Narrative-based Librarianship

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Abstract

Librarianship has developed rapidly over the last century, building up its own techniques while borrowing judiciously from other disciplines. In recent years there has been interest in adapting an approach which has emerged from medical science, namely evidence-based practice. However, there is now discernable in medical disciplines a recognition that in order to be effective it is necessary to go beyond this concept and consider how evidence is interpreted, presented and understood. Bare statistics and other quantitative approaches need to be accompanied by rich pictures which illustrate effective strategies and which are persuasive to both practitioners and clients. The result of this thinking has been the emergence of 'narrative-based practice'. In this paper, the case for a 'narrative-based librarianship', which would encompass both the management of libraries and the development of content, is examined.

Introduction

The telling of stories lies at the heart of human communication. If we go back to the earliest times we find that it is through story that knowledge, information and wisdom are passed from generation to generation. Take the Bible as an example. It opens with stories: the creation of the world in six 'days' (with the important, if now neglected, seventh day of rest!) and the story of the Garden of Eden, used to provide an explanation of why there is evil in the world, setting out a belief that this was not how things were meant to be. Continue through what we now know as the Old Testament and we find story piled on story, from Noah and the flood, through Abraham's journey to the Negev, the slavery of the chosen people in Egypt, their wanderings in the desert and their eventual establishment in the Promised Land. All of these are stories, and all are stories with a point. They are certainly not presented for mere entertainment and neither are they intended as a straightforward record of historical events.

Stories, quite simply, are one way of depicting reality and of revealing the meaning beneath the surface of events, of 'telling it as it is'. In everyday life they are used to provide a more graphic description of unfamiliar scenes than a straightforward factual report might provide. Take this description of medical practice among the ancient Babylonians:

> *They have no physicians, but when a man is ill, they lay him in the public square, and the passers-by come up to him, and if they have ever had his disease themselves or have known any one who has suffered from it, they give him advice, recommending him to do whatever they found good in their own case, or in the case known to them; and no one is allowed to pass the sick man in silence without asking him what his ailment is.*(Herodotus, 430 BCE)

The story of how medicine was practised gives a much better insight into the society of those times than would a table of mortality rates!

Throughout Medieval Europe the art of storytelling, in prose and verse, was much practiced. In England we had Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* while Malory wrote his enduring fable *Le Morte d'Arthur*; in Wales there was the *Mabinogion*; in Italy Boccacio enthralled his readers with *The Decameron*; in Poland, Jan Kochanowski is credited with writing the first Polish drama, *The Dismissal of the Greek Envoys*; and so we could go on. At this distance in time it is hard for us to realise just how powerful such narratives could be.

Britain, the world's first industrial nation, allowed almost unbelievable poverty to flourish during the nineteenth century. Peter Ackroyd has written, "if a late twentieth-century person were suddenly to find himself in a tavern or house of the period, he would be literally sick - sick with the smells, sick with the food, sick with the atmosphere around him" (Ackroyd, 1991). Yet many would argue that it was Charles Dickens' stories of the poor and destitute of London, in novels like Oliver Twist and Little Dorrit, which did more to change public opinion than any number of fact-laden official reports. Of course, those stories had to be supported by hard, quantitative evidence if they were to lead to purposive action. So, alongside Dickens, we had reports such as that by B. Seebohm Rowntree (1901) who calculated that of those living in 'primary' poverty (defined as "families whose total earnings are insufficient to obtain the minimum necessaries for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency"), 15.63% has suffered the loss by death of the chief wage-earner, 22.16 had families with more than four children and 51.96% simply did not earn enough to feed and house themselves properly). It was the coincidence of story and hard fact which led to action. Neither would be effective on their own.

The fascination of stories lies in their connectedness to our own lives. They appeal to experience. Further, they offer a holistic view – they consider not just the 'simple' fact, but draw in context and culture, and unashamedly offer a point of view. Some would distinguish 'story' from 'narrative', where the former is the underlying account and the latter its expression in the words of the storyteller. Others would dispute such a distinction, although recognising that the telling is as important as the tale. And linking the two, of course, is the storyteller.

The question for us as librarians is whether and how the power of story can be harnessed by and for our profession. A starting-point is the current interest in evidence-based practice.

Evidence-based practice
To attempt to describe the importance of evidence-based practice is to risk tautology: it is, put simply, an approach to professional practice, in whatever field, which insists that all decisions must be taken on the basis of the best available evidence. It is generally accepted that this approach was first developed at McMaster University in Canada in the early 1990s (Evidence Based Medicine Working Group, 1992), broadening out in the mid-1990s to 'evidence based healthcare' and then, by the late 1990s, emerging into other fields such as social work, education and human resource management.

As Booth (2003), in a comprehensive review of the literature, has remarked, it was natural for librarians – who were becoming involved in assessing medical evidence in their role as information and knowledge managers – to seek to apply this paradigm to their own profession. However, Booth also points out that as yet there is no

consensual definition of evidence-based librarianship. For our present purposes, Eldredge's (2002) definition is attractive, emphasising that the evidence sought comes from both quantitative and qualitative sources and is derived from the experience of work itself:

> Evidence-Based Librarianship (EBL) seeks to improve library practice by utilising the best available evidence in conjunction with a pragmatic perspective developed from working experiences in librarianship. The best available evidence might be produced from quantitative or qualitative research designs, although EBL encourages more rigorous forms over less rigorous forms of evidence when making decisions.

However, Booth's own definition (based on an evidence-based healthcare definition offered by McKibbon et al. (1996)) also contains an all-important emphasis on the observations and preferences of clients and users:

> Evidence-based librarianship (EBL) is an approach to information science that promotes the collection, interpretation and integration of valid, important and applicable user-reported, librarian observed, and research-derived evidence. The best available evidence, moderated by user needs and preferences, is applied to improve the quality of professional judgements.

There remain questions over how well the evidence-based practice paradigm fits a profession like librarianship. Apart from considerations of management practice, it is legitimate to ask just where the evidence base is to be found. The healthcare professions have a well-established infrastructure dedicated to the collection of data on every possible medical intervention, and a rigorous procedure of quality assurance, including peer review, dedicated to ensuring that knowledge about drugs, treatments and disease management is widely shared. Librarianship is not like that. Of course, there is a research base and an established literature, but there is a lack of firm expectation that it is that research base which should underpin practice. The research-practice divide needs to be overcome if any kind of evidence-based approach is to gain widespread acceptance.

One can of course look at this issue another way. Perhaps one of the implications of the evidence-based approach to librarianship is that, in the words of one team of observers, "it …… involves encouraging librarians to conduct research" (Crumley and Koufougiannakis, 2002). If librarians do not use the research base arising from academic enquiry, perhaps they should be encouraged to undertake more of their own studies. Whichever route is chosen – and surely there is room for both – it follows that it is worthwhile considering briefly the nature of the research which might underpin evidence-based librarianship. While, quite clearly, many standard research techniques will need to be applied – statistical analysis of transaction logs, user satisfaction studies and so on – it is in the area of qualitative studies, and perhaps most particularly that broad range of techniques which cluster under the term ethnographic studies, that is of most interest for our present purposes.

Ethnography and the place of stories in research

Stories have always been important to the practice of ethnographic research, which derives principally from anthropology and the study of the relationships between people, and investigates the cultural, social, personal, physical and other aspects of their lives. Sarantakos (1998) suggests that ethnographic research is based on four principles which have informed anthropological studies:

- Culture. The focus of concern is on the shared culture of groups of people, examining and seeking to understand the shared patterns of behaviour, values, norms and standards.
- Holism. The focus is on the whole system being observed, rather than on an isolated part. Meaning and purpose can only be discerned within the context of the whole system.
- In-depth studies. Ethnography is not interested in the superficial data collected by counting or even by questioning, but relies on 'living in' the group that is being investigated.
- Chronology. Originally, anthropologists concentrated on primitive cultures, although ethnographic approaches are now used by a wide range of social scientists to study both primitive and modern societies over time. Ethnography is interested in change, in how people and societies alter and reinvent themselves over time.

Ethnographic research is sometimes criticised as being too 'subjective' – because the researcher is immersed in the culture being studied, he or she cannot stand back and be fully objective. Hannabuss (2000a) comments that this criticism seems to be particularly sharp where "the evidence takes the form of narratives or stories, possibly communicated spontaneously by the respondents". One suspects that Eldredge, whose definition was quoted earlier, might be hostile to story as a "less rigorous form of evidence".

It is easy to see why this criticism is levied, but the danger is that if it is allowed to prevail a great richness of knowledge and understanding will be lost. Linde (2001) provides a taxonomy of knowledge in which she points out that 'tacit knowledge' needs to be considered alongside 'explicit knowledge', the latter so often being the 'stuff' in which knowledge management and similar approaches are interested. She points out that tacit knowledge "is commonly and easily conveyed by narrative". She continues, "knowledge about identity, who one is and what one's history has been, is a very important part of tacit knowledge". In an earlier work she described "the ways in which people use narrative to construct …… identities" (Linde, 1993).

We can link this approach to aspects of postmodern thought and particularly to the idea of social constructivism. Gergen (1985) wrote authoritatively about this concept, pointing out that our discourse about the world – the ways in which we think and speak about it, the ways we apprehend 'reality' – is the product of communal interchange. Because we are human beings, continually interpreting and reinterpreting our understanding of the world in a social setting that understanding is not, and cannot be, a fixed map of 'how things are', as an objectivist stance would claim.

It is within this notion of social constructivism that the importance of story or narrative becomes clear. Stories enable us to communicate within groups – social, family, work or whatever – because they provide context and interpretation. Bates (2004) suggests that in analysing narratives we can identify:

- Sequential and temporal structures, which help us to understand the sequencing of actions which make up the story. Traditionally, for example, a story might start off: "Once upon a time …" thus marking its beginning. It is important to note that this reflects the generally teleological structure of stories – they are about means and ends

- A specific focus or orientation of the narrative, which is an expression of the views, understandings and perceptions of the storyteller and how they understood the situation they were describing.
- The way in which the story is told, including the use of language, tone of voice, expressiveness and so on.

Hannabuss (2000b) comments on the use of narrative in organisations and the way in which members of the organisation use the narrative in order to deduce more general lessons:

> "One of the most frequent uses of narrative in organisations (is to generalise from them). They are unique and idiosyncratic, but they are used as a key part of sensemaking because they tell us something important about the circumstances now, and they can also be used as pointers or lessons for the future (e.g. if the company were to do this, then similar or comparable outcomes would occur). They can also be generalised from and add to the store of exemplars of successful and unsuccessful management practice which becomes the folklore of management itself."

In a separate paper (Hannabuss, 2000c) he also comments that "narrative allows for …. reflexivity", that is, it encourages reflection on the outcomes of decisions – it is a highly suitable vehicle for the reflective practice which is so widely regarded as good professional practice (see Schön, 1983) – "knowledge inherent in practice is to be understood as artful doing". Thus narrative leads to action.

It is also worth adding here that the nature of constructivist understandings of learning – and learning is at the heart of most libraries' concerns – is one that is highly conducive to the sharing of experience by means of story. We learn from one another by telling the stories of our experiences and listening to the experiences of others. "Constructivism places considerable stress on the sharing of perspectives - in other words learners participate in the process by revealing their interpretations to others and receiving feedback and new insights. The aim of this activity is not primarily to learn new 'things', to acquire 'factoids' to slot into a mental filing cabinet, but to develop ways of interpreting the world which are flexible enough to be applied successfully in new situations." (Brophy, 2001)

As will be apparent, the argument advanced here is that in order to improve our decision-making we need to go beyond the 'hard' sources that are normally the focus of demands for 'evidence' to encompass the much 'softer' and admittedly less objective stories which people – including professionals – tell each other. It is possible to discern this movement outside librarianship, most interestingly in the very same health professions from which evidence-based practice first sprang. In 1998 a collection of essays was published under the title *Narrative Based Medicine* (Greenhalgh and Hurwitz, 1998). They write:

> *You could make an objective list of the actions you performed over the last week, but if it were simply a "factual" account, it would not <u>mean</u> anything. But if you <u>told</u> us what you had done in the last week, not only would your story acquire meaning, but in telling it, both you the narrator and we the listeners would be compelled to reflect on it in order to gain a greater understanding of what had gone on. ……Just as history does not exist in nature, but is created in the telling, so, too autobiography and the medical case history emerge out of transactions which mean they are at the same time both less and more than the 'facts' of the case.*

The same is true of many other professions, and can be true of librarianship. We are more likely to find meaning in the telling of how things have been experienced by others than in the formality of arid statistics and measures. Or, at the very least, meaning is more likely to be discerned when the two are used in harmony.

Narrative-based librarianship
What does all this mean for the practice of librarianship? Well, perhaps it suggests that in order to improve our management practices, and the delivery of services to our clients, we need to take much more seriously the role of 'story' and we need to find ways to capture 'story' systematically as part of our evidence base. We need to acknowledge explicitly that, in fact, good managers have always relied on story – the anecdote shared in the corridor or the 'war stories' swapped over a drink in the conference bar. But sharing anecdotes in a haphazard and random fashion is by no means an adequate response to the challenge of managing libraries in the modern world. Rather we need to develop new ways of capturing, sharing and using narrative as a systematic part of service delivery and management.

Storytelling is not an easy option. Very few people are natural storytellers and the art, for surely that is what it is, needs to be learned and practiced. Educators need to include storytelling alongside other research techniques, giving due prominence to issues such as what makes an effective story, how stories should be selected and different ways of presenting stories to different audiences. Continuing professional development (CPD) needs to offer courses in storytelling for practising professionals. Librarians need to learn the art, not just of telling, but of listening to story.

There are examples of the use of storytelling in the literature of librarianship. The UK's People's Network, for example, has demonstrated its impact in part through the use of story. Alongside the statistics of use and the analysis of demographic characteristics of users, there are accounts like the following:

> I obtained a place at College on their basic ECDL (European Computer Driving Licence) course and used the library to practise some of the things I learned at the college. If it hadn't been for the initial use of the library computer I don't think I would have considered the college course… I now have a new job in which I need computer skills. So from playing about with the library computer I now have a successful career, all because computers were installed in local libraries. (Brophy, 2003)

Stories can be powerful advocates for libraries as well as tools for their management. Yet even that is not enough to exhaust their potential.

Stories as content
As librarians, the 'stuff' we deal with is information and knowledge. Yet, apart perhaps from the field of fiction librarianship – where the purpose is quite different – we have not excelled at organising story as part of the formal literature. Perhaps, however, this is one area where the new technologies are offering librarians – and their sister professionals in museums, galleries and archives – an opportunity to break new ground. In the traditional publishing paradigm, our users face enormous mountains to climb if they are to tell their own stories. Yet ordinary citizens – the everyday users of our libraries – have a wealth of experience and insight to share. Why should not libraries form the focus for a new wave of content, created by local users and shared locally, regionally, nationally and globally through the Internet?

It was this vision that inspired the creation of the COINE (Cultural Objects in Networked Environments) project, part-funded by the European Commission between 2001 to 2004, drawing together professionals from Poland, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Spain and Greece. COINE (Brophy, 2002) was a first step to realising a vision in which the power of PC networks and the Internet could be used by libraries to enable the creation and publication of structured content by users, who would require few skills to participate (though they would develop them as they progressed) and who would be able to share their stories while preserving them for posterity. The initial content can be viewed on the COINE website (http://www.coine.org) where more extensive information on the project can be found.

What is fascinating about this project is that its origin lay in a story. In 1999, two professionals – one a librarian, the other an information technologist – shared the story of an extensive project which had taken place in Ireland which encouraged primary school children to collect physical artefacts about their own antecedents. Such objects were placed in 'black boxes' which filled with scraps of text, photographs and, in at least one case, a toothbrush. Why, we thought, not provide electronic black boxes into which digitised artefacts could be placed to create stories which, unlike the physical analogue, could be shared and permanently archived? The story of Irish schoolchildren thus led to a pan-European initiative to revolutionise the role of the library.

Conclusions

This paper has suggested that stories can be a powerful addition to the evidence base upon which libraries rely for good management, that they can illuminate complex situations, can be effective tools for advocacy and, when used in conjunction new technologies, can provide an opportunity for libraries to play new roles. Where libraries have traditionally played their part towards the end of the information chain, relying on authors, editors, publishers and distributors for their raw materials, they could also position themselves at the initial, creative stages where information is constructed. Especially when considering agendas of social inclusion, which recognise that many different viewpoints are valid and worthy of respect, they could exploit storytelling to capture an essential responsibility in the developing information society and make it their own. A paradigm of 'narrative-based librarianship' offers both opportunities and challenges to professionals to look at their responsibilities in new ways.

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