
Do libraries aid learning? Approaches and methods for measuring impact. A report of the LIRG/SCONUL seminar, 9-10 December 2002, Scarborough.

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This LIRG/SCONUL (**Society of College, National and University Libraries**) seminar was held in an icy-cold and windy Scarborough on 9th and 10th December. The design of the course left no time to become chilled; all participants enjoyed the content of the excellent presentations and the tempo and pace of the workshops ensured a good mental workout. David Streatfield and Sharon Markless of Information Management Associates ran the seminar.

In May 2002, Markless and Streatfield were asked to provide a critical evaluation of one of the better-known impact and evaluation programmes in the LIS field. This was the 'Value and Impact Programme', commissioned by the Library and Information Commission before becoming Resource. Their report can be found at http://www.resource.gov.uk/documents/ev_impevb.pdf The recommendations contained in this report make salutary reading. Within the reports that were evaluated basic definitions of 'value' and 'impact' were undefined; tools such as comparative controlled studies or comparative non-experimental studies were not undertaken; most described process rather than tackle the fundamental issue of ascribing a value and measuring the impact of library services and the difference they make to the selected community. Although some of the reports were excellent, there was little evidence of value or impact of library services obtained from this programme and the need for research skills training was evident in the comments in the resulting report.

Both SCONUL and LIRG assumed a responsibility for offering opportunities to develop relevant skills. Both groups appreciated that there was a need to give people the correct tools to undertake impact assessments of services in Academic libraries. The SCONUL ACPI (**Advisory Committee on Performance Indicators**) Group joined with the LIRG to organise a seminar that would deal with the fundamental skills, tools and knowledge. With their wealth of experience in this area, David Streatfield and Sharon Markless as 'Information Management Associates' were obvious candidates to run the seminar.

The seminar was a well-balanced mix of presentations and workshops. The presentations from those currently undertaking impact studies were illustrative of various sector initiatives. Sue Wilkinson, Director of Learning and Access, represented Resource, the agency that has taken over from the Library and Information Commission. Resource has established a project to carry out further research on the available evidence of impact evaluation in the library sector. The Robert Gordon's University will do the work. The project will explore techniques and tools, staff training needs and good and evidenced based practice that could be shared

and applied to the Libraries Museums and Archives sector. The result is a framework for 'Inspiring Learning for All', and the report can be found at <http://www.resource.gov.uk/action/learnacc/00insplearn.asp>. Whilst the early results are interesting, the focus for this seminar was information about the techniques and the methodology contained within the framework and how they can be adopted to illustrate impact. The basic principles that underpin the framework are,

- That organisations need to be learning organisations;
- They need to develop services around identified needs;
- Involvement, managed by consultation and collaboration is essential;
- Moreover, there must be evidence of achievement obtained from the service users.

Nine organisations, including university and public libraries will pilot the framework.

The evidence from the previous Impact and Evaluation project identified the issues to be followed up: more rigour, examination of outcomes, focus on core services as well as projects, and filling the gaps in understanding of short and longer term impacts. The overall aim of the project is to provide tools to enable organisations to report more authoritatively on the impact they have on peoples learning. Consensus is to be reached on what outcomes should be measured, aligning these with other activities such as Best Value or the Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency (Institutional Audit). The pilot studies fall into one of three strands,

1. Analysing existing data;
2. Testing approaches to improving existing methods of data collection;
3. Developing and testing new tools.

This latter strand will examine a range of methods including comments forms and questionnaires but more effort will be placed upon the accurate reporting of learning that these methods may indicate. In some cases, this will mean changing the questions used or comments asked for. More promotion of responses to comments cards will be encouraged and new information about users will be sought, employing existing methods such as focus groups. Importantly the analysis will be sharper and more skilful, resulting in outcomes being more meaningfully employed to the benefit of the user, thus, improved evaluation and more impact.

In an article in Library Review, Briony Train and Judith Elkin traced the impact of a project 'Branching Out' through a variety of evaluative methods. They confirmed the value of longitudinal study for projects that 'concern the qualitative, person-centred evaluations'. At the seminar, this approach was emphasised by several other presentations from library and research staff that had undertaken impact projects. Dorothy Williams (Robert Gordon's University) was frank about the difficulties that librarians and teachers seem to have defining or illustrating with evidence any impact, which the School Library has. All agreed it was a 'good thing', that visits motivated students, and it was 'useful' but few could venture a constructive view on the real contribution a library makes to learning. Further details of RGU work can be found at <http://www.resource.gov.uk/news/snippets.asp?month=9&year=2001#89>. The project team employed very open observation of activities around particular learning situations (subject or pupil-year based). Data was collected using a variety of qualitative or semi-quantitative evidence from learners, librarians and teachers, by

observation and checklist, discussion or questioning, librarian logs, pupil's work in progress and completed assignments. It proved very difficult to get specific indicators for the impact of the library on an individual's learning from the teaching staff. Time constraints appeared to prevent librarians completing effective and evaluative learning logs with pupils, which may be a key evidence-base for such impact assessment. Librarians were able to provide service-orientated statistics, but not impact orientated evidence. The study progressed using qualitative data analysis and was able to draw conclusions about the different ways in which learners used information obtained in the library, but not about the impact that the information had upon their learning.

Linda Banwell provided an in depth look at the ways in which the JUBILEE (JISC User Behaviour in Information seeking: Longitudinal Evaluation of Electronic Information Services) project is tracing user interactions with electronic information sources. The project is extending into a fourth year and has moved from a focus on higher education into further education organisations. The approach taken is holistic, drawing on qualitative data, it is both user and discipline based. It draws evidence from use and non-use of sources and is based on the use of illustrative and contextualised pictures. The data assembled is proving valuable to the development of a monitoring and an evaluation-benchmarking tool. The project has built on the model adopted by the Tavistock Institute, of collecting performance data and synthesising this to create both formative and summative evaluations.

Fieldwork activity had established a base line for the success criteria and emerging themes. The JUBILEE EIS (electronic information services) toolkit is developing into a web enabled prototype to be re-applied to the sites visited in the early stages of the project. Measuring the effectiveness of skills, training using this toolkit will be a powerful outcome in FE and HE library practice. The evidence of the effectiveness of using EIS's will be a persuasive argument for the introduction or adoption of a collection development strategy based upon the purchase of such services. For library staff the outcomes of JUBILEE allow a fully informed assessment of their use and the pre-requisites for their introduction. The project has resulted in the collection of valuable evidence and proves how timesaving such research can be.

Richard Proctor discussed a recent project run at Sheffield University that showed how librarians could improve their ability to provide some measurement of value and impact. He also confirmed and summarised the research methodology that was adopted for the workshop sessions within the seminar. The investigation that was undertaken during the Sheffield City Libraries strike was used to illustrate the methodology. The study intended to prove a thesis that public libraries impacted upon learning. The qualitative methods used were anecdotal 'soft' data collected through people's stories, feelings perceptions and opinions. Qualitative methods of collecting 'hard' data involved statistics. Both have drawbacks, as people do not always say what they think but say what it is they think the interviewer wants to hear; statistics tell the researcher what is happening but do not provide reasoned argument for the activity. Thus, research in this area needs to be triangulated by some 'stakeholder' analysis focusing on behaviour patterns (observed) and changes in behaviour (before and after studies).

The method chosen was time-intensive, requiring semi-structured interviews to be carried out with library users. It also required analysis of statistical data, for example,

book issues before and after the strike with time series modelling to identify the impact of the closure of the libraries. The number of variables in such research does pose significant analysis problems. This research illustrated the importance of being able to activate research in response to an immediate situation (strikes cannot be brought about to order). Statistical analysis is made more difficult if the statistics kept do not relate to the data needed for contributory analysis. Questionnaire design is notoriously difficult and even more so when time is limited. The thesis upon which the research is based must have some informed context before the results can have meaning. In this instance, it was proven that the most educationally disadvantaged group identified the most significant reasons for missing the public libraries. Proving both value and impact becomes powerful and emotive evidence for maintaining library services. It also develops a 'more questions than answers' strand of research enquiry that is hard to resist, but even harder to fund. Valuable skills requirements were also identified by this project including the need for librarians to engage with the research methods of sociological study, the need to obtain experience of using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS), and the importance of focusing on observed, actual, behaviour.

The workshop sessions involved all participants in group-based activities connected with their selected topic. The workshops were structured and planned to emulate the trajectory of idea to completion for a work-based problem. Groups undertook a short period of negotiation to explore reasons for selection of the various topics and then began the search for tools to evidence value and impact. The author of this paper selected one example: academic staff development as a means of improving student information literacy. Three stages of work were undertaken, and these allowed us to establish clearly stated objectives, to develop critical success factors by exploring how we would know that we were making a difference, and **to** identify the relevant evidence that would support our impact assessment. This process clearly indicated the need to get each stage right before moving on to the next. If the objectives were too vague, the stage of identifying how you were making a difference was not achievable. If the criteria for making a difference were too specific the impact assessment would not be possible to prove, or would be too limited to be informative.

This seminar also introduced more questions than answers and both LIRG and the SCONUL ACPI group with the potential for a range of further workshops and seminars to be held to complete the original idea. Sharon Markless and David Streatfield are using some of the seminar work in their forthcoming book for Facet Publishing, on impact measurement. The ongoing debate will be maintained by work that is more detailed and the implementation of the ideas from the seminar. This illustrates how librarians can introduce research methodology. It is how practice improves to good practice by engagement and dissemination within the profession.

The following references may prove useful to readers of this article.

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