

# ASSESSMENT BUILDS STRONG PROGRAMS EIGHT WAYS! IT'S GOOD FOR YOU!

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Students who begin their undergraduate studies at California State University, East Bay, enroll in a First Year general education cluster, consisting of disciplinary, oral communication, composition, critical thinking, and information literacy courses. These students must fulfill a two-credit, general education requirement in information literacy to receive the bachelor's degree. Librarians at CSUEB teach ten to twelve sections of the two-credit *Introduction to Information Literacy* course (LIBY 1210) in the First Year Cluster program each quarter.

In 2003-04, separate events provided opportunities to examine the role of information literacy in the University Library's mission through strategic planning; in CSUEB's institutional mission through an accreditation self-study; and in the campus' general education program. Information literacy curricula and assessment were central to both the Library's strategic planning process and the preparation of the accreditation self-study. Concomitantly, the University increased the information literacy graduation requirement from one credit to two credits. The resulting redesign of course curricula, along with internal and external assessment imperatives, led the Library Faculty to develop a portfolio assessment process for LIBY 1210.

## ASSESSMENT CONTEXT

Assessment of student learning has been an integral part of CSUEB's required credit course program since its inception. Anonymous pre/post-tests, based on either the CSU Information Literacy objectives or the *ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards*, have been administered to students in each section of *Introduction to Information Literacy* since 1998.<sup>1</sup>

The initial pre/post-test, modeled on others already in use in library instruction, was a simple true/false & item matching format. Early versions focused on the nuts and bolts of finding information and were often source or tool specific. Later tests were broader, and questions were modified, added or dropped in an effort to more fully address the *ACRL Standards*.<sup>2</sup> The test is reviewed annually and underwent revisions in 2000, 2002, and 2004.

Aggregate test scores have shown improvement each quarter, although pre/post scores and the percentage of improvement varies considerably (ranging from 4.5% to 12.9%). In general, the lower the aggregate pre-test score, the greater the percentage of improvement shown in the post-test. The pre/post tests provided some useful, general data which has been used in curricular design.

This testing process cannot by itself provide a full picture of what students understand and know how to do. Such tests cannot capture students' thought processes or their understanding of IL concepts in application. The pre/post test data lack significant detail needed to inform adjustments in curricula, instructional design and teaching methods. Currently the pre/post test is seen as a complementary tool used in conjunction with other assessment methods.

## PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

Portfolio assessment was adopted by faculty participants as a means for instructors and students to compile and analyze student work. As portfolio parameters were designed by each instructor, faculty discussions centered on the utility of selective or comprehensive student portfolios. Although the project's assessment consultant and the education literature stressed the benefits of selective portfolios, most participants assigned comprehensive portfolios containing all of a student's work in the course.<sup>3</sup> Some instructors felt that the process of compiling and reviewing all of the coursework helped students synthesize course curricula.

Individual instructors made different assignments in each course section ranging from weekly homework using various library tools to twice weekly research journals detailing student research and

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thought processes. Most faculty revised their assignments and portfolio parameters multiple times over the span of the project, adjusting the emphasis placed on various course components both in the classroom and in grading practice. In most cases this process led to significantly more student writing in the course, including reflective (e.g. *My Usual Method of Research*) and/or analytical essay (e.g. *Information and Political Power*) assignments, and research journals or learning diaries. Concomitantly, faculty relied less on multiple choice or fill-in-the-blank assignments and quizzes.

Over time, an effort emerged to have students articulate ‘that they know what they know’. This led some faculty to edit and distribute the portfolio rubric (see below) to students.<sup>4</sup> Eventually most faculty assigned a culminating self-evaluation essay, to be written as the portfolio is prepared, wherein students describe their mastery of the course objectives and select pieces of work as evidence of their learning.

## RUBRIC DESIGN

Early in the project faculty participants met with the project consultant to design a common rubric for assessing student portfolios. As faculty discussed learning priorities for first year student information literacy, consensus emerged on two objectives drawn from the *ACRL Standards* and LIBY 1210 course objectives. These were eventually described in a revised version of the rubric as ‘*Develops and describes research processes and strategies*’ and ‘*Appropriateness of information collected*’.

As participants worked to apply and/or adapt the simple rubric to student portfolios, discussions centered around what information literate students should know and be able to do, how current teaching practices did or did not provide opportunities to evaluate what students were learning, and what evidence of student learning might look like.

## INSTRUCTOR NARRATIVES

The narratives are drawn from faculty participants with diverse orientations to information literacy and preparation for teaching. Some chose to become educators and came to CSUEB with teaching experience, professional preparation, or both. Other faculty, who had some experience with library instruction, began working with information literacy curricula when the University adopted IL objectives and developed the general education credit course program. Most undertook the role of educator and an identity as ‘teaching faculty’ after some time in more traditional academic librarian roles.

Faculty discussions, during the rubric development phase and beyond, often included the motivations for and purposes of teaching information literacy. Articulated pedagogical positions ranged from utopian to pragmatic mixed with a common concern for student and instructor engagement and satisfaction. While no faculty member expressed doubts about their expertise as librarians, in an atmosphere of collegial purpose and support, all disclosed concerns about being effective teachers in their courses.

Library faculty met over several quarters to review student portfolios and to share and evaluate their experiences using the rubric. Faculty were asked to assess their experiences with the goal of modifying curricula for subsequent quarters. As part of this self-

evaluation process, faculty wrote brief narratives describing multiple aspects of their experience with portfolio assessment. The narratives illustrate myriad changes in philosophy and methodology experienced by participants and the impact on multiple aspects of their teaching practice from classroom activities to grading.

## NARRATIVE INSIGHTS

*Is the rubric working? Parts are... [I] think I need to map some of my assignments (at least in my head) to [the] specific outcomes I want the students to try to achieve.*

The quote above echoes a recurring theme in the instructors’ narratives – of whether their curricula allowed students to demonstrate the abilities articulated in the rubric. Another instructor felt that “*the rubric caused me to try to explain to the student more clearly what I expected in the reflective essay [self-evaluation]*”. The process of applying the rubric to student work inspired a close examination of one’s own instructional design and teaching methods, helped instructors stay focused on the learning goals stated in syllabi, and prompted reflexive revision to align curricula with student learning objectives.

Assessing student learning in application also emerged as a common theme in the instructor narratives. One instructor noted that while he did not consider himself a ‘*natural teacher*’, he found it necessary to develop active learning strategies to gain more insight into what students were actually learning. Many instructors began using more active learning and group assignments where students worked cooperatively with the mediation of the instructor. Instructors reported that students found this active learning approach more interesting as well.

The instructors’ reflective self-assessment processes, developed over the course of the project are ongoing. In group discussion and informal conversation, themes from the project inform the practices of the library faculty in the first year program and throughout the department’s information literacy initiatives.

## STUDENT SELF-EVALUATION & FACULTY GRADING PRACTICES

Instructors used a broad range of grading practices, from allotting points to each assignment and calculating a summative total, to having students assign their own course grades based the portfolio and self-evaluation. In most cases changes in curriculum, instructional design, and assessment practices profoundly altered weighted assignment grading and methods of calculating the course grades.

Some participants experienced tension balancing student self-evaluation and instructor assigned grades and were concerned about potential discrepancies between student and faculty assessments. Eventually it became clear that the student self-evaluation essay was a critical aspect of student performance in the course and as such was assessed by instructors and factored into the course grade. As with the other course components, the self-evaluation essay should reflect students’ mastery of the abilities expressed by the rubric. It became increasingly important that students articulate in their self-evaluation essays a direct link between the work in their portfolios and the rubric elements.

Ideally the rubric would clearly describe target performance of the course goals, be used by student and instructor alike to evaluate student learning, and (hopefully) these independent evaluations would ‘mesh’. In effect, the rubric provided a much clearer means to evaluate the portfolio and determine the culminating course grade.

Over time, some instructors eliminated course components which they determined distracted students from the self-evaluation process. Some assigned the portfolio and research project a larger portion of the course grade as these tasks more clearly demonstrated the skills developed by the course.

### EIGHT WAYS THE PROJECT IMPACTS THE INFORMATION LITERACY PROGRAM

This project strengthened CSUEB’s information literacy program by applying authentic assessment techniques to enhance **student learning** and engaging participants in collaborative inquiry for **faculty development**; which led to **curricular renewal** in the first year IL program and contributes to **program assessment** efforts; which enhances **information literacy articulation** across the curriculum, informs library **strategic planning**, and campus accreditation processes through the **institutional self-study**; all of which have made it possible for the authors and participants to make this humble contribution to the **scholarship of teaching and learning** in our field.

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The CSU adopted the ACRL Standards in 2001.
- <sup>2</sup> Not all concepts imbedded in the ACRL Standards could be adequately assessed by these tests.
- <sup>3</sup> Especially persuasive is the rationale that students learn by evaluating and selecting representative pieces of their own work for inclusion in the portfolio.
- <sup>4</sup> The edited version adopted by the faculty is appended.

### RESOURCES

Angelo, T. A., & Cross K. P. (1993). *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

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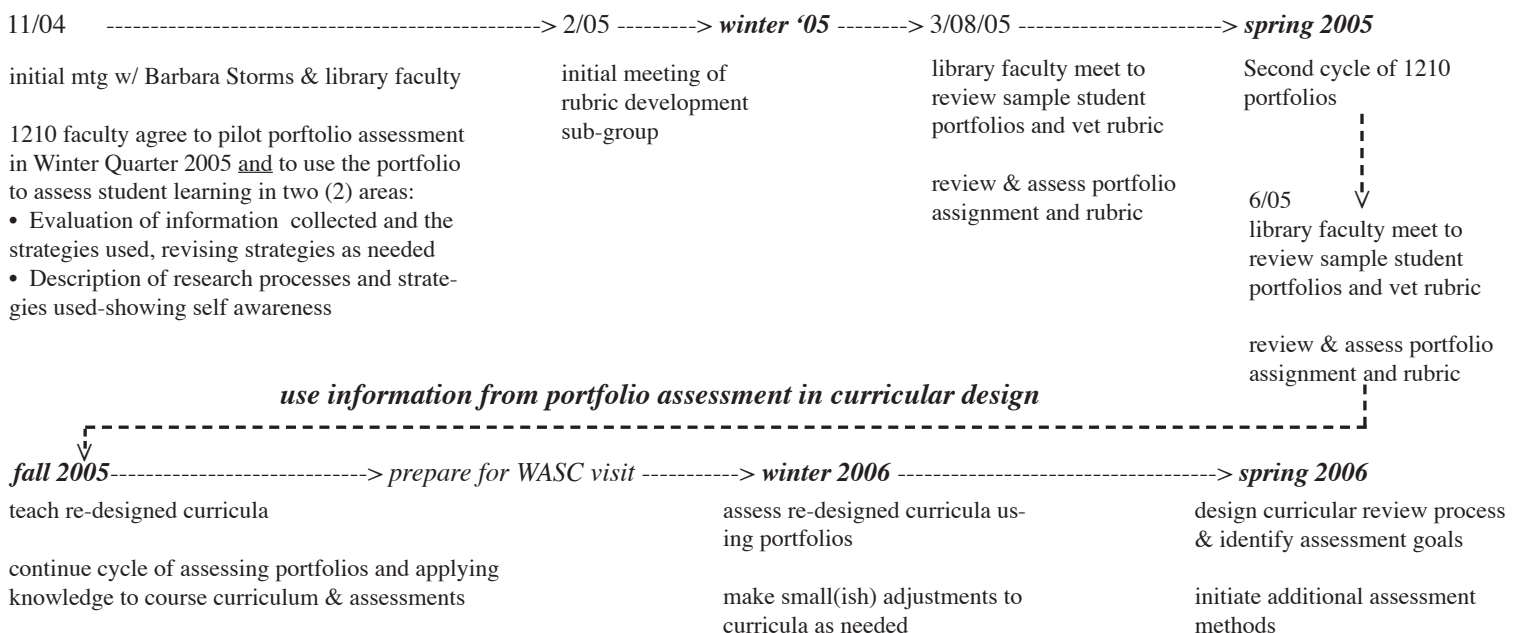
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### Portfolio Assessment Project Timeline 2004 - 2006



## Library Portfolio Rubric

The work of the student demonstrates:

	Target	Starting Point
Develops and evaluates research processes and strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develops and uses a personal strategy of searching for information about a topic</li> <li>• Demonstrates an applied knowledge of reference tools (e.g. catalogue, databases) to find reasonable sources</li> <li>• Evaluates the usefulness of personal research strategies and processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates little development or awareness of a personal strategy for searching for information</li> <li>• Chooses to use largely one type of reference tool (e.g., internet) to find sources of information</li> <li>• Repeats unfruitful attempts to gather information with little problem solving demonstrated.</li> </ul>
Appropriateness of Information collected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Searches for a variety of relevant information connected to a topic</li> <li>• Demonstrates some savvy about the information collected (e.g., selecting specific, contextualized information about a topic; being able to show why a source fits a topic; or be able to demonstrate why a source is important to a topic).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tends to search for only one type of information</li> <li>• Shows little discrimination in selecting reasonable sources about a topic (e.g., all sources may be very general or only vaguely related to a topic).</li> </ul>

## Library Portfolio Rating Scale

The work of the student demonstrates:

	Consistently	Often	Sometimes	Seldom
Appropriateness of Information collected: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exhibits skill in finding a variety of types of relevant information connected to a topic</li> <li>• Demonstrates some savvy about the information collected (e.g., selecting specific, contextualized information about a topic; being able to show why a source fits a topic; or be able to demonstrate why a source is important to a topic).</li> </ul>				
Develops and evaluates research processes and strategies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develops and uses a personal strategy of searching for information about a topic</li> <li>• Demonstrates an applied knowledge of reference tools (e.g. catalogue, databases) to find reasonable sources</li> <li>• Evaluates the usefulness of personal research strategies and processes</li> </ul>				

Developed by the library faculty with the assistance of B. Storms