Sharing to learn, learning to share: co-operation among health information professionals

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Abstract

Objectives
The aim of our study is to find out Finnish health information professionals' views and expectations on European cooperation within the framework of EAHIL. The results could be used to share best practices in an open learning environment.

Methods
A web-based semi-structured questionnaire will be sent to BMF members (totally about 100 Finnish health information professionals). It includes questions on five themes, such as sharing teaching materials, marketing library services, co-operation with library schools (continuing education for information professionals) and professional peer support.

Results and Conclusions
Based on the results suggestions and action plans for the European professional cooperation in EAHIL will be made.

Key words
International Cooperation; Librarians; Interprofessional Relations; Library Associations; Finland

Objectives
The aim of our study is to find out Finnish health information professionals' views and expectations on European cooperation within the framework of EAHIL. The results could be used to share the best practices in an open learning environment.

Cooperation has always been important for us, and we had the feeling it's important to get evidence based information for that. Our hypothesis was that collaboration could be seen as a way to create synergy, share practical solutions and empower health information professionals to meet new challenges. As the ongoing economic crisis effects also libraries and information services, the value of cooperation rises even further.

Methods
A web-based semi-structured questionnaire was sent to Bibliothecarii Medicinae Fenniae (BMF, see: http://www.bmf.fi/Briefly+in+English) members. BMF is an association of about 100 Finnish health information professionals. The questionnaire included nine questions on five themes:
professional peer support, collaboration in teaching, collaboration in marketing library services, attitude to new challenges, and co-operation with library schools.

The members were asked to answer the web-based survey, which was emailed to all BMF members on 18th February, 2014. Two reminders were emailed. The questionnaire was closed on 10th March, 2014. The questionnnaire was in Finnish. The questions were:

1. Collegial peer support (nationally, internationally, face-to-face, online)
2. Sharing teaching materials (for example online materials, Powerpoint and Prezi presentations, questionnaires, video clips) among colleagues
3. Sharing experiences about good practices in teaching and training (e.g. in seminars, trainings, conferences, workshops, articles, blogs)
4. Cooperation in marketing (e.g. marketing training services, research support, research data services, know-how)
5. Cooperation in the branding of services and creating service concepts
6. An updated link list of Finnish and international possibilities of continuing education events and possibilities (courses, seminars, conferences, workshops, webinars, massive open online courses = moocs etc.)
7. Open information about job exchange, job opportunities and internship (e.g. Erasmus programme, projects)
8. Mapping and embracing new challenges (e.g. altmetrics, research data)
9. Cooperation between library and information professionals and information research and educational organisations (in order to keep skills and knowledge up-to-date and to recruit new talents)

We used the Likert scale, see e.g. [http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/scallik.php](http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/scallik.php). The scale was:

1. = strongly unfavorable to the concept
2. = somewhat unfavorable to the concept
3. = undecided
4. = somewhat favorable to the concept
5. = strongly favorable to the concept

The structured questions were obligatory. It was not possible to answer "no opinion". Each structured question was followed by the possibility to write comments on that topic (optional).

**Results**

We got 55 answers, which means 64 % of BMF employed members (86) and 51 % of all BMF members (107), as 21 members are retired.

First we asked about the importance of collegiate peer support: 82 % of the respondents consider peer support very important and 18 % important (figure 1).

The results clearly indicate that collegial
peer support is considered extremely important.
- It is important to have professionals with whom you can share experiences, opinions and exchange advice.
- The views of colleagues help opening up your own eyes.
- National face-to-face collegial support is especially important as are international contacts when possible.
- Good advice can be shared even when standing in a coffee line. This happened to me, while standing in a line and chatting, I got more understanding of the differences between freetext and keyword searching.

In large organizations it was easy to get important face-to-face peer-support, which was regarded very valuable. Library colleagues working alone in the library considered the collegial support extremely important. By getting peer-support the isolated colleagues keep up to date and get new ideas on how to develop their work.

- Many colleagues work alone but the challenges are the same for everyone. The best part is that there is always collegial support and ideas for developing the work available. Collegial support works as a social field and a professional developer.
- It is a necessity to have the contact with colleagues. Otherwise one will soon be exhausted and unable to work. Without collegial support there is no feeling of being a part of a specialist group.
- One of the most important ways to professionally survive in today's working life is networking. Collegial peer-support is imperative in order to able to benchmark good practices and widen one's own views. If you don't know something, you will at least know who to contact. Divided we fall, united we inform.

EAHIL could play an important role in lowering the threshold for international networking. EAHIL has the potential of compiling a list of available mentors offering knowledge in their special area of expertise. The old truth "help others as you would like to be helped" is true also when it comes to supporting our colleagues.

Sharing teaching materials was considered very important by 53 % of respondents and important by 36 % (figure 2). No one considered sharing teaching materials being of no importance.

The comments received were as follows:
- I think that sharing teaching material is important, because it is a form of inefficiency to do the same work over and over again. In my opinion all teaching material should be Creative Commons CC-BY-licensed. That means the teaching material can be shared and edited as long as the source and original author is mentioned.
- It is difficult to understand why sharing could not be possible as long as sharing is somehow in balance: not so that some only take and others only give.
- If somebody has prepared good and useful teaching material why not share it with colleagues? In this way time and resources will be saved.
- Why to reinvent the same work many times? CC-BY!
There are many benefits in sharing materials: not reinventing the wheel, sharing good practice, networking between colleagues, cross fertilization of ideas, and last but not least saving time and resources. Several answers included the mentioning of CC-BY and respondents supported the idea that teaching material should be Creative Commons licensed: in this way the material may be reused as long as the source is mentioned.

A couple of respondents noted that even when sharing and utilizing teaching materials, these have to be modified to suit your own purposes.

- It is important to compile your own teaching material: when preparing the presentations one learns and updates knowledge on the material to be taught. That is why I prefer preparing and using my own material. On the other hand benchmarking others’ teaching material give new ideas, as there may be new things and ideas which are missing from your own material.
- Sharing is important but the material lent from others should be filtered through own experiences and knowledge. The work done by others cannot be copied and used as such.

Sharing experiences about good practices in teaching and training was regarded very important by 65% of respondents and for 27% it was important (figure 3).

When sharing experiences about good practices we can talk about collaborative learning. Unlike individual learning, people engaged in collaborative learning capitalize on one another’s resources and skills (asking one another for information, evaluating one another’s ideas and monitoring one another’s work.) (1).

- Sharing good practices generates new ideas, perspectives and new ways of seeing and doing things.
- Sharing experiences is important. This happens in my own library, but we have a multi-disciplinary university of applied sciences so that is why networking with other healthcare and social work information specialists is very important. There could easily be a site for sharing experiences whenever there is time for it.
- The Helsinki seminar (by BMF) on how to guide information retrieval issues opened my eyes to see how good practices are implemented in different libraries.

The respondents wished that there would be more articles on sharing good practices, and that information professionals would share their know-how in also blogs.

- The significance of training and continuous guidance is growing in our work. I think it is important to write articles on this subject in both national (Signum) and international (JEAHIL, HILJ) journals. A joint blog could also be considered.
- Professional journals should publish more on successful experiences and good practices.

However sharing good experiences does not solve the problem of lack of time: there is not time enough to implement all the useful new ideas.

- In principle this could be important. I have received good advice at training events (when I still
actively attended them). Putting them into the practice does not always work; the biggest problem is always lack of time. Sometimes also the resistance of the chiefs or their inability to make decisions. - The locality is emphasized. It is nice to learn about experiences from elsewhere in the country or from other countries. However, we all work in our own specific environment and often in tough and restricted conditions.

The pedagogical model constructivism is based on creating new knowledge upon the existing knowledge. Accordingly, sharing good experiences and practices with colleagues is extremely important. This sharing can be done in many different ways: in seminars and at training events or by publishing articles and blogging. EAHIL could motivate sharing by offering a common blogging site, helping non-English authors to publish by offering voluntary proof-readers. In Finland sharing good practices is considered so important that the Finnish Research Library Association recently sent a questionnaire on this subject where the members were asked to send their best experiences on teaching information retrieval.

- Sharing experiences about good practices in teaching must be promoted in every way.

More than 60% of the respondents considered cooperation in marketing very important or important. Less than 15% regarded cooperation in marketing not that important (figure 4).

![Figure 4. Cooperation in marketing](image)

Marketing is considered a bit like 'an issue' in a library world. Maybe we are not so used to it, or it is regarded from a narrow point of view, directly taken from the business world. But marketing happens everywhere, in every meeting we have with our customers. Also some worries exist if we have enough resources to answer the demands.

- We need to be careful, because our resources are too limited.

The respondents work in different organizations, which could cause limitations for possible advantages:

- Difficult, different services in different organizations.

But it was also seen as an opportunity:

- The experiences in other libraries give models to use in own work.

- Similar kind of marketing from several sources strengthens the message. To plan and produce good marketing material is really hard, so why not to reuse and benchmark the existing material others have already done.

![Figure 5. Cooperation in branding of services and creating service concepts](image)

Attitudes to cooperation in branding of services and creating service concepts varied quite much. Cooperation in this matter is important according to almost 60%, 17% regarded as not important, 25% chose betwixt and between (figure 5).
In research literature branding often goes together with marketing (2-3).
- Many organizations have their own concepts, not very important to cooperate in this matter.

The question of different kind and size of organizations rose again:
- Branding is possible only in bigger libraries or services. The small ones only react on demand.
But also cooperation in this sense awakes interest:
- This is exactly what I'm interested in. In what forum could we start to develop?. Alone it would be difficult.
- While everything is scattered or fragmented, it would be easier get a big picture if we named our services.

In library and information world we have a lot of useful things we want to offer to our customers, but maybe we need to divide it into small portions so that our customers can digest (4).

The answers to question on an updated link list of Finnish and international continuing education possibilities varied greatly. The list was considered very important or important by 69 % of the colleagues, while 29 % chose the option in the middle of the scale. One respondent saw the link list not that important (option 2) (figure 6).

In their free comments the respondents appreciated the idea:
- There is a lot of supply, so
- So we don't have to wade in the information swamp
- Even though it is not possible to participate in all events, just by browsing through what is available, could give a nice overview what is going on in the field.
- The list of training events would also serve as an effective marketing channel for the organizers.

It was hoped that the list would be international, covering at least European supply. Some respondents considered a link list old fashioned. They suggested using social media, such as Facebook, Twitter or Scoop-it. Some noted it would be too time-consuming to keep the list updated. So maybe instead of aiming to an all-inclusive list, hand-picked recommendations in social media could be good and less time consuming solution.

The question about open information about job exchange, job opportunities and internship got also varying reactions. 63 % of the respondents considered it very important or important. Notable is that quite many, 31 % of the respondents chose option 3, i.e. not been able to decide if it is important or not (figure 7).

In most free comments, this was considered a good idea, especially for the newcomers to the field, and for sharing
experiences on job exchange.
- I am just planning to go to exchange. I get all the practical information from my own organization, but it would be nice to share experiences about the job exchange with colleagues, both before and after.
- Getting more by sharing!

Two respondents considered this kind of information exchange not necessary:
- Information about Erasmus programs is open to anyone anyway
- I find the necessary information on Google

The respondents also commented on job exchange programs as such. Some saw that the value is more social than professional:
- The value of Erasmus is social: the participants get nice experiences, but the value in professional development is marginal.
- Exchange programs are most meaningful, when also real cooperation arises, not just "getting to know" Altogether job exchange was seen positively:
- It is a win-win!

**Mapping and embracing new challenges** got also like-minded responds: 51 % regarded it very important and 36 % important. Only 4 % regarded it less important (figure 8).

![Figure 8. Mapping and embracing new challenges](image)

- This is a self-evident part of the professional competence!
- If we want also our future colleagues to have jobs, it is essential to take a positive approach to the new challenges
- I would appreciate continuing education just in these matters. Short period intensive training would be valuable.
- It is crucial to look to the future...my next challenge will be altmetrics..

Only one doubtful comment was presented:
- This is not relevant in 1 to 2 person library units

We were also curious about our colleagues' attitudes to **cooperation with universities' information research departments and educational organizations**. 33 % of the respondents regarded it very important, 38 % important. 24 % could not decide and for 4 % it had no importance (figure 9).

![Figure 9. Cooperation with universities' information research departments and educational organizations](image)

Comments were accordingly split. There were doubts towards cooperation, because
some respondents saw information research as science to be alienated from practical working life.
- Information research departments are lagging behind, compared with what is going on in the field
- and they don't even notice it themselves.
Motivation for cooperation suffered also from the feeling that there is no time:
- As I am working in one person library, this question is not relevant to me.

Possibilities were also seen:
- Best results with cooperation: interaction is important.
- It would be important for research institutes to get hints of practical matters, and vice versa.
- Maybe we should be more active in telling what professionals in the field really need.
- From my own university studies I know this would be extremely useful. Even at the end of my studies my "touch" to the real working life was quite weak. Research oriented university and information professionals on the field, solving the practical problems, can be quite far apart from each other.
- If there are common interests, cooperation is meaningful.
- ... Best innovations are created when research and practice are combined.

Conclusions
In our study cooperation and collegial peer support were seen as extremely significant, as we expected. The sharing of teaching materials and good practices was also regarded important. Even if tailoring and modifying is needed, it's easier to start with something which has already been thought through and used in practice. It is important to remember ethical and legal use of materials others have created.

Marketing and branding of services is not a new thing for libraries, but until recently it has not been regarded as everyone's task through the whole organization. Marketing happens everywhere, in every meeting we have with our customers. We also need to brand our services and 'sell' them to our customers.

For all information professionals professional continuing education and keeping up to date are more than crucial. The old world does not exist anymore. Many organizations and associations have established 'in-profession' training programs when we get totally new demands like web 2.0-3.0, research data and altmetrics. We also need discussion with the organizations who educate new professionals to the field.

Based on the results we propose the following suggestions:
EAHIL and its members have the potential to
- compile and maintain an interactive list of available mentors offering knowledge in their special area of expertise.
- share and further develop teaching materials under CC-BY in e.g. SlideShare.
- set up blogs and social media tools for cooperation and collaboration.

Further evidence supporting - or contradicting - our proposals may lie in the findings of similar surveys in other European countries, and, if conducted, could provide tools for the association to develop cooperative actions and procedures.

REFERENCES
