

# Considering “impact” in libraries: reflections on impact, outcomes and how we build these into library practice using the Professional Development Framework.

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## Abstract

This chapter explores the concept of impact from the perspective of the *National Professional Development Framework for all staff who teach in Higher Education* as well as from a library centric perspective. It explores library impact and its meaning for library staff involved in teaching. It examines the meaning of impact and the different levels of interpretation. It presents an overview of how impact is presented in the Professional Development Framework and also in the library literature. By doing this it proposes to help library staff better understand not only the concept of impact but also how the professional development framework can inform the concept of impact. In turn they can explore their impact in teaching.

## Introduction

Impact is an ambiguous word. It has several different meanings and is therefore open to several different interpretations. We hear the word impact used regularly on our news headlines and nightly bulletins. It is a word that is associated with global warming, natural disasters and dramatic or destructive events, “at the point of impact”, “the explosives impacted”, “shattered on impact”, and the “site of impact”. Markless and Streatfield (2012, p. xv) describe the language relating to impact and performance as “overstuffed with complex terms that are often used inconsistently even within the same book”.

Impact can be positive or negative. It may result from an actual process or it may be something beyond our control with a range of factors and challenges both positive and negative affecting impact, from an institutional to individual level. It can have different meaning depending on your role in the Library and your values or point of view. It can also have different meaning depending on your Library's point of view "because institutional missions vary (Keeling et al. 2008, p. 86; Fraser, McClure and Leahy 2002, p. 512), the methods by which academic libraries contribute value vary as well" (Oakleaf, 2010, p. 30). Whether a library is research led, a charitable foundation, a public library, corporate or undergraduate focused and so on will determine its views on impact.

However, according to Markless and Streatfield (2012, p. 7) libraries are mistaken in continuing to solely seek impact influences using statistics alone as evidence as,

most library statistics still concentrate on monitoring the efficiency of the services currently being offered rather than their impact on users. Library managers usually do not have enough evidence of the impact of their current services to be able to tell how well they are doing, let alone having enough evidence to gauge whether a particular new service or intervention is likely to work.

Libraries demonstrating their impact differently has meant that there is an abundance of literature available on the topic. This may be a contributing factor to a feeling of confusion or that it is impossible, or at the very least "very difficult", or "challenging and problematic" (Broady-Preston & Lobo, 2011), for a library to demonstrate its impact – "Libraries feel increasing pressure to demonstrate their value" (Thorpe, Lukes, Bever, & He, 2016, p. 1). Many of the authors in the literature begin by outlining this sense of struggle (Oakleaf, 2010) and time consuming challenge (Bodycomb & Del Baglivo, 2012). However, they do go on to demonstrate how their case study or method overcomes this, replacing misconceptions with professional knowledge. While a library may see itself at the "heart of the institute", libraries do compete with other services and thus "In the competition for scarce resources, it becomes vital for libraries to show evidence of the impact and value of their services, preferably in quantified results" (Poll & Payne, 2006, p. 458).

Outcome is another word or turn of phrase used when describing impact. Again, outcome can be misleading and even presumptuous, a word full of intent. Learning outcomes is a familiar term to teaching librarians and used by other teaching professions in designing programme curriculum. Outcome when used by other professions such as the medical profession has completely different understanding and meaning. Urquhart and Turner (2016, p. 17) point out that there is “considerable confusion about the terms impact and outcome, depending on the sector in which people work”. In its definition, the Association of College and Research Libraries in its document *Academic Library Impact: Improving Practice and Essential Areas to Research* (Connaway, Harvey, Kitzie, & Mikitish, 2017), have settled on the principle of demonstrating “value”, as in to “demonstrate the Library’s value” as the all-encompassing preferred term to represent impact in all its derivations.

Choice of language and wording is proving to be a crucial key element in communicating impact. Library Managers and Senior Administrators must find a way to show how perceived value is communicated into actual value. Acknowledging that:

value is perceived value, by the user, and therefore subjective rather than objective. ...The impact research had to establish a link between the perceived values of the users and how these related to values that mattered to the senior management of the Trust (and funders) (Urquhart & Turner, 2016, p. 7).

### **The Professional Development Framework (PDF) and Impact**

The Professional Development Framework refers to impact on a number of occasions. It advocates that as teachers we “allow for substantial engagement” and that our approaches should have “the highest impact on students”. Impact remains central to the five domains and the framework creates opportunity to consider and reflect on how the concept of reviewing, assessing, and evaluating impact is built into practice. Within the framework there are a number of references to impact. Due to the inclusive nature of the document, it considers impact in its broadest sense and it is not prescriptive in its approach. This framework aims to empower, encourage, enhance, assist and contribute to professional development. It recognises “*evidence based*

*enhancement and transformation*” (PDF p.1), encouraging staff to review their approaches and implicitly their impact. It acknowledges different types of learning and the range of learning activities taking place in all our daily lives. Particularly the framework “identifies and recognises four types of learning associated with any professional development learning activity” (PDF p. 2) which are listed as New Learning, Consolidating Learning, Mentoring and Leading. It considers how we can review the effectiveness of our practice across all these learning types.

More specifically throughout the framework’s five Domains reference is made explicitly and implicitly to impact. Explicitly, in Domain 1, which focuses on the Self in Teaching and Learning, impact is a key element. Teaching staff are instructed to articulate “a personal philosophy of and approach to teaching” (PDF p.4) and to reflect on the “impact of current working context on self”. In Domain 2, which emphasises the importance of identity and values, the importance of the development of the scholarship of teaching and learning and the importance of professional development, impact is also recognised as a key element. Domain 2 focuses on impacts on the learner. Element 2.2 tells us to evaluate our “teaching and impact on student learning, based on self/peer review/peer observation, student feedback and/or other evidence”. The emphasis in Domain 3 is on professional communication skills and promotes the use of “excellent, clear and coherent communication skills required for the changing learning environment”. This message is echoed elsewhere in library literature where Markless and Streatfield (2012) also focus greatly on language and the need to for us to be alert and aware with language and for our communications to be impactful. Domain 4 emphasises the importance of “both disciplinary knowledge and disciplinary approaches to teaching”.

The spirit of the framework is to consider our practice and it offers guidance for the professional development of individuals and also guidance to the wider institution and networks on providing professional development activities. It is open to interpretation and is inclusive of everyone involved in student engagement and the learning process.

## **Reflections**

As a Subject Librarian I have had a professional interest in library impact for some time. I am specifically interested in how the teaching of library

knowledge and skills impacts on the students I teach. As a result of my interest in exploring impact I was pleased to be involved in this project. In particular I was drawn to the Framework as a lens through which I could reflect on the concept of impact in my practice and explore the concept more widely. The framework is not prescriptive in its approach to the concept of impact. The framework is commendably inclusive and by extension it has taken the concept of impact and presented it in a broad sense. By doing this it has set the scene for me to build on this broad foundation and reflect on this concept with a library focus.

Engagement with the framework has helped me develop in my professional understanding as a practitioner. I have experienced a variety of responses in my classroom. This could range from the jubilant and satisfying moments where you can literally see the “penny drop” to complete apathy and soul destroying boredom from the audience. This problem is not confined to library staff as many professions involved in teaching will attest to similar experience in their practice (Mann & Robinson, 2009; Tze, Daniels, & Klassen, 2016). While the professional development framework is not prescriptive in its approach to impact it provides avenues and opportunities through which to consider impact. One of these avenues came in the form of workshops on three key topics, i.e. Reflective Practice, Action Research and preparing a Teaching Philosophy.

### **Reflective Practice**

A significant moment in my understanding of impact began with a reflective practice workshop delivered by Jenny Moon, Centre for Excellence in Media Practice, Bournemouth University, UK. Moon describes reflection as “a form of mental processing - like a form of thinking - that we may use to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome”. (Jenny Moon *workshop on reflective practice* May 31, 2017) As I was introduced to the concepts and values of reflective practice, I was guided through exercises which led me to a deeper awareness of reflection. In one exercise, an account of an event relating to a general practitioner’s practice was presented to us in four different recollections. The first account began with hardly any reflection at all, followed by some, then a little more reflection, and finally the fourth which demonstrated a deeper level of reflective practice.

Attendance at the workshop taught me to look at all my teaching activities. One of the recommendations from the workshop was to keep

a work diary to reflect on. I use this diary to record my teaching activities. It helps me discern why on reflection one library class appears successful and another isn't, helping me to recognise what works and what should not be repeated unless improved upon. I have learned that we don't learn from experience alone, but we actually learn from reflecting on our experiences. In my reflective diary I can read over my existing reflections, this helps me identify any patterns reoccurring over time.

### **Impact and Action Research**

A further L2L Project workshop was delivered by Jean McNiff, Professor of Educational Research at York St John University, UK. McNiff describes action research as “a form of enquiry that enables practitioners in every job and every walk of life to investigate and evaluate their work” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011, p. 7), and explains that “practitioners themselves investigate their practices” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011, p. 8), as insiders and not outsiders. With action research we ask ourselves how we can improve upon our work practices. Why we do what we do? Action research tells me to ask myself, how can I improve? How can I hold myself accountable? Action research has helped me realise that my own practices can be considered best practice and my practitioner knowledge and experience (with reflection) has “validity” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011), meaning that with action research I can find evidence from my own work practices and learn from reflecting on those experiences and not be bound by the evidence of others.

I have learned with reflection that, as library staff who teach, we can have impact on others and we can be impacted on. We might assume that all impact is planned or orchestrated, but this is not always the case. On occasion the expected impact or outcome can be unintended yet it can have very impactful consequences.

### **Personal teaching philosophy**

Another L2L Project organised workshop I attended was delivered by Sheila Corral, Professor in the Department of Information Culture & Data Stewardship at the University of Pittsburgh. Corral describes a teaching philosophy statement as “a concise, compelling illustration of you as an instructor, a useful reflexive examination of your teaching, and a necessary component of many academic job applications” (University

of Pittsburgh Center for Teaching & Learning in Corral, 2017).

A combination of workshop activities, group discussions and prompts shaped the development of my personal teaching philosophy statement, as emphasised by Domain 1 of the framework, element 1.3 (PDF p.4) “Articulation of a personal philosophy of and approach to teaching”. While composing my personal teaching philosophy statement I was encouraged to articulate my approach to teaching. This has helped me to further reflect on my teaching goals and to reveal my focus, intentions and attitude to teaching and learning.

Activity 1 – asked me to articulate my beliefs about learning and teaching

Activity 2 – asked me to articulate my goals for learning

Activity 3 – asked me to articulate my style of teaching

Activity 4 – asked me to articulate my practices.

Prompts included statements/sentences to be completed such as:

- For me, learning occurs best when...
- As a result of working with me, my students develop...
- As a teacher, I prefer to be...
- Methods I often use include...

The resulting personal teaching philosophy statement is written in the first person and limited to 1000 words max.



Sir Edmund Hillary (left) and Tenzing Norgay (right). May, 1953.

Photo Source: Jamling Tenzing Norgay.

Image source: <http://www.tenzing-norgay-trekking.de/>

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My teaching philosophy also includes the above photo of Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay. This iconic photo from the twentieth century, captures the successful first ascent of Mount Everest in 1953. I chose this photo for inclusion as it represents for me the relationship between the learner and the teacher or the climber and the Sherpa. Just as the learner is reliant on the teacher, the climber is heavily reliant on the Sherpa's vast knowledge, skill, intuition and experience to guide, resource and advise and at times even carry them up and back down the mountain safely and successfully, and repeat the process over and over again.

## **Conclusion**

Library staff can choose for themselves what impact measurement approach or outcomes resonates with their own personal values or ideals or aligns best with overall institutional goals and mission. Whatever the outcome, according to Oakleaf (2010, p. 93), "the most important step is to start. Librarians who seek to create perfect value studies may be stymied, and likely let great be the enemy of good". Similarly, in the case of impact, attending more impact related CPD events and training would help librarians feel more informed about impact and more able to speak with authority on the subject within their institutions. This inquiry into impact may prove a practical and useful contribution to start them in their approach and their confident use of the framework. However, no matter the case we are advised to "use existing frameworks to point you in the right direction and give you some useful ideas. Don't follow them slavishly: consult them to see if they contain material that can be adapted to reflect what you want to achieve" (Markless & Streatfield, 2012, p. 95). In pursuance of our professional development, McNiff and Whitehead (2011, p. 257) would also ask us to avoid closure and absolute truths, "by closure we mean a situation in which you believe you have found the final answers...never believe that your knowledge is complete or there is no more to learn".



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