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REIMAGINING LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE EVALUATION FRAMEWORKS FOR RELATIONAL KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE WORK (Paper)

Abstract or Résumé:

We share preliminary findings from an interview study with 24 Library and Information Studies (LIS) professionals engaged in knowledge exchange (KE) work. Specifically, we examine the challenge of evaluating relational work and the disconnect between existing LIS evaluation frameworks and practices with respect to demonstrating social value. We speculate on the contribution of KE discourse and impact models to LIS assessment and evaluation.

1. Introduction

Library and information studies (LIS) professionals actively translate, share, and move information within and between the communities they serve. LIS professionals are information intermediaries, but increasingly their professional competencies and responsibilities converge with those of knowledge brokers (Mallidou et al. 2018). Knowledge brokering is a “transformative act” that de-/re-constructs knowledge to be more usable and tailored to local contexts (Meyer 2010, 120; 123). Knowledge exchange (KE) encompasses a spectrum of informational, relational, and system level activities (Shaxson et al. 2012, 12). While the informational aspects of LIS work are well-known (e.g., creating, storing, disseminating information for access and discovery), LIS professionals also foster “whole system” change as boundary spanners. They actively support people to co-produce knowledge, engage in dialogue and sense making, and consider the unique positionalities and expertise of constituents needed in relationship building and maintenance (O'Brien et al. 2022).

We interviewed 24 LIS professionals operating in a variety of settings and “doing” KE-related work as part of community engagement, scholarly communication, literacy, or information system design initiatives. Interviewees underscored the importance of relational work, but struggled to demonstrate the value of this work to decision makers, e.g., funders and managers, under existing frameworks that emphasize economic value and quantitative indicators (Nitecki et al. 2015; Missingham 2021).

Library assessment pertains to “ongoing improvement of the collection, space, or service,” while evaluation is “more holistic,” tends to “focus on more generalized end results” (Connaway, Harvey, Kitzie & Mikitish 2017, 10), and is used to convey the library’s value (Cheng & Hoffman 2020), e.g., economic, educational, social (Kelly & McNicoll 2011). Social value is concerned with the significance of libraries in the lives of constituents and communities (Missingham 2021), and is embodied in KE. KE is at the forefront of university strategic plans and national funding body directives (e.g., SSHRC 2019), and, since library assessment and evaluation are frequently aligned with broader institutional and societal trends (Missingham 2021), could inform more holistic library assessment and evaluation.

This extended abstract reports on interview study findings related to relational KE work. Specifically, we ask: *What challenges do LIS professionals encounter when attempting to show the value of relational KE work in the current assessment and evaluation landscape?* We reflect on these findings to consider how KE concepts and frameworks could support LIS organizations and professionals in demonstrating social value and impact.

2. Methods

Interviews were conducted with participants recruited through professional email listservs between January-May 2020. Participants (n=24) had an average of 11.5 years of professional experience, were fluent in English, and most identified as female (n=23). They worked in academic libraries (n=13), non-library university settings (n=4), public libraries (n=3), non-governmental organizations (NGO) and associations (n=2), community archives (n=1), and hospitals (n=1). Two-thirds (n=16) were from British Columbia; others resided in Ontario and Alberta.

Interviews lasted ~60 minutes and were conducted via telephone or video conferencing applications. Following informed consent, participants were asked semi-structured interview

questions related to: professional experience; KE projects in which they had been involved; KE competencies important in their work; professional development opportunities; and aspirations for KE work. Post-interview, participants were thanked for their time, debriefed, and given an e-gift card (\$20 CDN). Interview audio recordings were transcribed, reviewed by participants for accuracy, and analyzed in NVivo using codebook thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2019).

3. Findings

Participants described a range of quantitative (e.g., vendor statistics, web analytics) and qualitative (e.g., verbal and written feedback from constituents) data being gathered within their organizations. Significant themes emerged around the challenges they experienced when attempting to show the value of KE-related work. Here we elaborate on one specific challenge: evaluating relational KE work with respect to traditional, quantitative evaluation approaches. Ideas that emerged here related to the desired outcomes of communities, communicating the value of the work, and the temporality of relationship building.

Whose outcomes?

While participants acknowledged that quantitative data was easy to collect, it did not always capture community outcomes. Lisa, speaking about her library's role in Indigenous cultural revitalization, emphasized the need for agentic relationships, where the desired outcome was for community members to be able to "take the reins and share the knowledge that they need to share themselves, and decide whether it gets shared more broadly" (Lisa). Tara shared a story about an event that was a culmination of relationship building with a First Nations community. She explained, "we were asked to assist with the return of regalia to the community. So essentially, we arrived and were actually part of the ceremony! We didn't know we were going to be!" Both Lisa and Tara's examples reflect that desirable outcomes of relationship building were community agency, and that, while information professionals have roles to play, their involvement should be determined by communities.

Communicating value

Participants acknowledged that, although they were required to collect and report on statistics, these metrics did not reflect what they most cared about or wished to communicate about their work. Rather, gathering, sharing and reflecting on constituents' stories was prized. Stories were viewed as a powerful expression of "trust and goodwill" from constituents

(Lindsey) because they showed the significance of services and programs in people's lives. They were also a way to "keep building the case" (Sarah). This was important for Sarah, whose program did not have permanent funding, and for others who described initiatives that served a small number of people or moved outside of the institution to work with equity-deserving groups. Despite the value of stories to interviewees, they were collected ad hoc and were perceived to lack the legitimization of other forms of assessment.

Relational vs. organizational timelines

Lindsey pointed out that time-limited library strategic plans were lacking with respect to the relational aspects of KE work: "I mean you put something in your strat[egic] plan and it's your four-year strat[egic] plan. Do you take it off at the end of those four years?" Relatedly, other participants expressed distress about temporary sources of funding drying up, project goals shifting, or being assigned to new projects. These events jeopardized the relationships they had built and threatened the continuity of community-based initiatives with which they were connected. Thus, assessment and evaluation timelines operate on different cycles than community engagement.

4. Discussion

Interviewees described aspirations in their workplaces to support KE work and its evaluation, such as creating new positions or committees, but these were at a nascent stage. Fundamentally, interviewees stated that they did not know how to demonstrate the value of their work in the current landscape. Caitlin admitted, "we want to support knowledge exchange, but we're not exactly sure how to do that," and Carol underscored the need for "a more dynamic form of assessment." Amanda described the "disconnect" between current evaluation efforts and KE work and suggested looking "outside of our profession" for solutions to this challenge. Participants also reflected on various supports that could be offered in LIS programs or as professional development opportunities.

As we continue to think through this problem space, one idea ripe for consideration is what LIS can learn from knowledge exchange itself, and the field of knowledge implementation and impact. Research impact refers to "changes in awareness, knowledge and understanding, ideas, attitudes and perceptions, and policy and practice as a result of research" and involves a mix of qualitative and quantitative indicators (Morton 2015, 406). LIS professionals have the

potential to support research impact and KE (Given et al. 2015; O'Brien et al. 2022), but formal recognition of such work can only be achieved if KE activities are adequately documented, contextualized, and formalized in organizational evaluation frameworks and strategic plans.

Tracing research impact is a complex, imperfect process (Given et al. 2015, 7); societal challenges do not operate in closed systems, making it difficult to observe direct cause and effect relationships between research activities and outcomes (Morton, 2021). Thus, this field may offer no “easy answers, but does provide tools and frameworks for moving LIS assessment and evaluation beyond transactional, quantitative assessment measures to holistic, qualitative indicators (Oakleaf 2010). Specifically, contribution analysis involves strategies such as capturing the context, documenting service or program goals and decision-making framework, and describing activities, outputs, and observed outcomes (Mayne 2001), and the creation of “contribution stories” (Morton 2015, 412) that could support the use of stories to show social value. Models of research impact (Morton 2015; Orzanne et al. 2017) could be used to expand the kinds of activities that currently “count” to encompass more intangible, indirect outcomes, e.g., increased capacity or agency in a community.

Magnus et al. (2018) acknowledge “assessment as a social and political act” (“Critical Assessment, paragraph 2), while Nitecki et al. (2015) advocate for assessment to reflect the values of LIS professionals. Thus, continued critical reflection on library assessment and evaluation involves considering what we might learn from knowledge exchange – both the act of performing it and the body of research from which it originates – in order to support LIS professionals and their organizations to demonstrate the benefits of relational work.

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