

STRENGTHEN YOUR TEACHING FRAMEWORK: USING SELF-ASSESSMENT OF INSTRUCTION AS A STRUCTURAL SUPPORT

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Crucial to the success of any instruction program are librarians committed to the craft of teaching. In a time when academic institutions are experiencing decreasing budgets and increasing calls for accountability, getting the biggest “bang” for our instruction buck is more important than ever. As a profession, we often focus on outcomes assessments, utilize numerous student assessments, and solicit direct feedback from classroom instructors and, sometimes, from our peers. However, we often fail to engage in systematic self evaluation. In 2007, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Board approved the *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators*, hereafter referred to as the Proficiencies (See Appendix 1). The Proficiencies were created to provide instruction librarians with guidelines in order to “help instruction librarians define and gain the skills needed to be excellent teachers in library instruction programs and to foster collaborations necessary to create and improve information literacy programs” (ACRL, 2007, para.1). In this article, the authors describe and share a model for utilizing the Proficiencies as a self-assessment tool to grow and develop as a teacher. We will also discuss how this tool can be used by instruction librarians throughout their careers, as the authors include a library school graduate student, an early career librarian, and an instruction coordinator with more than fifteen years of experience.

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WHY SELF-ASSESSMENT?

Self-assessment provides greater awareness of our effectiveness and ensures “we are growing and maturing and that we have not become stagnant in our teaching” (Moreno-Riano, 2009, para. 7). As librarians, we can become so focused on covering the content in our instruction sessions that we fail to be attentive to the quality of our teaching. Unfortunately, many libraries do not have a system in place for the evaluation of teaching and this places the responsibility for doing so on each individual teacher librarian; self-assessment can provide the necessary reflective feedback. Because we often are our own worst critics, self-assessments, completed in an intentional manner, provide heightened awareness of multiple aspects of teaching. In the process of a systematic self-assessment we become aware of what works, what doesn’t work, and how we can change because of what we learn. In his study of the best college teachers Bain (2004) notes: “All the teachers we studied have some systematic program – some more elaborate than others – to assess their own efforts and to make appropriate changes” (p. 19). Self-assessment can be the tool that assures the quality and success of both teaching and learning.

CREATING AN ASSESSMENT TOOL

Interest in self-assessment on the part of teacher librarians is not highly evident in searches of the library literature. In 2004 the ACRL Instruction Section (IS) charged a virtual task force with developing publishable guidelines that consisted of “a list of proficiencies required of instruction librarians and other librarians who contribute to instructional services and programs at their institutions, focusing on broad areas of proficiency rather than a comprehensive list of skills” (ACRL, para.5). The task force¹ considered documents such as the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) *Professional*

*Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians*² and completed a literature review prior to the formation of the proficiencies document.

To begin to create the proficiencies document, the task force identified twelve broad categories, each with a number of specific proficiencies. Within each individual proficiency are skills appropriate to instruction librarians and coordinators. It is important to note that these proficiencies were not written in a prescriptive manner. Rather, they recognize the variety of instructional programs and settings and can be adapted as appropriate for each setting. It is important for those implementing them to recognize their ultimate intent, which is to “assist the librarians to improve instruction and programs” (ACRL, para.9). A careful review of the proficiencies by all who provide instruction should take place before any systematic implementation and each institution is encouraged to put into practice those which are most reflective of their institution and instructional program.

The assessment tool utilized by the authors was developed at the Undergraduate Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where mostly Graduate Assistants provide instruction for classes that fulfill the Composition 1 requirement. Despite a focused training program, team teaching, and instruction observation and evaluation, it is difficult to know how well each individual instructor is doing and how their instruction skills are growing and developing. To that end, a simple rubric (Appendix 2), based on the Proficiencies, was created to provide a framework for self-assessment that allowed each instructor to identify their individual strengths and weaknesses. Use of this tool is encouraged after each instruction session taught, and rather than focusing on the totality of the Proficiencies, it is suggested that individuals focus on specific proficiencies. Utilizing the tool in this manner is less intimidating to new teachers and can allow for greater improvement and awareness in specific aspects of their teaching. The personal insights gained from meaningful self-assessment can result in more intentional teaching, improved engagement, and increased student learning. It can be effectively utilized by instruction librarians at multiple points throughout their careers.

SELF-ASSESSMENT AND THE LIBRARY SCHOOL GRADUATE STUDENT

For a library school graduate student new to teaching in an academic setting, self-assessment provides a solid framework for recognizing and strengthening the fundamentals of library instruction. From classroom management to utilizing various learning technologies and theories, self-assessment affords graduate students the ability to learn both basic instruction and information literacy principles, while cultivating their own teaching presence and gaining confidence in the classroom environment.

While it is important to consider all Proficiencies and their role in future positions, a library school graduate student may not have the experience to connect all of these standards to his or her teaching. Focusing on standards that allow the library

graduate student to reflect on foundational skills helps develop individual teaching abilities and classroom strategies that will build teaching confidence, a significant hurdle with students new to formal or academic instruction. For example, evaluating *Communication skills* and *Planning skills* helps graduate students hone their awareness of student learning needs and how to manage and present these needs in a specific time frame. Emphasizing *Instructional design*, *Presentation skills*, and *Teaching skills* helps develop core instructional techniques, providing graduate students with the confidence they need to grow as library instructors. Assessing these areas allows library graduate students the opportunity to develop their knowledge of information literacy standards and find innovative ways to integrate these standards in the library classroom.

SELF-ASSESSMENT AND THE EARLY CAREER LIBRARIAN

A librarian in the first year of his or her first post-graduate job will certainly be in a position to grow. Adapting to this new environment takes patience, flexibility and persistence; balancing these tasks and qualities is challenging, but self-assessment has its place. An early career librarian who engages in self-assessment of library instruction skills will gain both short-term and long-term benefits. With persistent self-evaluation, the librarian learns to modify, improve and correct instructional skills and materials while establishing a habit of doing so throughout a career.

Knowing when and how to use the self-assessment tool described in this article requires a dynamic approach. For example, one could divide the proficiencies into the following categories to help decide when to assess: 1) does not apply to me or my situation - will not use, 2) best used after individual session, or 3) use each month, semester or year. To better understand these groups or sub-categories, an example of each is necessary. *Administrative skills* may be a proficiency that does not apply to every librarian; in some settings, one librarian handles scheduling instruction and maintaining statistics. *Instructional design skills* would be an example of what to assess after each individual session. This allows a librarian to reflect on how much preparation went into teaching a 50-minute class. Other categories of the tool are better used on a monthly schedule such as *Promotion skills*. This category is asking the librarian to evaluate his or her ability to promote instructional services, which is better accomplished at a faculty training session rather than during a traditional library instruction session.

Six proficiency categories are considered to be most beneficial in self-assessment of an early career librarian. Though a library school graduate student may assess *Communication skills*, *Curriculum knowledge*, and *Leadership skills*, a librarian will approach this assessment on a different and perhaps deeper level. Other categories which will be new to an early career librarian are *Instructional design skills*, *Promotion skills* and *Subject expertise*. An early career librarian may find that *Communication skills* are challenged if they begin working with students in developmental or English as a Second Language (ESL) programs (both very likely in a community college setting). *Curriculum knowledge* and *Subject expertise* fit

well together; a librarian conducting self-assessment of these skills will notice that as knowledge of an institution's curriculum increases, so will awareness of strengths and weaknesses in subject areas. As institutions may specialize in certain programs, a librarian must adapt and seek opportunities to educate themselves in various subject areas, to provide better resources and instruction to students in these programs. Honing *Leadership skills* and *Promotion skills* not only makes a campus community aware of a library instruction program but also makes it effective and utilized; librarians might demonstrate this by serving on instruction-related committees such as one devoted to academic integrity on campus. *Instructional design* is an exciting part of instruction and assessing it allows for a librarian to become a dynamic teacher. This is the chance for a librarian to plan active learning activities and assess how effective they are. As a librarian progresses in a career, he or she will find it valuable to add to this list of proficiencies to assess.

What to do with the self-assessment results is simple: take action. Essentially, these evaluations provide documentation for a self-reflection exercise. Going through a semester's worth of self-assessments, for example, will allow a librarian to identify areas worth improving. Taking steps to improving these proficiencies may include conducting a literature review, seeking continuing education opportunities, or requesting feedback from librarians or faculty. These approaches to self-assessment will help the early career librarian to stay aware of his or her skills, be open to constructive criticism, and stay current of techniques to increase student learning.

SELF-ASSESSMENT AND THE INSTRUCTION COORDINATOR

For instruction coordinators, several aspects of utilizing the Proficiencies vary from their application as an assessment tool for instruction librarians. To assure a holistic view of the instruction program, specific aspects of the Proficiencies fall under the purview of the coordinator. It is all too easy to become focused on specific aspects of managing a program; utilizing a self-assessment tool encourages a focus on all aspects of the program. First and foremost of importance for coordinators are the management aspects that are most predominant in *Administrative skills*, *Assessment and evaluation skills*, *Leadership skills*, *Planning skills*, and *Promotion skills*. Depending on the institutional setting of an instruction program, there may be elements of additional Proficiencies that fall to the coordinator to a larger degree than to individual instruction librarians.

Managing an instruction program reaches beyond what might be thought of as simply administrative skills. In addition to the establishment of outcomes and objectives and long-range planning efforts, there are day-to-day management aspects that must be attended to. Just as classroom instruction responsibilities are cyclical with varying amounts of time spent on specific responsibilities during the course of the academic year, so, too, is program coordination. One approach to utilizing the Proficiencies can be to analyze when it makes the most sense to focus on specific standards and use these in the creation of a planning document.

Ongoing Responsibilities

To assure the success of an instruction program and its continuity some proficiencies and standards should be reviewed and measured throughout the course of the year. *Administrative skills* are essential to the ongoing success of a program. Although the initial creation of learning outcomes, goals, and objectives may take place during the summer, their review throughout the year is crucial. Documenting the program through statistical and data analysis, and reports and presentations to campus colleagues are also tasks that are accomplished best when they take place during the course of the year. *Leadership skills* also lend themselves to a continuous focus. This includes mentoring and providing feedback to those teaching library instruction classes, working with library administration in a leadership capacity, and promoting instruction on campus. Establishing forums for those with instruction responsibilities that encourage sharing strategies and discussing issues and concerns may also be effective. *Presentation skills* can also be incorporated into a forum through discussions of new approaches and presentation techniques utilized by individual instruction librarians.

Summer Responsibilities

There are a number of Proficiencies and Standards that lend themselves well to a summer focus. Because summer is often a time when few instruction sessions occur, it affords additional time to concentrate on *Planning skills*. This is also the ideal time to utilize information gathered through reports and statistical analysis (Proficiency 1) and assessment and evaluation efforts (Proficiency 2) to begin strategic planning for the next academic year. In addition, awareness of upcoming curricular changes and instructional needs can be addressed and planned for during the summer months, allowing for a smoother transition to these changes when fall semester begins. *Information literacy integration skills* may also be easier to address when it included in the planning for the upcoming year.

Academic Year Responsibilities

As faculty tend to be most readily available during the academic year, it is best to concentrate on any standards involving faculty at this time. Faculty involvement and knowledge will be useful when focusing on *Curriculum knowledge* and aspects of Standard 5 such as 5.5 and 5.6 which encourage faculty awareness in the integration of information literacy skills. *Promotion skills* also include elements that are particularly important during the academic year, although the summer supplies ample time to create and produce promotional materials.

CONCLUSION

The use of self-assessment by teacher librarians can contribute to improvements in teaching that can have a significant impact on student learning. Use of the *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators* provides a framework for developing personalized self evaluation, a starting point for peer evaluation, and benchmarks for evaluating an instruction program. If teacher librarians are truly committed

to improving the overall quality of library instruction programs, self-assessment is a critical step that must be included. The flexibility inherent in utilizing the Proficiencies as an assessment tool provides an easy-to-use solution for instruction programs and librarians across academia.

Association of College and Research Libraries. (2007). *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators*. <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/profstandards.cfm>. Accessed March 25, 2010.

Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Moreno-Riano, G. (2009) The teacher and him or herself: toward a pedagogical conscience. *Pedagogy and teaching*. Lehrman American Studies Center, Sept. 2, 2009. <http://lehrman.isi.org/blog/post/view/id/228>

¹ Members of the task force were: Clara Fowler, Chair; Carla Wilson Buss; Chad M. Kahl; and Susan Vega Garcia.

² The RUSA Standards can be found at:
<http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=Home&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=26937>.

APPENDIX 1

Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators

A printable copy that includes all of the individual Standards for each Proficiency is available at:
<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/profstandards.cfm>

The proficiencies are organized alphabetically into the following 12 categories:

1. Administrative skills
2. Assessment and evaluation skills
3. Communication skills
4. Curriculum knowledge
5. Information literacy integration skills
6. Instructional design skills
7. Leadership skills
8. Planning skills
9. Presentation skills
10. Promotion skills
11. Subject expertise
12. Teaching skills

Each category contains core skills for instruction librarians and many categories contain additional skills for instruction coordinators. The standards define 41 core proficiencies for instruction librarians and 28 additional proficiencies for instruction coordinators.

APPENDIX 2

Example of *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators* Assessment Rubric

6. Instructional design skills

The effective instruction librarian:

- 6.1. Collaborates with classroom faculty by defining expectations and desired learning outcomes in order to determine appropriate information literacy proficiencies and resources to be introduced in library instruction.
- 6.2. Sequences information in a lesson plan to guide the instruction session, course, workshop, or other instructional material.
- 6.3. Creates learner-centered course content and incorporates activities directly tied to learning outcomes.
- 6.4. Assists learners to assess their own information needs, differentiate among sources of information, and help them to develop skills to effectively identify, locate, and evaluate sources.
- 6.5. Scales presentation content to the amount of time and space available.
- 6.6. Designs instruction to best meet the common learning characteristics of learners, including prior knowledge and experience, motivation to learn, cognitive abilities, and circumstances under which they will be learning.
- 6.7. Integrates appropriate technology into instruction to support experiential and collaborative learning as well as to improve student receptiveness, comprehension, and retention of information.

Self-Assessment of Instructional Design Skills

Skill	Exceeds	Meets	Needs Work	N/A
6.1				
6.2				
6.3				
6.4				
6.5				
6.6				
6.7				

Comments/Concerns: