

Theory- and Practice-Based Approaches to LIS Curricula:

A Prospectus for a Literature Review

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Introduction and Background

Of the many tensions present in library and information science (LIS) education, one of the most important is the divide between theory-based and practice-based approaches to such education. In the former camp are those educators who argue it is better to provide students with a broad-based education that, rather than teaching specific procedures and practices, focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of these so that they can adapt and respond to an ever-changing environment. In the latter camp, we find educators who argue practical skills and knowledge will serve students better in finding employment, focusing their educational efforts on practical, hands-on experiences that guide students towards fulfilling positions in the field. Given the stakeholders in this tension, it often parallels other divisions and tensions in LIS: those between practitioners and educators (see e.g. Dillon, 2005; Moran, 2001); practitioners and researchers (see e.g. Booth, 2003; Ponti, 2008); and believers in LIS as a single discipline, multidisciplinary profession, and vocation (see e.g. Audunson, 2007; Audunson et al., 2003) are common contexts. While it must, therefore, be considered in light of these other tensions, the tension between theory-based and practice-based LIS curricula is a separate topic deserving careful, thorough review.

Many authors have considered this tension—albeit at varying levels of depth—in both research- and advocacy-based publications. In the former category are found research studies such as Blankson-Hemans and Hibberd's (2004), comparing LIS curricula with the practical skills called for in the commercial sector; Callison and Tilley's (2001) examination of the evolution of LIS curricula; and Marouf & ur Rehman's (2007) assessment of a MLIS program

and its curriculum. However, the latter category of advocacy appears—based on initial analysis—to have at least an equal, if not greater share of publications. Examples of the latter include Bates’s (1999) argument that LIS PhD students must be taught both basic and applied research skills; Becker’s (2000) presentation of service learning as a useful educational approach for students to gain both theoretical and practical knowledge; Audunson’s (2007) view that curricula should conceptualize LIS first and foremost as an interdisciplinary profession; and Ponti’s (2008) suggestion that an LIS collaboratory will help bridge the gaps between research, theory, and practice. While many—but not all—of these base their advocacy in the literature, it is often only a small slice of the overall literature that is considered. Most notably, there is little to no known synthesis directly addressing theory- and practice-based LIS curricula, especially how they relate to each other on a continuum of approaches and reviewing potential strategies for spanning the divide between them. Such a review of the literature, drawing from both theoretical and practical research as well as on the arguments made by those with particular views, is thus both a worthy and necessary goal to pursue, one I propose to complete.

Purpose, Goals, and Scope

The purpose and main goal of the proposed review is to thoroughly cover both research on and discussion of the theory-based and practice-based approaches to LIS curriculum and education. Based on an initial analysis, research specifically addressing the theory vs. practice continuum in LIS curricula unfortunately appears to be a little sparse, as noted above. There are a few more publications where authors offer their views and opinions on how LIS education should tackle this issue, but—as also noted above—much of this has only considered a subset of the overall relevant literature. As such, another major goal of the review will be to establish a comprehensive, broad-yet-thorough perspective on theory-based and practice-based curricula in

LIS, such that further research and advocacy is based in what has already occurred; building upon prior work, rather than unnecessarily repeating it.

Given the relatively sparse nature of the literature and the high relatedness of this topic to other tensions in LIS, the review will also cover the broader literature on LIS curricula in relation to the theory-based and practice-based approaches and the continuum between them. In addition, it will cover literature on spanning the divide between theory / research and practice in LIS, focusing on those articles, chapters, and books that have clear implications for LIS curricula and education. Furthermore, the intention is to discuss service learning and evidence-based practice in the light of spanning the divide between the theory- and practice-based approaches. Coverage of these additional areas will be less thorough than the core topic, however, especially as their connections to the core become more tenuous.

Gap

While a number of articles—listed in the Proposed References section below—have included brief reviews that relate to the topic under consideration here, none of these has been especially thorough or focused. In particular, there are no known literature reviews that have focused primarily on the theory-based and practice-based approaches to LIS curricula. The most recent review of LIS education published in the *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* (Mezick & Koenig, 2009) did include a review of curricula-based research and advocacy (pp. 600-603), which has proven useful in preparing this prospectus. However, Mezick and Koenig did not cover the theory-based or practice-based approaches or the continuum between them in much detail. Similarly, while Logan and Hsieh-Yee's (2001) earlier *ARIST* review included substantial discussion of professional competencies (pp. 439-442) and curriculum (pp. 446-449), again the authors did not elaborate much on the tension between

theory- and practice-based curricula nor the relation of competencies to this tension. In light of this and other evidence uncovered during initial searching and analysis, I believe this proposed literature review will fill a gap which is in much need of filling. It will provide a more focused, thorough review of research and discussion on the theory- and practice-based approaches to LIS curricula, the continuum between them, and how LIS educators might span and integrate these approaches.

Proposed Organization

The organization of the literature review will be primarily thematic. Likely themes and section headings, based on initial analysis of the literature, include but are not limited to

- theory-based curricula;
- practice-based curricula;
- LIS curricula in general;
- related tensions and debates, including researchers vs. practitioners and research vs. theory vs. practice;
- service learning;
- evidence-based practice; and
- spanning the two approaches.

A chronological element will also be present as an undercurrent, examining how research and opinions have evolved over the years. Many of the same arguments and views will likely reoccur over time, and will thus emerge as further themes to base organization on.

Proposed References

The following 24 references have strong potential, based on initial analysis, to be included in the literature review:

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