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Innovation – the creative tension of risk and evidence

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ABSTRACT

Reliance on proven evidence or on theory can be academically sound and can reduce risk, but may also stifle innovation. Librarianship facilitates cultural growth by enabling information to be challenged and re-assessed – a professional principle which deserves assertion in the contemporary environment of change. The assertion of principle appears from the literature of evidence-based research to have been somewhat discounted. The resulting policy development process may likewise discount the innovative in favour of the safe “third way”. Victoria University of Wellington Library (VUW) has two strategic projects under way now which are central to its sustainable viability into the new century. The innovative solutions needed to leverage their full opportunities could be at risk if evidence or theory is allowed to replace professional principle as their driving context.

“There is nothing so practical as a sound theory” is a summation which has been attributed to John Maynard Keynes. Paralleling the scientific rigidities of the theories underpinning mathematics and the pure sciences, robust theories can be developed to guide the softer sciences such as those of human behaviour or of cultural transmission. A theory of this sort is not a mere assertion – it is something which can be tested with logic, irrespective of changes in context. Principles, or moral imperatives, in contrast, are grounded not so much on theoretical rationale as on belief or commitment. Sets of theories can be, and are, developed from principles, but the real value of principles is that they act as anchor points for new directions, especially when the wider context is experiencing fundamental change. The

American Library Association's 2002 *Principles for the Networked World* ⁽¹⁾ and the Association of Research Libraries' *Keystone Principles* of 1999 ⁽²⁾ are two recent examples in the library sector which have attracted attention beyond their country of origin.

The knowledge environment at the start of the twenty-first century, with which librarianship grapples to use its accumulated experience to guide it through an uncertain and shifting landscape, puts many professional theories to a painful challenge. In New Zealand, one of these challenges is the need to recognise Mātauranga Māori – the value system of the indigenous peoples – which is proving to be difficult for some in the profession to reconcile with traditional “western” emphases on open access to information. This will also be an issue in its own way in other societies; but something altogether more unsettling to established practices is the new approach to the ownership of intellectual property. Professional debate (as in the UK and in EDLIBA over the 2002 EU Copyright directive) ⁽³⁾ has shown at times a tendency to fall back on “public choice” and on other economic theories to rationalise the library case. This is perhaps the clearest instance where the library position can best be advanced by the robust assertion of principle, rather than by reliance on the use of evidence-based theory as if this were just another issue of public policy economics.

Librarianship is, at heart, the profession which cherishes the accumulated resource of human knowledge. It actively facilitates a culture where existing information is challenged so that new records of expression can be created. That professional role is based, not on any theory of knowledge management, but on a set of principles – written, spoken, and assumed – which assert the value of knowledge itself, the value of making it accessible, and the value of securing it safely across time and through different ideological fashions. The writings of Professor Tom Wilson represent an all-too-rare instance where the logical analyses of the Knowledge Management theorists are robustly challenged ⁽⁴⁾. Principles can be, and are, challenged by economic or political theory. Principles are not alternative theories; they require assertion above that theoretical context.

Achieving library potential in today's fast-changing knowledge environment has little developed theory or evidential experience to draw upon, because the context (in particular that of information technology) is so radically different from that dominated until late last century by the lineal certainties of print culture. Innovation, enterprise and lateral thinking will increasingly be called upon to frame the professional solutions. Innovation and enterprise, which are based on robust principles, can achieve outcomes which build on and extend beyond the bounds of observable evidence. These outcomes will, in turn, contribute to the development of new theory.

Evidence-based research has an inherent logic which is increasingly creating its own body of theory. In the UK political sphere, this is showing in particular in the nebulous realm of “the third way” ⁽⁵⁾. Here it is important to distinguish between the evidence of solutions – empirical observation of how something works – and the evidence of the existence of a need or of a problem. The latter will usually be more difficult to establish, when it is a matter of the absence of something rather than measurable evidence. If there is over-reliance on the evidence of proven solutions, there is an inherent risk of closing off considerations of alternative approaches. Constraining innovation may be a low-risk strategy but it is also a constricting one; falling back on the tested can quickly become a slippery slope to relying on the comfortable. Is librarianship any more prone to this risk than any other profession? Probably not, unless anecdotal evidence of a risk-averse bias can be tested with data.

Evidence of need, and the difficulty in resolving actual problems, are the strategic opportunities to elevate the value of theoretical principle, or more particularly of principled theory, as the trigger for improving practice. Innovation has an inherently high risk because it reaches beyond the proven: modern management systems place high value on “proof of concept” and on “business analysis” which can kill many a good idea which might otherwise have flourished and yielded dividends in a more entrepreneurial framework. Entrepreneurship naturally includes the risk of loss or of failure, even of spectacular failure. The challenge to this profession is to ensure that commendable risk-aversion does not lead inexorably to a retreat into a comfort zone which will become marginalized because of the scale of the external context of change.

Today’s knowledge environment has three core drivers of fundamental change

- Information technology, which moves writing and reading from the linear to a more interactive paradigm – e.g. through hyperlinking, websites and email.
- Globalisation which makes the reach of individual knowledge records infinite
- An apparent preference for instant data over longer-developed mature wisdom.

Professional principles enable all three of these drivers to be addressed positively. Innovation in the development of practice and theory based on these principles will empower the profession to identify and seize opportunities of contemporary knowledge management. Reliance only on theory, or on proven precedent, will result in lost opportunities.

Two current projects at New Zealand’s Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) library provide timely examples of how evidence-based research alone will be insufficient for policy development. They also show that core professional principles, observed need, strategic opportunity and the application of researched theory can be blended to achieve sustainable outcomes for both practical benefits and for a platform for growth.

VUW (see <http://www.vuw.ac.nz/home/index.asp>) was founded in 1899 and is one of eight universities in New Zealand. Some 13,000 equivalent full time (EFT) students and 640 EFT academic staff make up Faculties of Law, Science, Humanities and Social Sciences, Architecture and Design, and of Commerce and Administration. A further Faculty of Information Studies is currently in the early stages of design: this would encompass the academic teaching, learning and research of computer science information systems and of knowledge management. This latter area includes the Library and Information Studies of VUW’s School of Information Management.

The VUW Library consequently has a century of services, policies and collections behind it, in its support of teaching, learning and research across the total VUW range of subjects. The library has some 106 staff (89 FTE) and operates through its website and through physical staffed sites on each of VUW’s three campuses. Each of these three physical campuses is quite distinctive even though all are located within 3km of each other; the hilly geography of downtown Wellington City tends to inhibit the easy flow of students between them.

These outline summaries of VUW and of its library show that they are typical (in the essentials) of hundreds or even thousands of academic settings worldwide. Standard literature searching alone will produce comprehensive evidence to show how most issues likely to arise in such an institution can be addressed.

The strategic reality is that two current projects at the VUW library, while relatively conventional in themselves, are strategic opportunities for securing sustainability into the new century. These two projects are

1. The new physical library site to come into use from March 2004 (the start of the 2004 academic year) to serve greatly increased numbers of both students and staff at the expanding downtown campus (*Pipitea Campus*).
2. The implementation of Endeavour's *Voyager* Information Resource and Access Management System (IRAMS) from December 2003. This has two aspects: firstly, changing over from the *Dynix* system operated at VUW since 1988; and secondly, changing from a stand-alone system to a consortial one serving four New Zealand university libraries and linked to a single outsourced technical hub.

Both of these projects are taking place:

1. Concurrently: this is entirely co-incidental, but challenges conventional wisdom by endeavouring to use separate windows of opportunity which, in the light of experience, are unlikely either of them to recur in the immediately foreseeable future. That is, deferral or sequencing is not an option.
2. In a university which has, since 2001, committed itself to a national specialised excellence in the research of information technology.
3. While student rolls grow (6% in 2002 compared to 2001, and a similar scale of increase in 2003). This makes it imperative that project work does not prejudice or risk the quality of normal service delivery through 2003.

Both projects are thus of a scale, and a timing, as to require innovative solutions if they are to fulfil both their potential and strategic purpose. Theoretical frameworks and a diverse literature of evidence-based research, for both new library systems and for new library buildings, will provide some illumination, but this is unlikely to be sufficient for real project effectiveness. The key to this project effectiveness will be to leverage the wider future potential benefits of the new ventures, which is different from achieving an orderly project implementation according to plan. There needs to be a will to assert, beyond mere rhetoric, professional principles which relate to the human empowerment which knowledge access offers. Only if this is very clearly carried through in project design and implementation will the risks be dealt with, and the investment in effort and resources justified.

Reliance on the ample, and relatively easily assembled, evidence could well result in more of the same. This means the same as that which supported library effectiveness through recent decades – a necessary foundation, but not sufficient for 21st century success.

Indeed the evidence suggests that the relative eclipse of professional principles in the face of economic theory in the last two decades of the twentieth century in New Zealand has impeded library effectiveness. Theories of cost-benefit as a key indicator of collection size, and market theories emphasising current demand over long term, trans-generational value, have both compounded each other to increase library administrative overheads at the expense of quality collection development. These largely economics-based theories have tended to drive libraries down a spiral of diminishing returns, which has added to some of the uncertainties now facing the profession. Perversely, the new management environment's emphasis on performance indicators and output measurement has resulted in increased quantities of published data (in the guise of accountability) but decreased reflective professional analysis in the New Zealand literature.

In consequence the first project – the *Pipitea Campus* – requires a solution which will combine depth and breadth of quality-assured knowledge content with the sort of easy on-line accessibility which is increasingly the preferred mode of students. Evidence exists of computer access suites and of comprehensive search tools. Theories of collection use analysis and of student learning behaviours are numerous. Both will be used in the VUW solutions in a “three-legged stool” solution where the essential stabiliser is professional principle. The driving principles will be:

1. The value to improved learning outcomes of self-directed exploration of knowledge content.
2. Bias-free presentation of knowledge content covering diverse shades of opinion and published over a long span of time.
3. The value of “rubbing shoulders with knowledge”: ensuring that library spaces reflect the inherent value of knowledge, and provide the social space where the enquiring student can interact with recorded knowledge through either individual or group study.
4. Providing ready access to a broad span of recorded knowledge, not confined to the particular academic disciplines of taught courses, but deliberately drawing the students’ attention to the thinking and expression of the wider human and creative context.

Evidence-based practice in the form of benchmark sites in other institutions will provide some guidance to the design of the *Pipitea Campus* solution: it will be the demonstrated assertion of the principles by which the true qualitative impact will be judged by learners, teachers, and by University management. Inevitably there is a degree of compromise through the normal budgeting iterations and through some resiling from the frontiers of innovation by staff who are reluctant to look past the proven evidence of existing practices. The risk is that an evidence-based approach will produce an outcome which does not allow the real opportunities which the new campus offers.

The second VUW project – the implementation of the national *Voyager* system – has an inherent risk of being just one more software installation project. Its scale demands a strong project methodology and quality assurance framework to identify and eliminate risks at the earliest opportunity. Professional principles will need to be constantly re-asserted to ensure that the project’s sheer scale does not overwhelm its potential to bring about fundamental change in the way in which academic library content is described, delivered and delimited. Fundamental principles of librarianship have the capability of being reinforced by this project:

1. Collaborations between Universities will enlarge the total quantities of recorded knowledge which is readily accessible to faculty and to students.
2. Accuracy and consistency of bibliographic citations are fundamental to the robust research process.
3. The library collection (in all formats) has a value greater than the sum of its individual units.

Evidence exists in at least two regional areas outside New Zealand where the possibility of extending a consortial system purchase into a collaborative enterprise was considered and rejected at a fairly early stage because of the low probability of gaining the necessary commitment between the contracting parties.

This may mean that practice, and even the organisational theory of academic librarianship, points to the inevitable centrifugal devolution of focus to the individual institution. Economic theories of the efficiency gain of collaborative actions are unlikely to be sufficient to counter the evidence of such devolutionary trends. Asserted principle, and its continuous re-assertion in the face of apparent or potential implementation “issues”, will be necessary to ensure that the collective approach persists and becomes embedded. This is not a case of dependence on

the triumph of hope over experience: it is the opportunity to use principle to achieve the aspirations of hope.

CONCLUSION

“Is your practice evidence-based?” is the theme of this session. These two case studies from a real set of situations facing a University Library in 2003 are considered, to show that the question posed is the wrong one to answer. Rather, an examination of professional principles, and actively leveraging them to explore innovative ways of problem resolution, will permit thinking beyond the square and the seizing of the many opportunities which contemporary conditions offer if only we are innovative enough to recognise them.

References:

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