# Meeting in the Middle: Assessment Ideals and Campus Realities

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*Abstract*

This article describes the development of an information literacy assessment plan for course-integrated instruction sessions at the Ball State University Libraries. The impact of conflicting needs of stakeholders, the realities of staff time, and the university's campus culture related to assessment came together to impact the outcome of the assessment plan. The process of developing and enacting a plan allowed Information Services Librarians to begin to understand the relationship of their instruction assessment work to the larger library and campus assessment process.

*Keywords*: information literacy, instruction, assessment plans, authentic assessment

*Introduction*

Librarians are inundated with articles proclaiming best practices for information literacy assessment. However, these best practices can be difficult to reconcile with an institution's campus culture and the specific needs of individual stakeholders. This article tackles this issue by describing the development of an information literacy assessment plan for course-integrated instruction sessions at the Ball State University Libraries. The impact of conflicting needs of stakeholders, the realities of staff time, and the university's campus culture related to assessment came together to impact the outcome of the assessment plan. The process of developing and enacting a plan allowed Information Services Librarians to begin to understand the relationship of their instruction assessment work to the larger library and campus assessment process. The group also learned about the importance of authentic and formative assessment, which resulted in changes in librarians' teaching practices. In addition to sharing some lessons learned, this article also describes plans for the future of information literacy assessment at Ball State University.

Ball State University is a mid-sized doctoral degree-granting institution with approximately 21,000 students. More than 17,800 students attend classes on the main campus in Muncie, Indiana. The University Libraries' Information Services unit includes seven librarians and one paraprofessional staff person who teach information literacy instruction sessions.

Generally, these are one-shot sessions or a series of two or three sessions per course, each focused on different concepts and skills related to different research assignments for the course. The sessions are course-integrated; they are developed in consultation with the course instructor and are tailored to meet course goals and built around course assignments.

Specific student learning outcomes for individual information literacy sessions are determined collaboratively by the instructor and the librarian. The instruction program does have at its foundation the ACRL Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education and librarians connect course goals to specific parts of the Standards. Historically, there had been no formal assessment of student learning during these sessions by librarians. Some faculty members assign worksheets, quizzes, or other assignments based on the information presented in the sessions, but those activities are determined by individual course instructors and not consistent. The library instructor may or may not know of the assignment in advance, and may never know how students performed. The evaluation of the sessions has been used as part of the performance evaluation process for library instructors who teach the sessions.

The only mechanism for feedback for library instructors about the sessions was a one-time survey of faculty satisfaction used to gauge the success of the sessions from the faculty members' perspectives and was used primarily as a check on the library instructors' performances. Librarians also wanted to collect information about student learning during the sessions and to connect our sessions to the success of students in the classroom. In October of 2012, I attended ACRL Immersion Program's assessment track. This week-long training focused on assessment of student learning in information literacy instruction. One outcome of the program for each participant is the development of an assessment plan.

The assessment plan was designed to assess course-integrated instruction for first year writing courses. "ENG 104: Composing Research" was chosen because library instructors teach many information literacy sessions for this course, the content is generally consistent across sessions, and all of the library instructors participate in teaching them. Thus the assessment plan would benefit the most students and involve all of the library instructors in the process.

Though focused on student learning in the sessions, another goal of the assessment plan was, as Megan Oakleaf describes, "assessment as learning to teach." (Oakleaf, 2009, p. 541) I hoped that through the act of assessing, we would have an opportunity to reflect on our teaching practices and improve the teaching in our program. We would have a chance to think about learning outcomes for our sessions and gather evidence that students were (or weren't) "getting it." I wanted to share some of what I had learned in the Immersion program and give all of us a chance to learn about the assessment process and about our classroom practices.

*The Assessment Plan*

The assessment plan was designed to allow for the most flexibility possible; this was an important consideration due to the customizations and tailoring of presentations for various courses. Several possible learning outcomes for English 104 were identified, and each could be emphasized or deemphasized, depending on the course instructors' individual goals for the session and the librarian's lesson plan. Each time a librarian taught a session for ENG 104, he or she was expected to choose one of the identified learning outcomes to assess based on course instructor goals and assignment, and to choose a formative assessment activity. We used Thomas Angelo's *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers* as a guide for selecting, adapting, and implementing these. Eight of 9 library instructors participated in the pilot project in the spring semester of 2013.

Of 103 sessions conducted for ENG 104 in the spring semester of 2013, students in 61 sessions (59%) participated in some sort of formative assessment activity. Assessment activities used in the sessions were varied, and selected based on the concept being taught and what the librarian wanted to measure or collect feedback about. Activities included one-minute papers, worksheets, and a variety of exercises that asked students to perform research tasks required by their research assignments. The most common format of the formative assessment was a worksheet devised by the library instructor (19), followed by a "one minute paper" exercise (12). Other types of activities used included chain notes, written feedback and reflection from students, and polls and quizzes using our audience response clickers.

Outcomes measured included identifying keywords and generating search strategies in databases (32), identifying library resources or databases to use (22), and evaluating information sources (9). Student performance on the formative assessment activities was evaluated by individual library instructors. Library instructors created criteria for the assessment activities they used in class. For purposes of flexibility and simplicity, library instructors categorized the results of each student's assessments as mastery, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory based on the librarian's own criteria. This allowed librarians to see the range of results of the assessments and to decide what constituted success. In addition to measuring student understand-

ing of these concepts in information literacy sessions, this plan allowed us to see which information literacy concepts were being taught by our faculty partners and requested as part of the information literacy sessions.

Some library instructors also experimented with formative assessment techniques in other instruction sessions besides ENG 104. Students participating ranged from visiting high school groups to graduate students, and classes included intensive English courses for non-native speakers of English, business, business law, nutrition and journalism. Library instructors established student learning outcomes to measure based on the course and assignment. They devised formative assessment activities to measure student performance and established criteria to judge outcomes. Two library instructors were able to see the final assignments and assessment information from professors in order to assess the impact of the information literacy sessions. This was a positive outgrowth of our experiment. Several librarians became more confident and excited about the program and took the opportunity to look carefully at outcomes and results from other class sessions.

This experiment in assessment was successful in a variety of ways. The library instructors learned new assessment skills, found new ways to engage students in class, and took advantage of the opportunity to reflect on their personal practices. We also collected information about what skills and concepts were being emphasized by our faculty and assessed as part of their writing courses. Faculty members responded positively to the assessment activities, and many were happy to assist librarians by sharing student work based on the content of the sessions. The impact of the assessment pilot project was positive at the ground level. However, we also learned important information about our campus culture, the process for campus-wide assessment activities, and the realities of our assessment environment within the library.

*Conflicting Needs of Stakeholders*

A major goal for librarians during the pilot was to understand their classroom effectiveness using data about student learning. We also needed a way to engage students and make sure they were learning concepts deemed by their course instructors as important. By thinking carefully about what we were teaching, how we were teaching, and how we would know whether that teaching was effective, librarians gained valuable feedback about instructional practices and what students are learning and taking away from the sessions.

Not surprisingly, one of the most important issues that arose during the assessment experiment was the fundamental conflict between the kind of data valuable to library instructors and the data required by library administration. The assessment plan was, by necessity, flexible and the data collected was individualized due to the structure of our program and the culture of our campus. Though they had expressed interest in the data at the beginning of the pilot, administrators were

disappointed in the nature of the results. While the assessment experiment provided useful data for library instructors, library administrators did not find meaning in the results because they were not generalizable or summative. As Megan Oakleaf (2009) notes, it is important to consider the information needs of decision makers who receive data and reports and to plan reporting accordingly. Clearly, there is a difference of opinion between library instructors and library administrators about what useful assessment data is. As a result, library administrators were not compelled by the perceived success of the experiment. Instead, success was felt by those who carried out the sessions and by the students and faculty who participated in them.

This conflict was resolvable, but its resolution did impact the ability of library instructors to continue the assessment work they came to value in the classroom. Library administrators expressed a preference for a return to the survey for faculty members and the creation of a survey for students to collect information about perceived value of the sessions. Due to the wide variety of content and because the faculty members emphasize different information literacy outcomes, there is no way to measure or test student learning across all sessions. Library administrators wanted session instructors to collect standardized data from all session participants. As a result, a survey was devised to collect students' perceptions of their learning experiences in the sessions. A survey was also sent to faculty members asking about their experience and whether their session(s) met their goals and objectives. In this way staff are able to capture some information that is standard across all sessions, but it does not collect any evidence of student learning, which was the original intent of the assessment plan.

The loss of authentic assessment opportunities is an unfortunate outcome of reverting back to a survey. Librarians are no longer assessing tasks that are meaningful and connected to real assignments and course learning goals. Survey data does not document actual behaviors or allow for the collection of artifacts of learning. Thus, the "assessment as learning to teach" aspect of the assessment plan has been lost. Likewise, opportunities for students to practice and demonstrate learning and receive feedback from librarians have been reduced. As Oakleaf (2009) notes, students learn from completing authentic assessment activities. The "assessment as learning" element has been reduced or lost in some sessions. However, staff are still dedicated to incorporating the in-class active learning element of these authentic assessment practices whenever possible.

*Class Time*

The survey is administered at the end of each session. Though library instructors were not explicitly asked to stop using formative assessments in sessions, the reality of the time needed for the survey and to deliver content did not allow for the focus on formative assessment activities that librarians had used during the pilot. The time constraints of a 50 or 75

minute session made it difficult to include formative assessment activities, group and hands-on learning activities, and the survey during class time. It became difficult to find time for students to complete the survey and still provide activities that assess student understanding in the sessions.

Many of the library instructors have found creative ways to fit in the survey and to keep some of the assessment activities they found beneficial. The experience with assessment in the sessions has taught library instructors to reduce the number of "essential" topics to be covered in sessions. Instead of attempting to "cover" more content, many of the library instructors have shifted their thinking about the sessions they teach. As a part of the pilot, library instructors were required to think carefully about learning objectives and to identify the most important one or two concepts for a session. Planning has become focused on information literacy concepts rather than traditional point and click instruction. Time in the sessions is used more productively. The results of the in-class assessments are not reported officially, but they still serve an important function in the program.

*Campus Culture*

The data required by library administrators is related to the structure of assessment on campus and the role of the University Libraries on campus. Ball State University is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. According to the accreditation information on Ball State's website, there is no specific mention of information literacy concepts in the criteria. The criteria do state that the institution must provide students and faculty "the infrastructure and resources necessary to support effective teaching and learning." Libraries are considered to be a resource in this category. The other mention of libraries and information literacy in the criteria is the requirement that the institution must provide "guidance in the effective use of research and information resources" to students (Ball State University, 2014).

The University Libraries creates a report for accreditation that describes collections and programs, including Instructional Services. Statistics related to information literacy instruction included in the report are number of sessions taught and the number of students who attend. Results from the student and faculty surveys are also shared to demonstrate the value of the sessions to students and faculty. In this way, the library's assessment is linked to the assessment of the larger campus assessment process. We are not, however, contributing information about student learning. As Bonnie Gratch Lindauer states, "assessment of library performance should be defined and shaped by its connections and contributions to institutional goals and desired educational outcomes" (Gratch Lindauer, 1998, p. 547). Our assessment plan as it currently exists does support our campus assessment plan and educational outcomes, but in different ways than suggested in prevailing library literature.

Our campus situation is likely not unique, as many librarians seems to struggle to strike a balance between needs and expectations of campus stakeholders and librarians in the classroom. The literature is full of success stories and it is easy to feel dismayed when one's own experience is different and perhaps not as successful in the ways cited in the literature. However, every campus is different and each library instruction program must meet the needs of its faculty, students, and administrators, and accept the parameters of campus culture. While the literature can be seen as idealistic, those success stories give us examples and ideas that can be adapted to local situations.

The campus-wide assessment of student learning outcomes at Ball State is carried out in academic departments. Faculty members report grades and other assessment data according to departmental guidelines and procedures. Any data collected by library instructors is not reportable by departments as part of their accreditation reports. While faculty colleagues are supportive of information literacy instruction assessment, they do not need the data and have no stake in the assessment of library sessions other than the impact our improvement of teaching has on their students' learning.

*Lessons Learned*

Overall, the assessment experiment was successful in many ways. Library instructors were encouraged to observe the students' learning in their sessions, and many followed through. They created more opportunities for students to receive feedback about their learning. For me as the program coordinator, the results provided a macro view of what individual faculty members and library instructors emphasized in their sessions and how library instructors individually judged student success. Library instructors were encouraged to include activities and interactions in their sessions, rather than relying on lecture and individual hands-on practice. Once again, some library instructors adopted these practices and others did not. Based on feedback from course instructors, they were pleased with the more active and participatory sessions and appreciated the opportunities to assess student learning. Library instructors' teaching was reinvigorated and many library instructors seemed excited about the activities in the library sessions.

A compromise position was reached with regard to expectations of library administrators and library instructors. Library instructors and the program coordinator learned to use assessment techniques to develop their own practice and to ensure students are engaged and learning during their sessions. The current faculty and student surveys do gather some useful information about the program and about individual sessions that is useful for our library administrators and supports the assessment culture of our campus. The process also allowed the program coordinator and the library instructors to learn about the process of assessment on campus.

Despite the challenges of conflicting needs and expectations, library instructors continue to find ways to capture meaningful assessment data about their sessions to improve student learning while still providing useful data to library administrators.

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