



*Commentary*

**Is There a Future for Evidence Based Library and Information Practice?**

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The above title may seem a pessimistic note on which to open the Concluding Address for a conference on evidence based library and information practice, particularly one that has been as stimulating, thought-provoking, and successful as the *EBLIP6* in Salford, UK. In defence of my jeremiad I can offer the following exhortation, albeit one offered in a slightly different context. "Being willing to put everything we have back into the 'central pot' (i.e. everything is up for evaluation) . . . is actually the first - and arguably the most important - step of EBLIP service" (Booth, 2009a).

So following my own mantra I am going to question each element embodied in the phrase, "The Future of Evidence Based Library & Information Practice."

**The Library is Dead, Long Live the Librarian**

First target for the iconoclast is the concept of "the Library." While the "L word" has been a useful coat-hanger, upon which to communicate to the external world what exactly librarians do, I am not alone in feeling that the inherent disadvantages of this label now outweigh the advantages. In short, it constrains rather than elucidates. Focusing our question using the SPICE mnemonic (Booth, 2006) we must recognise that our Interventions, to range against the Comparator of "standard library service," may involve locations or services positioned outside the library. Indeed, in our increasingly virtual world, our Interventions, programmes, and services may involve no physical location at all! Furthermore, any ongoing dialogue regarding EBLIP and its

future needs to access evidence informed, or even derived, from far beyond the library walls. Finally the context, or Setting to continue with the SPICE terminology, for such a dialogue must not be within the self-absorbed arena of the library and its staff. Instead it must involve the wider, and distinctly less comfortable environs of the organisation and its objectives as a whole. In short the information function, regardless of label, must be able to survive amid the cross-currents of organisational and environmental change.

### **Evidence Based?**

Having already pruned our starting phrase to “The Future of Evidence Based ~~Library &~~ Information Practice” it is timely to consider what exactly we mean by evidence based. For many within the profession this expression feels far too deterministic and mechanistic for what actually occurs in practice. Intuitively “evidence based practice” feels like it belongs in arenas, such as medicine, where the quality and consequent certainty of the evidence is much more robust than in our own social science domain. Additionally, as I commented following the *EBLIP5 Conference* in Stockholm, the EBLIP model seems to be much more dependent on persuasion and negotiation with colleagues (Booth, 2009b) than the unilateral action of an autonomous clinician. Similar reservations hold for the alternative expression “evidence led” which almost seems to invite rebellion.

I do have some sympathy for the ideas behind evidence supported or evidence informed practice. However the latter loses the sense of imperative too much, appearing optional and even wishy-washy – as in “Thank you for informing me how much the public park means to you. Now I am going to concrete it into a parking lot.” Personally I find it difficult to conceive of a movement that will be able to sustain its impetus behind the rallying banner of “informed” – but then it may just be that I am ill-informed!

A further complication arises from the recent popularity of the formulation “Practice Based Evidence.” While inverting the EBP concept in such manner may provide a refreshingly new perspective it is certainly not a position that one can adopt for very long – not, that is, without causing a sudden rush of blood to the head! Whilst venturing into this territory can I take the opportunity to stick the knife into my personal non-favourite, “Evidence Based Research”? Can there ever be such a thing as “non-Evidence Based Research” – apart from, that is, bad research. And isn’t research one form of evidence anyway? – in which case are we not in danger of creating the mobius strip of “evidence based evidence” and consequently disappearing within our own fundamentals?

### **Information or Knowledge?**

Having arrived at “The Future of Evidence ~~Based Library &~~ Information Practice” we can consider whether “Information” is in fact the commodity in which we should be dealing. Increasingly, given the societal information explosion and individual information overload, emphasis is re-centering on adding value. Information, like data, is seen as a raw material most organisations are interested in the refined product. In short, our skills of drilling for previously uncharted information, hidden beneath seemingly impermeable surfaces, are less in demand than the ability to turn this into an endless variety of knowledge products. In trading in the “Futures” market our attention as a profession should focus on “Knowledge” in preference to “Information.” One advantage of such a switch comes in providing access to the useful, although, in my mind, overused concepts of tacit and explicit knowledge. Such concepts, arguably, bring us closest to the intent behind the conference theme of “Valuing Knowledge and Expertise” (Koufogiannakis, 2011a).

## Practice Makes Perfect?

Having reduced our original phrase to “The Future of Evidence ~~<Something> Based Library & Information Practice~~” we turn our attention to one of the foremost challenges of the whole “Evidence ~~<Something>~~” movement as articulated by the statement of the Medical Library Association: “Individual . . . librarians must apply the results of research *routinely* to library and information service practice, to the development of information policy, and to other information issues important to . . . institutions” [Italics added] (Medical Library Association, 1995).

Do we yet see much evidence of the *routine* adoption of evidence into our professional practice? Yes, the *EBLIP* conferences admirably showcase and profile exciting initiatives, pilot projects, and stimulating ideas. But how does our own version of the movement perform in terms of sustainability and spread? In short, how many examples exist where the influence of these initiatives extends beyond awareness - listening to presentations at conferences or reading articles in the *EBLIP* journal? Clearly the road to Practice, as opposed to Ideas and Hypotheses, is a long way from being well-travelled!

“The Future of Evidence ~~Based Library & <Something> Information Practice~~”

## What is Evidence?

One of the distinctive contributions of the spread of evidence based practice across multiple domains and sectors is that each domain has shaped and moulded its own conception of what is meant by “evidence.” So, for example, progression of the movement into the domain of social care and social work has resulted in enhanced recognition of the importance of client or user perspectives. While wide-encompassing and culturally sensitive conceptions of evidence are much to be welcomed we have to recognise that an undesirable consequence of this tendency has

been the distillation of the significance of the term. If, as in *Alice in Wonderland*, we can choose to make evidence mean whatever we want it to mean then literally everything becomes “evidence” (Koufogiannakis, 2011b). From here it is not too far to a point where nothing becomes evidence – in fact we start to wheel huge quantities of evidence around in wheelbarrows, like some devalued currency not even worth a loaf of bread. As a consequence we now hurl “evidence” unceremoniously out into the streets:

“The Future of ~~Evidence Based Library & <Something> Information Practice~~”

## What of “the Future”?

Listening to at least two plenary keynotes from the *EBLIP6 Conference*, particularly those from individuals based within the academic sector, one could be forgiven for wondering whether libraries will have any future at all! A serious point from such an unwelcome conclusion is that other library sectors, including academic, public and health, may well have to learn lessons from the School Library sector where *EBLIP* is less a strategy for continuous quality improvement and more a survival strategy – a tactic for fighting your corner and defending your territory in times of economic constraint and genuine recession. We can only speculate on the future of *EBLIP* amidst the double dip.

“~~The Future of Evidence Based Library & <Something> Information Practice~~”

Those of you who are still following this brutal “concept amputation” will have realised that with the above-heralded demise of “the Future” we are now at the minimalist position of being left with the word “of.” Now admittedly the word “of” has made a significant contribution to popular culture – the bodies of both fiction and non-fiction would no doubt be immeasurably the poorer for its absence. One need only think of “*Of Mice and Men*” or “*The Joy of Sex*” for example. However, forgive me if I am being

unduly pessimistic, but I cannot conceive of the word “of” as able to sustain an international movement!

### **Towards an Alternative?**

If the darkest hour is indeed before dawn then now is a timely point within my commentary to introduce a concept that offers a realistic alternative to Evidence Based Practice – namely, Knowledge Interaction!

Knowledge Interaction is a recently proposed and real-life variant of Knowledge Translation (KT). Over recent years KT itself has been

assuming increasing importance and use in public health, medicine, and health services research (Straus et al., 2009). KT is a relatively new term used to describe a relatively old problem – the underutilization of evidence based research (there, my *bete noir* phrase, again!), often described as a gap between “what is known” and “what is currently done” in practice settings (Booth, 2011; Lavis et al., 2003).

As with Evidence Based Practice, the popularity of Knowledge Translation originates from Canada. The Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) define KT as “the exchange, synthesis, and ethically-sound application of knowledge – within a complex set of interactions among researchers and users – to accelerate the capture of the benefits of research . . . through . . . more effective services and products . . .” (CIHR, 2004).

Rather than, I hope, representing a cynical attempt by the aforementioned country to perpetuate a lumber industry that has already benefited economically from the widespread deforestation associated with evidence based practice, KT differs from the traditional process of diffusion. It is primarily an active and manipulated process that involves “all steps between the creation of new knowledge and its application and use to yield beneficial outcomes for society”(CIHR, 2004, p. 4).

### **Why a Variant of Knowledge Translation?**

Compelling reasons exist to recommend Knowledge Interaction as a variant of Knowledge Translation.

- It doesn’t rely on RCTs
- It doesn’t even rely on Research
- It focuses on what needs to be done and on how to do it
- It can be applied to any intervention/programme/practice
- Within Knowledge Translation there is a considerable evidence base around what works, and
- Knowledge Translation is the Information Specialist’s Core Business

Nevertheless, despite its apparent novelty, the term knowledge translation has already been superseded because, along with knowledge transfer, they are seen to “misrepresent the tasks that they seek to support. By articulating the complex and contested nature of applied social research, and then highlighting the social and contextual complexities of its use, we can see that other terms may serve us better” (Davies et al., 2008).

The same authors therefore recommend the term “Knowledge Interaction” suggesting that “‘knowledge interaction’ might more appropriately describe the messy engagement of multiple players with diverse sources of knowledge . . .” (Davies et al., 2008).

Herein lies the principal reason for my support, namely that this very term captures the intent behind the revised model of EBLIP that I first suggested after the *EBLIP5 Conference* – messy, iterative, and multiplayer.

Not that I would dare suggest that *EBLIP6* in Salford will be the last conference to bear that particular label for, as the authors recognise: “While it might be hard to shift the terminology of knowledge transfer in the short term, awareness of its shortcomings can enhance understanding about how social research can have wider impacts” (Davies et al., 2008).

## In Conclusion

For the reasons outlined above Knowledge Interaction conveys more accurately my personal conception of what should be signified by Evidence Based Library and Information Practice. In short, Evidence Based Practice (and indeed Knowledge Translation) suggests an orderliness that it is neither present, feasible, nor desirable. In contrast Knowledge Interaction best reflects our messy real world and conveys genuine partnership.

Nevertheless I should conclude my "Expert" Commentary by evoking the warning from David Sackett, a founding father of Evidence Based Medicine, that we should "never trust experts". Indeed rather than spend the intervening years between subsequent EBLIP conferences trying to hammer home the dogmatic, and essentially gloomy, pronouncements afforded me in both my closing address and this associated commentary, I plan to take to heart Sackett's own caution:

Is redemption possible for the sins of expertness? The only one I know that works requires the systematic retirement of experts . . . Surely a lot more people could retire from their fields and turn their intelligence, imagination, and methodological acumen to new problem areas where, having shed most of their prestige and with no prior personal pronouncements to defend, they could enjoy the liberty to argue new evidence and ideas on the latter's merits. (Sackett, 2000)

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