely to make and inform decisions about value and impact. Other perspectives from research reveal that evidence-based practice is:

- Not always straight-forward or linear (messy)
- Holistic
- Deliberate or unintended (serendipitous)
- Used immediately or filed away for future use
- Impacted by time, accessibility and the availability of evidence
- Highly contextualised and influenced by the librarian's workplace

(Booth, 2002; Gillespie, 2014; Gillespie, Miller, Partridge, Bruce & Howlett, 2017; Howlett & Howard, 2015;
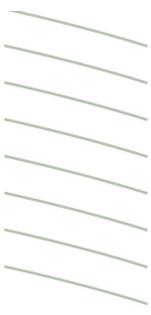
Koufogiannakis, 2015; Partridge, Edwards, & Thorpe, 2010)

There is no one right way to do or be evidence-based. The way evidence-based practice is applied in a library is up to the individual library professional. Whether it is reactive or proactive, whether it is continuous, ad hoc or as required. The right way to be evidence based is to focus on and be relevant to your library's context.

Evidence-based practice is relevant to all sizes of libraries and may be even more applicable to libraries staffed by one person. The Special Libraries Association (2018) lists a number of diverse responsibilities of information professionals, all of which incorporate aspects of evidence-based practice. Lewis and Wilson (2015) argue that solo librarians can "fly under the radar" to apply evidence-based principles and to apply their professional expertise, research evidence and user experiences to decision making and service improvement activities.

Sources of Evidence

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Early discussion around evidence-based librarianship promoted and focused on research evidence or literature as the only type of evidence (Koufogiannakis, 2013) with a strong reliance on systematic reviews and critical appraisal tools. Over the past decade, understanding evidence-based practice in the library practitioners' context has evolved to a broader view of what constitutes as 'evidence'. In particular, research identified an appreciation of the complexities that impact on the implementation in day-to-day practice (Gillespie et al., 2017; Alisa Howlett & Howard, 2015; Koufogiannakis, 2011b, 2012; Luo, 2018). Findings from empirical studies (Gillespie et al., 2017; Koufogiannakis, 2011a) confirmed that library professionals identify and use a variety of evidence types, beyond the research literature and often combine different types, to inform
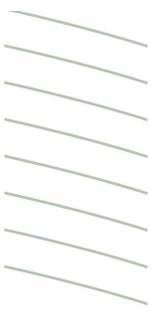
their daily practice. Koufogiannakis (2011c) identified two other types of evidence that are valid as important and contextual sources of evidence for library and information service practitioners – local evidence and professional knowledge. Combined with research evidence, these three sources provide a range of tools and methods that library professionals can use in applying and being evidence-based. The three different sources of evidence are equally valid; no one type of evidence stands alone. Indeed, the type of evidence used may depend on the task and the need for information (Jamali, 2018). The mix of evidence selected depends on the task, the availability of data, the intended outcome and the time available. For theological librarians and solo practitioners, evidence-based practice offers a way and opportunity to engage with stakeholders; to better understand client's experiences and expectation of collections, spaces and services; and to build a backpack full of stories and statistics that can be used as a tool for advocacy with authority and conviction (Bell, Moss, Thomas, & McLeod, 2017)

Putting Evidence-Based Practice into Practice

Evidence-based practice is not just about defining measures and undertaking data analysis; nor does it end with gathering and reporting data. Rather, evidence-based practice promotes an applied approach that is ongoing and reflective, in which library staff position themselves to respond to challenges and leverage opportunities within their library's local context. Measures are the means through which service is improved and professional practice is continuously developed (Howlett & Thorpe, 2018).

To understand evidence-based practice in practice, University of Southern Queensland Library has adopted a framework or "lens" (Figure 1) that explains our approach to working as an evidence-based library. The framework can be applied to an individual situation, team plans or at an organisational level. It is used to explain and apply evidence-based practice in our day-to-day work. The lens is particularly applicable to libraries that have a parent organisation or are accountable to a broader purpose. It recognises the realities of daily professional practice and experience (Howlett & Thorpe, 2018).

There are four elements to the framework. At every stage, evidence is gathered, analysed, used and applied. Library professionals must interpret institutional goals to use evidence for strategic priorities. The environment a library sits within will influence the sources and types of evidence chosen. The choice of evidence should be tied to the mission of the specific institution (Tenopir, 2013). Once strategic goals are identified, service improvements and decisions can be applied and implemented based on the evidence. By applying outcome-driven services based on strategic priorities, evidence-based practitioners have the opportunity to create and design service offerings in a way that generates bespoke evidence (Grieves, 2017).
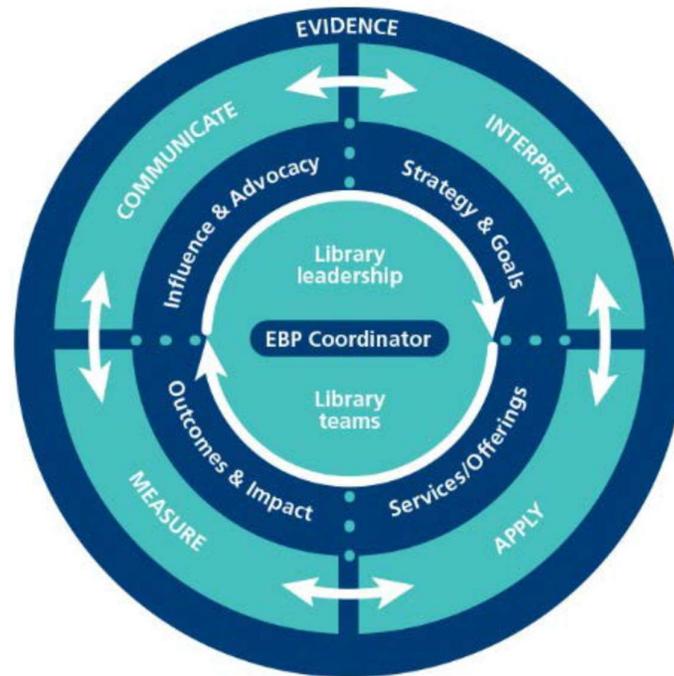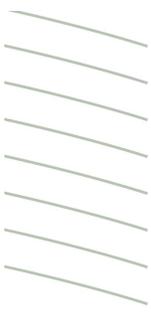
Figure 1: A lens for understanding the evidence-based library (Howlett and Thorpe, 2018)

Measures of outcomes and impact are the means of gathering and understanding evidence. Data must be interpreted and imbued with meaning; combining quantitative and qualitative data to form analytics and insights (Grieves, 2017). Libraries must move beyond "tombstone statistics", such as titles or volumes held, gate counts, classes taught, as they provide an incomplete picture of the library's impact and may be incomprehensible to stakeholders. (Springmier, Edwards, & Bass, 2018). Non-traditional and emerging methods of evidence gathering, such as techniques from user experience and design thinking methodologies, can complement statistics, enrich interpretation and add meaning. Appendix 1 identifies a range of methods and measures that can be used to evaluate information services, spaces and collections.

Communicating for influence and advocacy is the element, that if all others are done effectively, generates influence and advocates for what the library is, and what it achieves for the parent organisation, its clients and stakeholders (Howlett & Thorpe, 2018). There is a need to create and communicate a compelling vision of the library's current and future role which can take stakeholders along with the library. This should be linked to evidence of the value of libraries for individual use, various stakeholder community and the institution as a whole (Pinfield, Cox, & Rutter, 2017). Through these four elements, evidence-based practice can become a conscious and deliberate process of how an organisation operates.
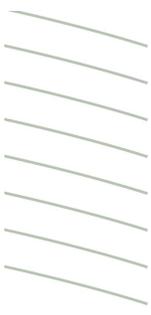
Stakeholder Engagement

The role of stakeholders within evidence-based practice is critical, not just as a group to be influenced, but also as a source of evidence. Abbott (2006) describes a research project within which the involvement of stakeholders was an essential feature as their input resulted in an increased understanding of the library's role in providing an engaging learning environment. In relation to strategic planning, emerging research is exploring how university libraries and library directors use a variety of evidence sources to demonstrate the library's value, including a focus on methods that involve library stakeholders in the process (Lembinen, 2018; Newton Miller, 2018). By developing a proactive approach that includes seeking, interpreting and using the input of staff, students and community, evidence-based practice approaches can clearly articulate the value of your library (Arizona State University Library, 2017).

Conclusion

Being evidence-based creates a healthy service culture in libraries and information services. By building capacity in evidence-based practice, library professionals can:

- demonstrate value to stakeholders,
- gain a deeper understanding of client needs and experiences,
- promote robust decision making, and
- improve service delivery.

Evidence-based practice can be empowering, proving what you know or suspect about your work, your clients and services, and building a platform from which you can convincingly demonstrate your worth to your parent institution, to your clients, and to your industry. An evidence-based culture in your library can be the first of many stepping-stones to a sustainable future (Bell, Moss, Thomas, & McLeod, 2017).

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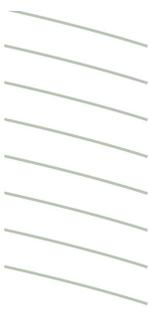
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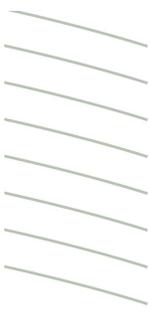
Appendix 1: Methods for Evidence-Based Practice in Libraries

Information Services	Print collections	Electronic/Digital Collections	Spaces
• Mystery shoppers • Observations of clients & staff • Statistics • Chat transcripts (Thomas & Wallace, 2018) • Client feedback • Surveys & evaluations • Focus groups, interviews, personas • Anecdotes/stories • Heuristic	• Usage & holdings data – borrowing and ILL statistics, stocktakes • Return on investment = item usage plus cost of housing the item (current and future value) • Large scale collection review (Arizona State University Library, 2017) • Significance assessment – for a single, group or cluster of items (uniqueness, rarity) • Accessibility, readability, discoverability	• Usage and non-usage (turnaway) data from vendors & discovery layers • Duplication, currency (embargoes), accuracy & completeness • Patron driven acquisition • Search logs • Webpage analytics • Vendor support & supply – pricing models, access rights, trials, training • Functionality, accessibility, ease of use • Technical feasibility, integration with other technologies, • Security & privacy	• Observations • Journey maps • Occupancy counts • Seating surveys • Gate counts • Wi-fi heat maps • Client feedback & surveys • Focus groups & interviews