Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Narrative Based Practice

Peter Brophy
Professor of Information Management
Centre for Research in Library & Information Management
Manchester Metropolitan University
United Kingdom
E-mail: p.brophy@mmu.ac.uk

Introduction

The telling of stories lies at the heart of human communication. If we go back to the earliest human societies, we find that it is through story that knowledge, information, meaning, and wisdom are passed from generation to generation. Take the Hebrew Bible, texts of critical importance to Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, 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 the narrative 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 what lies beneath the surface of events. They are interested in meaning rather than the recitation of "facts." They help us to explore what is significant. They take full account of the human dimension. They are concerned with interpretation.

In everyday life, stories are used to offer 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).

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 – and itself recommends the use of personal narrative ("whatever they found good in their own case") as a means of communicating advice.

Throughout Medieval Europe the art of storytelling, in prose and verse, was much practised. In England we had Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and Malory's 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, "London was indeed becoming what The Lancet described as a 'doomed city.' The average age of mortality in the capital was 27, while that for the working classes was 22, and in 1839 almost half the funerals in London were of children under the age of ten" (Ackroyd 218). 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 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"), 16 per cent had suffered the loss by death of the chief wage-earner, 22 per cent had families with more than four children, and 52 per cent simply did not earn enough to feed and house themselves properly (119-145),. It was the coincidence of story and hard data which led to action. Neither would have been as effective on its own.

The fascination of stories lies in their connectedness to our own lives. They appeal to experience. Further, they offer an holistic analysis – 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 simply one type of the latter, being characterised by an appeal to emotional effect (see, for example, Gabriel 5). 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 is whether and how the power of narrative can be harnessed by and for professional disciplines in general and our own profession in particular. Evidence based practice provides a starting-point for such a debate.

Evidence Based Practice
It is hardly necessary to review the development of EBP when writing for **Evidence Based Library and Information Practice**, although a brief summary is perhaps in order. It is generally accepted that this approach was first developed at McMaster University in Canada in the early

1990s, 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 (6), 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 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 (72).

Booth's own definition 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 (6).

There remain questions over how well the evidence based practice paradigm fits professional disciplines like librarianship. Apart from considerations of management practice, various observers have asked 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, though the efforts of EBLIP to correct this should be recognised and applauded.

Two specific issues need to be addressed with some urgency if the EBP paradigm is to be extended successfully to professional disciplines beyond those engaged in health care. The first is the nature of the evidence that is collected and used. The emphasis on randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in medicine is less obviously applicable in any discipline which operates primarily through its social context – and the emphasis in librarianship on user-centred approaches certainly operates this way. Secondly, an issue which has arisen in medicine becomes even more pressing in such socially focused disciplines, namely that the communication of evidence is at least as important as the evidence itself. It is worth looking at these two issues in rather more detail.

The Nature of Evidence

While it would be wrong to claim that quantitative evidence is always required by proponents of EBP, the emphasis placed on the RCT as a "gold standard" is revealing of a view of evidence based on "scientific," positivist paradigms. In this view, the scientific method, based on the testing of hypotheses through experimental methods, dominates. The RCT is in a real sense the purest form of this approach, with its requirement for double-blind trials using

properly constituted control groups, with the data gathered being used to disprove (but, as Popper pointed out, never prove) the original hypothesis. Eldredge appears to accept this hierarchy of evidence when he refers to a preference for "more rigorous forms over less rigorous forms of evidence" and goes on to state that "adherents to both Evidence-Based Medicine (EBM) and EBL consider the RCT to be the highest level of evidence found in a single research study" (Eldredge 72). While there has been some recognition that RCTs are not always the most appropriate methods in EBLIP – Brice et al. suggest that "randomised controlled trials, although offering the most reliable results for effectiveness questions, are not always the most appropriate study designs for other types of questions" (8) – there is little evidence that qualitative approaches are given anything like equal prominence to quantitative ones in EBLIP. Eldredge simply suggests that they are useful to "generate valuable exploratory hypotheses" which can "[be] subsequently confirmed through larger, quantitative based research designs" (72).

However, the positivist approach has an irreconcilable difficulty when applied to real-world social systems, namely that it is literally impossible to control all the variables. A scientific experiment relies on the ability of the researcher to carry out the experiment within a closed system, or as close to that as is possible to achieve. Thus medical researchers go to enormous lengths to minimise any bias introduced by external factors – even in the laboratory this is a major issue. But social systems, which include libraries, do not and cannot operate in such conditions.

In response to this dilemma, researchers have developed methods based on the relativist paradigm. As I have written elsewhere:

> [S]uch approaches accept that reality can only be described through the

eyes and understanding of the observer – which includes the researcher. To add to the complexity, all we have to describe the world is language, which itself introduces ambiguity, bias and difference. None of this denies the major achievements of scientific method and that approach's ongoing importance. However, when we seek to understand and describe complex systems, we should not expect the positivist tradition to supply all the answers. (Brophy, "Measuring Library Performance" 21)

Although "pure" relativists would reject the positivist paradigm, the most common research perspective is generally termed "post-positivist." This approach recognises that while the goal of achieving "certain" knowledge through scientific experiment is flawed, objectivity is possible provided that it is seen as a shared characteristic of society. Understanding arises as we make observations and communicate with one another, including the criticism of each others' work, recognising the social contexts within which we operate and from which we cannot divorce ourselves. It is also worth adding that post-positivism is open to "critical approaches," such as the feminist paradigm, which attempt to counter the prevailing assumptions which so easily slip into so-called objective research. Given these perspectives, any reference to the RCT as the "gold standard" merely provides evidence of an attitude which sees research and evidence based practice from a positivist standpoint. This in turn suggests a view that organisations are mechanistic systems which perform well if the right inputs are provided and the right processes put in place. The question is whether that is an adequate stance within a professional discipline which claims to be focused on human beings ("users") and which relies on

individual human judgement for so much of its operational delivery.

Within the health disciplines there is increasing recognition that qualitative approaches have a major role to play. Indeed, it is interesting to note that research has been undertaken on the issue of how well the secondary literature and current indexing practice supports the retrieval of such studies. Shaw et al. comment that "better indexing by databases and explicit qualitative methodology descriptors from authors are required to make searching for qualitative evidence more efficient and effective" (4) , and undoubtedly this is one of the reasons for under-utilisation of such studies.

Communication

It sometimes seems to be assumed by proponents of EBP that provided "hard" evidence is available and provided that practitioners are convinced that an evidence based approach is appropriate, then the problem has been solved. This makes unwarranted assumptions about how we communicate, how we learn and how we absorb and utilise new knowledge. Even in the health services, this is a serious problem. If it were not, the drug companies would not spend such huge sums on ill-disguised promotion of their products.

There is a vast literature on communication in organisations, among which the overriding emphasis is on communication as a characteristic of social systems – exactly the point raised by the relativists. This can be linked to the emerging consensus among researchers with an interest in pedagogy (the theory of teaching and learning) on constructivist approaches. These approaches suggest that rather than emphasising the transmission of "facts" (accepted knowledge about the world), modern societies need to encourage learning which encompasses both openness to differing world views and the

ability to relate new ideas to existing knowledge in meaningful ways, so that each of us is continually constructing, sharing, and reconstructing our understanding of the world in all its complexity.

To communicate knowledge in a form which enables it to be used constructively (in the above sense) therefore becomes a critical issue. It is not surprising in these circumstances that the attention of many management theorists and practitioners is turning to how communication takes place in broader society, which soon suggests that narrative may have a much larger part to play than has previously been acknowledged.

It is this twin requirement – to broaden our understanding of the nature of evidence and to focus more on how evidence is communicated effectively – that has led to a growing interest in the use of narrative in organisations. A number of management "gurus" and others have drawn attention to the power of narrative in decision making. For example, Stephen Denning has written:

> Steadily increasing recognition of the importance of narrative in mainstream management is now inevitable. . . . Narrative thinking is contributing to an emerging view of organizations that more accurately reflects not only the traditional structural, process-oriented, control-based aspects of an organization but also the living, flowing aspects of organizations – where talking, thinking, dreaming, feeling human beings work and play and talk and laugh and cry with each other, in a way that is organic and self-adjusting and naturally innovative. (Denning in Brown et al. 176)

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 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. (196-7)

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 ("Being There" 100) 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." Again, one suspects that Eldredge, whose definition

was quoted earlier, might be hostile to story as a "less rigorous form of evidence," as might many of the published proponents of EBP.

It is easy to see why this criticism is levelled, but the danger is that if it is allowed to prevail, a great richness of knowledge and understanding will be lost. Linde (161) 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 observes 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."

Social constructivism
We can link the ethnographic approach to a number of significant aspects of postmodern thought and particularly to the idea of social constructivism. Gergen wrote authoritatively about this concept, pointing out that our discourse about the world – the ways in which we think and speak about it, and the ways we apprehend "reality" – is the product of communal interchange. Because human beings continually interpret and reinterpret 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 (20) 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 and perceptions of the storyteller and how they understand the situation they are describing

- The way in which the story is told, including the use of language, tone of voice, expressiveness and so on.

Hannabuss 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. ("Narrative Knowledge," 412)

In a separate paper, Hannabuss also comments that "narrative allows for . . . reflexivity" ("Telling Tales" 222); that is, it encourages reflection on the outcomes of decisions, and so is a highly suitable vehicle for the reflective practice which is so widely regarded as essential to professionalism (see Schön). "Knowledge inherent in practice is to be understood as artful doing" (Hannabuss, "Telling Tales" 222). 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 management and decision making – 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, "Networked Learning" 136)

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 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, 4-5). 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 mean anything. But if you told 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. [original emphasis]

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 Practice

What does all this mean for the professional practice, including 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 narrative and find ways to capture narrative 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 professional practice 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. We need to develop narrative based practice (NBP).

Using narrative 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 practised. Educators need to include both the construction and the use of narrative alongside other research techniques, giving due prominence to issues such as what makes an effective narrative, how narratives should be selected and different ways of presenting them to different audiences. Continuing professional development (CPD) needs to offer courses in the use of narrative for practising professionals. Librarians and other professionals need to learn the art not just of telling but of listening to story.

There are examples of the use of narrative 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, "The People's Network," 8-9)

Stories can be powerful advocacy tools for libraries as well as tools for their

management. The same is true in many other professions.

Conclusions

This paper has suggested that narratives can be a powerful addition to the evidence base upon which professionals rely when making decisions, that they can illuminate complex situations, can be effective tools for advocacy, and can form the basis for more meaningful communication within and between organisations. None of this should be taken to suggest that the EBP approach is ill-advised, nor that the idea of basing decision-making on good evidence is flawed. But a paradigm which is enthusiastic to go beyond positivist perspectives and is hospitable to narrative based practice offers opportunities for professionals to improve their decision making. It also challenges them to approach professional practice in new ways, exploiting the riches that qualitative sources of evidence and narrative forms of communication have to offer.

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