



CHAPTER 30

Incorporating Critically Conscious Assessment into a Large-Scale Information Literacy Program

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Introduction

Large-scale information literacy programs often exist in an effort to standardize the process of teaching and learning, making it difficult for library instructors to feel a sense of ownership over the teaching space. When librarians at the University of Maryland redesigned the information literacy program for freshman composition, we began with a desire to reassert full personhood in the classroom by incorporating student-centered, socially conscious, and reflective teaching practices.

One of the most challenging components of the redesign was realigning our learning outcomes assessment to be more critical. Under the preceding program, assessment relied on positivist measures, such as multiple-choice quizzes. In the redesign, we hoped to incorporate assessment that would reinforce the values we were striving for in our instruction: an appreciation for the

individual journey of learners, resistance to the dichotomy of a right or wrong response, and opportunities for students to reflect critically on their library experiences. Because of the large scale of the program, the assessment also needed to be quick, concise, and easy to explain.

Although critical assessment methods had been incorporated successfully into one-shot sessions, transitioning these to a large program presented challenges. The first hurdle was the size of the program itself. While approaches such as research journals had worked well for smaller groups, it was difficult to find a qualitative method that could be scaled from twenty or thirty students to the thousands of students we taught in freshman composition. Second was the role of the assessment in campus reports. For more than fifteen years, freshman composition had formed the basis of the libraries' learning outcomes assessment program. The assessment method we would create would need to continue this role by providing a sufficient causal relationship between the work that was happening on the backend of our instruction and the ability of our students to achieve specific learning outcomes.

To meet these needs, we created a simple exercise. At the end of each one-shot session, students are asked to share their "aha moment" through an online form. Adapted from the six-word memoir, this exercise asks students to reflect critically on their experiences using no more than 150 characters. Rather than measuring specific skills, this assessment challenges learners to sift through the session and share a moment of personal impact. While the idea of the one-minute paper is not particularly innovative, the use of the responses in the evaluation of a large-scale program has started a conversation within our library about what counts as assessment. We are challenging conventional ideas about large scale by asserting that programmatic assessment can include qualitative data in a way that is both meaningful and manageable. Perhaps most importantly, we are arguing that information literacy instruction and assessment should reflect the egalitarian and socially minded values of our service profession and that allowing students to speak for themselves, rather than filtering their responses through multiple-choice questions, is one way to accomplish that goal.

To make meaning from the disparate points of data, we are coding responses against a rubric based on dispositions from the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy*, which also serve as learning outcomes for the program. Each response is categorized into one of seven dispositions and ranked on a level of developing, proficient, or advanced. Unlike the multiple-choice assessment, the aha moment values students by treating individual responses as unique and important. In this way, the assessment stays true to our mission of creating socially conscious and critical teaching spaces by honoring learners as individuals: people, rather than products.¹

Preparation

Consider how qualitative responses may impact any ongoing reporting. In our case, the “aha” moment replaced a multiple-choice learning outcomes assessment. When we transitioned to the new assessment, we needed a way to articulate the complexities of information literacy teaching to non-LIS professionals. Though we evaluate each student response independently, using a rubric has allowed us to translate complex responses into discrete concepts, making it easier to communicate the value of library instruction to campus administrators.

Further consideration should be given to the requisite analysis time for large-scale data. Moving from quantitative to qualitative assessment has substantially increased the amount of time and energy we spend on student learning assessment. While this has offered an opportunity to build a community of practice around assessment, it was only made possible through scaling back other areas of programming. We are also fortunate to have a team of library and graduate student instructors, which allows us to divide up the labor involved in compiling and analyzing data. If you are using this activity for a one-shot or small series of courses, the data will be more manageable than a large-scale program.

Identifying an analysis plan is recommended. In our case, we wanted to know if our teaching methods were helping students to develop the more complex dispositions represented in the *Framework*. Knowing ahead of time which dispositions we hoped to evaluate and that we wanted to use a rubric, we were able to develop a tool that fit our learning outcomes. This also impacted the prompt. To create an assessment that could be used to evaluate multiple dispositions, it needed to be broad enough to allow individual expression, but narrow enough to allow for comparison between responses. For us, the aha moment represented the happy medium between the two extremes.

Once you have established what you want to know and how you will evaluate it, identify when and how you will collect responses. To keep things manageable, we used a survey tool that allowed us to cap the characters in each response at 150. We also experimented with asking students to tweet out their aha moments and collecting responses through an open-source aggregation tools, such as If This Then That. Ultimately, the size of the program made it impossible to effectively collect responses across such a wide and diverse group, but for smaller groups a social media platform may work well.

Session Instructions and Assessment

1. *Building the rubric:* Start with establishing criteria for evaluation. This

can be created individually or borrowed from professional guidelines, such as the ACRL *Framework*. Complete the rubric by identifying levels of competency for each criterion. In our case, we selected seven dispositions from the ACRL *Framework* as criteria but tailored the competency levels (developing, proficient, and advanced) for our first-year student audience. Table 30.1 is an example of a criterion and competency levels.

Scholarship as Conversation	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
Seeks out conversations taking place in their research area	awareness of different points of view on a topic	articulates the importance of seeking out different points of view	articulates the value of including different points of view in the research process

2. *Norming the rubric:* Generally, norming involves a group of evaluators analyzing a set of learning objects independently, then coming together as a collective to reconcile discrepancies and reach consensus on how each level of competency would manifest itself in student work. For us, norming meant pulling random sample of 50 from the more than 2,300 total student responses and discussing responses as a group, determining which determining which disposition and level of competency was best represented. You should find the norming process that works best for you and execute it to the best of your ability.* Norming is a lot of work, and it is hard to do. Bring snacks.
3. *Analyzing data:* After you have normed and established your rubric, it is time to put it to use analyzing student responses. This process will vary based on sample size. If you have a large group of responses, consider pulling a representative sample from the group or dividing up the labor of analysis among instructors. If you have a small sample, it may be possible to analyze each response or to have multiple instructors evaluate each response. Embark on this stage with a sense of humor and willingness to be flexible. Plan for it to take more time than you think it will and make adjustments to the process.

* For more detailed information, see Claire Holmes and Megan Oakleaf, "The Official (and Unofficial) Rules for Norming Rubrics Successfully," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 39, no. 6 (2014): 599–602.

4. *Creating information:* Once you have evaluated your responses, you will be left with scores (for lack of a better work). Making sense of these numbers can be confusing. In our case, there were things that we were able to see immediately, such as that most student responses fell in the proficiency level and that very few responses were indicative of the “scholarship as conversation” or “research as inquiry” frames. However, there were pieces of information that were less apparent when looking at the responses en masse, such as the fact that one of the library instructors had responses in which “research as inquiry” was represented more often and at more advanced competency levels, or that students who submitted responses in the last eight weeks of the semester were twice as likely to reflect on evaluating information than those whose responses came in earlier. Running reports by different factors (such as instructor or time of the semester) presented a different perspective on the data and allowed us to see patterns that we may otherwise have missed.
5. *Deciding what to do next:* For us, critical assessment has offered an opportunity to reflect on the lived reality of learners and make purposeful and informed adjustments to our teaching. For example, though nearly a quarter of our first-year information literacy sessions are devoted to “scholarship as conversation,” few students reflected on this discourse in their responses. As a result, we adjusted the lesson plan to include a more purposeful “closing of the loop,” in which we reiterate through group discussion how their research and writing are an important voice in the larger conversation and can be used to challenge or disrupt even mainstream ideas. Although the collecting and analyzing of data is important, the reflection offers the opportunity to be proactive in developing the type of critical learning environment we want for our students.
6. *Do it all again:* The best assessments are ongoing. The next time around, make adjustments to the process. Ask new questions, try new things, or look at the data in a new way. Never stop listening to your learners.

Reflections

This assessment method is the first step on our path to creating a critical information literacy program. While we hope that incorporating a reflective moment into the session has been useful for students, an unexpected benefit has been the development of a community of practice among library instructors. Working together to evaluate and improve our teaching has introduced greater levels of vulnerability and trust into our work and encourages a sense of ownership over the process. As we continue to grow and improve our instruction program, the strength we have as a community of practitioners will

help us to make progress. Although these types of communities can emerge in many different ways, for us, it was the process of defining what we wanted to learn from our students that allowed us to begin the process of learning from each other.

Final Question

What message does your assessment send to your students?

Note

1. Maria Accardi, “Teaching against the Grain: Critical Assessment in the Library Classroom,” in *Critical Library Instruction*, ed. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbie (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 259.

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- Holmes, Claire, and Megan Oakleaf. “The Official (and Unofficial) Rules for Norming Rubrics Successfully.” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 39, no. 6 (2014): 599–602.