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Could the application of comparative method
within a single case study
identify libraries' Critical Success Factors?

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Abstract

Instead of explaining the causes for libraries' failure, how can we understand the reasons why some are successful in a way that facilitates effective transfer of that knowledge? This paper argues that one approach might be to apply social comparison methods (comparative librarianship) to a single case study to facilitate an analysis of the Critical Success Factors. It takes the development of education for librarianship in Iraq during the last 50 years as the case study to illustrate this approach, and to argue that a similar approach could and should be applied to understanding the issues surrounding library development generally. The paper points to the significance of the broad economic and social context; the need for libraries to identify their role within development plans to focus attention on their potential contribution; the need to be flexible to adapt to circumstances; and the crucial role of leadership and management.

Keywords

Research; impact; Critical Success Factors; comparative librarianship; education for librarianship; Iraq

Introduction: The role of research in underpinning success

Why do libraries still tend to be one of the first services to be affected by reductions in their budgets in difficult economic circumstances? In seeking a solution for this problem, most attention today seems to be focussed on developing leadership skills. Inevitably, this has led to a debate about whether leadership can be taught, or whether some people naturally develop the appropriate skills. If it can be taught, where do we find the lessons, and the convincing evidence to underpin them? Could evidence about how and why successes have been achieved facilitate effective transfer of that knowledge to others? If so, where can we find the reasons why some library and information

services are successful and present the evidence in a way that facilitates the transfer of that knowledge to others?

Could it be because we have not focused sufficiently on cause and effect? Could it also be because much research in librarianship has been methodologically weak? Nearly 70 years ago, one commentator on the literature of research into public libraries suggested that the reader would find “glad tidings, testimony and research, finding precious little of the last” (Beals 1942). Subsequently one of the leading thinkers in our discipline endorsed this comment, applying it as a criticism of the anecdotal and incomplete accounts found in the whole research literature of librarianship (Shera 1964).

For example, understanding the reasons why some libraries are making an impact on the development of the community or institution that they serve is clearly very important, but it is held back by a continuing failure to devise and implement effective research methodologies. While there has been considerable progress, at least in terms of activity, in research into the applications of technology in information work, and in bibliometric studies of the changes occurring in the scientific outputs of countries and specific disciplines, it has been recognised for some time that there is a shortage of meaningful research that evaluates the measurable returns to society from investment in library and information services (Menou, 1993; Johnson, 1994). Concerns are also being expressed about the lack of significant evidence about the contributions that libraries and information services make to the fulfilment of national development plans (Johnson 2010a). More recently, the problem underlying the lack of evidence for the impact of libraries in society was identified as the continuing failure to devise and implement effective research methodologies (Wavell et al. 2002). The emergence of an open access journal¹, at least one blog², and occasional and regular conferences³ devoted to reporting the evidence from studies of the impact of libraries are to be welcomed as a recognition of the need to explore those issues, but that is not the only area where more effort is clearly needed if relevant methodologies are to be explored.

The aim of this paper is to draw attention to one possible approach to this problem; social comparison, which has been used for many years in education (Bereday 1964) and other spheres of social activity. Comparative librarianship (Collings 1971) is a methodologically sound approach to the investigation of library activity, but seems to have been misunderstood in recent years (Johnson

¹ ‘Evidence Based Library and Information Practice’ URL - <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/EBLIP> [viewed 3 May 2010]

² libraryassessment.info: a blog for and by librarians interested in library service assessment, evaluation, and improvement supported by the Association of Research Libraries. URL – <http://libraryassessment.info/> [viewed 12 May 2010]

³ For example, ‘Evidence, Value and Impact: the LIS Research Landscape in 2010’ organised by the (UK) Library and Information Science Research Coalition to be held on 28th June, 2010 at the British Library; and the international conference ‘i3: Information: Interactions and Impact’, organized by the Robert Gordon University’s Department of Information Management, and held in Aberdeen, Scotland every 2 years; the ‘International Evidence Based Library & Information Practice Conference,’ also held every 2 years in a different location; and the ‘Northumbria International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries and Information Services,’ which is held on an irregular basis in different international locations.

2010b), and its techniques (Collings 1970) forgotten (Johnson 2009). The paper begins by clarifying the definitions of international and comparative librarianship; describes types of comparative studies; comparative methodology; and discusses methods of collecting data and their interpretation and evaluation. Finally, it explores, through discussion of a particular study, whether and how the comparative approach could be successfully applied to what seems a single case study.

Comparative librarianship

To begin, it is important to distinguish between 'international librarianship' and 'comparative librarianship.' They are often discussed as if they were the same, but they are separate topics. International librarianship aims to broaden awareness of the professional problems that are encountered in the different countries of the world. The outputs of these studies tend to be simple, descriptive accounts of professional practice. However, as one leading commentator explained:

"The meaningful organisation of libraries in the developing countries, and the intellectual progress of librarianship in the developed countries as well, are dependent to a large measure upon better understanding, particularly of understanding why things are as they are." (Danton 1973)

Comparative librarianship seeks to produce the analytical, critical, and evaluative studies that provide that understanding of why differences exist. In comparative studies, a number of systems – their structure, functions and techniques – are examined in order to place their characteristic features within a frame of reference applicable to all of them; to study the role which each of these features has played in the development of the system, and to assess its significance in relation both to the other features of the system and to other systems; the aim being to evaluate causes and effects, and from this, where appropriate, to formulate hypotheses as to the best ways in which one, or more, of these systems may develop in the future (adapted from Foskett 1965).

Such studies need not compare different countries, but could consider the reasons for different manifestations of a phenomenon in the same country or in different periods of history. Indeed, comparative librarianship frequently uses historical data, but it differs from conventional studies of library history in seeking to use the data to provide insights into current problems. While studies of library development have sometimes consider internal factors such as government, finance, organisational forms, how often do they consider the importance for library and information services of factors that influence development generally, for example, culture, social background, race, religion, moral conditions, geography, economy, climate, language, communication media, external agencies, ideology, and politics?

Elements in comparative studies

Conventionally, comparative studies are conceived as studies of a sector of library activity or professional issue in two or more countries or regions, or 2 or more institutions in a particular country. Potential foci for comparative studies include the impact of patterns of social behaviour, issues arising from the

economic situation, and approaches to resolving technical development problems. They are not necessarily bounded by seemingly substantial political, cultural or linguistic differences, nor by differences in the stage of libraries' development. The issues addressed can be wide-ranging theoretical issues or narrowly defined practical problems.

Could a single manifestation of a phenomenon be the focus of a comparative study? Yin (1994) argues that case studies are the preferred method for answering the 'how' and 'why' questions. Collings (1971), one of the leading writers about comparative librarianship, acknowledged the potential of case studies for providing analysis in depth of a type of library, or a key factor in library development, such as library education in a particular country. In general terms, the use of a single case study has been well documented as appropriate for exploratory research in the social sciences generally (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996), and for adding to existing experience and understanding (Stake 1994).

What is important is that a case study that aims to implement comparative method to understanding library problems should adopt the values of scientific method:

- Clarity in formulating the problem and describing the approach
- Rigorous and transparent application of methodology
- Systematic recording of a wide range of data
- Thorough evaluation of the evidence; objective rather than subjective
- Interpretation of the evidence free from bias, explaining causal factors, and demonstrating inter-relationships
- Judgements based on facts
- Acknowledging gaps in the evidence, fragmented or contradictory evidence, and apparent variations in data
- Identifies problems and topics requiring further research and investigation.

Formulating the problem – Iraq as case study

To discuss this approach, consider how it might be applied to the challenges facing education for librarianship and information studies. During the last quarter of the last Century, the discipline was subjected to considerable changes, perhaps more so than at any time since the introduction of printing with moveable type. These changes were stimulated in part by the increasing availability and capacity of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Whilst these facilitated the global transfer of information, the changes taking place in society - more widespread literacy, greater availability of education at all levels, growth in research activity of all kinds, and an increasing use of the resulting evidence – also stimulated a greater demand for the information itself. The latter part of the Century saw increasing attention being given to the concepts of information science, outlined in the first half of the Century by the Belgian, Paul Otlet (Rayward 1975), and to the parallel professionalization of Archives Studies, Records Management, and Information Systems Management. The growing recognition that these shared many common concepts not only with librarianship, but also with communication theory has resulted in a diversification of the teaching and research interests of Schools of Librarianship, and often in their co-location with one or more of these disciplines within the organisational framework of many universities.

At least partly as a consequence of these changes in the discipline, a number of Schools of Librarianship in the USA closed or were merged with other departments in their universities during the 1980s. For other reasons during the next two decades, Schools in Britain began to close their undergraduate programmes or in some cases closed completely. During the first decade of the Twenty-first Century, some Schools in Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain are struggling to recruit undergraduate students (and some universities there have ceased to teach librarianship). When Schools of Librarianship in the USA began to close, the concern was such that a number of studies were made to try to explain the reasons. But the number of Schools throughout the world has almost doubled in the past 25 years, and recently several new Schools in the USA have opened. Instead of explaining the causes of failure, perhaps it is necessary to understand also the causes of success - by exploring why Schools of Librarianship develop and how they can be assisted to grow? If that is to be done in an objective way, could a comparative case study be an appropriate research approach?

The remainder of the paper focuses on a study that the author has been attempting recently, applying comparative methodology in a study of the development of education for librarianship in Iraq. Why was Iraq selected as the case study? At the beginning of the 1980s, information in the public domain in English and other western languages suggested that there were two small Schools of Librarianship in Iraq: a 2-year undergraduate Diploma programme taught by part-time teachers in Al Mustansiriyah University in Baghdad; and a part-time postgraduate diploma programme, also taught by part-time teachers, in the University of Baghdad. The number of students was believed to be small. The reality that confronted the author during a visit in 1981 was that the postgraduate course in Baghdad University had closed, and there was a 4-year Bachelor's Degree programme in Al Mustansiriyah University, where there were about 300 full-time students and 16 full-time staff (Johnson 1981). During the 1980s, when Iraq was conducting a war with Iran that wasted its economy and human resources, student numbers in the Schools of Librarianship continued to grow, and 4 new Schools were established in the country. During the 1990s, when Iraq was politically, economically and intellectually isolated following the failed attempt to annex Kuwait, the School of Librarianship in Al Mustansiriyah University developed a Masters Degree programme and then a PhD programme. Could lessons be learned from examining the early history of education for librarianship in Iraq?

Research approach

Most of the previous studies of developments in Iraq have been repetitive and cumulative; that is to say that they have depended on evidence from a few easily identified sources already in the public domain, and in most cases have added little to what was previously known. Few looked beyond the superficial, recording events but failing to explore their full context, or the emerging trends. This study has therefore been based not only on a more comprehensive search of the published literature of librarianship, but also on an examination of relevant background texts, for example those dealing with the development of higher education in other disciplines in Iraq, and others dealing with the role and impact of international assistance in other spheres of activity. In addition, it has also

been possible to investigate material that was not open to earlier researchers in the archives of the major international agencies which hold the surviving correspondence and reports relating to their support for library development in Iraq.

The four basic steps in comparative librarianship have been identified as description, juxtaposition, comparison, and interpretation (Powell and Connaway, 2004). How could they be applied in a quasi-comparative study?

Description

The historical review of events is readily structured by considering the key periods in Iraqi history:

- From pre-history through to the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1918
- Through the British 'Mandate' and to the end of the Hashemite Kingdom in 1958
- Through the first Republican government until 1968
- Through the Ba'athist Republic until the beginning of the war with Iran in 1980
- Through the period of increasing isolation until the second Gulf War in 2003.

These conveniently coincided with significant events in the development of education for librarianship.

Systematic recording of data for comparison

In presenting information in this case study, juxtaposition and comparison is imposed by a systematic consideration within each of these periods of the themes that are required for a comparative study. These include a brief review of the national political framework within which libraries and information services operated the economic circumstances in the country; general educational and social trends; the evolution of local publishing; the scale and nature of library services; and the policies and practices of the international agencies that assisted in the development of libraries and education for librarianship. Although it has not been possible to find strictly comparable data about, for example, the number of students in higher education, the size of the university libraries' collections and staff, and the number of students of librarianship at different periods in their history, sufficient data is available to indicate general trends and the complex nature of the relationships between them.

Where appropriate, developments in other Arab states during these periods have been identified. The aim, it must be emphasised, is solely to distinguish exceptional circumstances and events in the Arab world that illustrate Iraq's relative position or response.

Interpreting the evidence

How could evidence such as this be reviewed in a way that provides insights into the impact of different factors on the development of education for librarianship? Cresswell (2003) advises that any qualitative research requires continuous review of the evidence as it is gathered, and its organisation into themes. But what might those themes be? For the purpose of this study, the framework of 5

key themes which was devised by Rockart (Bullen and Rockart 1981) for assessing Critical Success Factors (CSFs) was selected. This is a research tool widely used in management studies. CSFs are an ideal tool for analysing the issues arising from comparative studies because they are not a standard set of measures, but are related to the specifics of a particular situation, noting particular problems or opportunities that it may present, as can be seen in the following examples:

1. The industry. Each institution has a set of CSFs that are determined by the characteristics of the information sector that it serves in the country. In Iraq, education for librarianship focused initially on the needs of the few higher education libraries, but it can be seen changing as the public and special libraries grew and began to require more professional staff.
2. Strategic and competitive position. Each institution is in an individual situation determined by its history and current strategy, and this dictates some CSFs. Initially, a two year undergraduate course was established in Iraq when the state system required the School to admit large numbers of students, and may have been a mechanism for ensuring that those who lacked motivation would not be permitted to complete the degree.
3. Temporal factors. These are areas of activity for libraries or Schools of Librarianship that become critical because of the need to respond to a particular set of circumstances. So we can see, for example, the development of Doctoral studies in Iraq as a consequence of the economic and political barriers to studying abroad in the 1980s and 1990s, rather than simply as the natural evolution of teaching in the discipline.
4. Environmental factors. An institution must accomplish its mission while adapting to environmental changes over which it has little control. Obvious sources of environmental CSFs are government policy, and the expansion of education for librarianship in Iraq in the 1970s and 1980s can, in one context, be seen as largely driven by the expansion of the universities to absorb a growing population rather than by growth in employment opportunities in libraries.
5. Managerial position. Each functional managerial position has a generic set of CSFs associated with it. For example, almost all Heads of School of Librarianship are, or should be, concerned with defining strategies, and throughout the study examples can be found of the influence of particular individuals.

Evaluation of the approach

This study is positioning developments in education for librarianship against broader developments, providing some indication of significant elements that have contributed to library developments and the development of professional education in Iraq. The study is not yet complete, but the history of education for librarianship in Iraq clearly reveals some Critical Success Factors:

- Circumstances
- Strategy
- Leadership

It is becoming clear that, often, no single factor provides an explanation for particular developments. For example, some of the developments that saw the emphasis of the international agencies efforts shift from basic training to more formal programmes of education can be seen to reflect not only the economic

and political circumstances that applied at a particular times, but also the energy and determination of particular individuals. It must be concluded, therefore, that the transferability of these lessons to other institutions and other countries would need to be reinforced by further investigation.

Broader issues for LIS research

Nonetheless, it does seem that comparative approaches applied even in a single case study could offer new insights that could influence the development of libraries and information services. But it must also be acknowledged that it brings with it new challenges. Any study adopting comparative methodologies requires a multidisciplinary approach. Such an approach creates some possible problems for the advancement of LIS as a profession as we trespass into less well known intellectual territory, for example in ensuring that unfamiliar phenomena have been fully understood and their impact has been correctly interpreted.

In recent years, we have developed deeper knowledge and deeper specializations, drawing together and combining knowledge from multiple fields in order to advance knowledge of our own discipline. Drawing from other fields muddies the traditional boundaries of librarianship and information studies as a discipline, but it also challenges us to find or develop the appropriate expertise. Where do we find researchers who hold academic degrees from outside LIS who can apply theories from other fields to help us address important research questions? It is interesting to reflect on the fact that almost one third of recently appointed teachers in the American Schools of Librarianship and Information Studies had been awarded their doctoral degrees in disciplines other than Librarianship and Information Studies (Albright 2010). What implications does the need for expertise in a wider range of disciplines have for recruitment of staff and students into the Schools of Librarianship, and for programmes offered by the Schools? How can library and information science researchers develop the intellectual credibility that will make them acceptable as partners in inter-disciplinary collaborations? How can we ensure that our own relevance judgments are applied to the external perspectives that will be introduced?

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