Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Commentary

Is Now the Time for an International Association of EBLIP?

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"If it ain't broke, don't fix it" is a maxim that many will apply to the current success of the Evidence Based Library and Information Practice (EBLIP) community. After all, they may argue, doesn't EBLIP number many impressive achievements? Indeed as I comment in a forthcoming quinquennial review:

> EBLIP now has its own international open access journal, contributors from outside healthcare are starting to attend the international biennial conference series and to showcase the potential of EBLIP in a wide range of professional and peer-reviewed journals (Booth "A Bridge Too Far").

Furthermore, it is not the mere *existence* of the open access journal and international conference series that attest to the movement's extraordinary energy. Following a predominantly parochial first conference in Sheffield in 2001, each successive event has generated enthusiastic, energetic, and far-sighted individuals willing to organise and host the next fixture in the series. No doubt this would also have been the case at the recently concluded 5th International Evidence Based Library and Information Practice Conference (EBLIP5) in Stockholm; Sweden had not the need been identified for a more formal application process for the EBLIP6 conference. Equally the journal has continued to prosper and grow despite an almost non-existent business model.

Why then did those assembled at EBLIP5 on July 1, 2009, forego the undoubted pull of their hotel beds to meet for a lively pre-session discussion on the need for an International EBLIP Association? First, one suspects, such an assembly came about in unspoken acknowledgement of a prevailing zeitgeist regarding the maturity of the movement and its spread across sectors, countries and knowledge domains. However, more prosaic drivers include concerns regarding the lack of governance structures and the absence of a sponsoring organisation. While freedom from "red tape" has undoubtedly yielded benefits in terms of flexibility and mobility of conference organisation, the vulnerability of this model can be simply illustrated in a brief

sequence of "What if's:" What if a future Local Organising Committee decides unilaterally to cancel a Conference? What if there is a difference in opinion on the Conference "vision" between future Local Organising and International Programme Committees? What if a future Local Organising Committee decides to double the Conference Registration fees? The fact that such informal arrangements have worked so well in the past meant that all those assembled could securely voice such otherwise unthinkable concerns.

Another area for attention is the financial basis for activities such as the journal and the conference series. In previous years conference organisers have worked from an implicit and non-contractual assumption that, once costs have been recovered, any profits from their event would be passed to subsequent EBLIP conference organisers. There is no mechanism at present, either, for use of conference revenue to stimulate the maintenance and ongoing development of the *EBLIP* journal – arguably the vehicle for the greatest common good within the international EBLIP community – or, indeed, for any similarly worthy venture.

Of course the idea of an international collaboration within EBLIP is not new. Back in 1999, Eldredge (14) highlighted the need for such collaboration. Two years later, Booth ("Will Health Librarians" 62) concluded a Research Column with a plea for activities to mirror the "celtic fringe" of the Cochrane and Campbell Collaborations - even nominating eligible namesakes for such a venture! Appropriately, in a chapter collectively authored by collaborators from three countries, the need for more formal international ties was reiterated in a cumulative wish list for the movement as a whole (Booth et al "A future for Evidence Based Information Practice"). This theme was revisited in the pages of this journal concluding that:

> The EBLIP movement requires both strategic coordination and the development of international consensus. Strategic coordination would yield opportunities for a more planned and systematic approach to conference planning and the development and allocation of resources and initiatives according to genuine need. This would serve to channel the prodigious energies and enthusiasms of those already involved in EBLIP more productively as well as providing a rallying point for those interested in future participation (Booth & Brice "Prediction is Difficult" 100).

Less clearly articulated, however, have been the specifics of what such an international association might have as its purpose and indeed what its future activities might be. Among suggestions advanced at the meeting were roles as a membership organisation, as a home for the *EBLIP* journal, as a neutral "honest broker" that invites contributions from the widest possible constituency, as a social network for communication between conferences, as a strategic body to ensure the sustainability of emerging or recurring themes, as a conference organiser and as an implementation enabler in promoting research, implementation, training and the development of tools and instruments. Clearly the time is right to seek the views of the international community in shaping the future configuration of such a body.

Potential Association Models

Participants at the meeting rehearsed some of the arguments for and against a formal association. On the one hand, for example, an association would provide opportunities to enable EBLIP to become more integrated into everyday practice. On the other hand, it holds the danger of becoming a self-serving organisation divorced from the concerns of daily practice. Similar debates ranged to and fro. Certainly if one needs any reminder of the constraints of allying oneself to an existing international organisation, this has come recently with the decision of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) to move its congress and all associated events from Australia to Sweden (International

Federation of Library Associations). Nevertheless those in attendance were keen to explore the widest possible range of models for a potential association. Some of these are listed in Box 1.

1. Independent International Association e.g. Cochrane Collaboration
2. International Conference of Medical Librarianship (ICML)
3. International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) section
4. Official satellite of IFLA Congress, co-sponsored by a Section of IFLA (e.g. Northumbria International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries and Information Services)
5. International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) special interest group
6. National Governance, International Membership (e.g. Canadian Library Association Special Interest Group - http://www.cla.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Evidence_Based_Librarianship)
7. A "Work in Progress" Association (i.e. it adapts as each successive need arises)

Box 1

Potential Models for an International EBLIP Association

Way Forward

With such a range of models to be explored, not to mention any that those assembled were unable to identify, it is not surprising that the group felt unable to resolve such an important issue immediately. However the group did feel it important to separate the longer term strategy, perhaps involving creation of an international association, from the more medium term issue of where to hold the next conference.

The following actions were therefore proposed and accepted:

- A working group, led by Jonathan Eldredge from the University of New Mexico, should be formed to investigate potential association models and consider the suitability or viability of each model in relation to the EBLIP movement. Membership of the working group is yet to be confirmed.
- This working group would inform a wider consultation to establish a favoured association model, (including the option of no international association), using all available communication routes (e.g. former EBLIP conference attendees, the *evidence-based-libraries* discussion list and associated discussion lists), an online survey and via the pages of a future issue of the *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* journal.
- An International Advisory Committee, comprising one representative from each previous conference team and chaired by Andrew Booth, outgoing co-chair of the EBLIP5 International Programme Committee, would invite expressions of interest to host the EBLIP6 conference in 2011. Completion of two-page Expression of Interest application forms would take place in August 2009. It is hoped that the venue of EBLIP6 will be announced in September/October 2009.

Just as a parent mourns the transition of their child from the spontaneity of primary school to the exactingly choreographed formal timetable of secondary school so too many of us have cause to mourn the passing of the informal arrangements under which no fewer than five successful EBLIP conferences have prospered. Nevertheless, we have every confidence that addressing the concerns of longer term sustainability, accountability and governance will help contribute to the inevitable maturity of the EBLIP movement. I am reminded of the following quotation from Colin Powell, himself the Chair of a (much less enlightened!) proponent of international "collaboration": "If it ain't broke, don't fix it' is the slogan of the complacent, the arrogant or the scared. It's an excuse for inaction, a call to non-arms."

If you would like to contribute to our call to arms, whether randomised or otherwise, then please feel free either to contact the author, Andrew Booth <A.Booth@sheffield.ac.uk>,

informally or to make your views heard during the formal consultation period as soon as it is announced. Alternatively use the existing organs of the EBLIP community, namely the pages of the *EBLIP* journal and the *evidence-based-libraries* discussion list <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/EVIDENCE-BASED-LIBRARIES.html> to shape thinking around a future configuration of an International EBLIP Association. Your movement needs you!

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