PLANNING FOR SUCCESS: REPRIORITISING, REPURPOSING AND RETOOLING WITH RESULTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an organisational learning system implemented across a three year period within a multi campus tertiary library. It proposes a three stage system, framed within a reflective evidence based practice process to foster professional engagement and lifelong learning of staff.

KEYWORDS

Lifelong learning – reflective practice – evidence based practice – organisational learning

INTRODUCTION

Librarians' roles are increasingly complex, involving emerging technologies and exponential knowledge growth. As a result, organisations must implement lifelong learning strategies if workplace performance outcomes are to satisfy present and potential stakeholder communities. The focus of this paper is an organisational learning system introduced across a three year period, commencing in 2005, at Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE (NMIT) Library. NMIT Library comprises six campus libraries servicing approximately 28 000 students and 1 500 academic and non teaching staff annually. The library focus is on vocational training and education but is now also responding to the research and academic needs of increasing numbers of vocational degree programs being offered at NMIT. Ensuing requirements for higher level research, referencing and electronic data support to faculties and students was the major catalyst for the introduction of an organisational learning system.

In addition, the Head, Library Services recognized the preceding decade of budgetary cuts and austerity in relation to publicly funded educational institutions, including TAFE institutes, had served to reduce the professional skill levels of library staff. It became a standard budgetary practice to replace a professional librarian with a library technician and while operating hours remained the same the service complexity, levels and responsiveness were eroded.

The organisational learning system recognised the need for a culture change within the department. Library staff had developed a narrow professional perspective, characterised by a "desk" mentality, reluctant to take professional risks or accommodate changes in library and education practices. The resultant organisational learning system aimed to change this minimalist and detached attitude. Since the beginning of 2007 NMIT Library has undergone a paradigm shift moving from a reactive position providing standard library services to a proactive position creating a team of information professionals able to deliver targeted and specialised services.

This paper explores a change management process that occurred at NMIT Library based in reflective and evidence based practice resulting in a restructure of library staff and services. To illustrate this organisational learning system, we describe the three stage process of reprioritising, repurposing and retooling with the outcome of the development of a training culture and the encouragement of lifelong learning for staff. Library staff have 'learned their way to change' (Davis & Somerville, 2005) as they continue to search for opportunities to apply their expertise and further their knowledge and skills.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Reflective practice provides a realm for analysis and evaluation of past practice to inform future behaviour (Grant, 2007, p.163). The concept of the 'reflective practitioner' coined by Donald Schon in 1983 claims that reflection is essential for survival in a technological, exponentially advancing world where theory and practice is subjective to continual change (Schon, 1991). Reflection is particularly valued within a professional context as it enhances learning from practical professional experiences and provides a platform for the process of lifelong learning (Watson & Wilcox, 2000; Booth, 2004).

Schon's work provides a model for self directed, experience based professional learning and development. He proposes two types of reflection: reflection-on-action involving reflection after an event; and reflection-in-action where reflection occurs during an event (Schon, 1983). Schon (1983) argues that reflection is the primary professional competence, which also provides the key to acquiring all other required professional competencies. It involves a reflection of 'patterns of actions, on the

situations in which (we) are performing, and…the know how implicit in (our) performance' (Schon, 1983 in Grant, 2007). This is true for the individual, team and organisation as a whole.

Brookfield (1995) supports Schon's notions stating that reflection leads to informed actions, a rationale for practice, avoidance of self blaming, emotional grounding, an enlivened learning environment and increase in democratic trust. Williams (2002, p.56) states 'Reflective practice helps to integrate the technical expertise of the professional with the personal and emotional qualities of the individual'. Therefore, reflection is critical for initial professional development, day to day practice and continuous improvement (Schon, 1983; Cheetham & Chivers, 1998, p.267).

EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICE

Evidence based practice (EBP) is founded within evidence based medicine on the concept that 'practice should be based on up to date, valid and reliable research' (Brice & Hill, 2004, p.13 in Partridge & Hallam, 2005). EBP emerged in librarianship through the recognition that librarians were supporting and facilitating EBP rather than practicing it, and as a result were 'failing to model what they teach' (Ritchie, 1999). EBP has gone through several interpretations within library and information science since the mid 1990's. The term evidence based librarianship entered professional vocabulary in 1997, and evolved to evidence based information practice and currently evidence based library and information practice (Eldredge, 1997; Crumley & Koufogiannakis, 2002; Booth, 2002). For the purposes of this paper, the term evidence based practice library and information practice (EBLIP) will be used.

Despite the variance in terms over time, Booth (2002) found all have similar defining characteristics including: a context of day to day decision making, an emphasis on improving the quality of professional practice, and a pragmatic focus on the 'best available evidence'. Eldredge (2002) discusses EBLIP as a 'movement that seeks to improve library practice by utilizing the best available evidence in conjunction with pragmatic perspectives developed from librarians' working experience' (p.72). In other words, EBLIP is the 'daily application of research into practice' (Pretty, 2007). In this way EBLIP supports the notion of lifelong learning as it is a perpetual cycle of learning for continuous improvement.

EBLIP and reflective practice are inherently entwined. Sackett (1997) identified five stages of evidence based practice:
1. Identification of a problem or question
2. Finding the best evidence to answer the question
3. Appraising evidence for validity and usefulness
4. Applying the results to a specific population
5. Evaluating the outcome

In 2004, Booth (in Grant, 2007, p.163) adapted Sackett's five stages into six, adding an additional step:
6. Redefining the problem

Reflection forms a significant part of the evaluation of change and a redefined understanding of the initial issue at both an organizational and individual level (Booth, 2004).

Booth (2003) proposes that reflective practice will supersede notions of EBLIP stating 'the long term future of evidence based information practice…lies not in a single minded focus on research derived evidence but in a more encompassing approach that embodies reflective practice' (p.70). He continues to discuss the future information professional as a reflective practitioner who draws occasionally on a toolbox of which EBLIP contributes (Booth, 2003, p.70). It is on this proposal from Booth of the reflective practitioner utilizing EBLIP that the organizational learning system presented in this paper is built.

ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING SYSTEM

The organizational learning system mirrors the EBLIP process with the additional step of reflection. Although reflection is embedded within EBLIP it is an additional step to emphasise its core focus in the organizational learning system used by NMIT Library. The authors have termed this the 'reflective EBLIP spiral'. This is a fluid spiral process, with reflection occurring at the beginning and end of the cycle. In this way it is closely associated with Booth's (2004) six stages of EBP.

Figure 1: Reflective evidence based library and information practice spiral
(adapted from Cotter & Spencer, 2007)

The organisational learning system emerged in three stages, each utilizing the reflective EBLIP spiral:

1. Reprioritising includes a renegotiation of organisational foundations and operations.
2. Repurposing occurs according to identified needs established from new and changed priorities and
3. Retooling happens to align staff thinking and skills with new strategic directions.

As the process is fluid, to some extent all three stages occurred concurrently. For the purposes of this paper, each stage is considered individually to allow contemplation for how each contributes to the organisational learning system.

Reprioritising

The impending introduction of degree programs in 2006 provided a vehicle for utilising the reflective EBLIP spiral. With a new client market, the adequacy and relevancy of the Library service was reviewed. It was determined that first hand evidence was required and as a result, in late 2005, the Head Library Services and a senior reference librarian embarked upon an industry skills placement in the USA to gather evidence of best practices. The placement highlighted, through the exceptional knowledge of the librarians encountered on the tour, the loss of professional skill and lack of industry understanding existent within NMIT library staff. The study tour became the foundation for NMIT rethinking the conceptual basis for its library service.

A multi-faceted organisational system emerged from an inclusive one year strategic planning process. First hand evidence gathered in the USA and research conducted into Australian tertiary libraries revealed a need for reprioritizing library goals and repurposing of staff. A cultural shift toward a training culture encouraging lifelong learning was also identified. Core foundations of the library were reflected upon, providing the Library Management Team with the opportunity to immerse themselves in a comprehensive strategic planning exercise which encouraged discussions surrounding service values, goals and objectives. The aim was to achieve a closer alignment of the library with the teaching and learning priorities of the institute. This analysis provided a long overdue opportunity for key players in the library team to deconstruct the NMIT service philosophy and rebuild based on contemporary library principles.

Following this a SWOT analysis was conducted, an effective reflective tool for locating an organisation within its immediate internal and external environment. This process involved the Library Management Team reconsidering library purposes, processes, and relationships. The outcomes of the SWOT identified strengths in the area of the library as an embedded service within the Institute, and the adaptability and synchronicity of library staff. However, the SWOT also raised issues concerning poor communication, lack of stakeholder knowledge, and shortage of professional development. From this evidence acquiring and appraising process, the Library Management Team constructed a three year strategic plan and annual operational plan. The success of reflective EBLIP spiral was the unification of staff toward a common framing of the future through the reprioritisation of core goals and the establishment of a transparent structural foundation.

Repurposing

A top down approach was applied during the organisational repurposing stage due to outcomes from the overseas industry placement and a recognition of the high erosion of professional skills, confidence and morale. For the decade leading up to 2006 the Library Management Team comprised a traditional structure of a campus librarian at each of its six campuses, responsible for staff and budgets at a designated campus and as such tended to become quite parochial. The challenge was to unite the six independent librarians into a network of interdependent professionals. An intensive customised leadership program was developed for the team to enhance their self- knowledge, emotional intelligence, leadership skills and team building. It resulted in the erosion of barriers and led to the unification and cohesiveness of the team.

Continuing from the success of the leadership program, an external knowledge professional met individually with library management team

members to construct a professional narrative reflection. This provided scope for a critical reflection on past career experiences; professional self perceptions; individual and organisational strengths and weaknesses; and future goals. This reflective practice, reinforced with evidence already gathered, led to the re-evaluation of library management team roles. Commencing in 2007, the team transitioned to include five faculty librarians plus four specialist librarians consisting of an Information Services Librarian, Records Management Librarian, Teaching and Learning Librarian and Resources Librarian.

Retooling

With the development of a solid foundation and a reinvigorated leadership team attention turned to retooling all library staff in 2007 to regain professional confidence. The primary goal of retooling was to develop a training culture and encourage the lifelong learning of staff. The commencement of the Teaching and Learning Librarian role, responsible for the coordination of library information literacy programs, provided the opportunity to review delivery practices. The result utilised emerging technologies and professional presentations rather than conducting walk and talk sessions. Standardised library orientations were drafted with options for customising classes as required. All staff were trained in delivery standards in January 2007 and the new delivery format launched with the commencement of Semester 1.

The Teaching and Learning Librarian observed a variety of orientations to view the success of the delivery format and received initial feedback from students and teaching staff. After two months, focus groups with library staff were conducted to review progress. Staff commented on initial difficulties with new technologies and structure however overall found the changes increased their confidence, freedom and success in session delivery. This feedback, in conjunction with observations made by the Teaching and Learning Librarian, resulted in refinements to sessions and the development of customised orientation sessions for English language students.

This was complemented with library staff participating in a customized training program which also allowed them to complete three units from the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. The program focused on improving presentation skills and facilitating learning in both group and individual situations. This included strategies for fostering inclusivity in the learning environment and provided a foundation for understanding learning principles and styles. It also included strategies for providing feedback, and methods for reflection and self assessment.

REFLECTING ON SUCCESSES

The reflective EBLIP spiral framed within this three stage approach has fostered workplace information literacy and lifelong learning of staff. Library staff are better educated and understand the context of their role within the Institute, education industry and library profession. An awareness of librarian specialist skills has eventuated, increasing communication and collaboration across the library team. Lifelong learning has been achieved through staff reengagement and a commitment from management to ensuring ongoing support, training and development.

In November 2007, an external academic library consultant facilitated an external review of NMIT Library's organisational changes. Within her review Faculty Associate Directors and Heads of Department commented positively on the introduction of the new library leadership model, proactive nature of librarians and resulting impact on curriculum development and classroom delivery activities. The review findings also showed the new enthusiasm and engagement of library staff keen to get more involved in providing further support for faculty teaching and student learning. The increased autonomy and responsibility of lower level staff at campuses has also fuelled invigoration of involvement in operational processes.

This revitalization of library staff has increased commitment to roles and encouraged active involvement in the reflective EBLIP spiral, using it as a continuous improvement tool. The teaching departments have witnessed this singular shift in service delivery and are now demanding higher level services and more complex and collaborative project developments.

FRAMING THE FUTURE

NMIT Library has completed its first cycle of this three stage organisational learning system, based in reflective EBLIP. Due to the firm foundations now established, the second cycle commences at a higher level focusing on refinement and building upon continuous improvement and lifelong learning processes. It is through the continuous improvement process that commitment to lifelong learning is sustained.

Through the organisational learning system, the library has reached its benchmark for minimum performance standards and is looking to foster more involvement in the planning process across

all staff levels. For example, the library management team recognises that the mission and values derived in 2006 have since altered. It is proposed for all staff to participate in the redevelopment of library mission and values, through online feedback opportunities, focus groups and departmental meetings. This will ensure the collaboratively developed mission and values mimic and are embedded within the organisational culture.

As the Library Management Team have been repurposed, the next step is to repurpose lower level library staff. This has begun to be developed with the identification of skills and skill needs in a departmental skills recognition project. As the service continues to grow in complexity and need, staff will continue to be repurposed and retooled as necessary to meet changing requirements.

CONCLUSION

This three stage organisational learning system framed within the reflective EBLIP spiral employed at NMIT Library has provided a rich foundation for organisational development, change management, continuous improvement and lifelong learning that will provide ongoing benefits to the organisation, Institute and library profession in the future. Although this process occurred within an educational library environment, the three stage organisational planning process and principles of the reflective EBLIP spiral are easily transferable to any organisation. In the case of NMIT Library, this process allowed the development of services from a static, one dimensional, reactive service to a rich, multidimensional, proactive service. Through critical reflection of organisational foundations and evaluation of relevant evidence; reprioritizing, repurposing and retooling provides successful outcomes and a solid pathway forward for the future.

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