



# How academic librarians experience evidence-based practice: A grounded theory model



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## ABSTRACT

This study explored academic librarians' experience of evidence-based practice. A better understanding of evidence-based practice from an empirical basis can help fulfill the aims of evidence-based library and information practice to continuously improve practice and make effective, value-adding decisions about library and information services for their clients and communities. This research uses a constructivist grounded theory approach to investigate the question: How do academic librarians experience evidence-based practice? Thirteen Australian academic librarians participated in semi-structured interviews. The study used the methods of constant comparison to create codes and categories towards constructing a new theoretical model of experiencing evidence-based practice in the academic library context. The model consists of six categories of experiences: empowering, intuiting, affirming, connecting, noticing and impacting. This model can provide a platform for developing support for academic librarians and their educators by increasing awareness of various mindsets and actions experienced in the workplace context towards facilitating evidence-based information practice.

## 1. Introduction

For almost twenty years, evidence-based practice (EBP) has been a topic of discussion among professionals within the library and information science (LIS) sector (Booth, 2002; Crumley & Koufogiannakis, 2002; Eldredge, 2000). Simply stated, EBP refers to the process of using formal research skills and methods to assist in decision making and establishing best practice. 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 the LIS sector in the United Kingdom. The examination concluded, "research should be promoted as a valuable professional activity for practitioners to engage in" (McNicol & Nankivell, 2001, p. 82).

## 2. Problem statement

While numerous studies have been undertaken under the guise of being evidence-based, very few LIS studies have empirically explored EBP as the object or phenomenon of study. Consequently, while there is a growing understanding of why EBP should be part of the LIS professionals' practice, very little is known regarding how EBP is understood or experienced by LIS professionals. This is an important information gap to

be filled in order to "firmly establish an evidence-based culture in our profession so that the profession itself truly has a future" (Partridge & Hallam, 2006). Glynn (2006) suggests EBP "still has a way to go before it is practised regularly and systematically" (p. 2). What is clear from the professional discourse is that research is needed to understand how LIS practitioners experience or understand EBP within the context of their day to day professional work. This study meets that need by examining how LIS professionals within the academic library context, actually experience EBP in their professional work.

## 3. Literature review

Evidence-based practice consists of a systematic and structured process for identifying, acquiring, appraising, and applying evidence in making decisions in professional practice. The evidence-based practice movement grew from a need for effective health care, most notably in the United Kingdom, and gained traction in the 1990s in government policy. Evidence-based practice was shaped by social evolutions of transparency and accountability in making informed, value for money decisions (Brice & Hill, 2004). Since then, EBP has broadened its application to other areas such as education, social sciences, crime and justice, and, over the last 15 years, library and information practice (Brice & Hill, 2004).

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### 3.1. A decision-making framework for library and information professional practice

The current evidence-based library and information practice model is founded on a conceptual re-modelling of the decision making framework from evidence-based medicine and health librarianship (Todd, 2006). Eldredge (2000) proposes the first framework for evidence-based practice and posits that evidence-based practice “seeks to improve library practice by utilising the best available evidence combined with a pragmatic perspective developed from working experiences” (p. 291). An early definition of evidence-based practice from Booth (2002) builds on this framework by providing an outline of the process, including types of evidence and its role in making improvement to practice or “professional judgments” (p. 53).

Literature discussion about a process for evidence-based library and information practice was initially popularised Booth's (2007) 5A's model – ask, acquire, appraise, apply, and assess. The first step, ask, is largely the focus of this discussion, as asking the right questions and formulating and answering questions requires using professional knowledge, or “librarian observed” evidence (Booth, 2004, p. 62).

Todd (2009) begins to acknowledge the role of professional knowledge in the evidence-based practice process, presenting a holistic approach to evidence-based practice in the school library context. “Evidence in practice” is the “transformational dimension” in Todd's (2009, p. 89) conceptual model that is about integrating available research evidence with professional knowledge, while also engaging with locally derived evidence to identify issues, needs, and opportunities to actively contribute to the student learning goals of the school. From conceptual foundations, the evidence-based practice movement has established the means through which library and information practice can be continuously improved. Yet their direct application to professional practice remains unrealised as the current evidence-based practice model is insufficient in recognising the complexities of the working environment and how decision making and problem solving is approached in these settings. What actually happens in the professional context, or the process that sees evidence identified, acquired, appraised and applied to library and information practice is the least understood in evidence-based library and information practice literature.

### 3.2. Evidence-based library and information practice in context

While there is research literature that describes case studies of applying evidence-based practice in an organisational setting, few studies have derived an empirical basis for how library and information professionals conceive and experience evidence-based practice as the object of study (Bayley, Ferrell, & McKinnell, 2009). A pilot study by Partridge, Edwards, and Thorpe (2010) was the first study to explore variations in how evidence-based practice was experienced by nine Australian library and information professionals from across library sectors, including academic libraries. The researchers used a phenomenographic approach to categorise critical variation in the experience of evidence-based practice:

1. Evidence-based practice is experienced as not relevant.
2. Evidence-based practice is experienced as learning from published research.
3. Evidence-based practice is experienced as service improvement.
4. Evidence-based practice is experienced as a way of being.
5. Evidence-based practice is experienced as a weapon.

Experiences of evidence-based practice are described in relation to the internal and external work environment, the role of both the professional and the evidence in decision making, and how and why evidence is used in practice. The research suggests experiences of evidence-based practice by library and information professionals are “complex and multi-dimensional”, characterised by factors in the work

environment that influence the approach taken to gather and use evidence for decision making (Partridge et al., 2010, p. 294). Variation in the character of the experience indicates implementation of an evidence-based approach to decision making may be unique to the professional context or sector.

Australian studies in school librarianship provide insight into the nature of evidence-based practice within the broader professional context of education. Conceptually, Todd (2009, p. 89) describes “evidence of practice” as used together with research and professional knowledge to identify learning needs and gaps, and to make decisions about the improvement of school library practices. Todd (2003) found school-librarians used tools such as checklists and feedback strategies to gather evidence from their practice. Also, the value of evidence-based practice was found to be experienced locally, within the school or organisation in which the school library was situated.

Exploring experiences of being an evidence-based practitioner, Gillespie (2014) found an iterative, holistic approach by teacher-librarians, suggesting evidence-based practice is not a step-by-step, linear process. In experiencing evidence-based practice, evidence may be purposefully engaged with or sought after, or it can be encountered as a serendipitous event or activity (Gillespie, 2014). Critical characteristics of teacher-librarians as evidence-based practitioners are “intuitive” and “reflective”, aiding the application of evidence to improve practice (Gillespie, 2014, p. 16). Gillespie (2014, p. 17) also reports that the actions of gathering and using evidence in practice do not occur in isolation, but are “entwined” and “tangled”. For teacher-librarians in Gillespie's (2014) study, evidence based practice can be guided by the practitioner's own knowledge to actively engage in evidence.

School librarianship is not unlike the professional context of academic libraries, as their services also contribute towards university goals and outcomes. Findings from Koufogiannakis' study of academic librarians in Canada found that where individual decisions are being made, evidence-based practice begins with instincts or initial thoughts and reflecting on what is already known (Koufogiannakis, 2013a, p. 10; see also, Gillespie, 2014, p. 34). Then, with evidence that is received or gathered, including research, locally derived evidence, or another's opinion, the practitioner can confirm and better understand the problem in order to feel more confident in the decision (Koufogiannakis, 2013a). Both Koufogiannakis (2012, 2013a) and Gillespie (2014) found that different types of evidence are gathered and used in combination to make decisions and improvements in practice.

Making decisions in the professional context, particularly those that have a high impact on the provision of information services is found to influence academic librarians' experiences of evidence-based practice. Koufogiannakis' (2013b) study reveals that evidence is used differently in the work environment depending on how and who is making the final decision. Firstly, academic librarians tend to work together in groups—an observation that Koufogiannakis (2013b) says may be transferred to other sectors. Secondly, for the most part, another stakeholder usually makes or has final approval of significant decisions which impact service (Koufogiannakis, 2013b).

Research to date provides insight into the knowledge gaps that remain in understanding evidence-based practice in the library and information profession. Most notably, a gap still exists in how library and information professionals experience evidence-based practice in their day-to-day work. This gap includes all facets of the evidence-based practice process – how library and information professionals identify the need for, recognize, gather (or encounter) evidence, and how different types of evidence are appraised and applied to inform decisions and practice. While similarities exist across library and information practice, empirical findings suggest that experiences are ultimately characterised by factors unique to the professional and organisational context, such as needs, priorities, processes, and expectations (Partridge et al., 2010). The current conceptual model is only as effective as it is understood and experienced in professional practice. This research seeks to understand and fill this knowledge gap from an

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