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Moving from Critical Assessment to Assessment as Care

Veronica Arellano Douglas, University of Houston

Abstract

In *Teaching Against the Grain: Critical Assessment in the Library Classroom*, Maria Accardi sought a critical, feminist approach to assessment that questioned power structures, celebrated learners, and found strength in diverse perspectives and voices. This article expands on Accardi's work to explore a care-based assessment framework rooted in the foundations of critical assessment, relational-cultural theory, and critical generosity. This includes a critique of the current language of assessment in library and information science literature and higher education; an examination of models for more caring versions of assessment (particularly those from other feminized professions); and a reframing of the conversation around assessment from one of demonstrating value to one of embodying a value of care and connection in learning for both students and librarians.

Keywords: assessment, ethic of care, relational cultural theory, teaching, value, *Critical Library Instruction*

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Moving from Critical Assessment to Assessment as Care

In *Teaching Against the Grain: Critical Assessment in the Library Classroom*, Maria T. Accardi rightly characterizes assessment in higher education as a practice of power. Assessment results, “legitimize a course or an instruction program, provide evidence of student learning, substantiate effective instruction, and justify curricula” (Accardi, 2010, p. 251). The practice of assessment “embodies power relations between the institution and its students” (Reynolds & Trehan, 2000, p. 268) and every permutation of relationship between students, faculty, librarians, staff, and administrators. Despite its importance and political power, “there is no common definition for assessment in higher education” (Wall, Hursh, & Rodgers, 2014, p. 6). Yet an undercurrent of fear permeates the need for assessment within our institutions, leading academic libraries to adopt a practice of assessment firmly rooted in justification. We strive to prove our value, show our impact, and demonstrate our worth to external audiences. This is the narrative of assessment we’ve accepted, and we reinforce it through copious amounts of literature, conferences, and reports that temporarily mollify fears and heighten a sense of crisis that we then address with more assessment. It’s the new academic library assessment cycle: crisis, justification, report, repeat.

Rather than reinforce the dominant discourse of assessment in academic libraries, Accardi (2010; 2013) sought a critical, feminist approach to assessment that questioned power structures, celebrated learners, and found strength in diverse perspectives and voices. Her ideas have influenced practitioners of critical pedagogy in libraries, and were most recently explored in Magnus, Belanger, and Faber’s (2018) critical questioning of assessment practices in academic libraries. Yet the rhetoric of assessment is still one of survival—for libraries, students, and institutions of higher education—in a time when academic funding and jobs are precarious (Head, Bull, & MacMillan, 2019, p. 4). I am sympathetic to attempts to demonstrate that our work in libraries is important, but that is the action of advocacy and reporting, not assessment. If students are indeed at the center of our teaching in higher education and libraries, then learning, and by extension, assessment, should be an inherently relational act (Schwartz, 2017, p. 6). Assessment practice has the potential to be a site of connection and care, an exchange of ideas and feelings, and a place where we can truly engage in bell hook’s (1994) idea of engaged pedagogy, where everyone involved in education is empowered. Assessment can enrich our students and ourselves as educators, librarians, and people, but it requires an approach that prioritizes care over justification, connection over reporting, and people over products.

This article is an exploration of a care-based assessment framework rooted in the foundations of critical assessment, informed by relational-cultural theory, and inspired by the idea of critical generosity. I draw from the existing library and information literacy assessment literature to analyze the current language of assessment and its critiques; examine models for more caring versions of assessment (particularly those from other feminized professions); and reframe the conversation around assessment from one of demonstrating value to one of embodying a value of care and connection in learning for both students and librarians.

Value Over Values

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Value of Academic Libraries Report*, which circulated the same year as the publication of *Critical Library Instruction*, essentially set the agenda for assessment in libraries (Fisher, 2018; Magnus et al., 2018; Nicholson, 2017). Its focus on the “articulation of library value to external audiences” was an explicit push for a demonstration of value that situated libraries, and more importantly, teaching librarians, in defensive positions (Oakleaf, 2010, p. 11). It set us up to prove ourselves worthy of time, money, trust, and acceptance to “institutional leaders.” Influenced heavily by performance accountability culture in higher education, Oakleaf warns librarians that we can “no longer rely on [our] stakeholders’ belief in [libraries’] importance” (2010, p. 11). Assessment is then framed as savior, or what will ultimately situate libraries and librarians into influential positions at their respective institutions (all in just 22 easy “Next Steps”).

What followed was a 3-year IMLS-funded grant sponsoring the ACRL Assessment in Action (AiA) Program, in which librarians from over 200 academic institutions participated in assessment projects aimed at demonstrating their library’s impact on student learning and success (Association of College and Research Libraries, n.d.). From 2013 to 2016 the AiA program cemented the *Value of Academic Libraries* version of assessment in our professional practice. Its projects resulted in articles, books, conference presentations, and posters that flooded the library and information science literature, all discussing academic libraries’ connection to student success and demonstrating the value of libraries. As a participant in the first AiA program cohort, my own contribution to the value agenda lives on in this literature, stubbornly attempting to wring impact from a correlational study that was

ultimately more about the need for integrated information literacy and writing education than any proof of library importance. In setting the scholarly trend for assessment as accountability, the *Value of Academic Libraries Report* and the AiA Program determined not just what (and how) we assessed, but *why* we assessed anything. As Wall, Hursh, and Rodgers (2014) write, “what is measured has value, or becomes valued as it is measured” (p. 9); what we measured and ultimately came to value in library assessment was the justification of our own existence in higher education.

Although the *Value of Academic Libraries Report* claimed to “lay out multiple assessment perspectives” (Oakleaf, 2010, p. 7), its emphasis was on the practice of assessment to acquire symbolic capital, or proof of worthiness, within a neoliberal academic context (Nicholson, 2017; Wall et al., 2014). Critical perspectives on the assessment movement in higher education were dismissed as “impractical” (Oakleaf, 2010, p. 7), but the emphasis on assessment to prove value does nothing to improve our actual professional practice (Farkas, 2013, p. 6). Instead, it seeks evidence to support a claim that we all desperately want to be true: Libraries matter. But within the value agenda, the only mattering that matters is that which speaks to administrative interests and government funding, not to the learners and users we want to empower and support.

The extension of this proof-of-value or impact-value assessment has recently turned towards learning analytics, which is characterized within this kind of assessment as a means to “collect data on individual library user behavior, while still maintaining privacy” (Oakleaf, 2010, p. 12). The ethics of such systems are questionable at best, as they track things like visits to the counseling center, library access, timing of classes, etc. and tie them all to individual students and their academic performance. Students are not given the opportunity to decline participation in these systems and may not even be informed that they exist (Fisher, 2017, 2018; Oakleaf, Brown, Walter, Hendrix, & Lucia, 2018; Rabinowitz, 2019; Robertshaw & Asher, 2019). The collection of more and more invasive data is justified by claims that “students’ lives are hanging in the balance” and our assessment/invasion of privacy is what can save them (Oakleaf et al., 2018). The practice of learning analytics is characterized as “one of both inevitability and necessity, the only possible response to the crisis of higher education” (Nicholson, Pagowsky, & Seale, 2019, p. 62). In this system of assessment gone awry, the powerlessness of libraries that must prove their own value is then transferred to students who don’t have the ability to opt out of surveillance systems. The data gleaned is then used to prop up academic libraries, connecting student use of

library services, resources, and instruction to academic success. Yet a recent meta-analysis of library impact and learning analytics studies showed that there was very little to no effect of library use or instruction on student GPA outcomes, making the use of learning analytics in our assessment not worth the ethical risk (Robertshaw & Asher, 2019). The use of assessment to support a pre-existing claim has an impact on both what and how we assess in academic libraries; but are we stopping to ask why we assess at all?

Critical Models of Assessment

Within the assessment culture of higher education and academic libraries there is often “a lack of critical reflection and research about motivations for engaging in assessment work” (Doucette, 2016, p. 288). The notion of proving value has been such a motivating force in academic library assessment that it has become the *de facto* purpose for our profession. Yet as librarians continue to engage with critical pedagogy, the push for a more critical version of assessment has gained traction, subverting the dominant narrative of library impact research. This summer, the Association of College and Research Libraries published a version of *Keeping Up With...* (a current trends publication) focused on critical assessment. The authors encourage librarians to consider the power structures and systems that impact assessment and question how we can practice *with* rather than *on* learners (Benjes-Small, Seale, Hodges, & Meiman, 2019). Magnus et al. (2018) advocate for a macro-version of critical assessment that “interrogate[s] all aspects of assessment” processes, including question formulation, methods, data collection, and use of results (Critiques & Responses section, para. 5). By examining the multiple decisions, we make as we pursue assessment projects, we engage in a continually reflective process, one that encourages us to deeply consider for whom (and why) we do assessment (Wall et al., 2014).

This critically conscious version of assessment is seen in participatory or participative assessment, a process in which learner and teacher “share, to some degree, the responsibility for making evaluations and judgements” about student work (Reynolds & Trehan, 2000, p. 270). Students create their own evaluative criteria and participate in assessment of their peers, flattening the hierarchical structures of traditional education systems. In doing so, students take ownership over their learning and assessment, yet, as Magnus et al. (2018) caution, “this must be done in ways that do not simply shift the burden of labor” onto students (“Defining Purposes” section, para. 3). There will always be a power imbalance in the learning environment; ultimately professors give grades and are in positions of authority and privilege within their institution. A more critical version of assessment, one that takes a

participative approach, seeks to mitigate this power imbalance by assessing *with* rather than *on* students to improve their learning experiences.

In rethinking our motivations to assess and deliberately expose and dismantle power structures, we create a practice of assessment that is an “ethical and valuing process” (Wall et al., 2014, pp. 10–11). Rather than focus on demonstrating that libraries and librarians have value, we can answer the question: What is it that we value? In *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction*, Maria Accardi (2013) asserts that “feminist assessment is possible” and that this practice of assessment values the uniqueness of individual learners (p. 76). This emphasis on celebrating difference, listening to alternate perspectives, and highlighting learner voices is what makes feminist assessment so powerful and appealing to libraries. As librarian instructors we work to make our classes learner-centered because we value the learning process and the individuals who are learning. Through feminist assessment, we make these values explicit, taking the overarching themes of critical assessment, and applying them to a local context where together learners and teachers can create change. Through reflection, discussion, and ultimately action, feminist assessment has the power to upend the status quo and challenge dominant narratives of learning and assessment in academic libraries and higher education. What distinguishes feminist assessment from critical assessment more broadly is the emphasis on the learning relationship between learners, and between learner and teacher. A feminist ethic of care values relationship and connection and sees the power it holds in an educational system that is increasingly controlled and standardized (pp. 80–81).

The Power of Care

In her keynote at the 2018 Digital Pedagogy Lab, journalist Anya Kamenetz argued that the best schools in existence today are those that the technology industry has created for robots. It’s a tongue-in-cheek way of expressing her frustration and surprise at a society that treats robots, or artificial intelligence more specifically, as unique opportunities worthy of time, individual teaching, and special understanding, but treats children and their schooling as problems to be solved with standardization, homogenization, and broad sweeping one-size-fits-all education. This is education devoid of care, a system that fails to see students as whole human beings, and as a result, fails to educate them.

An antidote to this assembly-line approach to education is bell hooks' (1994) emphasis on a "holistic approach to learning" (pp. 13–14). She advocates for "engaged pedagogy" which "is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes the well-being" of both teacher and student (p. 15). We bring our whole selves to the classroom, just as our students do. There is no "mind/body split" and we do not leave our feelings or experiences at the door (p. 193). Reading hooks was the first time I discovered a theoretical approach to education that emphasized the importance of *both* teacher and student. Through caring for ourselves as educators we learn to care for students as individuals. Care is both mutual and relational; it is not a form of mothering, but a means of being with and in relation to another person. Within the relationship individuals are attuned to one another, open to change, receptive to new ideas, and able to see the value in themselves and the other person (Jordan, 1991b; Noddings, 1988; Thayer-Bacon & Bacon, 1996, p. 257). To care is a sign of respect and an acknowledgement of the basic human dignity we all possess. During "care moments" in teaching we hold ourselves accountable as teachers and students accountable as learners, recognizing that those roles can easily change and reverse (Howard, 2017, p. 66; Thayer-Bacon & Bacon, 1996, pp. 259–261).

Nel Noddings (1988) thoroughly applies an ethic of care to education, intersecting with ideas from a relational-cultural model of human development. According to Noddings, the caring relationship facilitates growth in students and ourselves, intellectually, emotionally, and morally. To incorporate an ethic of care into education would require a radical overhaul of teaching and learning, one that centered dialogue, individual understanding, and mutual empathy. The relationships inherent in educational experiences should be the primary concern of all of those involved in education. An overwhelming focus on content at the expense of connection, attempts at objectivity that distance students from the instructor, an overemphasis on behavior instead of feelings and motivations for behavior are all "attempts to avoid caring occasions" in the classroom (p. 222). I am sensitive and sympathetic to these protective actions. As a woman of color in a system (higher education) that frequently calls upon black women, indigenous women, and women of color to do the majority of the caretaking, emotional labor, and service work in academia, I know that caring is not an easy ask. Nor is it rewarded in neoliberal systems of education beyond its contributions to graduate rates and tuition dollars. But what Noddings, like hooks, calls for is *not* more unpaid, unacknowledged labor on the part of educators from marginalized groups but a

radical shift in the approach to education, one that values and humanizes teachers *and* students.

We are not unlimited givers of care to be stripped until there is nothing left of us. Rather, we are people who recognize the need for the care of our students *and* ourselves. As Noddings (1988) states, “if, without knowing a student—what he loves, strives for, fears, hopes—I merely expect him to do uniformly well in everything I present to him, I treat him like an unreflective animal” (p. 226). The same could be said about educators: by not acknowledging ourselves and our own loves, fears, hopes, frustrations, and needs, we devalue our work and ourselves. Conversely, care allows us to validate and confirm life experience and needs, as well as grow together as teachers and learners. Care is not without boundaries, though, and boundaries are not antithetical to care. Within Relational-Cultural Theory, boundaries are described as “a place of meeting” indicating that positive care and connection can only occur with the existence of boundaries. Stating, rather than setting boundaries indicates that we as teachers (and students) are entitled to privacy, self-protection, and safety. Without boundaries, care is not sustainable.

Assessment as a Practice of Care

The concept of assessment as an extension or practice of care may seem paradoxical in an environment where assessment is so closely associated with accountability, reporting, and return on investment. But alternative interpretations of assessment exist, particularly in scenarios that focus on health and bodily well-being. In *Critical Generosity*, Jill Dolan (2012) recounts a scene in *Acts of Intervention* where author David Roman describes the process of caring for HIV positive friends in the audience of a showing of the famously long play, *Angels in America*. Throughout the 6-hour performance, he conducted frequent interpersonal assessments: Is everyone doing ok? Does someone need to take their medication? Is there enough food and water? Do people need a break or a space to rest? The root of this assessment was care, sustenance, and love. Would we, in a similar situation, refer to this kind of care as assessment? Likely not. However, it is a version of assessment in its purest form. It recognizes situational context and individual needs, demonstrates what is valued (friendship, health, and well-being), and creates an experience that is good for everyone involved, even the caretaker. In caring for his friends, Roman has the peace of mind to enjoy the performance knowing everyone is well.

I appreciate and share this anecdote because when it was shared with me at the 2018 Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium by Kush Patel and Anne Cong-Huyen, it created a new, more generous way of viewing assessment. In a society where caring is strongly associated with women, and women are largely devalued, the act of caring is not seen as work. It is characterized as innate and instinctual—a good thing to have but not essential. But caring work is highly sophisticated work, and to essentialize it as “women’s work” is to demean both caring and women (Jordan, Hartling, & Walker, 2004, p. 21). In an effort to demonstrate our value as a profession, librarians have sought to distance themselves from the idea that library work is care work, service work, and feminized work, leading us to a practice of education and assessment in libraries that neglects the idea of care (Harris, 1992, pp. 16–21). Within other feminized professions a feminist ethic of care is embraced and provides a model for what such a practice may look like in our own work in libraries.

Nursing

A relational practice of “caring is fundamental to nursing” which in turn creates a holistic approach to assessment of patients (Alvsvag, 2018, p. 128; Howatson-Jones, Standing, & Roberts, 2015, p. 1). What is fascinating about nursing as a profession and its training of future practitioners is the emphasis on *identifying* values rather than proving value. In making these “values and beliefs” explicit, nursing education takes “steps to making them a reality in...work” (Howatson-Jones et al., 2015, p. 11). Central to these values is the concept of person-centeredness and person-centered care. Within this framework care is not about prolonging dependence but about creating a sense of patient self-worth and autonomy. The relationship between nurse and patient fosters growth, and assessment is the means by which nurse and patient come to a shared understanding of one another, the situation, and ultimately, care (Howatson-Jones et al., 2015, pp. 10–11). Assessment is done “with rather than on patients” and is “a process of evaluating a patient’s...needs...and of identifying the patient’s wishes.” These needs go beyond the medical and physical and encompass a patient’s “life world” or all of the social, cultural, relational and experiential aspects of a patient’s life (Howatson-Jones et al., 2015, pp. 20–21). It’s a call back to hooks (1994), Noddings (1988), and Thayer-Bacon and Bacon (1996) and the concept of whole-person education, one where assessment is a shared experience that determines what teachers need in order to teach well and what students need in order to learn well.

Midwifery

This mutual approach to care is also reflected in a feminist practice of midwifery, which takes a partnership approach to prenatal, birthing, and postnatal care (Gaskin, 2011). A social model of childbirth emphasizes the caring relationship between midwife, mother, and partners who all accept responsibility for childbirth and care (MacLellan, 2014, p. 805). Once again there is an emphasis on interconnectedness *and* respect for the uniqueness of the individual, which requires an understanding of the individual through a form of assessment rooted in care. In doing so, the mother *and* midwife both feel empowered and confident throughout the birth process, drawing on a relationship based on trust, solidarity, and shared outcomes for strength. This refocusing of midwifery back to an ethic of care acknowledges the vulnerability of the mother, much as hooks (1994) recognizes the vulnerability of students in the classroom. In each scenario there is a state of temporary vulnerability that demonstrates a degree of trust in the midwife/teacher, during which support is offered (hooks, 1994; MacLellan, 2014). To assess in this state of vulnerability should be to care and to help, not to evaluate, judge, pronounce deficiency, or declare what has not been done. Taking an accountability model of assessment in a situation where vulnerability is present is a denial of our own responsibility in that moment, and a denial of the value of care.

Education

Skeptical of society's desire to solve its problems, Noddings (1988) fears that the current forms of education and its accompanying evaluation and assessment are too tightly wound up with persons and structures in power. In our emphasis on measuring "things that are relatively easy to measure...we contribute to the proliferation of problems" (p. 226). Changing assessment culture has the power to change education. Instead of focusing on educational failures, student deficiencies, and arbitrary yet standardized benchmarks that "prove learning," we should engage in assessment that focuses on affective growth, relationships, individual needs, and lived experiences of teachers and students (pp. 226–227). Through this kind of assessment, we demonstrate a valuing of teachers, learners, and learning relationships. It's a torch that has been lit in K-12 education as a response to the power of standardized testing, which impacts everything from how and what students learn to how teachers are paid and which schools are funded. Assessment as a caring activity in education is concerned with the needs of students and teachers both in and out of the classroom. It embraces a practice of compassion, kindness, trust, attention, and concern; and

some would even say, love (Booth, 2011; Denial, 2019; hooks, 1994; Schwartz, 2017; Stommel, 2018; Torres, 2019).

Assessment as Care in Academic Libraries

Drawing from caring practices of assessment in nursing, midwifery, and education (broadly speaking), we can begin to construct a version of assessment in libraries and information literacy education that practices and facilitates care. This version of assessment will be messy but so is learning. In rejecting neatness and assessment narratives that fit a particular story, we are centering the people at the heart of teaching and learning in libraries and all their complications, needs, bodies, feelings, and experiences. To care through assessment, we will emphasize what we value, not that we have value, for an ethic of care assumes an inherent value and worthiness in us all.

Valuing students

If we value students as individual learners, then assessment in library education programs should be about what students need. Standardized tests used to gauge levels of information literacy ability or pre-tests intended to tell us what students know about research and the library neglect the possibility of sharing experience outside of what we seek and expect to find. If, as I once did in a survey, we ask about students' experiences conducting research for papers in high school, we aren't getting a full picture of what a students' high school experience was like or what research actually means to them. In asking those questions, I applied my own narrow definition of research to a needs assessment and, in turn, used that narrow slice of information to make assumptions about the students I would be teaching. It assumed either a satisfactory set of experiences or a deficiency of them but did not leave room for an understanding of a students' full, individual experience.

To assess individual student needs and strengths, we need to talk to individual students, either in a classroom setting, through a one-on-one meeting in person or online, or in groups outside of the classroom. We are doing what Head et al. (2019) describe as examining "what students actually do, rather than what we think they should do" (p. 4). It is an act of listening, validating, and appreciating the vulnerability and openness that students may show in these situations. Rather than give students choices in assessment tools that make it easier for us to aggregate data and code experiences, we can and should be prepared to listen for things outside of our realm of understanding. If caring is a relational act and assessment is an act of caring, then in valuing our students we are valuing a relationship

with them. This means that needs and strengths assessments don't just happen once, at the beginning of the first year of college, the first day of class, or the start of a library instruction session. Care is constant and continuous, and we must be prepared to listen and look for what students may need and how they can teach us to be better teachers and librarians.

The needs of students, much to our own dismay as helping professionals, may go well beyond our professional capacity to help. A student who needs a place to sleep at night or is unsure when their next meal will happen is unlikely to be thinking about research and library databases as pressing needs. In accepting teaching and assessment as care we must be prepared to hear these kinds of needs and concerns and act on them appropriately. That means knowing what campus resources exist, leveraging our research experiences to aid in finding assistance, or referring to a more qualified professional when more intensive help is needed. As previously stated, boundaries are important. They are where we meet students and how we both promote safety for others and feel safe ourselves. By knowing and honoring our own boundaries and limits, we place ourselves in a better position to offer help to others and facilitate care. We are educating whole people who bring all of themselves and all of life's complications and joys with them into the classroom, but we are also whole people in our own right, who bring our own complications, abilities, and limits into the classroom.

Valuing ourselves

Assessment is typically seen as something librarians do *to* or *with* others; We assess students, programs, learning outcomes, and our own teaching effectiveness. Yet to adopt hooks' (1994) notion of engaged pedagogy we need to be prepared to value ourselves as teaching librarians and assess our own needs, experiences, feelings, and situational contexts. Because of the need to create sustainable library teaching programs, we often delve into assessment and curriculum planning that "treat[s] teachers as interchangeable parts in instructional procedures" (Noddings, 1988, p. 227). We teach, assess, and refine so that ultimately we have lesson plans that anyone can teach that will cover exactly the outcomes we want to address and yield uniform results in learning. But learning is never uniform. The same librarian teaching the exact same lesson on the same day to two different classes can have vastly different experiences and create entirely different learning experiences. Assessment doesn't erase difference. Caring assessment celebrates it. Bad assessment just ignores it.

In applying assessment to ourselves as teaching librarians we can “ask [ourselves and our colleagues] what [we] need to engage in our work comfortably” (Noddings, 1988, p. 227). Is it a new approach to teaching and learning? More instruction librarians? Greater administrative support? Better policy that states and respects our boundaries and limits? Assessing the needs of teaching librarians tells us not just what they need to do their job well, but how they feel about their teaching work. So much of the emotional labor felt by teaching librarians comes from having to mask emotions, manage feelings, and hide or minimize the parts of themselves that don’t fit socially acceptable models of women in libraries (Browndorf, 2016; Julien & Genuis, 2009; Larson, 2008; Sloniowski, 2016). To care for teaching librarians is to enact an assessment that asks if one person teaching 50 classes in one semester is 20 too many. It’s an assessment that investigates if the current model of teaching in your library is conducive to building learning relationships with students. It could also be an assessment that asks teaching librarians how they are feeling about their teaching in a particular day, month, semester, or year. In assessing teaching librarians in this way, we are recognizing their labor and significant contribution to learning. In short, we are showing that teaching librarians matter, too, because “for our work to be truly sustainable, it needs to also be sustaining to our needs as people who entered the work of librarianship, specifically teaching librarianship, to help others” (Arellano Douglas, 2019, para. 5).

Valuing Growth Through Relationship

Caring exists within the structure of relationship, or put another way, in the way that individuals exist in relation to one another (Jordan et al., 2004; Noddings, 1988). A healthy, caring relationship rooted in mutuality is a vehicle for human growth and development, including educational development (Jordan, 1991a; Jordan et al., 2004). We can view assessment as a relational practice rooted in care (Schwartz, 2017) and use assessment to care for the learning relationships we painstakingly try to cultivate and maintain. The literature of teaching librarianship is rife with calls for improving the librarian-faculty relationship (Arellano Douglas & Rabinowitz, 2016; Cook, 2000; Nalani Meulemans & Carr, 2013), but our focus on outcomes-based assessment or assessment to prove value does not embody care for the faculty-librarian relationship itself. We want to pursue and continue these connections with faculty because they provide opportunities for librarians to teach and foster relationships with students, but how do we demonstrate care in these situations?

Once again, this can be enacted through a version of assessment that shows that all parties of a relationship matter. We can seek and offer feedback not just on what librarians do or do not do to further relationship, but on how faculty actions, ideas, and sentiments impact this working relationship as well. As a profession, we are quick to assess the actions of teaching librarians and liaison librarians with a critical lens, but we would do well to listen to their relational concerns as well. What struggles do librarians have in initiating and maintaining teaching relationships with faculty? How is the time needed to enact these relationships valued? The same relational care and concern should be extended to our faculty colleagues. Rather than attempt to sell them on a version of information literacy education that will speak to stakeholders through carefully crafted messaging and coordinated campaigns, we could ask faculty about their classes. How many sections are they teaching? How are they feeling? What are their concerns? There is a deeply human connection in the kind of assessment that asks these questions.

The relationship between librarians and faculty is not the only one that matters. So, too, does the relationship between librarian colleagues, librarians and students, and the relationships that organically arise between students. A version of self- or peer-assessment that offers feedback without judgement or shame is a powerful means of caring. Schwartz (1988) advocates for a version of assessment that facilitates engaged feedback, recalling Noddings' (1988) emphasis on assessment as both external and self-reflective. In both instances assessment itself is a relationship. It is reciprocal, evoking critical analysis of the self and the other, which ultimately helps those in relationship learn more about themselves and one another. Asking students to reflect on their work and effort and suggesting that teachers do the same is a meaningful way to assess their relationship to the learning experience and, consequently, to one another. In this practice of assessment, the learning relationship is cared for, highlighted, and practiced. Assessment to further relationship examines both people in the relationship and the relationship itself.

Valuing intentionality

In *Asking the Right Questions*, Head et al. (2019) advocate for librarians to “bring the same intentionality to assessment as we do to teaching and learning” (p. 9). There are so many “unquestioned assumptions about assessment,” which often, as Magnus et al. (2018) share, lead to a “misalignment between...values and the assessment practices and attitudes we...foster” (Introduction section, para. 3). In centering what we value as teachers and librarians, we set a foundation for a version of assessment that is intentional and caring.

With this strong foundation we are rooted in what matters to us, our colleagues, and students. We are able to step back from the never-ending, crisis-induced fear of obsolescence, irrelevance, and lack of value. We know what we value, and that guides our practice in ways that help us shape our future, rather than accept a dismal future “that is already known” (Nicholson et al., 2019, p. 54).

Conclusion

As I was revising this essay, *Library Trends* published a new article by Nicholson, Pagowsky, and Seale (2019), “Just-in-Time or Just-in-Case? Time, Learning Analytics, and the Academic Library.” It was an exploration of the relationship between (constructed) time and power, and how this relationship played out in library assessment practices that led us to the adoption of learning analytics. What stood out for me when reading this article was the overwhelming inertia of neoliberalism within higher education and libraries. It’s shaped the way we view the future of libraries—as though the future can ever be known—which has in turn led libraries to create assessment practices that speak to this known-future. Pushing back against this force is not easy, but doing so is necessary if we want a practice of teaching and librarianship that embodies the values we hold dear.

The shift in assessment practice I advocate for in this article does not fit neatly into current practices of teaching and assessment in libraries. It can easily be dismissed as unrealistic if we are trying to fit this caring version of assessment into an uncaring system of academic libraries built on reporting, demonstrating value, and acquiring political capital. Much as Noddings (1988) advocated for a radical shift toward caring in education, Ina May Gaskin (2011) emphasized mutual care in midwifery, and nursing practice shifted towards assessment with rather than on patients, I’m asking that we make a radical shift toward caring assessment in teaching librarianship. How can we overhaul our teaching practices—everything from one-shots to co-curricular efforts to information literacy courses—so that they reflect care for teachers, learners, and relationships? Who and what are being assessed and are we doing so in a way that demonstrates care? If a version of assessment as care is unrealistic or too difficult to implement, what do we need to change in our practice, educational and organizational structures, and professional culture to facilitate this method of assessment? Why are we assessing at all?

I recognize that assessment as care does not align with ACRL reporting structures, institutional reports, and consortial statistics. It complicates our work of data collection, visualization, and comparison because feelings, care, and concern don't fit within the confines of an assessment dashboard. It may also make us uncomfortable. In questioning why and how we've practiced assessment we may see pieces of our own professional history that make us cringe (I know I have this history and reaction). We may also feel overwhelmed at the task of creating change in our work. But pursuing assessment as a method of care provides us with a much-needed challenge *and* relief. It encourages us to look past the library to the needs of ourselves and those around us, motivates us to see education as relationships, and provides us with the space to demonstrate what and who we value and hold dear. It creates the kind of connection we all long for in our work and gives everyone involved in education the opportunity to create meaning for themselves rather than seek external validation. We determine what matters in conjunction with colleagues and students, and in doing so, create a practice of assessment that helps everyone involved in learning experiences benefit from care.

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