

SEMINAR INTRODUCTION

Applying research to practice in information and library studies

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The genesis of this RAILS Seminar was discussion among some members of the profession with similar interests who have been participants in two groups:

- ISEF (Information Studies Educators Forum), a loose coalition of Australian university departments established in 1997 to explore collaborative research and teaching ventures
- the REAP (Research Exchange and Partnership) Group of ALIA (Australian Library and Information Association, 2002b).

Discussions centred on sharing ideas about possible collaboration and exploring and initiating common endeavour. To some extent there has also been a desire to foster wider understanding of application of appropriate research methods. This was to be undertaken so that Australian applications could be provided to illustrate work such as that explicated in Williamson (2002).

Since ALIA was to hold its Biennial Conference on the Gold Coast in 2004, a group with information and library studies interests within QUT's Centre for Information Technology Innovation offered to facilitate a meeting contiguous with the Conference. Some participants were, therefore, able to attend both meetings. ALIA itself has periodically addressed the issue of research priorities, most recently at a forum conducted by its then Board of Education in 1998. From that meeting, six issues were articulated (Todd, 1999):

1. Understand the dynamics of the human dimensions of the values/benefits of libraries and information agencies
2. Understand information seeking and information utilisation in an information-rich environment, rather than an information-scarce environment
3. The importance of the development of information literacy
4. Research in emerging areas of information practice, such as knowledge management and electronic information management
5. Elucidation of notions of information communities and information networks
6. Understand the information-seeking behaviour of the 'library non-user community'.

Unfortunately, follow-up on these pointers seems to have been very limited, at least in a formal way. Although ALIA has a statement about its role in research (Australian Library and Information Association, 2002a), it does not pronounce upon research priorities. It has also found that 'there was little interest in the concept of a Research Agenda' (Australian Library and Information Association,

2003, #3). The universities have research agendas and the flavour of some of these is seen in the papers contained here. However, the agendas are established within research centres that typically encompass information and library studies within broader groups. The agendas are driven by faculty specialisation, grant and research student availability, not areas that have readily melded with the practising profession.

Researchers and library administrators alike are continually striving to bridge the gap between research and practice. At times there is frustration with lack of involvement by practitioners in academic investigations or with irrelevant lines of research by academics. However, there is increasing engagement by practitioners through university research programs, which, in cases such as our own at QUT, strive to examine 'real world' matters.

It can also be said that items 2-5 of Todd's list above, in particular, are being addressed in some way by the research reported at this meeting, though not within the framework of an overall agenda. Nevertheless a research gap exists, contributed to by issues including:

- The motivators are different – researchers must increasingly work within the framework of grant-awarding procedures which can be subject to political agendas that may not match specific practitioner concerns
- Practitioners often wish to see 'research' into areas such as staffing, application of information technology or improvement of procedures and services, which essentially require application of management procedures rather than application of new knowledge
- Many of the immediate problems of practice may be addressed through consultancy and project management work, which may draw upon expertise of researchers, on a consultancy rather than research agenda basis.

One way in which the gap between research and practice has been addressed in the health library sector has been the concept of evidence-based practice, with a practitioner-driven approach to research. This aims to promote 'the collection and interpretation and integration of valid, important and applicable user-reported, librarian-observed, and research-driven evidence in order to improve professional judgements' (Booth, 2004).

Notwithstanding, ongoing research founded in academia has many benefits for the profession including:

- Contributing to the formation of the professional discipline by formulation of models and principles and articulating an information science
- Underpinning practice by documenting, comparing and establishing performance criteria for service delivery
- Through scholarship, providing a basis for curriculum development and teaching for those entering the profession
- Influencing the evolution of future development through contributing to strategic planning, or through public policy development in information areas

- Identifying appropriate approaches to organising information so that the information technology better facilitates delivery through endeavours such as the semantic Web
- Examining information-seeking behaviours and improving the ability of users to work with information.

Continuing evolution of a research agenda is a concern of most disciplines, and should be so for information and library studies.

In the UK, two recent research projects have looked into practitioner and research priorities. Some of their outcomes have been reviewed by McNicol and Dalton (2004), who have contrasted studies of practitioners and researchers to itemise their respective research priorities. They found overlap of interest in areas such as user information needs, learning and information skills, social inclusion, and information technology and its support of information services. However, they concluded that there was a danger of LIS research being regarded as an activity important to academics and policy makers, but of little or no immediate reference to practitioners.

Michael Buckland (2003) has also tackled the issue of outlining a research agenda driven by specific problems identified by librarians and library administrators. He focuses on five areas that he sees warranting significant exploration:

1. Library services and how they may be made more meaningful, so that they have significant impact in areas such as literacy on the communities that they serve
2. Library theory and the intellectual history of its development
3. Digital libraries from a user-centric viewpoint to balance the data-centric development that currently dominates
4. Library values and the extent that they represent socially neutral forces in society (Buckland is referring to the US), and how sustainable this may be, given the purposes behind funding
5. Use of new forms of community analysis such as those of virtual networks and the extent to which libraries may be engaged in such social networks.

These differ significantly in expression from Todd's list, itemised above. Admittedly Buckland's personal views come five years later, but Buckland seems to give stronger emphasis to the social aspects of the library role. We can debate the extent to which the Australian research agenda has a similar orientation. However, it is of interest to see that the Davis and Wilson presentation in these proceedings uses Buckland's approach to frame discussion.

The four papers that constitute the proceedings of this seminar present overviews of research being conducted in four different schools in Australia. As such they are representative both of research interests and of methods being applied to investigation in information and library studies. They are accompanied by some edited comments arising from discussions that followed the presentation of the papers. Invited respondents led the discussion.

This meeting was initiated with the aspiration of going some way towards an investigation of the research agenda in this country. We did not expect to create such an agenda, but to stimulate the questions that must be raised in order to formulate one. It has been pleasing to see that participants, encouraged by this seminar, have volunteered to organise two further seminars during 2005 and 2006. These should foster further linking of research and practice, a wider awareness of research projects and continuation of the framing of a research agenda in the discipline.

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