



Evidence based librarianship in the humanities: an application for second language learners

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Introduction

This paper examines one librarian's experience in applying an Evidence Based Librarianship (EBL) model to her practice as a humanities librarian.

Background

The University of Lethbridge is a primarily undergraduate liberal arts institution with a full time student enrolment hovering around 6000. The Library supports the students, faculty, staff and community of the University. The professional librarians are assigned specific subject areas and have responsibility for all collections, information literacy and liaison programs within their assigned areas. Every six years we are entitled to apply for a year's study leave. In 2002 I applied for and was granted a leave for the 2003/2004 academic year. My goal was to focus on learning more about a question that arose from my practice as a languages librarian, specifically, determining the information needs of second language learners.

The success of my application and subsequent leave depended on my ability to identify specific goals and outcomes for my research, and to conduct the work within a well recognized research framework. At that time, although the EBL model had been employed almost exclusively in the health sciences, there were certain characteristics that could be applied to humanities librarianship and were directly applicable to the work I was doing.

Defining the Problem

The EBL literature provided direction in forming the question I would use as the focus of my research: What are the information needs of university students in introductory foreign language courses?

The Literature Review

A 10 year literature review was carried out based on a search of *Library Literature* as well as an examination of literature available from the websites of relevant professional associations¹.

Although there was existing research in the area of foreign language learning and learners, the majority of it focused on public library populations and technical aspects of collection development in academic libraries. I discovered no research neither addressing the information needs of my population nor answering my original question. I set about gathering evidence to answer the question myself.

¹ Association of College and Research Libraries, Canadian Library Association, American Library Association, International Federation of Library Associations, Modern Languages Association

Gathering Evidence: Examining Experience

I believed the evidence could be found by examining the experiences of language students themselves. In 2003/2004 I began my study leave with this objective in mind. To investigate the experience of a student taking an introductory foreign language course, I decided to register in a second language program in a university that had a collection of information resources supporting student language learning.

I enrolled at the University of Guanajuato Language School in the fall of 2003 and was placed in introductory Spanish grammar and conversation classes. The second semester I added Mexican literature and history courses. During the year I was required to do class presentations, short papers and complete grammar and vocabulary worksheets.

The Self Access Center (SAC) at the Language School provided information resources in support of the language learning needs of the students. Included in the collection were fiction and non-fiction books, reference materials, magazines, movies, music, books on tape and computer language programs, all at various language levels.

Results

Spanish language dictionaries and encyclopedias, grammar books, English language full text journal indexes and internet web sites were most useful when preparing for class presentations, writing papers or completing worksheets for class.

For additional language study and practice I read fiction books written at a lower reading level, in particular translations of popular young adult fiction. I also used Spanish language dictionaries, grammar texts and computer language programs on which I could practice verb drills. Language learning web sites were extremely useful but frustrating to use due to slow connection speed.

Testing Evidence: The Survey

Armed with a clear picture of the nature of information resources used when learning a second language I tested my experiences against those of other students in the SAC. I created a survey to measure users' assessments of the relative importance of particular information resources to their language learning. Thirteen information resource types held by the SAC were identified and users were asked to rate each resource type for its importance to their language learning. Although other questions were included that addressed attitudes and demographics, the resource question was what I was most interested in.

A pilot survey was distributed by the Director of the SAC in February 2005 and the feedback was used to create my final survey. In March of 2005 I returned to the University of Guanajuato to conduct the survey in the SAC. Surveys were distributed to every person who entered the SAC during a one week period. Users were asked to complete one survey only. Of the 193 surveys distributed, 187 were returned.

Results

The majority of respondents were between the ages of 18-30 (69.5%). Students of the Language School and students at the University of Guanajuato taking language courses at the Language School made up the vast majority of respondents (92.5%). Of the 187 respondents, 108 were studying English, 66 French and 59 Spanish.

The information resource identified most often by most users as either very important, important or somewhat important was grammar books (96.3% of respondents), followed closely by textbooks (95.7%) and movies on video/DVD (94.7%). Music was a close fourth at 94.2% and non-fiction language books and programs on audio cassette were next at 78.7% and 78.6% of respondents respectively.

60.4% of respondents indicated that they used the information resources for self study, 47.1% to study for class, 35.8% for homework and 34.2% to prepare for a project or class presentation.

Conclusion

The benefits of my experience as a second language learner were many. Most importantly, I was able to identify the types of resources needed and used to support language learning. As well I was able to acquire a second language – one that is part of my subject area responsibilities – and that has informed and improved my practice as a language librarian.

In conclusion, the application of an EBL model to my practice as a humanities librarian has been a success. By examining my own experience and then testing that experience in a broader population I was able to find the evidence I required to answer my original research question. This evidence has informed my own practice and, when shared with the broader academic community, can inform the practice of others as well.