Evidence Based Library and Information Practice: A New Zealand perspective

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Abstract: The evidence-based library and information practice (EBLIP) movement emerged in the mid-1990s and arrived on the shores of New Zealand in 2000 with Andrew Booth's LIANZA Conference address in that year. The uptake of the practice in New Zealand in the 20 years since that time is the focus of this article, looking at its use in all library sectors. The growth of interest in evidence-based practice is shown in the increasing number of articles and reports of EBLIP use in New Zealand over that 20-year period, and current EBLIP use is outlined to provide examples and context to its use. Key findings include evidence of the use of EBLIP at both individual and institutional levels in New Zealand, and encouragingly, there is also evidence of library practice using evidence-based measures and techniques but without the overt application of the EBLIP label to their work, possibly indicating its acceptance and more widespread use. The LIANZA Research-SIG committee conducted its own research into this practice using EBLIP methods, resulting in the identification of benefits and barriers to the use of this practice in the New Zealand context. This information forms the basis of advice and support to those wanting to further explore the use of evidence-based library and information practice in the New Zealand context.

Keywords: evidence-based practice, evidence-based librarianship, EBLIP, research, planning

Introduction

Evidence-based library and information practice (EBLIP) has been part of the New Zealand landscape for 20 years. Andrew Booth first introduced this practice and its library applications at a LIANZA Conference in 2000. There have been several subsequent presentations, talks and training events on evidence-based practice for libraries and the information professions in New Zealand, and instances of formal reporting of EBLIP practices in the literature. What is more difficult to identify is the amount of uptake of this practice in New Zealand library and information professions, and the extent of its influence on research and practice in information services. This paper presents an environmental scan of both the formal and informal uptake of EBLIP in the information professions in the 20 years since it was first introduced here. The purpose of this scan is to identify how widespread this practice may be and to encourage the profession to again consider it as an easy and valid way of improving practice and research in providing library and information services.

The scope of the environmental scan (Larsen, 2013) incorporates: a review of the literature on EBLIP in New Zealand over the last two decades; examples of EBLIP in action that the authors are aware of (either through conference presentations or individual connections and observations); conversations with practising librarians and other accessible data sources. It is designed to present an overall summary of the current state of EBLIP practice in New Zealand.

What is EBLIP?

Librarianship is a profession, like social work and education, that has a perceived 'research-practice gap' (Booth, 2011, p. 9), with academic theories not seen as being easily relatable to everyday practice in library service. Evidence-based librarianship is one way to address this 'gap' with research methods tied to real practice. It produces results that are based on evidence and are able to be practically implemented. It is an important way to identify and improve issues, strategies and practices in library service.

"The EBP movement had its origins in the early 1990s in the United Kingdom in medicine and health care services" (Todd, 2008, p. 17). Sackett et al. (1996) defined evidence-based medicine as the "conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients. This practice

means integrating individual clinical experience with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research" (p. 71). Todd (2008) explains that this

> *definition has pervaded the now wide-ranging EBP literature across many fields of practice, drawing on the idea of meshing research-based evidence with professional knowing and experience to make professional decisions and implement professional action. Interest in EBP has grown, and its application has extended from medicine to allied disciplines, such as nursing, pathology, and cardiology, and to the social sciences and business professions. Both the education and librarianship fields are developing strong approaches to EBP, and these provide directions and pose challenges and tensions for EBP for school librarianship. (p. 16)*

Creating the evidence-based environment requires us to broaden our focus and attitudes, accepting the practical applications and benefits of academic, theoretical research in our task-oriented environment (Hallam, 2018). This provides librarians with an opportunity to reinvent ourselves as practitioner-researchers (Koufogiannakis & Brettle, 2016), engaging as skilled professional practitioners who also conduct research.

In New Zealand, at the LIANZA conference in 2000, Andrew Booth introduced evidence-based librarianship (EBL) to the library profession, describing it as

> *an approach to information science that promotes the collection, interpretation, and integration of valid, important and applicable user-reported, librarian-observed, and research-derived evidence. The best-available evidence moderated by user needs and preferences, is applied to improve the quality of professional judgements. ("Defining" section, para. 4)*

Todd (2008) explains further that "evidence-based practice is fundamentally about professional practice being informed and guided by best available evidence of what works" (p. 16). In explaining this further, two characteristics of EBL are "(1) using the best available evidence, which gives preeminence to evidence derived through randomized controlled trials; and (2) combining this evidence with professional acumen to deliver high-quality services" (Todd, 2008, p. 16). It is about having an emphasis on decisions based on evidence rather than opinion and includes the use of "user-reported evidence" amongst other forms of evidence.

Booth (2009, as cited in Hallam, 2018) explains that the theoretical model of EBP is well suited to focus on 'tame' problems – simple to analyse and supported in the literature to provide logical solutions. In contrast, library problems have been described as "'wicked', i.e. there is an interplay between a number of complex challenges encompassing diverse technologies and multiple stakeholders in a unique context" (Hallam, 2018, p. 455). These issues require local sources of evidence that cannot be obtained from the literature (Koufogiannakis, 2012).

The EBLIP process

Put simply, the process of EBLIP is a discovery process that follows a relatively simple research methodology. The process is designed to fill the gaps in the knowledge and information required to make decisions based on evidence, rather than gut instinct or opinion. First steps are to design the research question or ascertain what it is that needs to be decided and then establish what data or evidence is needed to make that decision. As Hallam (2018) describes the process from there, the following steps are taken to address the research need:

- Articulate: What do I already know?
- Assemble: What are the best evidence sources to answer this question?
- Assess: How does the evidence I have apply in my context?
- Agree: What is the best decision based on all the evidence?
- Adapt: What worked? What didn't? What can be improved?

While there are many different models or descriptions of the EBP process, it is almost always a case of establishing the information gap and then gathering the data needed to fill that gap. Gathering 'new' evidence can take place using a range of mechanisms, but the first is to establish what is already known or held and then checking that existing knowledge for validity in the current context. As an example, annual student satisfaction surveys are a common occurrence in academic institutions and these often include questions or data regarding library services. Therefore, before running another client survey, these existing data sources should be analysed for the current context – the evidence required may already be available. Following the initial audit of evidence already held, decisions are made about what additional evidence or data is needed to make decisions and then how that can be gathered or sourced. This step does not necessarily require a complex research methodology, as evidence can take many forms (Gillespie et al., 2017). The research-led concept behind EBP is that the evidence used is clearly and formally described as part of the decision-making process. Keeping a detailed summary, such as the one below, has potential to influence decision-makers and stakeholders in a positive way – there can be a level of trust in the decisions being made.

- What is your evidence? (type of evidence)
- Where did it come from? (systems or methods used)
- Why did you collect it? (what could it tell you?)

- When did you collect it? (what time periods does it cover?)
- Who does it cover (who was giving feedback, were there particular populations you were looking at?)
- How is this relevant to the question or hypothesis that you are trying to prove?

As one of the drivers for EBP is to move away from instinct or opinion-based decision making, it is critical to the process that personal bias is not allowed to have influence. It is not that personal experience or expertise cannot be a type of evidence, but more than if it is to be used it should be acknowledged openly as such.

Koufogiannakis (2012) explains that research evidence is not the only type of evidence that can be used to support practice in libraries. In addition, Gillespie et al. (2017) provide an outline of evidence used in Australian academic libraries, breaking this down to six different categories of evidence used for decision making:

- Observation, (deliberate and controlled or unexpected and serendipitous).
- Feedback, (formally or deliberately sought or could come from incidental encounters - e.g. surveys vs emails from patrons)
- Professional colleagues, (include sharing experiences and informal networking at conferences)
- Research literature, (maintain awareness of scholarly literature to increase credibility of evidence presented)
- Statistics, (internal - data useful for accountability, to plot trends over time, to indicate workload such as periods and areas of high use, and likewise, underutilization, good for budgets, external - regional demographic changes)
- Intuition (personal experience and knowledge, and interpretation of the actions of others)

A further consideration in the use of EBLIP is the question of ethical research practices. While it may not be a necessary step to acquire formal 'ethics approval' from an institution (depending on the context of the research), the practices of sound, ethical behaviour should always be considered, especially when working with human participants (Research-SIG, 2017). Consideration must be given to processes of informed consent, security and privacy of data, anonymity and confidentiality and openness and transparency in evidence gathering. Ethical practices are of particular importance when researching with vulnerable groups (e.g. young people and people with mental health issues), and, in New Zealand, consideration should be given to the Treaty of Waitangi and how research with Māori participants align with appropriate tikanga and kawa in terms of cultural knowledge and identity.

A current review of EBLIP in NZ

Reports and professional discussions on evidence-based librarianship have been taking place in New Zealand for over 20 years, but it remains difficult to find reports of its use in practice in terms of a formal evidence-based approach. While there are good examples of EBLIP practice, application and development reported in the literature, this may represent only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the actual extent of the practice. This does provide a good indication of the types of EBLIP in New Zealand used, so is useful in that respect. But as much of EBLIP practice is conducted as practical information-gathering for specific issues arising in the workplace without first seeking the theory behind it, much of the EBLIP remains unreported. What follows is a current review of EBLIP in New Zealand libraries based on information gathered from the literature, conference and other presentations, and examples known by New Zealand library practitioners.

In the first decade since Booth's introduction of EBLIP to the New Zealand library community there was a small but growing body of work in this area. There is very little to draw on in the published literature for the first five years to 2004, but more in the following five years to 2009. In the literature, by 2007 participation in EBL was noted as being in New Zealand and 22 other nations (Connor, 2007, xxiiv). This second period contains references to New Zealand's EBLIP practices amongst cumulated reports of practice across many countries (for example Farmer, 2009; Weber & Vonhof, 2009) and a few individual reports and discussions of New Zealand EBLIP practice (for example Esson, 2009; Hart & Brown, 2009). In this decade the idea of evidence-based practice was coming to be more widely known, and reports of practice were starting to emerge.

The second decade from 2010 to the present time saw a growth in the number of published items showing EBLIP in use in New Zealand libraries and an increase in the number of practitioner reports at conferences and seminars. Reports of international practices in EBLIP include New Zealand within their accounts (for example Mardis, 2011). Accounts of EBLIP in practice in various library sectors start to emerge at this point, showing not only its uptake within these sectors but also the broad applicability of EBLIP across all library sectors.

In the academic library sector, reports showing EBLIP in use appear in academic journals and other sources. These include the report by Esson et al. (2012) of two case studies at an academic library of client and stakeholder participation, input and feedback, particularly looking at "how librarians can ensure that their surveys are of the best possible quality by using an evidenced based library and information practise [sic]" (p. 471). Another example comes from Chisholm and Lamond (2012), who describe a new practice in embedding librarians in online courses in a New Zealand university and outline "the model used, and how the librarians are using evaluation of outcomes to support evidence based library and information practice" (p. 224).

In the school library sector, published reports are scarcer, but there are many presentations and blog posts recording details of evidence-based practice in libraries. Examples of EBLIP in the school library sector in New Zealand include White's (2018) investigation into teacher and librarian perspectives on the school library to identify why the school library is undervalued even though it is an essential part of student learning. The National Library of New Zealand's Services to Schools (n.d.) actively guides schools in evidence-based school library practice, showing why it matters, gathering evidence and turning it into action. Raising awareness of this practice has no doubt led to its implementation in a number of different school settings, although details of where and how are not reported. This indicates a widening use of evidence-based library and information practice in school libraries, although sharing of information and results is not readily available to substantiate this.

In the public library sector, reports of evidence-based practice appear less frequently in the published literature and are also evident in other places such as a product review for collection management software. This states software "was introduced at [Dunedin Public Libraries] in 2011 to support evidence-based collection management and development decisions" (collectionHQ, 2020). This demonstrates a planned choice and use of EBLIP tools, in this case related to gathering statistical information on the content and use of collections to provide evidence on which to base future decisions about the practice in collection management and development. The Public Libraries of New Zealand (2012) Strategic Framework called for public libraries to "develop an evidence-based model of measurement that can be used to demonstrate public libraries' value and contribution to outcomes and for benchmarking purposes" (p. 38) and to develop "evidence-based practice supporting investment" (p. 34). This second aspect calls for evidence-based measurements to be made to develop a cost-benefit analysis for public libraries and refers to this already being in practice in Australia and the United States (p. 34).

In the special library sector, there is anecdotal evidence of some evidence-based practice being used, but little appears to be reported due to the more insular, commercial or specialised nature of special libraries and the agencies they work within. This makes the quantification of the level of evidence-based practice in this sector difficult and the identification of clear examples more problematic. In the section on Trends Affecting the Government Sector, Ralph and Sibthorpe (2009) explain "by incorporating such management principles as evidence based management into their library managerial roles will mean these librarians will be able to convince higher management of their value and continue to contribute to their respective organisations" (p. 671). However, this needs to be considered alongside a 2002 study by Kathlyn Turner (as cited in Fisher & Robertson, 2007) investigating research as a tool in evidence-based management, which found that special librarians in government agencies in New Zealand "were less likely to use research than their academic counterparts. That study also found that the smaller the library staff size, the less likely the librarians were to use research" (p. 6). These reports confirm that evidence-based practice is commonly used in special libraries, but that reporting on the exact nature of the evidence being used or the purpose it is being used for is less common.

Running alongside the reported practices using an evidence-based approach are many reports in various forms that show an evidence-based approach being used, without it being explicitly labelled as such. These reports find their way into various internal and external publications, reports, websites, blogs, meetings and conversations. Examples of evidence-based methods include the use of customer exit surveys, staff feedback, database use and search analytics, library catalogue analytics, website and building on programmes with students or library members that achieved results to capitalise on that success. This shows a more widespread and growing use of evidence-based library and information practice in New Zealand, but less awareness that this is a defined and deliberate research and practice method.

EBLIP benefits and barriers

There are both benefits and barriers to using EBLIP. The benefits of working to overcome the barriers and embed EBLIP within libraries are more widespread than may be expected. Nguyen and Hider (2018) identify and discuss the benefits of undertaking research in work as a librarian, with research being a key tool for EBLIP, particularly in the academic environment. Conducting research can improve key critical and analytical thinking skills and improve problem-solving and decision-making skills. The flow-on effects of developing such skills can include enhanced opportunities for collaborative projects with others in the wider institution, benefiting both organisations and individual professionals (Clapton, 2010; Nguyen & Hider, 2018). This is also good for EBLIP as it widens networks, creates new opportunities for gathering evidence and grounds the methods for gathering evidence across a wider base of people, experiences and viewpoints.

Evidence-based reports have an increased chance of getting funding for projects as verifiable parameters and measures provide some surety. Being able to articulate the evidence supporting the theory behind a project is more likely to influence stakeholders. An example is the collaborative initiative between the State Library of Victoria and the Public Libraries Victoria Network to determine the skills needed for public librarians, which would inform training and development plans (Hallam & Ellard, 2015). An evidence-based approach was deliberately used in this initiative, encompassing "qualitative and quantitative research activities: literature review and environmental scan, stakeholder interviews, focus groups and a workforce skills audit" (Hallam & Ellard, 2015, p. 113). This

provided not only quality information on which to develop a measure of the current skills gap, but also confidence that the information was accurate and authoritative.

Evidence-based practice has also been used as a way of professionally developing staff. Haglund and Herron's (2008) account of using EBLIP methods to develop library staff includes descriptions of a journal club for staff to select and review literature according to a clear set of criteria, creating a plan for continuous feedback and improvement of library operations and services using evidence based through the Palpus programme. This was followed by staff collaboratively writing an article to publish the evidence they had uncovered. This use of EBLIP benefits not only the library by producing the outcomes but is also actively used to develop the potential and performance of staff as part of the process.

The barriers to EBP have been identified by multiple researchers. To overcome them, we must first understand them. Booth (2011) provides a comprehensive set of barriers identified from the literature. To complement this, the LIANZA Research-SIG committee has collaboratively identified a list of potential barriers from their individual and institutional perspectives along with possible ways to overcome these barriers within the New Zealand context. The potential barriers and possible ways to overcome them or things to consider when addressing them are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1
Potential Barriers and Suggested Solutions

Potential barriers	Possible ways to overcome the barriers
Funding	• Start small with user feedback or analysis • Walk the talk and others may see benefits and then funding can be sought
Understanding protocols and guidelines	• LIANZA Research-SIG Research Toolkit a good place to start
Resources	• LIANZA Research-SIG Research Toolkit a good place to start
Privacy/ethical issues	• LIANZA Research-SIG Research Toolkit
Lack of training	• Manipulating data, interpreting and analysis • Try a MOOC • Library Carpentry • R stats • Ask an experienced practitioner for advice
Priorities and demands from work	• Do you need to gather data? What do you already have at your disposal?
Impostor syndrome	• Know we have the right as long as we have integrity and take on board ethical issues • Understand what research can look like (evidence-based, user research, horizon scanning, literature based, formal research with publication, front-end analysis (pp. 7–11)
Systems, processes and policies	• Document your processes and that could help others • Endeavour to obtain leadership team buy-in to share the process and assist with changing work culture
Undervalue of own ability and self confidence	• Put it into your development plan and ask for time to build your skills. Consider the 70:20:10 rule. Development is often achieved through on the job experience (e.g. on the job – 70%), exposure (e.g. by working on projects, contributing to the professional body – 20%) and through coursework (workshops, courses – 10%) • Be curious and ask questions (e.g. The 5 Why's)
Time pressure to fix problems	• Need to factor in time for development in this area and read how others work • Propose your library set up a Community of Practice for discussions and to run by ideas or with surrounding libraries if only a small operation • Document processes to use in future
Keeping up with new technologies/learning new	• Self-assess for development

Community willingness and trust	• Report back to the user group and show what you have done in response to grow trust. It doesn't always have to be what they want as long as you can show why
Defining a problem and scope	• As practitioners, we need to practise how to briefly articulate the problem, explain what data-gathering options are required and what outcomes we wish to meet. Compare with a Dragons Den type presentation – succinct, clear and convincing • Set up a template
Lack of access to data and data sharing	• Share information about the process and value of EBLIP with others to build confidence in sharing data • Make data you generate or have available so that others can make use of it
Isolation when there are no experienced people around for support	• Seek support from others in your wider workplace, professional sector or professional association • Seek support and ideas from the literature • Adapt practices used elsewhere

In an evolving marketplace with an increasing range of practical and technological solutions, the possible ways to overcome identified barriers to using EBLIP will also be evolving. Table 1 aims at providing a starting place for ideas on how to overcome barriers that have been identified so far.

Conclusion

This New Zealand perspective on Evidence-Based Library and Information Practice has traced the uptake and use of this practice, from the time of the first presentation of the method in 2000 (Booth, 2000) through to the current year, 2020. There is evidence, both from the literature and from library and information practice itself in New Zealand, that there is uptake of EBLIP in the day-to-day operation of library service. The reported uptake is small but growing, and it is assumed that there is far more evidence-based practice actually happening, but much of it without the 'EBLIP' name attached. There are both benefits and barriers in the use of EBLIP, and these have been outlined. Both point to ways EBLIP can be introduced and managed, to get results that may solve the immediate problems they are seeking to solve and also grow capability in staff for future endeavours. One of the heartening findings was recognition and promotion of the value of EBLIP to libraries in New Zealand in the 2012–2017 Public Libraries of New Zealand Strategic Framework. This stated an aim to "develop an evidence-based model of measurement that demonstrates value and contribution to outcomes" (Public Libraries of New Zealand, n.d., Strategic National Priorities section). The planned and deliberate use of evidence-based practice in libraries and information institutions in New Zealand is growing and taking advantage of the benefits this practice can bring. It is hoped that the intentional use of this practice becomes more widespread and commonplace in New Zealand in the future, making use of the advantage and benefits EBLIP can bring.

Acknowledgements

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