

## Building Instruction Assessment and Teaching Support from the Grassroots Up

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It's the nature of our work: librarians typically come into one-shot instruction sessions without the benefit of knowing much about the students they'll be teaching and by the time the session is over and they have learned something about them, they may never see those particular students again. Developing valid rules of thumb, then, becomes precious. If a class full of freshman is more likely to engage with a certain pedagogy or resource, knowing so based on past experience would give librarians an advantage as they plan their lessons and engage with students in-session. In the spring of 2010, the English librarian and the science librarian at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) began a project to identify such trends across classrooms by creating a common student evaluation form. We hoped using the form would generate a dataset that could inform our sessions with evidence-based pedagogical approaches and contribute to instruction planning dialogs with classroom faculty (Ariew & Lener, 2007).

Quickly, it became clear that the most useful dataset would be the largest. We wanted to draw data not just from the 100+ sessions taught between these two librarians each year, but from as many as possible of the approximately 750 annual sessions taught by GVSU's larger team of librarians. This presented the project with its defining challenge, and, in retrospect, its defining success: the creation and implementation from the grassroots up of a shared tool for assessment and collection of instruction-session data, adopted without an edict from library administration or the authority to require participation from our colleagues.

Implementing this shared resource without an explicit mandate meant we had to take a four-pronged approach that could be used successfully at other libraries: 1) identify and capitalize on the natural cohorts of students—and librarians—our library already had, 2) give participating librarians control over use of the information they provide, 3) emphasize and facilitate the tool's potential use as a means for self-reflection and professional growth and 4) be proactive and take advantage of any opportunity to implement an assessment program—be thoughtful, but do not wait for explicit permission to get started.

### Background

At GVSU, a comprehensive university with over 24,000 students in western Michigan, instruction sessions are taught by 18 librarians assigned to individual academic departments. GVSU's librarians were at this time operating without an instruction coordinator, which generally left us to plan, execute and assess our own teaching as we each saw fit. Our experience at GVSU suggests both pros and cons to this arrangement. Sole responsibility for one's teaching al-

lows for a tremendous amount of customization to suit the librarian's strengths as well as the needs of individual classrooms, and we believe our culture of innovation is due in part to this "hot house" of self-motivated achievement. However, pronounced trade-offs come in the areas of assessment and teacher support, where the value of shared resources like the dataset we hoped to create is exponentially increased by wider participation (ACRL, 2003). For example, without a common evaluation form, comparing student responses from different classes was difficult. Since we all could potentially be teaching different concepts, there were fewer opportunities to meet and discuss strategies for student engagement.

When this project started in 2010, the library was beginning to develop an instruction program that would address many of these trade-offs. This program had been in discussion for several years and was thought (correctly as it turns out) to still be one or two years from implementation. Thus, our evaluation project benefited from some excellent timing in syncing with the library faculty's wider attention on how an instruction program could support and develop good teaching practice. This also allowed us to capitalize on the existing freedom to individually try new things that the old model afforded us while focusing on a task that, while not yet articulated amongst the developing program's goals per se, was consistent with its underlying purpose. It gave us a chance to set the tone on student evaluations, and while opportunities for grassroots projects like this might look different at other libraries, the most broadly applicable lesson here might be that recognizing moments ripe for grassroots action for what they are is the first and most important step.

Absent a requirement for librarians to use student evaluations, status quo practice was inconsistent, self-motivated, and used primarily for self-reflection. Even this type of use was worth encouraging and expanding as it ultimately improves the quality of library instruction and self-confidence of librarians (Fenske & Roselle, 1999; Choinski & Emanuel, 2006). It was important that the new evaluation tool pull "double-duty": seed a larger dataset and provide the basis for reflective teaching practices that would fit nicely within a larger effort to support and develop quality teaching amongst librarians.

### Finding Our Natural Cohorts

We hoped to begin the project by approaching a subset of GVSU's librarians to pilot our tool, identify possible improvements, and form the foundation for a larger "buy-in" from library faculty. We found the ideal pilot group when the librarian in charge of coordinating the library instruction for Writing 150, the university's freshman composition

course, became aware of our project. The lone exception to GVSU's liaison structure, Writing 150's 60+ sessions each semester are distributed among a group of 10 librarians, an ideal cohort to provide a sizable and comparable dataset. Many libraries have these types of classes; natural cohorts should be available to anyone interested in starting a similar project.

### **Participant Control of the Data**

From conversations, it became clear that one potential barrier to participation might be any implication that data about an individual's teaching could be used out of context in performance reviews, tenure and promotion decisions, or even work assignments. We believed firmly that the form would be most valuable if every stakeholder understood that we considered this use of the form contrary to our goals. From the outset, we explained to participants the reasons for collecting data. First, to support effective instruction with data and, possibly, to seed a dataset for later assessment purposes by GVSU's nascent instruction program. Second, it was made clear that participation was voluntary. Finally, potential participants were assured that there were no plans to examine instruction as done by individual librarians, such as for use in performance evaluations. Beyond the necessities of data entry, the evaluation tool was anonymous. Paper forms were completed at the end of instruction sessions and turned in by librarians to an inbox monitored by a student worker. Participants were encouraged to keep photocopies of the forms from their sessions and to use the paper form for their personal reflection.

In the end, seven librarians participated, easily enough to consider the pitch a success. It helped that we had a ready audience with the Writing 150 librarians. For several semesters prior to starting this project, the Writing 150 Library Coordinator had been building a teaching support program for librarians involved with this course. Frequently this took the form of participant-led teaching topics, including one previously taught by the English and science librarians on using session evaluations. This existing context for teaching support reinforced the project's goals and provided a forum to discuss the student feedback.

### **Data Collection, Analysis and Application**

Data collection, after standardizing the form (see Figure 1) to ensure common language for the learning objectives section and IRB compliance, began for Writing 150 in fall 2010. At the end of the semester the dataset contained 536 evaluations. A student-worker was recruited to enter the evaluations with a unique code into a Google spreadsheet and the data was then exported to SPSS for analysis.

Basic manipulations of the data uncovered some numbers that affirmed the project and expectations: 86% of students completing the evaluation had not had a librarian visit one of their classes before. Of those remaining 14% who

previously had library instruction, most reported that more than half of the material covered had not been covered in those previous sessions. For the question "On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being highest) how useful do you think this session will be as you do the research required for this course?", 86% of all students responded with a 4 or 5. These numbers, and the rest of the preliminary data, were shared with participating librarians at the end of the semester. Their anecdotal feedback suggested satisfaction with the results and pleasure at the high rate of student satisfaction.

### **Conclusion**

With the implementation of this process, the benefit to GVSU libraries has been immediate and encouraging. There has been an increased interest in talking about how assessment could be included in an instruction program, including a current project of a shared question bank for student evaluations.

Because the evaluations are distributed before students have truly applied a session's lessons, the assessment value of this data is limited in a fundamental way. That said, even this early feedback can lead to worthwhile adjustments in teaching if applied with the proper perspective. The occasional suggestion, for example, that library instruction in Writing 150 might be redundant to its placement elsewhere in general education courses, is challenged by this data. And this is only the beginning. Participating librarians are finding meaningful points for reflection from individual class forms. For instance, one librarian noticed students were ranking simple 'how to' learning objectives higher than conceptual objectives, suggesting she could do a better job of linking clicks to concepts. In subsequent instruction, she made a deliberate effort to explain the logic behind clicking a particular library link and discuss why and when one might use library databases and how these resources compare to Google.

Some participating librarians have chosen to use the results and trends from their own sessions in their pre-instruction conversations with faculty. The high student rating of these sessions' utility could be used to remind classroom faculty of the value of library instruction or even open doors with faculty who haven't yet collaborated with a librarian.

Within the library's Writing 150 Program this project has led to a shift in the collective vision. As GVSU's librarians start looking at what they teach in the classroom they are also beginning to consider how this aligns with the library's Information Literacy Core Competencies document (GVSU, 2010). As a group, they began asking themselves whether they were practicing what they preach and are teaching first year students the skills outlined in this curriculum document. It has been a real challenge finding a balance between autonomy and broader instructional initiatives, and this project, by putting the emphasis back on the

(Get a List...Continued from page 5)

discuss the idea of search boxes to “refine” a results list. Explore ProQuest and find the limiters are on the right. The intent here is not to get them to memorize a list of vendor quirks, but to understand that there are compatible features in most tools if you look for them.

I finish by telling students again that there’s nothing wrong with the process of typing some stuff in a search box, hitting the button, and getting back a semi-random list of results. I do suggest that they could make it better, faster, less frustrating by applying some tool savvy and critical thinking. Everyone wins, and is hopefully less stressed about how to perform a “complicated” library search. They now have a simple, but sophisticated approach that works not just in Google, but anywhere, and they are better searchers for it.

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students’ learning and their preferences, has in part led to a more fruitful conversation.

Lastly, this project helpfully highlighted several support needs that GVSU’s new instruction program might fill, such as pragmatic concerns like developing an intranet tool for instruction data or a template for reporting our instruction statistics. GVSU’s librarians can now speak with the voice of experience by providing a case in point. This dialog has helped engender a strong, shared interest in student evaluations and a tested foundation that can be built upon by our new Head of Instructional Services, putting GVSU that much closer to an articulated and shared practice of teaching within the library.

All of this happened, and will continue to move forward, thanks to a grassroots effort started by a small group of librarians. We encourage others to not wait for an explicit administrative mandate or be concerned about not having the authority to compel participation from their colleagues—by approaching a project in a thoughtful way and gradually building consensus, there is a great deal that can be accomplished.

**References**

Ariew, S., & Lener, E. (2007). Evaluating instruction: Developing a program that supports the teaching librarian. *Research Strategies*, 20(4), 506-515.

Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL). (2003). Guidelines for instruction programs in academic libraries. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/guidelinesinstruction.cfm>

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layered design that uses an overlapping, two-column grid scheme on the main layer. It also sports big, bold text in visible grid boxes that suggest the form fields of a web log-in page. All the text is right-aligned and features spatial zones that break the right-side margin.

In her monograph *The Grid Book*, art historian Hannah Higgins states, “. . . grids are endowed with a most human contradiction: a vigorous free spirit and a propensity to control.” While we may associate the grid with control and order, clearly, it can provide a way to free our creativity. A good designer practices **both** inside, and outside, of the box thinking.

*\*Editor’s Note: Google recently changed the way it displays search results, which are reflected in the article (essentially, they moved some advanced tools to the top that were formerly on the left). More details: <https://plus.google.com/+google/posts/FkDZdfkXRrA>*

Choinski, E., & Emanuel, M. (2006). The one-minute paper and the one-hour class: Outcomes assessment for one-shot library instruction. *Reference Services Review*, 34(1), 148-155.

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**Figure 1**

**Library Instruction Evaluation**

1. Is this your first library instruction session? YES NO

*If no, about how much of today’s session repeated content from previous sessions?*

None 1 2 3 4 5 All

2. What year in school are you? 1 2 3 4 5+ GRAD

3. From the following list, please identify the first (1), second (2), and third (3) most useful elements of today’s presentation:

     [LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1]  
     [LEARNING OBJECTIVE 2]  
     [LEARNING OBJECTIVE 3]  
     [LEARNING OBJECTIVE 4]

4. Is there anything you wish we had spent more time on?

5. On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being highest) how useful do you think this session will be as you do the research required for this course?

Least 1 2 3 4 5 Most

6. How else could the library improve this session?

**THANK YOU!** Your comments help us improve student learning.