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2022

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# TOWARDS A CRITICALLY REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: APPLYING AN EQUITY AND INCLUSION LENS TO LIBRARY ASSESSMENT

SHEILA GARCÍA, STEPHANIE ROSEN AND JESUS ESPINOZA

## INTRODUCTION

Communicating the value of information literacy within higher education is a common goal for instruction librarians: how can we best demonstrate the impact of our work? Increasingly, librarians have turned to assessment (whether large- or small-scale), using learning analytics to build a narrative of user behavior. Relying on quantitative data to indicate correlations between instruction and user behavior, however, reflects a capitalist practice whereby value is derived from a return on investment (Gregory & Higgins, 2018). While such numbers may lend visibility to the labor of instructional librarians, what they often fail to do is maintain a user-centered approach. By assessing students on standards they may not fully understand, assessment can disempower the student as a learner and reinforce hierarchical power dynamics inherent within higher education (Accardi, 2010). Such practices can have a notably negative impact when conducting assessment related to the experiences of underrepresented groups.

This paper relates the assessment work of three librarians across several aspects of library instructional practice. Sheila García, Professional Programs Liaison at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) and former Resident Librarian at the University of Michigan (U-M), will share how a residency capstone project led her to create an intentional reflective practice for engaging in assessment work. Stephanie Rosen, Accessibility Specialist at the University of Michigan, will share key pointers for ensuring an inclusive approach to assessment data, with a focus on the self-identification of persons with disabilities and its impact on data collection. And Jesus Espinoza, Student Success Librarian at the University of Michigan, will delve into student-centered assessment practices with one-shot library instruction and with the Peer Information Consulting (PIC) program.

## REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN A RESIDENCY CAPSTONE PROJECT: SHEILA GARCÍA

In order to fulfill the requirements of a third year capstone project during my residency experience at the University of Michigan, I decided that I wanted to undertake a research project. During the first year of my residency, I conducted a literature review surrounding the work of language brokers, so I planned for my project to center around this population. A language broker is an individual that translates information from a dominant culture/language to another culture or language. Language brokering is especially common among immigrants and for many immigrant families, the individual that takes on the role of a broker is a younger family member, usually a teenager or a child because they tend to learn English and acclimate to a new culture quicker than adults. The project I envisioned sought to determine if the tools taught in information literacy sessions regarding how to evaluate sources for credibility transfer outside of the academic environment to the personal interactions of Latinx students that identify as language brokers (García, 2019). Over the course of my second year, I sketched a rough research framework, which consisted of a mix of focus groups with four to six participants per group and six scenario-based contextual inquiries in order to gather data. The final product was to be a Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results analysis, better known as a SOAR analysis, which would help contextualize the strengths of language brokers and guide the critical examination of current instructional practices (“SOAR,” 2017).

During the summer of 2019, I participated in the Association of College and Research Libraries’ Immersion program and used my planned capstone project to guide my learning. Immersion focused on examining assumptions in the way participants engage in teaching and assessment work (*Immersion Program*, 2013). While participating in the various conversations and activities of this program, three main lessons illustrated to me how I could be perpetuating systemic harm with this project:

## Revolving Door of Information Creation

This refers to the practice whereby research by academics leads to new information being created and then this new information is built upon *within academia itself*. While I recognize that academic scholarship can be difficult to access and at times, digest, what we can do as assessment practitioners is communicate back the results of our study to participants and impacted communities in an accessible manner.

## Citation Practice

While there is clear value in proper citation practice, I acknowledge that copyright is a concept built on Western practices and beliefs and can contribute to the revolving door of information creation rather than the dismantling of it. If possible and appropriate, cite sources that may not be traditionally defined as scholarly in your work and make sure you're taking novel approaches to share research results.

## (Re)search as a Reflection of Colonization

When we conduct "research", particularly research that includes individuals from marginalized communities, we may simply be introducing concepts to academia from these communities versus bringing anything new to the communities we're studying. For it to be an equivalent exchange, academia must offer something back to the community, whether that is through improved processes and approaches or simply to communicate that we found nothing through our work. While we are obligated to do some good through our research, these communities can choose to reject our ideas and that is ok.

In developing a sustainable approach through an equity and inclusion lens, I needed to reenvision my project; a one year timeline was not only unsustainable, but irresponsible to the community with whom I would be working. I decided that what I could do was engage in preliminary talks about the project with students and faculty to discuss the impact this research could have and hear their thoughts and reservations. By hearing from the community first, I could further examine my initial assumptions and engage in creating a collaborative research plan with the local community. Unfortunately, I left my residency program at the beginning of the third year and plan to rework this project only once I have built strong relationships with the Latinx community at my new institution.

## ASSESSING ACCESSIBILITY: STEPHANIE ROSEN

In library accessibility, assessment is the starting point to making the library, its resources, and its services more accessible to more people. To address accessibility, equitable access, and inclusion, we must first ask questions. And to get meaningful answers, we must learn from those who regularly face barriers to access.

Learning from people with disabilities, disabled folks, Deaf folks, people with chronic illness, neurodivergent folks, and everyone who experiences disability<sup>1</sup> means building trust with individuals and communities. For me, this has meant showing up, building relationships, offering resources, and becoming a resource to disability groups on campus. A foundation of trust can offer opportunities to learn by listening—when disabled individuals are willing to name library issues in front of me—and to learn by asking—when I have broad networks of individuals with disabilities to call on for input.

Learning directly from library users with disabilities is invaluable. But in some cases, libraries want to broadly survey all users, then slice data into different user groups. In these situations, deciding who "counts" as a user with disabilities is a complex and high stakes question, for many reasons. First, who counts themselves as a person with a disability depends entirely on what, and how, the question is asked. Simply asking about identity ("Do you have a disability" or "Do you identify as an individual with a disability?") will yield one set of answers, and will depend largely on the context and confidentiality of the asking. Other questions yield other answers, and each question type has particular issues.

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<sup>1</sup> This list is meant to reflect some of the preferred terms used by different individuals and groups within the many communities affected by disability. Some prefer "person-first" terminology (student with a learning disability, librarian with a disability), others prefer "identity-first" language (disabled professor, autistic student), and some do not consider their condition to be a disability and/or identify with other language of their choosing (Deaf, neurodivergent).

Some survey instruments ask about specific conditions or impairments, and use those conditions/impairments as proxies for disability (Zola, 1993). This technique<sup>2</sup> introduces assumptions about disability that may not match individual self-perception, and introduces difficulties in summing up totals (Zola, 1993, p. 12). Questions about functional impairment (“Do you have difficulty seeing, hearing, grasping?”) and questions about activity limitations (“Do you have difficulty attending school/work, cleaning your home?”) also bypass self-perception and depend on assumptions about what a body can do (for functional impairment) or about what activities are most important (for activity limitation). And they yield different answers: functional limitation questions result in data showing 20% of the population over age 15 have disabilities, while activity limitation questions result in data showing 14% of the population do (Zola, 1993, p. 13).

Any broad survey of library users must make careful decisions about what to ask regarding disability, and will ultimately include different subsets of the total under “library users with disabilities.” Libraries should also be aware of the fraught situation of disclosing disability in many employment and educational contexts. Tara Wood’s research on navigating disability disclosure in higher education shows that students use a variety of strategies to assess the risk of disclosing in any context and often do not disclose or do so selectively (Wood, 2017). Joanne Oud’s research shows that disability discrimination in library workplaces prevents staff from disclosing broadly or at all (Oud, 2019).

There are additional issues affecting who considers themselves disabled, even among people who have the same condition. Home community, access to diagnosis, awareness of disability culture, and intersectional identity can all affect whether or not we consider ourselves disabled, or “disabled enough” to count as a person with a disability<sup>3</sup> (Price, 2011). There are no simple answers for libraries looking to assess disability and accessibility. Rather, there are some key issues to consider, and many real individuals and communities to learn from.

## **LIBRARY INSTRUCTION AND THE INFORMATION LITERACY FRAMEWORK: JESUS ESPINOZA**

At the University Michigan Library our Learning Programs and Initiatives’ (LPI) department is in charge of most of the instruction for first and second year students primarily in English and Writing classes. In the past year, we have begun shifting our instruction to highlight the frame of Scholarship as Conversation to align with the curriculum (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015). Many instructors in English and Writing classes assign Mark Gaipa’s essay “Breaking into the Conversation” that situates academic research and scholarship as a conversation (Gaipa, 2004). We also recognized that the Scholarship as Conversation frame would help empower students, to see themselves as creators and contributors within scholarly conversations.

In examining critical assessment within this context, Maria Accardi’s chapter “Teaching Against the Grain” was instrumental. Accardi (2010) poses that critical assessment disrupts power dynamics and reframes the ways in which we define and measure learning. In our instruction we ask students to critically examine whose voices they are including in the ‘conversation’ and which voices are being left out, emphasizing that they have the power to decide who to include or exclude for their assignments. We then lead students through an activity to assess resources, leaving room for them to reflect and provide feedback. This feedback provides a form of assessment which centers students’ voices and experiences. Since we are teaching students to see themselves as creators in these spaces, imparting these critical modes of assessment is beneficial.

When exploring databases during an instruction session, librarians provide a reflective worksheet as students begin to conduct research. We usually conclude with an activity where we ask for volunteers to demonstrate their search and explain their process. The worksheet allows students to reflect on the lecture and the activity allows them to apply and communicate what they learned. This activity is used to assess student learning and the effectiveness of the instruction, allowing us to examine assumptions and determine if there is prior knowledge the student has that we may be discounting. For example, if a student has previous experience with the database, they may highlight tools that were not covered in the lecture. Another real-life example is of a student who volunteered to demo their search and used a database that was not examined during the lecture. If the student felt more comfortable with this database and was able to apply their learning to their search strategy, then this provides valuable assessment information for the librarian indicating that a student had prior knowledge but was able to learn something new. Therefore, informal assessment can be very useful during one-shot instruction sessions, and integrated in a way that maintains a student-centered approach.

### **Peer Information Consulting Program**

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<sup>2</sup> The National Health Interview Survey uses this technique.

<sup>3</sup> See discussions on being “disabled enough” in Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 109, 201.

The Peer Information Consulting Program at the University of Michigan is a peer learning program made up of undergraduate students hired for their interpersonal skills and academic strengths (*Peer Information Counseling Program | U-M Library*, n.d.). They are trained to provide reference and research consultations to their peers and to work on special projects within the library. The program has been in existence for 35 years and currently (within the 2019-20 academic year) there are 24 students in the program. I serve as a co-coordinator along with my colleague, Alexandra Rivera.

Assessment for the program is centered on the students' experiences. The students submit biweekly reflections discussing what they learned, meaningful or successful user interactions and offer feedback to the program coordinators. We also ask them to share if they have applied anything they learned while working to their studies or any other aspects of their life. This allows us to assess both the services that the students provide and the experiences that the student employees have within the program. We also hope to instill in them a sense of ownership over the program by incorporating their feedback into our assessment methods. This practice builds a sense of accountability for the coordinators; when students give us the gift of feedback, we have a responsibility to listen and act on that feedback.

For some, our student programs will be just a job and that is fine. As librarianship turns to building a "culture of assessment", we are inclined to demonstrate value by seeking stories about the deep and lasting impact our programs have on our students. Certainly, that can be the case, but it should not be the benchmark for determining success.

## CONCLUSION

While deconstructing academic structures founded in capitalist perceptions of value may not be a change that most librarians will see in their lifetimes, instruction librarians that conduct assessment can employ a conscientious approach to their practice. The critical reflective narratives provided in this paper have focused on both formal and informal assessment (Magnus et al., 2018). They have stressed the importance of centering the voices of our communities by developing strong relationships and ensuring that the data we collect is used to not only inform internal library practices, but also inform our communities and hold us accountable to providing services truly founded on the principles of equity and inclusion.

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## APPENDIX

### Resources for Building a Critically Reflective Assessment Practice

#### Readings

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#### Online Resources

53 Ways to Check for Understanding  
<https://www.edutopia.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/blogs/edutopia-finley-53ways-check-for-understanding.pdf>

Keeping Up With...Critical Assessment  
[http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping\\_up\\_with/critical\\_assessment](http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/critical_assessment)

Vaction! Vacation + Action (featuring an summary of Dr. David Stovall's work around Fugitive Space)  
<https://justicebydesign.org/ried-blog/2018/4/12/vaction-three-takeaways-from-the-white-privilege-conference>

Racial Equity Toolkit  
<https://www.housingconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Racial-Equity-Toolkit-Downloadable.pdf>

Building Organizational Capacity for Social Justice: Framework, Approach, & Tools  
<https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/aapip.pdf>

Getting Started with Reflective Practice  
<https://www.cambridge-community.org.uk/professional-development/gswrp/index.html>

American Library Association, Equity Diversity and Inclusion Speakers Bureau  
<https://www.cambridge-community.org.uk/professional-development/gswrp/index.html>

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