



Persuasive evidence: improving customer service through evidence based librarianship

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Abstract

This paper presents three case studies to illustrate how evidence based practice has contributed to informing decisions and resolving issues of concern in service delivery at Bond University Library. Drawing on the experience of these research projects the discussion will highlight the benefits of evidence based information practice in finding solutions to problems and improving of library services. The need for practitioners to develop the skills and methods for undertaking research will also be discussed.

Introduction

Like most Australian university libraries, Bond University Library employs a range of quality processes and gathers vast quantities of data to measure performance and ensure students and staff receive a high standard of library service. For example, performance indicators such as processing turnaround times are used to verify that resources are available for customers in a timely manner. Usage surveys inform decisions about resource selection and retention and a customer survey objectively measures levels of customer satisfaction and indicates the service areas where further development is needed. These performance indicators and survey results are benchmarked internally over time and externally against other libraries and organisations in the wider community.

A great deal of qualitative data is also gathered to measure the Library's performance including free comments in surveys and feedback received via suggestion boxes (physical and virtual), focus groups, roundtable forums and so on.

While some of these measures are designed to diagnose problems and prescribe the appropriate response or remedial action required, others raise issues for which there is no ready made solution. At Bond University Library there has been a natural progression from using a systematic quality framework to applying evidence based practice as an effective methodology for solving problems in service delivery.

Evidence Based Librarianship in Action

Despite the absence of an agreed definition for evidence based librarianship (Booth & Brice, 2004) there is general consensus that evidence based practice in library and information science means applying a sequence of information management processes:

- Specifying the problem
- Finding the evidence to answer the problem
- Appraising the evidence

- Applying the results
- Evaluating the outcome
- Redefining the problem (Brice, Booth & Bexon, 2005)

This paper will describe the application of this process in solving a number of practical problems that arose at Bond University. Two of the issues emerged from customer feedback and the other evolved through a collaborative project between an academic group and Library staff.

Case Study on Library Opening Hours

Question: Should Bond University Library increase opening hours to meet student demand? How realistic is 24 hour opening?

While Bond University Library opening hours are good by Australian standards, in 2004 students were increasing pressure on the Library to extend its opening hours including requests for 24 hour opening. Requests were received through the Suggestion Box, in the Rodski Customer Survey and from the Student Council and other student associations.

The decision was made to resolve this question using an evidence based approach when the issue was escalated to senior University management. Library management decided that a comprehensive report with recommendations based on best practice and other relevant evidence would inform all stakeholders and help to resolve the issue. In other words the issue had intensified to a point where a rigorous approach was needed to find some convincing answers.

The evidence was gathered in a variety of ways:

- The Library's opening hours were compared to those of other Australian university libraries using the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) annual statistics. This revealed that Bond Library's opening hours were the fourth best in Australia. Only one other institution's opening hours were significantly better.
- A survey of the 24 hour facilities of other Australian university libraries was conducted via CAUL and this showed that six Australian universities had a 24 hour facility associated with the Library ranging from a traditional computing laboratory to specially designed and constructed areas incorporating collaborative and individual learning/study facilities.
- A review of the literature illustrated that internationally, an increasing number of institutions are opening their libraries for 24 hours for some days of the week and new libraries are being built to incorporate a 24 hour facility. Research conducted in the United States indicates that students' requests for extended library opening hours are perennial and they vary from requests to open until 2.00am during exam periods to demands to open 24 hours per day seven days of the week, most days of the year (Steele & Walters, 2001; Curry, 2003; Engel, Womack & Ellis, 2002).

- A quantitative analysis of the feedback received from Bond University customers in 2004 indicated a low but persistent level of complaints.
- A quantitative analysis of the usage patterns gathered in the Library's Facilities Use Survey was used to show that the current spread of hours approximated closely to usage patterns.
- A detailed costing was prepared for 3 different scenarios ranging from longer opening hours for the duration of the semester to a short period of 24 hour opening leading up to the examination period.

The evidence was appraised and summarised to produce a report incorporating a short term recommendation to further increase opening hours in the weeks leading up to the examination period. The recommendation for the longer term was to incorporate a 24 hour study facility when and if the Library is refurbished. Based on the CAUL survey, such a facility should provide individual and group study spaces, computers, wireless access, laptop ports, photocopier and printing equipment, vending machines, lounges and appropriate security arrangements.

The report was discussed with the Student Council and senior University management and while the recommendation for the long term was accepted, the short term proposal was not adopted. Through the process, all stakeholders gained a good understanding of the issues and agreed with the decision that was made.

In the period since the research was undertaken, the concept of refurbishing the Library has progressed and the University has invited proposals from architects to develop a brief for the project. The evidence gathered to resolve the opening hours question has contributed to a better understanding in the wider University community of the Library's role in providing a learning environment in addition to its role as a repository of books and provider of electronic resources. This is helping to convince senior management that a refurbishment is necessary to meet student needs.

The refurbishment proposal has defined a new question: What facilities and services would students like to see included in a refurbished library and stakeholder feedback is being gathered using surveys and focus groups.

Case Study on Management of Access to Feature Films

Question: How can the feature films on DVDs and videos be organised and managed to maximise access for the Bond community? Should these resources be more tightly controlled to improve access? What is the most appropriate shelf arrangement?

To support the Bond University School of Film and Television (FTV) programs, the Library has an extensive collection of feature films on DVD and video. The collection benefits the entire Bond community and is heavily used. Academic staff and students in the FTV School had a number of issues concerning their access to the feature films:

- Due to the popularity of the films, FTV staff and students felt that the DVDs and videos were often not available for their primary purpose; i.e. the teaching and learning needs of FTV courses. They felt that the DVDs and videos they wished to access were often damaged, lost or loaned to borrowers who were not undertaking FTV courses.
- The arrangement of DVDs and videos using the LC classification and a genre designation was too difficult to use and a title order arrangement was requested.

In this instance an evidence based approach was chosen to resolve the problem because some of the issues being raised were based on anecdotal evidence. Furthermore, the causes and potential solutions of the problems were not well understood.

Evidence to resolve the questions posed was gathered using a survey, analysis of reports of damaged and lost items, analysis of loan patterns and perusal of the policies applied by other university libraries. A literature review was also undertaken.

- A survey of the management practices used in Australian university libraries was conducted via CAUL. This confirmed that most universities have relatively open access policies for their films on DVD and video; i.e. loans available to all borrowers, material on open access, standard loan periods, multiple items allowed for borrowing.
- The survey revealed libraries were using a variety of security arrangements including traditional Library security strips as well as locked security cases. According to the survey results, most libraries were not experiencing a great deal of theft or loss of feature films. Videos are the most prone to damage due to their aging format.
- The survey showed there were significant differences in how libraries shelve their feature films although about a third of those surveyed use a system that effectively organises them in title order.
- According to the survey, 70 percent of CAUL libraries use some form of booking system to ensure films are available for class purposes.
- A literature review indicated that management of audiovisual collections and especially feature films in academic libraries is an evolving topic for all aspects of their collection management and access. (Merry, 2004; Brancolini, 2002). The trend is strongly towards integrating audiovisual collections into the mainstream of library collections, minimising specialist treatment due to the medium.
- Analysis of Bond Library's loan statistics confirmed that usage of the feature films was high compared with other parts of the collection but that most borrowers were respecting the loan period.
- Analysis of lost and missing reports has been ongoing and this has highlighted the titles that are most susceptible to theft, namely DVDs of popular television series.

Based on these findings FTV academic staff were consulted and a number of steps could be taken immediately. For example, a manual booking system for staff to reserve their titles for class teaching was promoted and an automated system is under consideration. Secondly, feature films were re-shelved in title order. Thirdly, security was increased for the popular television series that were found to be susceptible to

theft by relocating them to closed access at the Loans Desk. Lockable cases are being investigated in order to be able to return them to open browsing access.

A report with recommendations is being prepared to vary the loans policy including proposals to limit both the number and length of time that feature films can be borrowed. The new policy is to be discussed and agreed with stakeholders and would incorporate maximum flexibility for academic staff and students in the FTV School to facilitate their borrowing for teaching, learning and research purposes.

Case Study on Teaching Undergraduate Students EndNote

Question: How can undergraduate students be supported to learn the basics of using EndNote?

At Bond University all undergraduate students are required to undertake a series of core courses including a course delivered by the School of Information Technology (SIT) that is designed to ensure students understand the key concepts of information technology. The course aims to enable all students gain competency in using a range of productivity packages. In 2005, it was decided to add EndNote to the list of applications that students would master in this course.

Since the acquisition of a University site licence for EndNote in 2002, the Library has been responsible for support and teaching of the program within the University community. Acknowledging this expertise, SIT staff called on the Library's support in the new initiative. With a strong vested interest in the success of this initiative the Library decided to gather evidence for best practice on teaching EndNote.

The literature was reviewed and a survey of practice in Australian universities was conducted via CAUL.

- The literature review revealed a plethora of articles about the technical aspects of EndNote including reviews of new versions of the software but relatively few articles on support and teaching EndNote (East, 2001; Siegler & Simboli, 2002).
- The CAUL survey showed that all but one of the 34 universities that responded had a site licence for EndNote and those 33 provide support and training in some form. The institutions surveyed indicated they focus their EndNote training on staff, researchers and postgraduates; however, 16 provide EndNote training for undergraduates usually at the request of academic staff.
- In terms of evaluation of training, 17 of the institutions surveyed via CAUL ask participants in workshops to evaluate content and delivery to inform course development but none appeared to evaluate the learning of participants or use tests or exams to assess competency. A few are using quizzes and exercises for learners to test their own progress as they work through EndNote tutorials.

Once the survey results were analysed, further discussions were held with SIT academic staff and it was agreed that Liaison Librarians would give input to the development of the EndNote mastery tests being produced by SIT staff. Library staff conducted EndNote training for the SIT tutors who would deliver the

practical tutorials for undergraduates. It was also agreed that a Liaison Librarian would be coopted to introduce EndNote in the lecture program.

At the end of the semester, students' results on the EndNote mastery test will be analysed. A broader question about the impact of teaching EndNote still needs to be researched and answered: How will teaching undergraduate students EndNote impact on their information skills?

Evaluating Our Performance

Using evidence based practice at Bond University Library constitutes a deliberate strategy for introducing change and continuous improvement. While professional experience and judgement are not discounted, using evidence based practice is an attempt to move away from relying solely on anecdote and personal experience to solve important problems in service delivery.

Analysing our performance in applying evidence based practice at Bond University illustrates our successes as well as our limitations. One of the highlights and an essential feature of the process at Bond Library is the involvement of stakeholders. This varies from seeking their input to partnering with them to learn from their expertise. The ability to build consensus and agree action plans with stakeholders is an important outcome of that process. This stakeholder involvement is akin to the patient centred approach that is a hallmark of evidence based medicine (Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes, & Richardson, 1996). In the Bond context, it continues a strong tradition of developing and maintaining good relationships with customers.

In critically analysing each step of the evidence based approach we used, the three case studies have been a valuable learning experience:

Specifying the question: In the case of the opening hours issue and the access to feature films problem, the questions were focussed by analysing the feedback from customers. In the case of support for EndNote the question was not as easy to define and as it transpired, the broader question that could have been asked still needs to be addressed. In all cases a structured process such as PICO or SPICE could have helped focus the questions and in turn would have aided the process of choosing the research design. (Brice et al., 2005).

Finding the evidence to answer the problem: In each case, a range of techniques was used to gather evidence, including literature searches, surveys and other data gathering methods. As reported by Brice et al. (2005), the literature search process was complicated due the range of information sources that comprise the evidence base. In each case, a survey via CAUL gathered a broad base of valid and reliable evidence about current practice in the sector. However, the survey methodology used could have been more rigorous. For example, the questions could have been more thoroughly tested to obtain more accurate and comprehensive information and more thought given to how the responses would be analysed. If the survey methodology had been automated, the results would have been easier to analyse. Web based survey applications with inbuilt analysis methodologies can save a lot of time for those responding to surveys as well

as those analysing the responses. While using surveys as the predominant research method may not meet the gold standard for research rigor (West, 2003), in the case of the questions raised at Bond University, they satisfied the need to gather evidence quickly so that pressing service problems could be resolved in a timely manner.

Appraising the evidence: The evidence base generated by the literature searches was informative and contributed to an improved understanding of the issues. But as found by Booth (2002), the results for all three case studies showed few studies with findings that could be transferred to the current situations. This may be inevitable given the practical nature of the questions being posed. Fortunately, the lack of transferable results in published studies was partly overcome by the broad base of evidence generated through the CAUL surveys. The survey information was analysed and the major trends for the sector could be readily identified and used as a guide for practice at Bond University. Another valuable evidence base in two of the three cases described was the analysis of local usage statistics.

Applying the results: In determining the applicability of the evidence assembled, questions about costs, severity, timeliness and politics as suggested by Koufogiannakis and Crumley (2004) all came into play. In each case feedback from stakeholders had been significant in raising the issues in the first instance. Their involvement was equally important in deciding how the results of the research would be applied to address those issues. In each case, library staff discussed the evidence with stakeholders and through the process a consensus developed on how best to proceed. Both library staff and stakeholders were informed by the research and assured that plans to take action were soundly based.

Evaluating the outcome: The opening hours case was concluded to the satisfaction of both library staff and stakeholders and is now pending a refurbishment of the Library. The other two cases have not yet been concluded although following initial research and consultation with stakeholders some interim actions have been undertaken and this has allayed some of the biggest concerns of stakeholders especially in the case of managing access to feature films.

Conclusion

The three case studies illustrate Bond Library's first intentional foray into using evidence based practice to capitalise on well established quality processes and to stimulate innovation and change. The concept of "professional practice built on the explicit and judicious use of current best research findings in making decisions about the performance of the day-to-day role" seems hard to fault. (Todd, 2003). However, as the Bond University experience has shown, there are barriers to overcome even when the work environment is conducive. Like most professionals, librarians at Bond University need to develop the skills and a culture to effectively carry out evidence based practice. These include the skills to articulate questions, undertake research, appraise research findings and implement a course of action. Above all it requires librarians to develop a culture of questioning and reflecting on what we do. Despite the limitations in some aspects of the

evidence based practice used at Bond Library, the success of the three research projects described in this paper amply demonstrates the benefits of an evidence based approach. Persuasive evidence!

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