

Assessing the value of a librarians' journal club

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Abstract

Journal clubs for librarians are little discussed in the professional literature. Brighton and Sussex NHS Library and Knowledge Service has run a journal club for all service staff since 2011, meeting every six weeks.

Objectives

To determine if librarians' journal clubs are an effective medium for continuing professional development, understanding and applying best practice to service improvement, and practicing evidence-based librarianship.

Methods

The results of a literature review will be presented. The presentation will analyse the articles presented at journal club meetings, by journal, presenter study design and theme, and assess the club's impact on individuals and the service. The archives of the journal club from 2011 to 2015 will be analysed, and sources and themes identified. The impact of the journal club will be analysed by mixed methods, including case studies and a validated survey of presenters past and present.

Discussion

We will discuss the club's impact on continuing professional development, revalidation, confidence in supporting clinicians' journal clubs, and critical appraisal and presentation skills. In addition, the usefulness of the journal club as a means of service improvement will be assessed. Benefits for users of the library and knowledge service will also be analysed.

Conclusion

While journal clubs require commitment from presenters and participants, we believe them to be a valuable tool for the continuing professional development of librarians, and for the improvement of services to clinicians.

Keywords: Periodicals as Topic; Education, Continuing; Professional Development; Organizational Innovation; Accreditation; Journal Clubs

Introduction

The invention of the journal club is traditionally attributed to Sir William Osler, at McGill University, Canada in 1875 (1). Health librarians support journal clubs for clinicians, but while there is an extensive literature on running clinical journal clubs (2), there is rather less on the provision of journal clubs for library and knowledge service staff themselves. We hypothesised that there might be benefits in journal clubs for library and knowledge services staff, helping their continuing professional development (CPD), helping them understand and apply best practice to service improvement, and supporting the practice of evidence-based librarianship. We wanted to investigate whether a librarian's journal club could also improve confidence in supporting clinicians' journal clubs, and the development of critical appraisal and presentation skills.

Brighton and Sussex NHS Library and Knowledge Service (LKS) provides services to the local health economy in Brighton, Hove and parts of East and Mid-Sussex, serving acute, community and mental health trusts, as well as primary care and public health, and is a partner with Brighton and Sussex Medical School. The LKS has twenty five members of staff (full and part time) based at three sites in Brighton, Hove and Haywards Heath. A journal club for all LKS staff has run since 2011, meeting every six weeks. Meetings are linked to those of the Searching and Teaching Peer Group, which meets regularly to discuss issues of concern to literature searchers and those delivering the service's teaching programme. The journal club is open to all members of the LKS team, irrespective of role or status.

Journal club lasts for one hour, two papers being presented, each by a member of the team, allocated by rota. Each presentation is allowed thirty minutes, including questions and discussion. Presenters are asked to select a paper of their own choice. Eighteen members of the team have presented in the period covered by this paper.

A literature review identified 13 articles on journal clubs for librarians, of diverse publication types ranging from brief communications to case studies. The literature review methods and results are presented in Appendix 1. Only two articles were based on mixed quantitative-qualitative methodology, using questionnaires to gather evidence in addition to qualitative methods. Pearce-Smith (3) concluded that a journal club is an effective method to support evidence-based librarianship, but used a small sample (five survey responses) and a short period of time (six meetings), so its findings may not be generalisable. Young and Vilelle (4) drew data from a larger sample of 14 library journal clubs, concluding that they contribute to social cohesion within a professional community and promote better understanding of other departments. They also found that journal clubs had little effect on professional practice.

Methods

Records of papers presented at the journal club, covering the period May 2011 to December 2015 were extracted to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, recording date of presentation, journal, title of the paper presented, presenter, presenter's role and study design where known. Each article was allocated free text tags to reflect the subject matter, and the journal was allocated to a broad empirically derived subject classification.

21 questionnaires (Appendix 2) were sent to current (16) and former (5) members of the team who had presented and/or attended journal club, using SurveyMonkey. 17 had both presented and attended, four had attended but not presented. Those who attended and had not presented were invited to answer the first four questions, while presenters were asked to answer all questions.

17 completed questionnaires were received, an 81% response rate. Of the respondents 4 were leavers and 13 were current members of staff. One non-responder said they did not complete the questionnaire as they had only attended journal club once.

Respondents were asked if they would be available for a follow-up face-to-face semi-structured interview, and three agreed. Interviews were conducted between 29 April and 5 May 2016. Interviewees were provided with an information sheet and signed a consent form (appendices 3 and 4). Interviews were recorded and transcribed; any details that could make the interviewee identifiable were redacted. Transcripts were then reviewed for themes.

Results

70 journal articles were presented at 37 meetings of the journal club in the period April 2011 to December 2015. Six further presentations were of institutional reports (2), conference presentations (2) and blog posts (2), and were excluded from further analysis.

Papers were presented from 41 unique journal titles. The five journals most frequently chosen are shown in table 1.

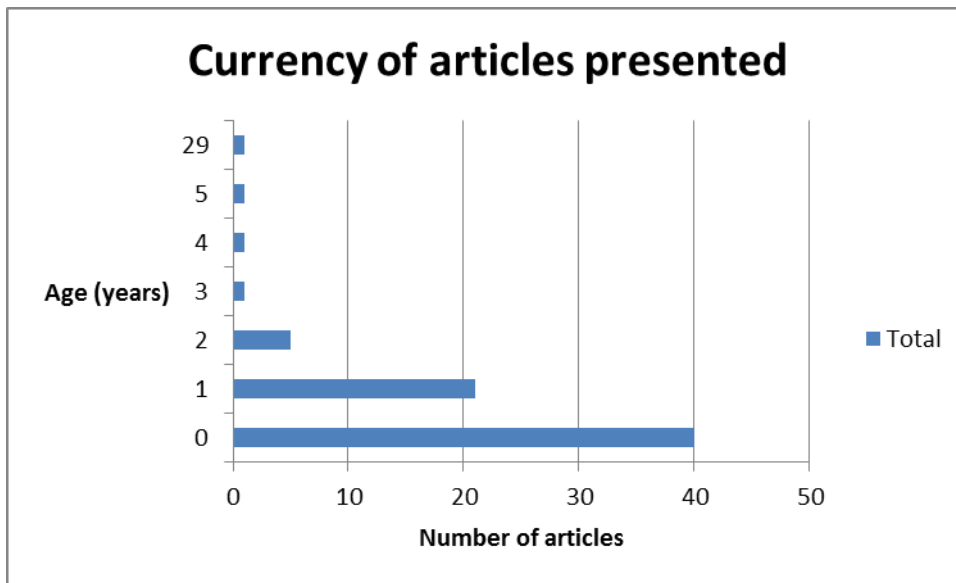
Table 1: five journals most frequently chosen

Journal title	Number of papers presented, 2011-2015
Health Information and Libraries Journal	12
Journal of Hospital Librarianship	7
Journal of the Medical Library Association	7
Medical Reference Services Quarterly	4
Library Management	3

48 of 70 papers (68.5%) were from journals categorised as in the library and information science field. Of the remainder 19 (27%) were from clinical journals and two (3%) from management journals.

Currency of papers presented was high. 40 papers were presented in their year of publication, 21 the year after publication, five two years after publication, one three years after publication, one four years after publication, one five years after publication and one 29 years after publication.

Figure 1: currency of articles presented



Subject tags were ranked by frequency of occurrence.

The top five tags are shown in Table 2:

Table 2

Tag	Frequency
Searching	15
Information literacy	11
Systematic reviews	4
Patient information	4
Social media	3

Responses to the questionnaire showed that 70% of attenders and presenters at the journal club have attended other journal clubs, chiefly within clinical teams.

We asked if there were perceived barriers to attending journal club. Diary clashes with other commitments were identified as the biggest barrier (n=10) while seven felt there were no barriers to them attending (respondents were able to identify more than one barrier).

When choosing a paper to present, 86% (13/15) agreed or strongly agreed that personal CPD interest influenced their choice. The same number (80%) agreed or strongly agreed that the relevance of the subject matter to current LKS work influenced their decision. All respondents (100%) agreed or strongly agreed that they selected a paper because the topic was one they wanted the LKS team to discuss.

We asked respondents about the currency and availability of papers and its influence on choices. 80% chose papers with currency in mind, but availability was less important. Only four people said that the availability of a paper on open access influenced their selection.

We hypothesised that people would choose papers either because they wanted to learn more about a topic, or because they already had some knowledge of the topic. 47% (7) said they chose papers on which they already had some knowledge, while 27% (4) chose papers on topics about which they knew little.

We wanted to find out if journal club had any impact on continuing professional development for attenders and presenters. 94% (15/16) of attenders agreed or strongly agreed that it has increased their reading of library and information science research. 100% of presenters agreed or strongly agreed that the club has increased their reading of the research literature.

The majority of presenters and attenders agreed or strongly agreed that it has helped them develop critical appraisal skills (67% of presenters and 70% of attenders), with the same number agreeing or strongly agreeing that it has helped them be more critical when reading research studies. We also asked about impact on presentation skills. 53% of attenders agreed or strongly agreed that the journal club had helped improve their presentation skills. However, 29% (5) were neutral and 18% (3) did not believe it had helped. Those that had presented felt similarly about impact on presentation skills with 53% agreeing or strongly agreeing that that it helps, but nearly as many remaining neutral or disagreeing (7).

We asked questions about the impact of the journal club on applying best practice and supporting evidence-based librarianship. When asking if the journal club helped influence decision-making within the LKS, 41% (7/17) of attenders agreed or strongly agreed that it did. 35% were neutral (6) and 23% (4) thought it did not have any influence. Results for presenters were similar with 40% (6) agreeing or strongly agreeing that it does help, but with 6 people being neutral and 3 people disagreeing.

We asked attenders and presenters if they thought that the journal club had made any difference to their individual practice. Responses from presenters were nearly evenly matched with 53% (8) presenters agreeing or strongly agreeing that they thought they had applied results of the papers to their practice (6 people were able to identify 7 seven papers), although 46% either were neutral or disagreed.

We wanted to find out if any presentations had had any direct impact on LKS wide practice. Whilst (53%) agreed or strongly agreed that they thought journal club does help apply results to LKS practice, when we asked if any particular presentations have any direct impact on LKS practice only 4 presenters said yes and could identify only 6 papers out of the total 76 presented. The majority said no; none of the papers had had any known impact or that they didn't know (73%). A total of 12 out of 76 individual papers were identified as having known impact on LKS wide and individual practice.

When we asked if there are any ways the club could be improved, 7 out of 17 chose to submit suggestions, which included: *“Perhaps a better system for capturing ideas/best practice that the group comes up with as a result of papers presented”*. *“Would be good to revisit papers a few months on if team decided on any follow-up actions – to see influence in practice”*.

Analysis

A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts showed that interviewees valued the stimulus journal club provided to keep up with the professional literature, to learn from peers and to share knowledge. Two of three interviewees expressed reservations about the methodological quality of the professional literature and the predictability of findings, *'I don't think there's anything out there that we've found...that would blow my mind'* said one. Another found it reassuring to find other library services working in similar ways.

Asked about the impact of journal club, interviewees cited papers presented on search techniques that had informed practice when performing evidence searches, papers on web site design that had contributed to a refurbishment of the LKS site, and papers on social media that had informed day-to-day practice and the development of a social media strategy for the service.

Interviewees liked the structure of journal clubs and that the rota required everyone to present. Some felt that journal club helped develop presentation and critical appraisal skills, though one questioned whether critical appraisal skills could be developed, because of the low quality of the librarianship literature.

Interviewees liked the high level of engagement in journal club discussions, 'passionate' was one word used, and unusual papers, described as 'left-field', 'wacky', off-the wall, were considered to stimulate good discussions. *'It doesn't actually have to be perfect. It has to be interesting and start an interesting conversation'* said one. Relevance to the context in which the interviewee worked was also important, *'So that's why it stuck in my mind, because I could really apply it to my kind of speciality'*.

All suggested that a more rigorous approach to recording actions and outcomes of discussions would be helpful *'[it would] make them feel like they are actually saying something and someone's listening'*. One suggested that a pre-selected pool of articles for presentations would be helpful.

Discussion

The main difference between our approach and the majority of papers found by our literature review is that the latter lack a clear evaluative methodology. The two reported studies which used a questionnaire differ from our approach in that Young and Villele studied multiple journal clubs, while Pearce-Smith surveyed a small number of participants (n=5) over a short period of time. Neither used post-questionnaire interviews to gather additional evidence to support the conclusions of the study.

On the basis of our results, we conclude that a journal club can help LKS staff read more library and information science literature. Some believed that it helps develop critical appraisal skills, though the important caveats about methodological quality of our professional literature should not be ignored. The journal club does help staff adopt a more critical stance when reading research papers, but it is unclear whether the club helps influence decision-making, even though all presenters selected papers because they wanted the LKS to discuss a topic.

The majority of staff use the club to learn and develop their own individual practice but were less convinced that it influenced service-wide practice. This was backed up by the relatively few papers cited as having any impact – personally or LKS wide. Six out of 70 papers were cited as having a known service improvement impact. There was no conclusive indication that a journal club helps improve presentation skills.

The chief limitation of this study is that data in the survey and interviews are self-reported and therefore open to recall and social desirability biases.

Contributors: IB conducted the literature search and analysed results, JF devised and administered the questionnaire and analysed the results, TR extracted and analysed data from the journal club records and carried out, transcribed and analysed the follow-up interviews

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