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# Assessment through peer assessment: Developing a method of peer evaluation for the liaison model

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**Title**

Assessment through peer assessment: Developing a method of peer evaluation for the liaison model

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**Abstract**

Academic libraries in the United States are increasingly adopting liaison models in order to increase their impact across the campus community. Through the evolution of this model, librarians must negotiate the new landscape for providing information literacy instruction to diverse and specialized populations. In order to adapt to specific departmental needs, while maintaining learning outcomes within the ACRL Framework, liaisons must design a systems for assessing how best to ensure all needs are addressed. Peer mentoring establishes a community of practice that will guide strategic planning while maintaining continual reflection and revision of the information literacy program.

**Keywords**

Assessment, peer evaluation, information literacy

**Introduction**

Information literacy -in the purest sense- is teaching a specific set of skills, but in the modern era of digital literacies and personalized learning it is no longer just a skill set that can be delivered through a focused lecture. Today our students need to be engaged on multiple levels and the information we impart must be made relevant in order for an understanding of the research process to take place. The goal of any information session is for students to leave with the confidence to access the information they need and the ability to seek additional help in navigating those resources. There are many techniques for engaging with students and no one size fits all model, but there are methods that can be adapted to suit the delivery of content whether a session is face to face or online.

Designing assessment to develop the information literacy program you wish to build is

essential. In order to accurately understand the unique needs of users, librarians who teach information literacy sessions must reflect on their own teaching methods and implement reflective practice into developing their sessions. This allows instructors to adapt teaching methods that allow for conversation rather than pure content delivery, thereby designing sessions that can be easily modified and tailored for specific faculty and student needs.

Our primary goal as librarians is to ensure our students gain a research skill set, we must also ensure that they truly understand the research process. As librarians in an age of myriad digital literacies we must be mindful of student self-efficacy, as well as their understanding of research and reliable information. We must encourage students to take ownership of the research process, and we must work with each other, while reflecting on our own instruction methods, to design and adapt our instruction programs.

Peer-mentoring and support among faculty librarians provides built-in resources for improving one's own instruction, as well as helping fellow instructors reflect on and expand their own sessions. Facilitating an environment where we teach each other, best practices, mini-workshops, and peer-mentoring, allows for continual assessment, adaptation, and improvement. These assessment measures are easily established, no-cost to put into practice, and can be adjusted to suit any academic libraries' needs.

In order to best assess our engagement level and the impact of our sessions, librarians must work together to reflect on best practices, teaching techniques, and long-term goals for deeper engagement. Working with each other provides a low-stakes environment to develop sessions that will engage students, demonstrate the high-stakes value of information literacy to faculty, and establish the need for instruction as playing a crucial role in retention and critical thinking to university-wide stakeholders.

**Literature Review**

In the modern academic library, assessment has become one of the guiding factors in strategic planning and daily operations are being explored for possible ways to measure their value and impact. One of the easiest methods for excavating data for assessment is through the examination of instructional methods and practices. Assessment as defined by Dow, "focuses on evidence of impact on undergraduate learning, on the effectiveness of faculty and students as teachers and learners, and on the campus learning environment" (1998). In this era of assessment libraries are tasked with demonstrating our value in meaningful narrative so that stakeholders are better able to understand the myriad ways the library is woven into the wider campus community. There is an

indisputable significance placed on assessment methods and outcomes in nearly every institution of higher education today, but there is not always a receptive climate around these practices by those who are actually implementing them (Smith, Tryon, & Snyder, 2015).

Often the focus is on what students are learning, we are ensuring that our content is equitable across instruction sessions, but there has not been as much focus on the various styles and instruction methods used by liaisons. In order to scaffold assessment across departments it is necessary that all instructional librarians, or liaisons, are able to visualize and internalize the benefits of continually evolving practice to enable seamless assessment. This can be achieved by creating a "culture of assessment" which facilitates an organizational environment in which decisions are based on facts, research, and analysis, and where services are planned and delivered in ways that maximize positive outcomes and impacts for customers and stakeholders (Lakos & Phipps, 2004). Rather than a top-down approach, a culture of assessment within a library department is a natural fit with the liaison model as it seeks to establish an environment wherein all staff has a stake in assessment.

Personal ownership within the practice of assessment adds intrinsic value to any assessment initiatives and practices as all members will have both a responsibility and a reason to care about the outcomes. This encourages everyone involved in the process "to know what results they produce and how those results relate to customers' expectations. Organizational mission, values, structures, and systems support behavior that is performance and learning focused" (Lakos & Phipps, 2004). Creating departmental structures, practices and groups that support this ideal is a key component to being able to successfully assess any program or initiative within the library.

For many libraries this will require a shift in the organization as assessment culture must become a regular part if institutional practice and all members of a department must buy in to the development and implementation of assessment practices (Farkas, Hinchcliffe, & Houk, 2015). If assessment is not interwoven into the values of a department an academic library risks participating librarians viewing assessment as a burden and without any true effort behind the assessment initiative data collected will not be consistent or of any value. Some of the key questions to ask focus on the evaluation of the department as a whole, including determining if libraries have the ability within the department to develop, conduct, and analyze assessment methods "in house." Beyond the development of practice in gathering information, and scanning of the data, librarians must also consider how to use the acquired data to improve their practice (Farkas, et al.). The data must be used systematically to inform future planning and reflect on best

practices for the department. By creating a model that gathers results that can be tied to the overarching goals of the university librarians are able to better understand and communicate their role within the larger system (Hockenberry & Little, 2013). Combined with the ability to assess data within the library department to accurately define how best to serve the users and placing students in the center of services (Nitecki, Wiggins, & Turner, 2015) academic libraries have the means to craft their own narrative and irrefutably demonstrate their impact. With more qualitative and quantitative methods of assessment being developed libraries are poised to demonstrate a value that has long been evident, but not necessarily articulated to the greatest degree.

The era of assessment dominating academic librarianship has made it imperative that academic librarians understand their role in coordinating assessment and analyzing data. With stakeholders asking for data-driven decisions and greater demonstration of student outcomes librarians must have a voice in the conversation (Saunders, 2016). To guarantee success in sharing their value to the wider campus community libraries must align their practices and pedagogy with the larger goals, outcomes, and the mission of the institution. Libraries should take a reflective approach to understand how best to serve the wider community and continuously reassess their users' needs (Liebst & Feinmark, 2016) in order to shape the narrative accurately academic libraries must be able to readily demonstrate their value. In order for librarians to best ensure that their expertise is included within assessment structures assessment must start at the departmental level and weave throughout any instruction program within the library.

**Background of Stony Brook University Libraries Liaison Program**

At Stony Brook University it is our mission to develop and execute our shared vision to actively engage our campus community, support research and provide information literacy instruction for all levels of scholarship. In order to best implement this vision we have adapted a liaison model in which liaisons focus on scholarship and relationship building between the academic, research and teaching communities on campus. Our liaisons advocate for the library, mentor each other, anticipate collaborations and cultivate new models of engagement. With one of the core missions of liaisonship being that librarians "keep abreast of national and international developments in information literacy and library instruction" (Luckert, Y., 2015) Stony Brook University Libraries developed an Academic Engagement Working Group to better focus assessment needs and efforts.

Under the department of Research & User Engagement, the Academic Engagement Working Group operates in guiding the University Libraries' participation in the entire life cycle of research and learning on campus. The group defines and prioritizes strategies for assessment and in order to understand and articulate the University Libraries' impact

on student success and the overarching mission of Stony Brook University. One of the first initiatives of the group was to assess current peer evaluation practices and develop a sustainable model for evaluating a robust instructional program and contributing to the development of a community of practice for all liaisons.

**Stony Brook University Libraries Academic Engagement Working Group Case Study**

The Academic Engagement Working Group designed a model for peer evaluation that would be used each semester and look at a small cohort of liaisons rather than try to capture and assess the individual experience of each member of the department. In order to develop the model, members of the Academic Engagement Working Group were the first to pilot this program. Members selected from a pool of instruction sessions and each was tasked with observing one to three courses of by other members of the group. This peer assessment model seeks to achieve a more holistic method for assessment of instruction with a focus not only on what students are learning, but the effectiveness of our practice by understanding various teaching styles and methods. In order to encourage relevant and honest feedback liaisons are selected in cohorts that pair diverse specialties, experience and expertise. Liaisons will cycle through peer observation program every two years.

The peer evaluations are conducted using an online form that was designed to be easy to use in typical sixty to ninety minute sessions. The form includes a broad spectrum of categories for observation which allows for a narrative response that can be used to develop a qualitative look at instruction. When it was designed the members of the Academic Engagement Working Group evaluated past practice in conducting teaching observations and chose open ended questions that best matched to the University Libraries' overarching mission, Research & User Engagement's departmental goals, as well as core student outcomes.

Feedback from members of the Academic Engagement Working Group was not only positive, but the observations were insightful. We used several open-ended questions to gather data:

1.      Describe the lesson taught, including objectives and methods used.

"The lesson objectives include explaining the library and the many resources available, explaining what databases are, how to use them, how to search; the types of catalogs we have, how to find appropriate and scholarly materials, resources, etc. The librarian went over resources and tools offered by the libraries through a combination of slides and live demonstrations, including: library website, course guides, library faq, finding sources, evaluating websites, library catalog, general library databases, federated search results,

Academic Search Complete, LexisNexis, JSTOR."

"Instructor reviewed the objectives at the outset. The presentation was lecture format. She used questions throughout the presentation to keep students engaged. Avoided jargon-y language - used "central search box" instead of EDS".

2.      How well-organized and clear is the presentation? (5 responses)

"The lecture flowed very naturally and the instructor's introduction of each new piece of information was seamless. The session was appropriate to the audience of Writing 102 students and she frequently checked-in with students to ensure they were engaged with the material and understanding the information discussed."

"The presentation was "pitch perfect." All of the resources were introduced at an introductory level appropriate to freshmen, with specific respect to the Undergraduate College program."

"The pace of the presentation was lively and engaging and the session was appropriately geared towards new users' needs. Instruction was tailored to highlight key points in finding information, evaluating information and accessing additional information. The process of developing and constructing searches was explained through the lecture on federated searching and the databases."

3.      Describe the level of participant interest and engagement. How did the instructor use technology, engagement exercises, or takeaways to enhance instruction?

"Students became more engaged during the exercises. Several questions were asked to generate responses and evaluate the level of knowledge regarding research practices."

"Students began the class quiet but appeared to be following along on the library site and did respond with raised hands and nods to questions. The instructor kept asking the group questions and the course instructor helped by jumping in with her comments."

4.      What specific recommendations would you make to improve the instructor's teaching in this class?

"Perhaps consider taking a moment to ask a question of the class or encourage students to speak/give an opinion. Since the session is 90 minutes, maybe incorporate a brief exercise/activity to help keep students engaged."

"Perhaps give the students the opportunity to ask questions about anything library related."

"Could be confusing jumping back between presentation and live demo of website at the

very beginning when reviewing services. Maybe show how to look up a specific article."

"If there is time, assigning a searching exercise might be a way to have the students use what was covered in the lesson and still leave time for them to work on their own research."

## Conclusion

Assessment and revision are vital components to the success of any information literacy program. In order to further evaluation and remain current in practices and strategic planning both peer and self-evaluation are crucial to understanding a libraries' strengths and impact on the wider campus community. In the case of Stony Brook University Libraries our Academic Engagement Working Group's development, piloting, and implementation of a peer assessment program has established a baseline for future development information literacy initiatives and assessment of our practices. Peer to peer feedback will improve our liaisons' instructional methods, as well as provides insight on how to shape our engagement with these students in the future. Based on our findings the Academic Engagement Working Group will be inducting our first cohort of liaisons for the Fall semester of 2017. As we move forward we will be able to use the experiences and insight of our liaisons to adjust our practices and explore opportunities for growing the program. We will continue to expand and reflect on our practices to suit the diverse and ever changing needs of our campus community.

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**Bio**

Claudia McGivney is the Head of Academic Engagement at Stony Brook University. Claudia holds a Master of Science degree in Library and Information Science from Long Island University, C.W. Post, a Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from Hofstra University, and is currently working on a Ph.D. in Literacy at Hofstra University. Her research interests include information literacy, reflective practice and the use of graphic novels and manga in higher education,