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Research and practice in documentation

Summary: The relation between research and practice in library and information science is discussed, and the position of the Journal of Documentation in communicating research relevant to the practitioner is stated. (6 refs.)

Keywords: Library and information research; practitioner research

Among the books reviewed in this issue is Brian Vickery's autobiographical essay 'A long search for information'. Among the points which Vickery brings out from his reflections is an insistence that research in information science should be deeply embedded in the practice of the subject.

The relation between research and practice in the information sciences has been much discussed, and often lamented over, for many years. Twenty years ago, Blick (1984) described this in terms of an adversarial relationship, 'research versus the practitioner', and deplored the reaction against research of many practitioners. In 1997, a conference was devoted to the subject, with the editors of the proceedings noting that 'in the past it has not been uncommon for information professionals to feel that research has borne little relevance to practice, and researchers for their part have bemoaned the fact that research findings have often been ignored and consequently have had little impact' (Beaulieu, Davenport and Pors 1997). They then went on to suggest that the situation was changing, with common research issues and questions being addressed, and a new partnership emerging between academics and professionals.

This optimism seems to have been misplaced. Later authors have echoed the doubts of previous years, as for example:

- "The best way to ensure that the results of library and information science research [are applied] has been debated for many years with difficulties arising, even to what should be included as 'research'" (Goulding and Matthews 2002)
- "Librarianship has had a long pre-occupation with the research-practice gap. Practitioner-led research is criticised for its lack of rigour, academic research for its lack of evidence" (Booth 2003)
- "A widely held concern in library and information science is that the relationship between research and practice, and particularly the communication of research to practice, is flawed" (Haddow and Klobas 2004)

A number of strategies have been proposed to deal with these problems. These generally fall into one of two camps. One is an increase in high-quality research carried out by practitioners: indeed, Cornelius (1997) argued that research should be seen as an integral part of reflective practice. The second is an improved communication of relevant research results to practitioners, for example by the inclusion of short research reports in practitioner publications.

The *Journal of Documentation* has always had a reputation for being academically rigorous (generally well deserved), for being difficult to comprehend by non-specialists (sometimes deserved), and for being largely irrelevant to the world of practice (generally undeserved). The *Journal's* role continues to be to communicate research and scholarship, and no apology is needed for that. However, the need to promote the interaction with the world of practice is taken very seriously. Practitioners play important roles as editorial board members, as book reviewers, and as referees of submitted articles. We encourage submissions of practitioner research, and seek new ways of making our content known to, and valuable to, practitioners. Believing, with Oliver Wendell Holmes, that 'even for practical purposes, theory generally turns out to be the most important thing in the end', we see no contradiction in our position. Nothing is so practical, as the old adage attributed to several originators has it, as a good theory; the *Journal* will communicate the theory, research and scholarship, firmly believing in its ultimate practical value.

Beaulieu, M., Davenport, E, and Pors, N.O (eds.) (1997), *Library and information studies: Research and professional practice*, London: Taylor Graham, pp 1-2

Blick, A.R. (1984), Information science research versus the practitioner, in *Representation and exchange of knowledge as a basis of information processes*, H.J. Dietschmann (ed.), Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp 231-244

Booth, A. (2003), Bridging the research-practice gap? The role of evidence based librarianship, *New Review of Information and Library Research*, 9, 3-23

Cornelius, I. (1997), Research as practice, in *Library and information studies: Research and professional practice*, Beaulieu, M., Davenport, E, and Pors, N.O (eds.), London: Taylor Graham, pp 243-248

Goulding, A. and Matthews, G. (2002), Putting research into practice, *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 34(2), 63-65

Haddow, G. and Klobas, J.E. (2004), Communication of research to practice in library and information science: closing the gap, *Library and Information Science Research*, 26(1), 29-43

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