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Building Effective, Sustainable, Practical Assessment

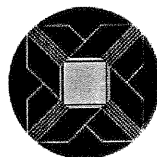### August 4-7, 2008

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Assessment in LIS Education

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Abstract

In recent years, librarians, regardless of the type of library in which they work, have become increasingly focused on evaluation and assessment. There are a number of motivations for this shift: a need to improve the quality of services offered, a respond to calls for accountability, a push to position the library as more of an institution player, a sincere desire to support the institutional mission and vision statements. As a result, more and more librarians are adding assessment responsibilities to their job duties many of whom have no formal training in both evaluation and assessment. This panel will differentiate between evaluation and assessment, with greater emphasis placed on assessment. The purpose of the panel, composed of LIS educators, is to discuss what some educational programs are covering. What assessment skills are library and information science schools teaching students to prepare them for the workforce? What new assessment skill sets are emerging? This panel of LIS educators will discuss LIS student learning outcomes, assignments, and courses designed to prepare the next generation of LIS professionals for their assessment responsibilities.

Megan Oakleaf

At the iSchool at Syracuse University, faculty believe that a solid grounding in assessment is critical to the preparation of pre-service librarians. As a result, assessment of library services is the focus of one core course (*IST 613*) and a part of several other courses.

In IST 613: Planning, Marketing, and Assessing Library Services, assessment theory and practice is taught "in context." Students complete projects proposed by librarians in the Syracuse area and across the country. The projects are focused on new or recently revised services provided by the "host" libraries that agree to work with IST 613 students. In past semesters, services have included digital reference, library 2.0 technologies, downloadable audio, gaming programs, book or summer reading clubs, information commons spaces, single service points, coffee bars, and digitization projects.

The in-context approach to learning assessment is important for three main reasons. First, when students learn new information in context and apply it in real world situations, they have authentic and meaningful experiences. Second, by engaging actively in the learning process, "Students construct meaning and knowledge: they do not have meaning or knowledge handed to them in a book or lecture. Learning, then, is a process of students 'making sense' of how things fit together; factual and procedural knowledge is built along the way".[1] Finally, by learning assessment in context, students realize that assessment is open-ended and there is no one right answer to assessment problems in the real world.

In IST 613, students select from a list of proposed projects, then they prepare three planning documents: a project management plan, a marketing plan, and an assessment plan. Assessment plans are extensive and include a literature review, service outcomes with links to strategic planning goals, target audiences, methods and tools for assessment evidence collection, data plan, result scenarios, decision-making indicators, recommendations for reporting results, responsible parties, and timeline. As students develop assessment plans, they are reminded that the intended outcome of assessment is to enable librarians to make informed, evidence-based decisions in order to increase library patron knowledge and abilities, improve library services, gain needed resources, answer calls for accountability, and improve the assessment process itself.

The assessment plan assignment impacts both IST 613 students and the libraries they work with. For example, students often gain professional positions as a direct result of this assignment. One

student's work earned her accolades as the 2008 Federal Librarian Technician of the Year. Another student was recommended to become chair of the New England Law Library Consortium assessment committee.

Librarians at host libraries also report significant impacts on their work. Nearly all librarians provide very positive evaluations of student work, and most use student assessment plans in whole or in part. They also provide testimonials that are useful in encouraging future library students to take assessment seriously. For example, as a result of an IST 613 assessment plan for a family resource center at a children's hospital, one hospital administrator wrote:

> "We have paid thousands to 'consultants' who have produced reports that don't come anywhere near the level of detail and professionalism that these students provided for us gratis. If we were to move on this we could have a family-centered program at the [children's hospital] that would become a national model."

Another librarian writes to a former student of a new downloadable audio service:

> "If you were wondering if your project was ever touched—most certainly! Your project has been the backbone of my knowledge and launching point for inquiry. Hopefully in 2-3 months you will see these items [downloadable audio] in the catalog and in our marketing."

At the iSchool at Syracuse University, IST 613 students learn assessment and evaluation skills in context, working collaboratively to plan, market, and assess new library services across the country. Happily, Syracuse University is not the only LIS program to consider assessment skills an important component of library education. Other programs that incorporate assessment and evaluation in their preparation of pre-service librarians include those at the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, University of Michigan, Rutgers University, University of Indiana, University of Texas-Austin, University of Wisconsin, University of Hawaii, and Florida State University. Taken as a whole, LIS educators are committed to preparing new librarians for the assessment responsibilities they will face throughout their careers.

Karin de Jager

From my point of view, there were two implicit assumptions at stake in the very topic of this panel discussion: that the workplace requires evaluation and assessment activities from librarians, and that library schools are at least beginning to teach some of the competencies required for these activities. From where I come, both of these are questionable.

Firstly, one has to note that in South Africa there is very little standardized data collection required from libraries—with the inevitable result that there is not a strong culture of assessment evident on the library scene. Evaluation, where it does occur, is ad hoc and usually only done when specifically required by outside donors such as the Carnegie Corporation.

So if evaluation and assessment aren't a high priority in libraries, it seems almost self-evident that they are not a high priority in library schools either. Post-secondary education in SA has historically been tainted by inequalities largely propagated through racial discrimination. "Inequalities were (and still are) also expressed though levels of literacy, wealth distribution, geographic location, and access to education, among other factors."[2] These inequalities are of course no longer legally enforced, but many of them persist, also in library education.

Since the 1990s, LIS education has generally taken place in library schools or departments which are generally small and have reduced in number during the last decade from eightenn to twelve and there are more possible closures in sight. A number of those that remain have merged with other disciplines in order to survive.[3] Some have evolved various survival strategies, mainly by diversifying into adjacent areas like knowledge management, media studies, and publishing,[4] and thereby almost inevitably losing their prime focus on libraries.

The qualifications offered at library schools in South Africa have generally been of two kinds. In the English speaking universities, the model has mainly been that of a post-graduate diploma after a bachelor's degree in order to ensure that students have had at least some subject specialization. At the other universities, a first degree in librarianship with somewhat less emphasis on subject specialization developed. Although the two qualifications were initially envisaged as equal, and both took four years to complete, there gradually emerged a three year qualification in information studies, where much less subject specialization is required.

The result has been that librarians by and large are rather technicist in orientation and prefer to

focus on the practicalities of obtaining, managing, and providing information resources. In university libraries, librarians frequently do not have enough subject expertise to be regarded as equals by faculty and therefore tend to concentrate on undergraduate needs and increasingly on the information literacy of a very diverse and frequently underprepared student body. In such circumstances, library performance assessment may also be regarded with suspicion or fear that one's own institution 'might be shown up' to be of somewhat lesser quality than others.

At my own institution, the Department of Information and Library Studies at the University of Cape Town, we have however introduced a small course on performance evaluation in our postgraduate diploma. Six teaching periods are spent discussing the objectives of performance evaluation, approaches to measuring, and a few informal case studies and examples of processes and procedures. It is emphasized that students might well encounter evaluation in their workplaces in due course. Occasionally students become interested, in which case they might consider an aspect of evaluation for the self-study project in their diploma course or perhaps even for a higher degree. In this way projects or dissertations have been completed on interlibrary loans departments, assessment of information literacy competencies and information needs; statistics for electronic resources and Web usability studies.

More recently, a growing demand for demonstrating quality in libraries is becoming evident and is beginning to force librarians to engage with issues of performance assessment. By 2004, the South African Council for Higher Education had become responsible for quality assurance in all higher education institutions and mandated national institutional audits, requiring universities to provide evidence of the quality of their processes, programs, and services, including library services. University libraries now also have a role to play in the evaluations in their institutions and have to contribute to providing evidence of the quality and impacts of library services on teaching and research at their institutions.

Partly as a result of these mandated audits which expressly demand evidence of quality and benchmarking, libraries also started to show interest in LibQUAL+®, which began to be seen as one way of obtaining reliable and comparable data about user perceptions of needs and services.

LibQUAL+® surveys have therefore been conducted on a number of campuses since 2005 and have raised awareness of library assessment in spite of the fact that its language and structure are regarded as very difficult at institutions where English is not the first language of the student body.

This growing interest in performance assessment among librarians was also evident at the Seventh Northumbria International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries and Information Services, which was held in South Africa in 2007. About seventy librarians from South Africa attended out of a total of nearly 200 and for many of them this was their first serious encounter with assessment in libraries.

As libraries became more aware of the importance of assessment, it has also become obvious that the whole South African research enterprise is in decline. Research output has effectively been decreasing since the 1990s and while the current cadre of internationally recognised researchers generally is approaching retirement age, there are not enough new researchers to take their place.[5]

The LibQUAL+® survey that was done towards the end of 2005 at the University of Cape Town confirmed that support for research was perceived to be inadequate. While undergraduates were mainly happy with library resources and services, postgraduates and researchers were not: both faculty and postgraduate students, i.e., both current and future researchers, rated Information Control below their minimum expectations.

In response, the library therefore applied to the Carnegie Corporation to fund a major project to support a serious and sustained intervention by academic libraries to support young and emerging researchers. A grant of US$2.5 million was awarded to a consortium of three research libraries in 2006.

One component of the project[6] as been a novel intervention into the South African library education process, with the specific intention to address gaps both in librarians' awareness of the importance of assessment and their ability to assist meaningfully in the research endeavor. Six librarians from each of the three institutions were selected both in 2007 and 2008 to attend a 2-week "Research Academy," where they experience an intense 'total immersion' into the research enterprise.

The best possible researchers in a wide range of disciplines and from very different epistemologies

address participants about the detail of their own research. Each participant is expected to produce a potentially publishable research paper, with data collection, measurement, or assessment as a component. As one of the organizers has said, "We hold their feet to the fire of research and measurement. We make it clear that research is not concerned with rhetorical questions where the answers are already known; that literature reviews are not uncritical descriptions of what other writers have said, but that research involves finding out and counting and measuring in order to understand what is really going on—whether in libraries or elsewhere in the research enterprise."

While it is obviously recognized that research and assessment are not the same, the intention has been for librarians to gain real insight into what research is all about; not only the research that goes on in academic institutions, but also research into what gets done in libraries and how measurement and assessment are essential for demonstrating quality and improving performance.

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Endnotes

1. R. J. Shavelson and G. P. Baxter, "Linking Assessment with Instruction," In *A Handbook for Student Performance in an Era of Restructuring*, R. E. Blum and J. A. Arter, eds. (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Develop, 1996), IV-7:1-IV-7:6.

2. D. Ocholla and T. Bothma, "Library and Information Education and Training in South Africa," In *Libraries for the Future: Progress and Development of South African Libraries*, T. Bothma, P. Underwood, and P. Ngulube, eds. (Pretoria: LIASA, 2007), 149.

3. Ocholla and Bothma, 151.

4. Ocholla and Bothma, 154.

5. Department of Science and Technology, "The Synthesis Paper: Human Resources for Knowledge Production in South Africa," (paper presented at the Human Resources for Knowledge Production Conference, Cape Town, June 23-24, 2005), 16-17, http://www.naci.org.za/OECD/HR_for_Knowldge_Production_SynthesisPaper.pdf.

6. For a fuller account of the entire Project, see the poster also presented at the 2008 Library Assessment Conference entitled "Assessing Library Research Support in South Africa," by Pat Busby, Colin Darch & Karin de Jager, http://www.libraryassessment.org.