



Commentary

On Skepticism about EBLIP: Friendly or Otherwise!

Andrew Booth

Director of Information and Reader in Evidence Based Information Practice School of Health and Related Research (ScHARR) University of Sheffield
Sheffield, Great Britain, United Kingdom
E-mail: A.Booth@sheffield.ac.uk

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I congratulate the *EBLIP* Editorial Team on publishing the provocative piece, "Friendly Skepticism about Evidence Based Library and Information Practice" (Banks), in the previous issue of this journal. It is surely a healthy sign for the movement when one of its foremost organs opens its pages to such "friendly skepticism." Indeed, only one year ago in this very journal, Anne Brice and I bemoaned the absence of such reflective soul-searching: "... there is little evidence of genuine innovation and debate" (Booth and Brice 94). Does such skepticism about evidence based library and information practice (EBLIP) pose any threat to the paradigm? Let us consider some of the criticisms raised by Banks and others.

First of all, advocates of EBLIP cannot afford to be "data-driven." The paucity of evidence across all types of questions and all the major library and information domains requires a best-available evidence approach. Indeed, we cannot even afford to be problem-led. As busy

practitioners we seek the solution to practical library issues, and we do not have the luxury of spending an inordinate amount of time focusing on the perfect question. Our optimal response is to be neither problem-led nor data-driven, but to be "solution-focused" (Booth and Brice 103). In truth, many of us have been drawn to EBLIP because it provides a realistic and practicable antidote to decision-making based on hunches or gut instincts.

In proposing objections to EBLIP it is important that arguments are advanced, not simply rehearsed. In their seminal article about common criticisms of evidence based medicine Straus and McAlister make a constructive start by separating the limitations of medicine *per se* from the limitations of evidence based medicine. Arguably it is equally appropriate to attempt to separate the limitations of the library profession in general from the specific limitations of evidence based library and information practice. For example, the fact that librarianship is not a

research-minded profession is a characteristic of the problem, not a limitation of the solution. Furthermore, inordinate attention to the preferences of users, as described in Banks' commentary, may indeed be symptomatic of our inability as a profession to initiate a wider dialogue incorporating a perspective from the research literature and securing recognition of the value of the viewpoint afforded by a professional librarian. Certainly it is our professional duty to resist any suggestions that user preferences should be allowed to completely and singularly determine whether or not a service is provided.

In the second stage of their rebuttal, Straus and McAlister turn their attention to the more common criticisms of evidence based practice in librarianship:

- It is too time-consuming.
- It privileges research over other types of evidence.
- It makes the ideal the enemy of the good.

These criticisms are based on a misunderstanding of evidence based practice or, at the very least, an incomplete or outdated understanding of this decision-making model. As I commented in a recent article,

We should acknowledge the contribution of the widest variety of research investigations to our day-to-day practice. Fundamentally as a profession we are pragmatic principally because we have to be so. (Booth, "Using Evidence" 49)

To take but one example, the alleged "privileging" of quantitative over qualitative research is currently being widely redressed and will do much to put the all-important perspectives derived from service users on a more rigorous footing.

Above all, we cannot allow criticisms to imply that evaluating a service is a greater waste of time than continuing to deliver an entirely

useless non-evidence based service. Evaluation does not require a lengthy process. My favourite library research study involves dropping books through different types of book drops and evaluating them in terms of damage! This is far from rocket science. Ask not whether we can afford to undertake EBLIP; ask instead, "Can we afford to not pursue it?"

This was the topic of the discussion between Scott Plutchak and myself at the 4th Evidence Based Library and Information Practice Conference (Chapel Hill-Durham, North Carolina, 2007). The question as to whether EBLIP should be pragmatic, philosophical, or both continues to loom over the movement and resurfaces in Banks' article. Perhaps we are guilty of having manufactured a climate where, in the absence of genuine, well-founded debate, adherents of EBLIP gravitate naturally to controversy – substituting heat for the absence of light? If such is the case, the real extent of dissension will likely be less pronounced than such artificially constructed rhetorical debates might suggest. Indeed there are many assumptions and values expressed by such skeptics with which to concur. Yes, the emphasis must be focused on real decisions that make a difference. Yes, a good understanding of the needs and preferences of our users must mediate the evidence. But no, we must not let evaluation stifle creativity and innovation. By espousing such criticism and reflection such skeptics are perhaps closer to being evidence based practitioners than they would either wish or have us believe!

The paradigm may well be flawed, but such limitations cannot be considered to be fundamental; they relate instead to the immaturity of its development. EBLIP does not command a blind allegiance, but it demands ongoing reflection and self-scrutiny. As with the Cochrane Collaboration, the very people who are most active in EBLIP are those most aware of what it can and cannot do and where it is and is not appropriate. Indeed those of us who have been associated with the broader

context of evidence based practice for many years have already undergone extensive therapy and counseling to help us overcome these alleged deficiencies. We have moved on and overcome them.

EBLIP 2.0, if we dare slip into such populist jargon, is quite a different “animal” from that first unleashed at the onset of the movement. We realize that, with less than two dozen randomized controlled trials in the known library universe, we are unlikely to overturn completely entrenched and unhelpful behaviours with RCTs or systematic reviews (or perhaps even guidelines). We will have to employ the widest range of study designs and types and sources of best available evidence. This coincides with developments in many fields to define “evidence” in broader terms than those initiated by the narrow medical model. At the same time, this falls far short of the unsatisfactory verdict that “everything is evidence.” As information specialists we have always been custodians of quality and should continue to be so.

This being the case, we should welcome the choice by any skeptic, friendly or otherwise, to raise objections and counterproposals through the pages of this journal. As Julius Caesar might have attested, “Keep your friends at arm's length ... and your enemies even closer!”

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