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Opening doors for libraries on campus and beyond

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Boston University



Opening Doors for Libraries on Campus and Beyond

Ken Liss, Boston University

THE BOSTON UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES were a latecomer to Assessment in Action (AiA), not even beginning our application to the third year of the program until after the original deadline had been extended by an extra three weeks. The suggestion to apply came from the Associate University Librarian for Graduate and Research Services, who is also head of the libraries' assessment committee. She was aware of my involvement in a small-scale project experimenting with new approaches to information literacy instruction in the first-year writing classroom of the university's College of Arts and Sciences. She knew, as well, of conversations about IL learning outcomes that the Associate University Librarian (AUL) for Undergraduate and Distance Learning and I had begun with the head of the university's new Office of Program Learning Outcomes Assessment. The two AULs and I saw AiA as an opportunity to expand the libraries' knowledge and skills around assessment and learning outcomes, to broaden the focus of our assessment activities into information literacy instruction, and to enhance the libraries' standing as a partner with faculty and others in promoting and assessing student success.

Even with the extended deadline, time was tight. We had to develop a proposal, build a team, and get sign-off from the provost's office in four weeks. Our application was not finalized and submitted until three hours before the deadline. But despite that Johnny-come-lately beginning, Boston University's involvement in AiA has paid and continues to pay dividends at BU while also contributing to the broader goals of the AiA program.

AiA team members from the libraries, the College of Arts and Sciences Writing Program, and the Program Learning Outcomes Assessment office have built on the relationships that developed through AiA. They have continued to collaborate with each other and other partners on projects both on campus and beyond. At BU, those collaborations have included joint leadership of a seminar on threshold concepts for librarians and writing instructors, expanded experimentation with instruction based on the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (the focus of our AiA project), and active participation in the development of an information literacy component in the university's new general education program.

Beyond BU, AiA team members, along with others from the university, have been accepted into multi-institution programs run by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the Dartmouth College Institute for Writing and Rhetoric. These activities are opportunities for us to learn from others and to share our own success with collaboration and with library contributions to institutional goals and assessment with colleagues at other institutions.

Boston University's Assessment in Action Project

Undergraduates in the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), the largest of BU's many schools, take a two-semester sequence of topic-based writing seminars. These seminars are managed by the CAS

Writing Program¹ and taught by a combination of full-time and part-time lecturers and graduate teaching fellows. Undergraduates in other BU schools (Engineering, Business, Communication, Education, Fine Arts, Hospitality Administration, Health and Rehabilitation Sciences) also enroll in one or both of these courses to fulfill their writing requirement. That makes the writing program and its seminars a “high-touch” element engaging with a high percentage of undergraduate students early in their time at the university.

The second course in the writing sequence, WR150, is designated a writing and research seminar, with information literacy or “learning to conduct college-level research” as one of its stated goals. Under the leadership of the AUL for Undergraduate and Distance Learning, the libraries have in place a long-standing practice of assigning a librarian to every section of WR150. There are as many as 160 sections each year, with the bulk of them taught in the spring semester.

The nature and degree of librarian involvement in WR150 have been left up to the individual writing instructors and their assigned librarians. For most, this has consisted of traditional library “one-shot sessions” focused on tours, search techniques, introductions to the library website and its discovery system and databases, and so on. Some sections have done more, while some instructors have chosen to handle the information literacy component on their own.

Neither the writing program nor the libraries had developed a consistent understanding of or pedagogical approach to information literacy. The writing program conducted assessments of student learning (alternating quantitative and qualitative assessment year to year), but information literacy received only cursory attention (e.g. “How many sources did the student cite in their paper?”). The libraries did not conduct any assessment of their work with students in the writing program.

I joined the BU Libraries staff in March 2014 as Head of Liaison and Instruction Services and was put in charge of our support for the CAS Writing Program. I also took on the librarian assignment for several of the classes myself.

Two of the WR150 instructors I worked with had leadership roles in the CAS Writing Program: one as the writing program’s curriculum coordinator, and the other as chair of an initiative called WRX, designed to provide writing program faculty “a structured opportunity to experiment with innovative writing pedagogies and course models.”² These two instructors were already experimenting with a curriculum that asked students to develop a semester-long independent research project related to a broad course theme and to present their research in several genres for several audiences. During the 2014–15 academic year, we further experimented in their classes with a new approach to information literacy based on the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, then in draft form.

That work formed the basis for our application and ultimate acceptance into AiA. Our team consisted of myself and the AU for Undergraduate and Distance Learning from the libraries, the two instructors from the writing program, and the Director of Learning Assessment in the Office of the Provost.

Our AiA project involved two sections, one control and one experimental, of each of the instructors’ WR150 classes during the fall 2015 semester. The control group sections were provided a one-shot instruction session, an optional meeting with the librarian for each student, and an online guide to research resources tailored to the topic and assignments of the course. The experimental sections were provided with an instruction session, flipped classroom videos, required individual meetings with the librarian, a librarian presence in Blackboard, and a course research guide (same guide for both sections of each class). The focus of these efforts was on two frames from the ACRL *Framework*: Research as Inquiry and Searching as Strategic Exploration.

Changes in students' understanding of research as inquiry were assessed using a rubric developed by the team to measure improvement in their topic or question from the initial question they posed near the beginning of the course to the topic or question reflected in their final paper. Students' understanding of searching as strategic exploration was assessed via analysis of two different reflective essays they completed during the semester. The results of the assessment showed a greater understanding of both frames among the students in the classes that had enhanced librarian engagement.

The project also led to greater understanding of assessment methods and how to apply them to the new approach to information literacy embodied in the ACRL *Framework*. Those understandings and the relationships developed or strengthened during the course of the project began to bear additional fruit, on campus and beyond, even before the conclusion of our involvement in AiA.

Extending Library/Writing Program Collaboration and Assessment

With the analysis of our AiA results underway in the spring of 2016, our team began to lay the groundwork for an expanded assessment project to be conducted the following academic year. We saw a shared understanding of the ACRL *Framework* and *Framework*-based learning outcomes, as had developed among our team, as the key. We developed a plan to bring those ideas to a wider group of librarians and writing instructors as preparation for more extensive assessment the following spring.

One writing instructor on the team and I developed and co-led a seminar series for librarians and faculty members from the CAS Writing Program. There were three sessions, with assigned readings and discussions, designed to explore how threshold concepts were shaping pedagogy in both writing and library studies and to examine the ACRL *Framework* and librarian/writing instructor collaboration, as we had experienced it, among a wider group.

Topics of the seminar were threshold concepts and their use in writing programs; threshold concepts and the new ACRL *Framework*; and librarians and writing instructors collaborating. Some two dozen librarians and instructors took part in some or all of the sessions. For many, this was the first opportunity they had had to discuss information literacy learning objectives together and to engage in a big-picture view of library/writing program collaboration.

The spring 2016 seminar for librarians and writing instructors was followed in fall 2016 with another three-part seminar for all instruction librarians at BU, again with readings and discussions about the ACRL *Framework* and information literacy learning outcomes. The aims of these sessions were (a) to begin to develop broad, assessable goals for our instruction program; (b) to develop ways to share ideas and techniques; and (c) to foster creativity and experimentation in pursuit of our goals.

In spring 2017, when the next large wave of WR150 classes was scheduled, the writing instructors and I created a research pedagogy initiative to encourage librarians and writing instructors (including many of those who had participated in the seminars) to develop their own assignments and lesson plans based on one or more of the ACRL frames. More than twenty sections took part. Students in these sections were asked to complete an expanded set of reflection questions about research and information literacy for further assessment and analysis of student learning and pedagogical approaches to information literacy. We also collected, with IRB approval, student portfolios from these sections, as well as faculty syllabi, assignments, and exercises.

We submitted an application to participate in the 2017 Dartmouth Summer Seminar for Composition Research offered by Dartmouth College's Institute for Writing and Rhetoric in collaboration with the Council of Writing Program Administrators.³ The program, now in its seventh year, focuses on "Data-Driven Inquiry: Process, Methods, Results."⁴

Our application, based on our new initiative and building directly on the work we had done in AiA, proposed scaling this research up within our own program with three purposes in mind:

1. to take a more rigorous approach by setting up experimental and control groups to test our curricular experiments and further educate ourselves about analyzing data;
2. to involve more faculty and librarians in our program, thereby fostering more opportunities for innovation around teaching research in our program; and
3. to publish our results, bringing both our collaborative approach and the value of academic libraries to a wider audience.

We also saw our participation in the seminar as an opportunity to share our experience with assessment and collaboration around information literacy with a national and international group of writing program faculty and administrators.

Our application was accepted, and one of the instructors and I spent two weeks at Dartmouth with some three dozen writing instructors, writing program administrators, and composition scholars from across the United States as well as from Jamaica, Kuwait, and Qatar. (I was the only librarian and the first one to participate in the seminar since it began in 2011.) The program consisted of lectures, workshops, practice sessions, and individual and group consultations. The syllabus covered a range of research methods, including quantitative and qualitative analysis, carrying out critical analysis with (and of) statistics and statistical software, and preparing for publication. There were extensive readings and assignments to complete each evening.

We came away from the seminar with a scheme for coding and analyzing two types of data we had collected during our expanded research pedagogy initiative: faculty assignments and student reflections—and with a lot more work to do in the months to follow.

Equally important, we were able to share and spread our ideas, sending other participants back to their home institutions with new ways of thinking about information literacy and librarian/faculty collaboration in the writing classroom. The impact was evident in some of the reactions to our twenty-five-minute presentation—“New Possibilities and Mind-Boggling Questions’: Research Dispositions in the Writing Classroom”—on the last day of the seminar.

The cochair of the Student Success in Writing Conference (a writing instructor at a university in Georgia) suggested we present at the conference in April and also at the International Conference on Information Literacy in September 2018. The Director of Writing and Rhetoric at a college in Maine invited us to do a workshop for librarians and writing instructors at her institution. Several people asked for suggestions for the kind of assignments that lead to learning about information literacy in ways that go beyond the mechanics and techniques of research. Others said they would change their approach to working with the librarians on their campuses. “Just with talking informally with you two over the seminar I’ve gained a much deeper understanding of the information literacy field—and how it can change so quickly!” said one. “Very helpful. I will no longer just plunk a ‘library day’ into my FYW course.”

Information Literacy, the Writing Program, and General Education at BU

The CAS Writing Program, with its broad reach across much of the undergraduate student body, has long been a central focus of the libraries’ information literacy efforts at BU. Our involvement with the writing program in AiA and the expanded activity that has grown out of that collaboration have presented an opportunity to better assess and improve those efforts.

The skills and relationships we developed through AiA and the increased attention it brought to the libraries have also led to opportunities to work with the writing program and others in broader university initiatives. Chief among these is an ambitious new general education program called the BU Hub. The Hub, announced in the spring of 2016, is BU's first-ever attempt to develop a university-wide general education program that applies across all schools and programs and all four years of an undergraduate student's time at BU.

A task force report released that spring—*The BU Hub: A Vision for University-wide Undergraduate General Education at Boston University*—focused on “the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that all BU undergraduates need to thrive in their professional, personal and civic lives.”⁵ It identified six core capacities, one of which (the Intellectual Toolkit) included Research and Information Literacy as one of several “how to's for thinking and living that, exercised often, become enduring habits.”⁶

The roadmap for the BU Hub is a complex one.⁷ It includes piloting new and revised courses, proposed by faculty, in the 2017–18 academic year, with full launch for all incoming freshman in the fall of 2018, followed by a process to assess, revise, and improve the program. Guiding that effort will be an implementation task force and the relatively new Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL).

In spring 2017, CTL put together a team to participate in the Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Among the aims of the institute were “to help campus- and system-based teams devise equitable, integrative, learning-centered pathways that deeply connect with the assets students bring to college” and “to integrate and transform curricular and cocurricular practices to support higher levels of student success.”⁸

The BU team put together for the institute was focused on support for the Hub, including three major areas: information literacy, writing-intensive courses, and multimodal composition. The team included three members of our AiA group: the AUL and me from the libraries and the Director of Learning Assessment. (She had suggested including the library, based on the work we had done in AiA.) Also participating were the interim director of the CAS Writing Program, the interim assistant director for Writing across the Disciplines, and three members of the CTL staff.

(In addition, the writing instructors and I, all members of our AiA team, were named coleaders of a group revising the curriculum for WR150, which is seen as one of the main pathways through which students will meet the information literacy requirement of the Hub.)

At the AAC&U Institute, held at BU in June, we worked with facilitators and with teams from other academic institutions to discuss and refine our plans and effective ways of implementing and evaluating them. We were also able to share the new approaches being taken at BU, including how the libraries and information literacy are contributing to institutional goals and initiatives, with a broader audience of higher education professionals. Perhaps most importantly, we strengthened our working relationship as a team, paving the way for further collaboration as important players in the evolution of the BU Hub.

Conclusion

At the outset, the BU Libraries' participation in Assessment in Action appeared to offer an opportunity to bring more formal assessment practices to bear on an experimental collaboration with writing program faculty. Indeed, that proved to be the case. In-person workshops at the ALA Annual and Midwinter conferences, together with virtual meetings and communication with other members of my cohort, were very helpful in developing effective assessment techniques. We have

continued to put the new knowledge and skills learned at AiA to good use with the writing program and in other areas.

More surprising has been a potentially longer-lasting impact related to the broader goals of AiA. As those goals make clear, assessment is not just about understanding how we're doing and how to do it better. It's about communicating the value of what we do.

The collaboration and demonstration of library value that came out of our project have helped the libraries secure a more central place in new and emerging institutional goals and efforts to address them. We are being included, in formal and informal ways, in learning initiatives on campus and in engagements around student learning with faculty and administrators in other colleges and universities.

That is helping to ensure that we—libraries in general and the BU Libraries in particular—are seen as partners, not just as auxiliaries or support, in efforts to create an experience that, in the words of the BU General Education report, “embraces and exploits the social, institutional, and intellectual richness of residential higher education.”⁹

Assessment in Action was developed as part of the ACRL Value of Academic Libraries initiative, which aimed to help academic librarians participate in “the national conversation on assessment, accountability, and value.”¹⁰ The BU Libraries’ participation in AiA and the relationships that emerged have brought us into that conversation, on campus and beyond, in ways that we had not anticipated.

Biography

Ken Liss has been Head of Liaison & Instruction Services at the Boston University Libraries since 2014. He has been a librarian since 1992 and has worked at Boston College, the Harvard Business School, and the Boston Public Library as well as at a nonprofit organization and a library software company. Prior to becoming a librarian, Liss was a journalist and a public relations specialist. Reach him at kliss@bu.edu.

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