



*Commentary*

***The Great Debate: Be it Resolved that Evidence Based Librarianship is a Bunch of Hoey***

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## Introduction

*Be it resolved that evidence based librarianship is a bunch of hooey.* This was the subject debated at the Memorial University Libraries Research Fair, held at the INCO Centre on the St. John's Campus of Memorial University, from November 15-17, 2006. The light-hearted, friendly and often tongue-in-cheek debate, based upon the format of the Great Debate held at Canadian Library Association conferences, closed out the three day fair. The affirmative side was debated by Louise White and Chris Dennis, both from Memorial University. The negative side was debated by Researcher-in-Residence Jessie McGowan from the University of Ottawa and Danial Duda from Memorial University. Who won? To borrow from and to manipulate the Bard, "Read on Macduff" and decide for yourself...better yet, what does the evidence tell you?

### The Affirmative: Louise White and Chris Dennis

Presenting the affirmative of this case requires an examination of definitions. The negative meaning of "hooey" can be analysed into three components: it denotes talk without substance; it connotes carelessness with reasoning and inappropriate generalisation; and it suggests that cover is being provided for ulterior motives – that a resonant-sounding aura of legitimacy and originality is being conferred on a concept that may well not be either, and which may (mis)lead to malign consequences.

Evidence based librarianship (EBL) seems to be defined, in the words of a colleague's unpublished paper, as a "focus on methods for resolving daily problems in the profession through the integration of experience and research, involving asking questions, finding information to answer them (or conducting one's own research) and applying that knowledge to practice." The question that comes to mind is, "does any of this mean anything other than good well-founded practice?" If it

doesn't, it is a name without anything specific to which to refer; talk without substance. One asks, why give good well-founded practice a new name? Is the concept simply an exhortation to use research as a basis for making operational decisions? What's new about that, beyond the label? Is it really the case that librarians never did this before? One might appeal to the prescribed six-step process as a way to distinguish evidence-based librarianship from what went before, but in the same vein, one has to ask whether that is any different from good practice either, or calls into question all practice before 1998, when the notion of EBL first had currency. The first component of hooey, denoting talk without substance, seems to apply.

We understand that the concept of EBL purports to have broad application. Depending on the extent of the application claimed for it, this seems an instance of the connotation we noted in defining "hooey," of carelessness in reasoning and inappropriate generalisation. One might ask whether, to the extent that it does mean anything other than good well-founded practice, it constitutes a general method to cover everything we do. The answer should be no, because there are questions and practical decisions which in principle are not susceptible of answer by evidence, or worse, for which following "evidence" (e.g., what everyone else does or wants), can or will give the wrong answer. Community-inspired censorship of materials in public libraries is just one instance where "evidence" can be either beside the point or actively deleterious to the mission of librarianship. Ours is an ethically founded profession, not just a social science, and deciding what we should do goes beyond simple knowledge of facts. Claims for the completely general application of EBL thus seem false. Alternatively, we could interpret it as a suggestion that librarians should do research. But that is motherhood: of course librarians should do research. However, should we always be seeking an "EBL" way to address practical questions? The answer is "no," as we have seen;

there are questions to which that method is inappropriate.

To affirm that EBL is hooey is also, as we noted at the outset, to suggest that the concept provides cover for ulterior motives, and may lead to malign consequences. Suspicion is aroused by the fashionability of the term, which tends to create a social compulsion to follow its methodology against the ideal of independent scholarly activity. Such compulsion creates a need to apply it to whatever work one does in order to confer credibility. And this advances the agenda of those who for various reasons might wish to circumvent the application of librarians' judgment to practical problems that have ethical dimensions or to confine librarians' research to prescribed areas for purposes of evaluation or control. Of course, they are pleased to call it an "objective" method, forgetting that the purpose they intend is not legitimate in the first place. In short, because it is so vague and anodyne, the advocacy of EBL can legitimise whatever one wants to do and deceive with its imprecision. The danger is that uncritical application of EBL can lead librarians to suspend professional judgment in the name of following evidence.

### **The Negative: Jessie McGowan and Danial Duda**

Hooey huh! Is not the idea of evidence based librarianship, or EBL, simply "good research"? Thus, why use a catch phrase or title like EBL? Advocates of this new and growing field of research would explain that EBL has a rightful place because the methods used in EBL help decision makers at all levels of librarianship. Yet, there are those who think, and/or believe, that the term EBL is simply a bunch of "hooey." They ask why give a process, or processes, that have been used for decades a new "title"? It is interesting that librarians, just like physicians, have felt "offended" by being asked to embrace this philosophy. A few years after the introduction of evidence based medicine in the literature, Sackett et al. replied to all criticisms

and verifying that the historical origins date back to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Paris. This article is now over 20 years old and evidence based medicine is now standard in most medical schools – we need get on with things and catch up! Our question to proponents is, "What is the alternative?" Just make do with what feels good or see what Google has to say? We think not.

A new term or title can breathe new life into an established process. EBL is such a case. EBL comes to the larger library community from one of its specialized subfields: health librarianship. Health librarians, in turn, borrowed the process from medical practitioners who asked clinical questions to solve patient-related problems. This is what all fields in academia do, but each discipline in academia is unique in nature, especially in collecting evidence and how it is used. What EBL does is combine the best available external evidence with professional librarian judgment to help decide how a problem or question should be resolved. Good professional judgment takes into account the librarian's work experience and knowledge of the local factors of the problem so that the solution can be implemented in a specific setting. However, without current best library practice, practice risks becoming outdated.

The EBL process can be explained in five steps. The first step is to formulate the question which can be seen as analogous to asking a reference question but with specific criteria. Sometimes, new evidence does not need to be found, but a new question needs to be formulated. Next, you need to find the evidence. A literature review will help you determine if other people or organizations have already dealt with a similar situation and their findings or conclusions may be all you need. How deep do you need to go to find the answers you need? Once you find the evidence, it needs to be appraised and evaluated for its research value. Does it meet the needs of the situation? If the evidence does meet the needs, then it has to be applied to your situation taking into account the preferences of your user audience. Finally, the whole process has to be

evaluated to understand the impact the evidence had in answering the question or to see if some of the earlier steps need to be revisited (i.e., maybe your search finds no evidence and you decide to ask another question). If you don't find sufficient evidence to answer your question, you may also decide to contribute to the literature and develop your own study.

No one is against the idea of "good research" but to say a process like EBL is "hoey" simply because that is what we have always done is missing the point. What EBL does do is help you think each step through. If a step is missed, some decisions could be made that wastes time in the long run. By following and understanding

these steps, librarians can be assured that they are using the best practices to find a high quality solution. This is not "hoey" but a tool that can help us be better librarians.

### **Works Cited**

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