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Bridging the research / practice divide: research and evaluation at the State Library of New South Wales

Kerrie Burgess

State Library of New South Wales

Introduction

As a response to demands for public sector accountability government agencies have started to develop internal research and evaluation capabilities (McDonald, Rogers & Kefford 2003). While the benefits of such practice for libraries include a better understanding of workplace issues and the ability to develop relevant services, evidence to justify current funding or support increased funding and general professional development (Williamson 2002) libraries have generally been slow to follow suit (Powell, Baker & Mika 2002).

The creation and implementation of the research and evaluation program at the State Library of New South Wales provides an interesting case study in the establishment of a research culture and program within a major public and reference library. A discussion of the program's development, its role within the organisation, two key projects and the program's outcomes illustrate the significant contribution research and evaluation can make to the development, enhancement and review of the contemporary library.

Background to the research and evaluation program

In 1975 *The Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Role and Needs of the State Library of New South Wales* (The Lern Report) recommended a 'genuine Research and Development Unit be set up within the Library' (Council of the Library of New South Wales 1975, p. 19). However, this recommendation was not implemented until twenty five years later when in 1997 the Library created a dedicated research and evaluation position. Credit is given to the foresight of the current State Librarian and Chief Executive, Dagmar Schmidmaier AM who is committed to the notion that well reasoned research should inform Library strategy, policy, services, products and programs.

The most critical decision was to recruit a research and evaluation professional from the broader community, rather than rely on the more accepted practice of placing a library professional, with an interest in research, in the position. The introduction of a research practitioner with a social research background has resulted in the development of a broad cross disciplinary research framework being applied at the Library. Such an approach can be very beneficial to the library sector (Van House 1991).

The formal establishment of this position within the Library does not suggest that research and evaluation was not carried out at the Library prior to 1997. Projects focusing on client use of Library services had been conducted for many years. These studies, while often relevant, were not always based on rigorous research practice either in terms of design, methodology or reporting. Much of the work undertaken was simply 'data collection', namely statistics relating to service and collection use and operational activities. The process of data collection was often the end result, rather than a means to informing service and collection development.

At the same time many staff held the strong belief that individual observation and experience provided the best indicator of clients' requirements. Such a bias towards anecdotal evidence is seen by some commentators as a general characteristic of the profession (Brice, Booth &

Bexon 2005). This approach, coupled with narrow and often simplistic definitions of research and evaluation meant there was little understanding and acceptance of the broad range of skills and experience a research practitioner could bring to the Library.

Consequently it became clear at an early juncture that both the 'demand' and 'supply' side of research within the Library needed to be addressed. While the 'supply' side refers to the organisation's capacity to conduct research and evaluation, the 'demand' side refers to the development of a research culture within the Library whereby library staff value and support research and evaluation. As other practitioners involved in similar activities have observed, it is not just a matter of developing the skills of individuals or providing the formal processes and resources to conduct research and evaluation, but rather there is a strong need to focus on working with the whole organisation, to create a research culture (McDonald, Rogers & Kefford 2003).

Definitions

The terms 'research' and 'evaluation' can hold various meanings within a library context. In the context of this paper and the Library's current activities, research and evaluation is defined as applied social and policy research. The central defining feature of applied research is that it is undertaken with a specific purpose and on the basis that action will arise from its findings (Moore 2000). While this point may seem unremarkable, it is in fact the core tenet of the Library's approach; before any research or evaluation is embarked upon, there is an end goal in mind. In the Library's context this could mean assisting service development, reviewing program performance or attempting to influence current policy debates within the broader community.

Establishing the research and evaluation program

The first task was to undertake a review of the Library's research practice to determine what activities were being conducted, by whom and for what purpose. In response to the unforeseen amount and diversity of information uncovered, what was scheduled as a four week audit became a major six month review.

The review's findings provided strong evidence that the Library needed to coordinate the multifarious research activities that were being undertaken by multiple areas across the Library. The second step was to develop an action plan based on the review. This plan detailed the program's objectives, scope, outcomes and the specific projects that would achieve them. Initial efforts to address the supply side focused on the lack of research skills within the Library. To meet this need, a qualified and experienced reference librarian from within the organisation was recruited to a newly created research position. The incumbent was provided with extensive professional and on-the-job training in research and evaluation methods. This combination of library and research skills has proved to be very successful for the two individuals who have held this position, and for the Library. It has also ensured the program has been able to adequately support the Library's research and evaluation requirements.

To address the demand side; the development of a research culture within the organisation, a selection of staff from across the Library (ranging from a curator, to the security manager) were asked to join a research group. The aim of this group was to advocate, promote and support research and evaluation within the Library. Those selected participated in research and evaluation training developed by the author in conjunction with the Information Management and Knowledge Program, University of Technology, Sydney. A second major initiative, developed by the author a few years later, was data collection and reporting training. A larger number of Library staff have participated in this course. Both training

packages have a strong practical focus, underpinned by social research theory. While this training has contributed to a significant increase in basic research competencies much needed in the library profession (Booth, Brice & Bexon 2005), the most important outcome has been in bridging the research / practice divide by developing greater support and understanding of the value of research within the library context.

Following these efforts to build organisational support through skills development and training, the next stage concentrated on developing and conducting the research and evaluation projects to support the Library. This is an ongoing, iterative process based on sound research design and practice, project management principles and importantly constant communication between the researchers and their colleagues regarding the projects, findings, and the applicability and relevance of research and evaluation within the Library's context.

Role of the program

While research and evaluation at the State Library is now a mature program, it is constantly evolving and adapting in response to the Library's strategic and operational priorities. The program's success can in part be attributed to its ability to combine a strong strategic focus with a 'grass roots' approach. Library staff are involved in research and evaluation from proposal to implementation of the project's recommendations. This practice is in response to the author's and others' observations that library staff only use research that they have been directly involved in (McNicol & Dalton 2004). From the author's experience it also one of the most effective ways in developing a strong and insightful understanding of the role of research within a library context, thus strengthening the research practice and culture.

The program now plays a critical role within the Library, supporting its strategic planning process, service delivery priorities, policy development and corporate governance and reporting. The program currently has three key areas: clients; collections; services and support. The type of projects conducted fall into four major categories: market tests, client research, service and program evaluation and State Library projects.

Market tests are concerned with the testing of ideas, plans and prototypes developed for a Library service, product and program. This type of work draws heavily from market research techniques and is usually qualitative in nature, namely focus group research. An example is a study undertaken with the young (aged 18-35 years) exhibitions and events audience. This project was commissioned as part of a plan to attract new and younger audiences to the Library's exhibitions and events program. It explored this client group's awareness and attitudes to leisure, cultural events and exhibitions, the Library, communication mediums and reactions to possible events and exhibitions.

Client research at the Library varies significantly, depending on the project. A primarily interpretivist approach, employing a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods is taken. The Mitchell Library reader research and State Reference Library client research are two examples of this type of work. Both projects explored clients' attitudes, perceptions, use and satisfaction with the Library's reading room services. A more detailed discussion of the Mitchell Library reader research is provided in the following section.

Service and program evaluations review the performance of a service, program or policy. This type of work focuses on the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of the service. Quantitative research methods are normally used to measure efficiency and effectiveness while qualitative research is generally employed for ascertaining the impact of a service. A recent example is the evaluation of the Library's Drug Information at your Local Library (di@yll) initiative developed in partnership with the NSW Premier's Department. This project evaluated the

success of the project against its stated objectives and identified the outcomes to result from the provision of community drug information through the NSW public library network.

State Library projects vary considerably in topic, research design and methods. Some of these involve working with other government departments and are large scale reviews of policy initiatives and programs. Others involve the meta analysis of existing research that contributes to a broader understanding of Library services and clients. A number of projects have also contributed to organizational change through support of total quality management initiatives. The meta analysis of the Library's exhibition program illustrates this type of work. This study reviewed quantitative evaluations of the Library's exhibitions from 1999-2004. The project highlights trends regarding visitor profiles, visitation patterns, effectiveness of different types of publicity and the preference for certain exhibition themes and genre.

The number and diversity of research projects means that while most are conducted by the Library's two in-house researchers, consultants are employed for the larger and more specialized projects such as website usability testing.

Professional development is also an important part of the program and includes representation of the Library on external committees, involvement in special interest groups and participation in conference programs. These activities help link research with practice and also contribute to the broader debate about libraries within information, government and cultural sectors. They also provide an opportunity for review and reflection of the Library's research and evaluation activities: an essential activity often put aside in the face of immediate project deadlines.

Projects

A brief summary of two of the Library's research projects best highlights the program's cross disciplinary approach, the variety of methods employed, and its success in producing insightful and strategic information that continues to assist the Library in its planning, development and review of services.

Mitchell Library Reader Research

This was the first major project for the Library's research and evaluation program. The study explored and quantified Mitchell Library readers' use, perceptions and attitudes towards the Library. Conducted from 1998-1999, it involved two distinct phases. The first phase was shaped by a grounded theory approach in that it attempted to understand readers' reactions to recent changes in the Mitchell Library reading room in terms of their overall relationship with the Library. A total of twelve individual in-depth interviews, seven focus groups, as well as content analysis of documents, published articles and correspondence were conducted. The second phase built on the findings from phase one and involved a questionnaire which quantified readers' use, satisfaction and perceptions of the Library, as well as basic demographic information. The questionnaire which was mailed to a random selection of readers and also made available in the reading rooms attracted a 55% response rate which equaled a total of 529 responses.

The first phase signaled a distinctly new approach for the Library. The grounded theory framework proved invaluable in developing a better understanding of the often strong and sometimes irrational position some readers held towards the Library. A case in point is the theme of the 'culture' of the Mitchell Library. A combination of intense use and reliance on Mitchell Library resources, and an ongoing relationship with staff and other readers had resulted in a small (but very articulate and vocal), tight knit group of readers developing a strong personal investment in the Mitchell Library. According to these readers the Library is

imbued with a culture steeped in the notion of the Library as a place of orderly, scholarly learning and research. Assumptions as to what constitutes a library, reader and valid (usually academic) research underpin this culture. As Burns (1998) points out, these notions are very much linked to the concept of the library as a collector and preserver making orderly sense out of information. These readers feel that this culture is one that should continue, but at the same time be exclusive to a certain type of reader such as the scholar. However, as the research also highlighted not all readers share such an opinion, particularly the younger reader and those pursuing personal interests such as family history.

As the study highlighted, this tension between readers as to what constitutes the Mitchell Library's culture is a result of changes in academia, leisure, libraries and generations. Over recent times academics have experienced a contracting of resources and a shift from tenured positions to performance based contracts, a decline in the perceived value of scholarly research, an increase in competition for postgraduate scholarships and fellowships, and a decrease in enrolments in traditional humanities subjects such as history. These changes have led to some of the Library's readers looking to the Mitchell Library as a constant amongst change. At the same time, the growth in research as a leisure pursuit, whether that be pursuing one's family history in great detail or researching niche topics such as Tasmanian railway history has resulted in a different type of reader using the Library. This trend, combined with generational change, with today's students being more likely to study cross disciplinary subjects such as cultural studies has led to younger and new readers requiring services that meet their needs. Moreover, these readers question the validity and exclusivity of the Library's 'culture' as upheld by the more traditional reader (Burgess 1999).

On a practical level, the research highlighted a major service issue that the Library needed to address, namely the need for independent access to its collection and services. Mitchell Library readers expressed frustration in their attempts to use the reading room without resorting to staff for assistance. There was insufficient direction in the form of signage, guides and general information on how to access and use the collections. Staff were described as gatekeepers to the Library's resources. This situation, coupled with the aforementioned belief that staff knew what readers wanted from the Library and that the type of service available often depended on the individual staff member, had led to readers becoming extremely frustrated and discouraged from using the Mitchell Library.

Until this major piece of research, these themes and service issues had not been articulated in a way that was constructive to either readers or the Library. The project's findings also questioned many staff's perception of readers; who they are, their research purposes and what they require from the Library. While the challenge has been translating these complex issues into practical outcomes, it has been made easier through this in-depth research that has provided clear directions as to the key service priorities from the reader's perspective.

NSW Community Survey

Another and very different piece of research was the NSW Community Survey. This project has provided the Library with a complete and up-to-date numerical picture of the New South Wales community's awareness and usage of and satisfaction with the State Library. Completed in 2004, this research, based on a random telephone survey with a sample size of 1223¹, profiles the community's awareness, use and perceptions of the State Library.

The most interesting findings from this project have resulted from the segmentation of the NSW community based on statistical (cluster) analysis of the survey data. Through this work three distinct segments have been identified; the committed, passive and potential library

¹ The sample coverage was adults aged 15 years and over. All respondents had to be residents of NSW.

supporter. Each holds a very different view of the Library in terms of attitudes, perceptions and general support. They also represent varied socio-demographics. This segmentation highlights the importance of a person's life 'context' as a key determinant in their attitudes and behaviour towards the Library as opposed to the usual bias towards life stage (Ritchie 1995).

The committed supporter comprises 38% of the NSW population. This group is actively engaged with the Library. They see it as offering relevance and value to the community as well as to themselves. They are also strong library users, whether that is their public, school or university library or the State Library. Committed supporters are older (59% are over the age of 45 years) and have mature families. They are professionals, who either earn high incomes (over \$60,000 per annum) or are retired. They are the group most likely to reside in suburbs close to the Library.

Passive supporters represent 22% of the NSW community. Although passive supporters believe that the State Library has a role to play in the community, they perceive that it has little to offer them personally. These people have a reasonably stereotypical view of the Library as an 'academic' institution that caters primarily to students. Passive supporters also consider that the Library is becoming increasingly irrelevant, due to the growth of the internet. This segment usually consists of the retiree, married with older children. If employed they are primarily 'managers/administrators' earning less than \$60,000 per annum. Sixty percent are over the age of 45 years.

The remaining 40% of the NSW population fall into the 'potential' category. This group can best be described as being ambivalent towards the Library. While they are less likely to place credence on the Library and its value to the community, only a quarter agree that the Library has little to offer them. They also tend to hold the least stereotypical view of the Library, understanding that it is not just for historical research. Potential supporters are familiar with libraries, with six in ten having used one within the last twelve months. Amongst the three segments they are the most frequent internet users and the least frequent Library users. Potential supporters are generally the least satisfied with the Library's services. They have young families and are less than 45 years of age. This group is primarily tertiary educated and of all the groups, earns the highest income.

This research illustrates the importance of understanding library clients not only from a basic demographic point of view, but also (with the use of quantitative research methods) from an attitudinal, life context and life stage perspective. This work has uncovered important information that will assist the Library in planning, development and enhancement of Library services, products and programs. It provides insight as to how the Library might best engage and communicate with these groups. It also challenges the assumption that libraries are a universally supported service that people, whatever their life context, will continue to use.

Outcomes

The challenge for any research practitioner is their ability to critically evaluate their own work (Somekh & Lewin 2005). In reviewing the Library's research and evaluation activities since 1997 it is appropriate to examine several outcomes. There is no doubt the Library's research and evaluation program has contributed to a greater understanding of its complex client groups and their awareness, use and perceptions of the Library. The program has also provided an opportunity for a constant and open dialogue between the Library, its clients, public libraries and stakeholders. In so doing, broad themes such as 'independent access' to the State Library's collections have become a pervasive argument in the development of the Library's reading room and electronic services. Improvements based on evidence, as well as more efficient processes and enhanced products, services and programs fulfill the applied

focus of the Library's research activities. On the basis of research, the Library has in some instances decided to not develop a proposed program. In other cases it has led to significant improvement of services.

However, it is the least tangible outcome that is the most significant: the development of a research culture within the State Library of NSW. Research and evaluation at the Library is now based on sound research practice which in turn has contributed to informed decision making. The Library has now begun to produce a body of work that is not only directly relevant to the Library, but also to the broader library, cultural and government sectors. The State Library's research program is evidence of what others have observed: that research does transfer over time into practice and the iteration between research, reflection, practice and policy takes the domain forward (McKee 2003).

The challenge facing the Library's research program is to remain relevant to the organisation, to contribute more to broader policy debate and to inform the development of new library services in the digital era.

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