Knowings in practice; evidence-based practice implemented by students

Research in Information and Library Studies should be related to information work, either shedding new light on aspects of information provision and/or use or being used to help solve problems of information handling and use. As the field has grown in theoretical sophistication, it follows that students understand the field of professional practice at a conceptual level of abstraction, which they are then expected to apply. This study explores this issue through an examination of the capstone subject in the Bachelor of Communication (Information and Media) offered through the University of Technology Sydney, which requires students to provide a solution, based on the literature, to an information handling problem in a real organisation.

The subject assumes, in line with the University's expectations, that the students are using research-based knowledge to solve the problem, and in the process, they are knowingly creating new knowledge. The part of the subject concerned with reflection and evaluation uses Schön's notion of reflection in action and reflection on action to help students come to terms with this notion of new knowledge.

This study takes the problem-solving reports of one cohort of students (approx. 40 students) and analyses them to question these assumptions and at the same time to track the use of theoretical understandings and conceptual models. Through this approach, it seeks to answer questions about how these students have integrated some of the contemporary issues from research in the field into their work. These issues are around the implementation of evidence-based practice and include the paradigm shift from information behaviour to information practices; the shift in approaches to describing information needs and use and identifying user characteristics; and the way evidence is used to justify decisions – notions of best practice versus research findings, and so on.

Most students did not introduce discussion of contemporary issues into their work. A small number attempted to use an over-arching model such as information ecology, but most were task-oriented. There were differences in the approaches used to solve similar problems, suggesting that this cohort have a repertoire of conceptual models of professional practice. For example, their descriptions of the user group, a compulsory component of the solution, show a mix of approaches, with some using approaches from information studies, others using scenarios as might be found in web design and a third group focussing on the roles of those engaged in the work around the problem from a management perspective.

The study concludes that the work of students in solving these problems is informed by the research literature but that the solutions are pragmatic, aiming to emulate "best practice", either through reference to standards or to the experiences of other, respected, organisations. It is rare for a student to present their solution as 'innovative' or as 'new knowledge' in the context. Research findings are a tool for problem solving rather than a prompt to imaginative thinking.

Schön, D. 1995, The reflective practitioner : how professionals think in action, Arena, Aldershot.