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A TWENTY YEAR PATH

Learning about Assessment; Learning from Assessment

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the development of educational assessment from the 1970's to the present, including discussions of basic working definitions and models of assessment in information literacy. It reflects on what librarians have learned from assessment and about assessment, and how this information is being used to improve current and future assessment offerings.

INTRODUCTION

Just as there are many tributaries that supply large lakes and rivers, most major ideas originate and develop from numerous sources in response to diverse cultural, internal, and external stimuli. Educational assessment is one of those “big ideas” that has been influenced and molded from many arenas and that has matured as a result of the thought and illumination of numerous writers and practitioners. For educational assessment’s beginnings, we can look to the body of literature

from the 1970's implementation of Outcomes Based Education in K–12. This concept, which was influenced by Benjamin Bloom and other well-known educators, looked to the achievement of students and the design of “education ... based on the outcome (the end), not the other way around” (Spady, 2002, p. 1829). While thriving more in K–12, the academic philosophies and practices within higher education (time-in-class rather than student achievement, delivery of content from experts, and independence in teaching) meant that outcomes based education was not as good

of a fit for colleges and universities (O'Banion, 1997; Spady, 2002; Spady & Marshall, 1991).¹ In the 1970's and 80's the ideas of Stiehl and Lewchuk, Light, Wiggins, O'Banion, Bok, Banta, Angelo, Marchese, Cross, and others elevated the conversations about assessment in higher education by addressing many of the unique factors and cultural barriers that needed to be considered.

Clearly one of the more influential concepts to transition assessment was Barr and Tagg's (1995) emphasis on moving from teaching to learning. They encouraged us to view college as "an environment conducive to learning" (p. 4) and to incorporate learning outcomes in the design of instruction. Chickering and Gamson's (1987) *Seven Principles of Good Practice for Undergraduate Education*, and the American Association for Higher Education's (1991) *Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning*, brought us even closer to a learning-centered framework. Stiehl and Lewchuk (2002) helped us implement these ideas with a method of curriculum design, curriculum alignment, and program assessment that begins with "envisioning what students need to be able to DO in the rest of life that [educators] are responsible for in the classroom" (p. 28). These were the fruitful, intellectually-engaging discussions on the topic of assessment, but they did not evolve in isolation; they were in conjunction with, and some prompted by, the advancing energy of assessment driven by external forces of public accountability and accreditation.

The writing, research, and practices in libraries that coincided with and responded to these trends in higher education and these external arenas focused on developing the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), 2000) and *Characteristics of Programs of Information Literacy that Illustrate Best Practices: A Guideline* (ACRL, 2003), a growth in literature and program development on information literacy, teaching, and learning, and on the conception of the learning library as elucidated in the 1997 Instruction Section/

Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Presidents Program at the ALA annual conference (Pelster, 2000).

In 1998, ACRL issued a foundational report that set the stage for how all libraries might think about assessment and challenged us to consider our work as "*the ways in which library users are changed as a result of their contact with the library's resources and programs.*" This goal set our sights well beyond the notion that student satisfaction and evaluation were sufficient, and focused us on much meatier questions such as:

- Is the academic performance of students improved through their contact with the library?
- By using the library, do students improve their chances of having a successful career?
- Are undergraduates who used the library more likely to succeed in graduate school?
- Does the library's bibliographic instruction program result in a high level of "information literacy" among students?
- As a result of collaboration with the library's staff, are faculty members more likely to view use of the library as an integral part of their courses?
- Are students who use the library more likely to lead fuller and more satisfying lives?. (ACRL Task Force on Academic Library Outcomes, 1998)

Professional conversations continued to expand our concept of assessment as numerous programs, committee projects, and publications focused on assessment of information literacy and information literacy programs. Instruction librarians were exploring ways to collaborate with faculty on assignment design, designing assessments that coordinated with the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2000), and moving from evaluation to assessment. Project SAILS Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (Kent State University, 2000–

2009)) and TILT web-based information literacy tutorial (University of Texas at Austin, 1998) brought assessment of information literacy to another level by demonstrating how various information literacy skills and concepts could be taught and assessed to large groups of students. As models and strategies entered the general discussions of assessment in higher education, academic librarians were quick to discover what they might mean and look like in the library context, and how they could be implemented.

WORKING DEFINITIONS AND MODELS OF ASSESSMENT

The ideas in this article are built on my personal definitions and concepts of assessment and my observations of our professional growth and change with the initiative. While many definitions of assessment are available in the literature, I believe assessment to be:

- Knowing **what** you are doing
- Knowing **why** you are doing it
- Knowing what students are **learning** as a result
- **Changing** because of the information (Gilchrist, 2001).

This definition considers that *knowing what you are doing* is based on the development of student learning outcomes that provide clear direction for an instructional session or library instruction program; that those outcomes were thoughtfully designed and rooted in a philosophy or approach to information literacy so that *why you are doing it* is extremely clear; that there is opportunity provided to check-in with students and have them demonstrate their work so that the librarian can observe the learning and maintain confidence in *what students are learning* as a result of instruction at reference or in the classroom; and that the librarian/teacher takes time to analyze the student work in order to make meaningful *changes to their teaching* with the end result being to improve student learning and success. Assessment is characterized by systematic and ongoing processes that involve gathering and

analyzing information from multiple sources using multiple methods, and using the results to draw inferences about students, programs, a library, or an institution in order to make informed decisions that improve student experience, learning, and success.

LEARNING FROM OUR ASSESSMENT EXPERIENCES

If assessment, then, is about learning and change, what have librarians learned and how have we progressed in the 20+ years that assessment has been part of the academic conversation? What has educational assessment brought to the library and how have librarian's ideas and use of information literacy assessment evolved? What meaning does this word hold after two decades of examination, criticism, trial and error, enlightenment, acquiescence, disregard, improvement, and change? Initially conceived as a means for academic librarians to be accountable to others, assessment in academic libraries has progressed to embrace a broader and more fruitful purpose of continuous improvement and change. Over the course of 20 years, the library instruction community has learned several key lessons that will serve us well in the future.

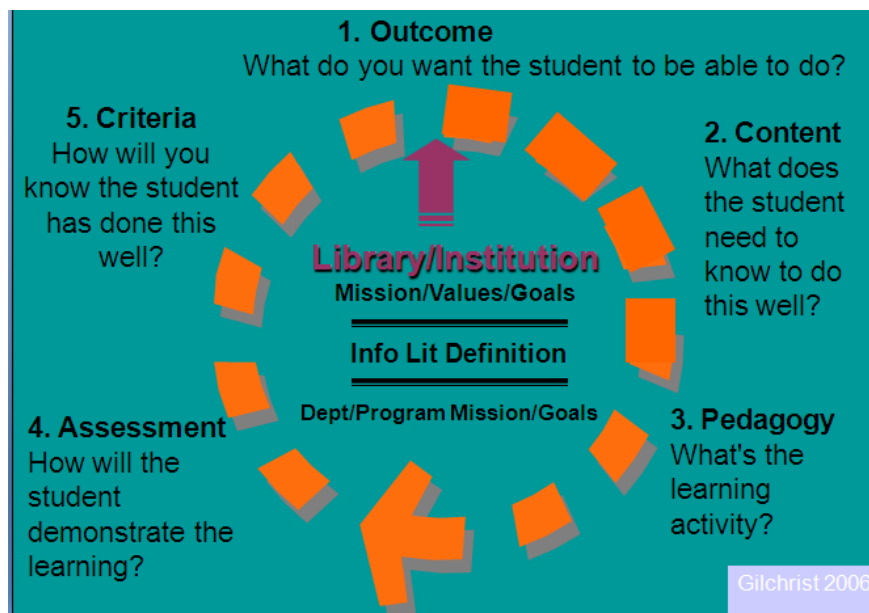
We have learned that assessment is a process. First and foremost, we have recognized that assessment is much more than gathering data. Assessment is a thoughtful and intentional process by which faculty and administrators collectively, as a community of learners, derive meaning and take action to improve. It is driven by the intrinsic motivation to improve as teachers, and we have learned that, just like the students in our classes, we get better at this process the more we actively engage it. The more we systematically assess, reflect, analyze and use information to bring about understanding to engage the next phase of our work, the more skilled at it we become.

What makes assessment different than traditional evaluation is that it is intentional, designed into the instruction, and integrated into student work. Planning is a normal part of

instruction; assessment merely requires a few additional planning components to complement that familiar work. We have become conscious of the fact that assessment is a cycle that begins with:

1. Establishing clearly defined learning outcomes for information literacy programs, credit courses, and individual instructional sessions. Learning outcomes specifically state what the student will be able to do as a result of the instruction. Good outcomes are written in language accessible to students and faculty, and, depending on the level of the outcome, are based on personal and team philosophy, the curriculum, and/or course assignments. (See Figure 1.)
2. Consciously preparing for instruction so that it incorporates all that the student needs to know in order to be successful with the assignment and utilizes pedagogy that is creative and that directly corresponds to the outcome.
3. Incorporating an assessment into the instructional session or integrating it into the faculty member's assignment to determine if students can do what we set out for them to do in the outcome.
4. Developing criteria in advance of assigning the work so that both librarians and students can evaluate to what degree the outcome has been met. Criteria are most helpful if they are shared with students in advance and offered as guidelines for completing the assignment.
5. And finally, changing as a result of the analysis of student work. This could be undertaken individually, with other library colleagues, or interdepartmentally with discipline faculty. Based on what was learned in reviewing student work, what can be changed, reinforced, or enhanced in order to increase student learning the next time this class session is taught?

FIGURE 1 — FIVE QUESTIONS FOR ASSESSMENT DESIGN



By including each step and thoughtfully completing the assessment process, we are prepared to cycle back and begin the re-development of the instruction and/or the assignment with enlightened eyes. The result is a deeper understanding of our impact in order to strengthen the learning.

Assessment takes time. It takes our energy and attention to put the pieces in place, to develop instruments, and to collaborate with discipline faculty on the design of relevant and integrated assessments. It requires our diligence and patience to learn to do it well, and may mean that department activities must be evaluated for what can be eliminated in order to do assessment well. Different than evaluations that are often focused on student attitude toward the instruction, assessment results in complete alignment between outcomes, curriculum, and student learning.

We have learned the difference between research and assessment. Many of our early efforts with assessment only considered what could be formally measured. Aligning with the national conversations, we have discovered that assessment is about telling a story—the story of our students’ learning, the story of our instruction program, the story of our contributions to overall student success. Research considers what works; proposes theory; provides an explanation; searches for fact; is often transferable; or examines meaning and experience in a structured, scholarly manner, or empirical manner. Assessment can be considered a type of action research with the primary goal of improving our practice, not generating theoretical knowledge. It incorporates measurable data, judge-able information, and professional observations in order to foster change. Collaboration is inherent in assessment’s success. Assessment is built into our operation and inter-connected whereas research can be isolated, one time, and independently conducted.

We have learned that institutional culture must be acknowledged and valued in order for assessment to be successful. The culture of any

library is learned; we develop and pass down the traditions, ways of operating, philosophies, and priorities that make each academic library unique. What new initiatives have in common is the need for introducing them in light of the library culture. This way, we are more certain of the initiatives’ success and of their ability to stand the test of time. We have discovered that the cultural patterns of our own libraries can be useful in determining the strengths of an assessment endeavor. In 1999, Lakos and Phipps, set the stage by defining how libraries can develop a culture of assessment. Many authors have addressed culture related to the context of that article, emphasizing both its importance to their work and to librarians’ overall progress in understanding it. In addition to these broader cultural elements, there are many practical hands-on strategies that have emerged as important to the implementation of assessment. These included sharing assessment results in a collegial manner that invites insightful observation, reflection, and connections instead of anxiety; posting assessment ideas on wikis and intranet sites so that individuals within organizations don’t have to reinvent the wheel; collaboratively designing assessments so that we can learn together and from each other; reporting assessment results as a department or program so that they represent our collective endeavors and don’t reveal the work of any individual; following through to implement the ideas assessment has revealed; and including other departments in the analysis so as to maximize the possibility of revealing patterns across the library. All of these practices have contributed to our learning. These elements can be incorporated into the library culture so that assessment is naturally and positively implemented and sustained. “Assessment is a process in which rich, usable, credible feedback from an act—of teaching or curriculum—comes to be reflected upon by an academic community, and then is acted on by that community—a department [a library] or college—within its commitment to get smarter and better at what it does” (Marchese, 1997, p.5).

We have learned the value of collaboration so as to assess authentically. The partnerships we

develop with discipline faculty have been our most critical change agent. Good information literacy assessment programs have capitalized on and more richly developed the relationships and collaborations librarians determined were key to the success of instruction programs. Academic librarians are capitalizing on partnerships and using our creativity to help discipline faculty envision what assessment of information literacy concepts could look like in their classrooms. Assessment has also helped discipline faculty see the common ground we are building, where the gaps are for their students, and how librarians and faculty are working together to co-educate. The advantage of assessment is that it opens doors to different kinds of conversations by focusing on the one key question: what do we want the students **to be able to do** following instruction or interaction at the reference desk? That gives a substantive and formative question to negotiate with discipline faculty whose classes we teach. It becomes a different conversation with a faculty member requesting instruction when we focus on student outcomes instead of on what we as teachers will say or do during that 50 minutes or what content the discipline faculty want us to cover. Together, the faculty member and librarian can focus on student work, the results of student assessments, and where we both see weaknesses and potential in their effort instead of how much time we are taking in their course. This key question re-focuses the conversation with discipline faculty to spotlight what faculty and librarians BOTH want the student to be able to do after information literacy instruction.

Assessment provides a common ground and offers the library faculty a focus for our teaching. We have been creative in defining our partnerships by looking to our colleagues in student services, the campus Teaching and Learning Center, and those who educate graduate assistants to develop instructional partnerships.

We have learned that the tools we need are wide-ranging. Since student learning outcomes can be written at a variety of levels, we need a broad toolkit of methods to measure/judge

student learning and achievement. Program level outcomes, course-level outcomes, and session-level outcomes define different levels of ability. As a profession, we have developed simple, to-the-point worksheets and sophisticated digital tutorials and assessments. Three tools that have been particularly useful are rubrics, integrated assessments, and comprehensive tests of information literacy.

Rubrics are descriptive scoring schemes created by educators to guide analysis of student work (Oakleaf, 2009). For information literacy, they describe the level of performance or achievement for individual information literacy skills or concepts that assist librarians in evaluating student assessments. Rubrics have helped us by describing what information literacy skills look like when applied (also termed criteria), by assisting us in leveling those skills so that we could visualize the skills in a developmental manner appropriate for different groups of students or describe to a student where their work falls on a continuum, and by providing librarians at an institution with a common point of understanding.

As previously discussed, collaborations with faculty are critical, particularly because the value of an integrated assessment is much greater to the student than a stand-alone assessment. Integrated assessments of information literacy are a part of the assignments within courses so that information literacy has a context and built-in relationship for students. Grant Wiggins (1990) described this as **authentic** assessment. From the student's perspective, authentic assessment is more meaningful than many other types since it is positioned in a context that emulates how they will be using information after graduation and models behavior for career and lifelong problem-solving. The more students can observe that evaluation of information is a key component of their biology curriculum and to their success as a biologist, for example, the more chance there is that information-seeking will be permanently integrated into students' future actions as professional biologists.

Comprehensive tests of information literacy such as Project SAILS (Kent State University, 2000–2009) and the Bay Area Community College Information Competency Assessment Project (2004) are assessment instruments that are based on specific outcomes tied to national information literacy standards. These instruments can be administered holistically to assess the overall information literacy achievement of a small or large group of students. They are particularly helpful in getting an overall picture of student accomplishment.

We have learned that assessment is about continuous improvement, not the data.

Consistently using information to make good decisions is at the root of an assessment culture. Looking beyond the data to implement the needed changes or further nurturing what is working so that it is sustained is the key. We have learned that it is important to make assessment the root of the way we learn and work. Outcomes are the soul of our work. Assessment is a way to both honor our students and honor our professionalism by checking in and discovering more about their experience in our libraries and classrooms. While many may indeed benefit, these documents that we are creating are for **us**, not for **them**. This movement may have started with accountability, but our professionalism will have it continually rooted in the desire to embrace the impact of librarians' work and to ensure that students are achieving. In his book, *Full House: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin*, Stephen Jay Gould (1996) points out that “the most erroneous stories are those we think we know best—and therefore never scrutinize or question” (p. 56).

We have learned to value progress, change in large and small ways, and to notice what is going on around us to increase our confidence, set direction for additional work, and proceed on firm ground. Developing assessment systems and structures that everyone in the instruction program has a hand in will increase ownership. Making assessment discussions a regular part of meeting agendas, including assessment documents in the normal course of

business, integrating into the budget process the action plans that describe librarians' actions as a result of what we have learned, and establishing an annual assessment calendar will further our efforts. Wisdom – our deep thinking on librarianship, information literacy, teaching, and learning – is a vital element of assessment if we are to get to a complete answer about student learning and success. We have learned to capitalize on our innate interest as humans to make meaning out of the world.

We have learned the value of standards and best practices.

The Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (ACRL, 2000) have given us a common framework to discuss information literacy outcomes, assessments that work, and instructional strategies that ensure student learning. They have been the centerpiece of our conversations and brought us to a tangible reality of what we want students to be able to do as a result of interacting with us in the library and the library classroom. We have also learned that we can't do it all; we need to scale our instruction and our programs to achieve what is do-able and, unfortunately, leave some of the standards behind. The Characteristics of Programs of Information Literacy that Illustrate Best Practices: A Guideline (ACRL, 2003) grounded our ideas of what the programs should/could look like and offered a framework for assessing both information literacy programs and student learning. This document helped librarians identify what is important to the health and scalability of a program.

We have learned that good leadership is essential.

Leadership is not an action that only a few in positions of authority engage in; individuals at any level of our libraries can assume a leadership role through their influence. We have honed our capacity as leaders in assessment by both establishing new positions and structures with responsibility for assessment and by individually learning more about assessment so that our voices will be influential in our libraries and on our campuses. Many librarians are leaders of campus-wide assessment initiatives.

We have taken responsibility for student learning. Strong information literacy programs employ librarians who have accepted responsibility for student learning and assessment and who have made assessment an integral part of their role as teachers. This acknowledges that assessment is not solely the function of the campus or library assessment coordinator or the instruction coordinator and that a shared effort is indeed a stronger effort. Accepting this responsibility has further cemented our role as educators; regarding our educational role as primary instead of as a service to the discipline faculty has furthered this understanding, as has recognizing that all roles in the university and college library are focused on student experience, not only those in reference and instruction. As strong and caring teachers, we haven't waited for someone to ask us to carry out assessment but instead have taken it upon ourselves to assess at every opportunity, read the latest article within library publications and education publications, attend an assessment workshop, or call a colleague in order to progress our thinking and our techniques. We use assessment results to mold and sculpt our teaching and our programs into our vision.

We are learning to let go of the fear and take pride in our progress. Earlier I discussed the importance of culture, but, unfortunately, one of the common cultural elements with assessment has been fear; fear of failure, fear of facing reality, fear of not doing as well as colleagues, fear of losing resources, etc. The cultural practices outlined above have assisted in assuaging the fear, but our role as assessment leaders calls on us to step even further into unknown territory and model for others that this process is about students, not about librarians. Our pride and ego can step aside because students count more and the professional approach to our work demands that we stay accountable to the students and to our personal integrity as teachers.

We have learned there are gaps. New assessment questions are on the horizon. We need to increase our documentation of student

learning and student progress on individual learning outcomes and to become more skilled at how to compile and record assessment results so that they are easily analyzed. Assessment plans should be more broadly developed and implemented. It is important that librarians further engage faculty in other disciplines and publish in journals read by non-librarians to educate beyond the library field. Developing a culture of assessment needs to be a higher priority in libraries so that all members of the community can benefit from continuous improvement.

WE HAVE GAINED PERSPECTIVE

One of the things I love about living in the Pacific Northwest is the opportunity to kayak as just part of life in this region. Puget Sound has miles and miles of shore to poke around in as well as "big water" to provide adventure. It only takes a few inches of water to float a kayak, so I can dawdle at the water's edge observing tide pool life, glide by houseboats, or pick blackberries that hang off of the edge of rock outcroppings. Or I can paddle out to the center of a larger expanse of water where that same rock outcrop or beach or view of downtown Seattle now looks totally different; one small boat enables many different perspectives. That is also how we have come to benefit from assessment. One focused piece of data or information combined with other pieces, or the same issue looked at through different lenses can provide librarians with valuable perspective on how students are progressing in one individual course with a single information literacy outcome, they can combine to offer a perspective for a department on how our students in general are progressing, be examined in light of which courses and collaborations we are able to foster with faculty, placed beside reference assessment information to seek patterns, or combine with information/data from additional parts of the library to view more closely what we contribute to the academic enterprise. It gives us perspective with which to nurture the portions we find fruitful, to change those that are not quite up to the task, and to update our map in order to continue paddling in

a fruitful direction. The maps of the past 20 years have been sketchy and we have worked to fill them in with good information and landmarks; the maps we create over the next 20 years will more solidly determine our future path.

NOTES

1. One exception that continues to serve as a model for outcomes assessment is Alverno College (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), an institution that has fully embraced outcomes assessment philosophy and implementation in their teaching and institutional culture. I enthusiastically refer you to all of their publications.

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