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Authentic Assessment in the Library Classroom: Transforming Activities into Assessment

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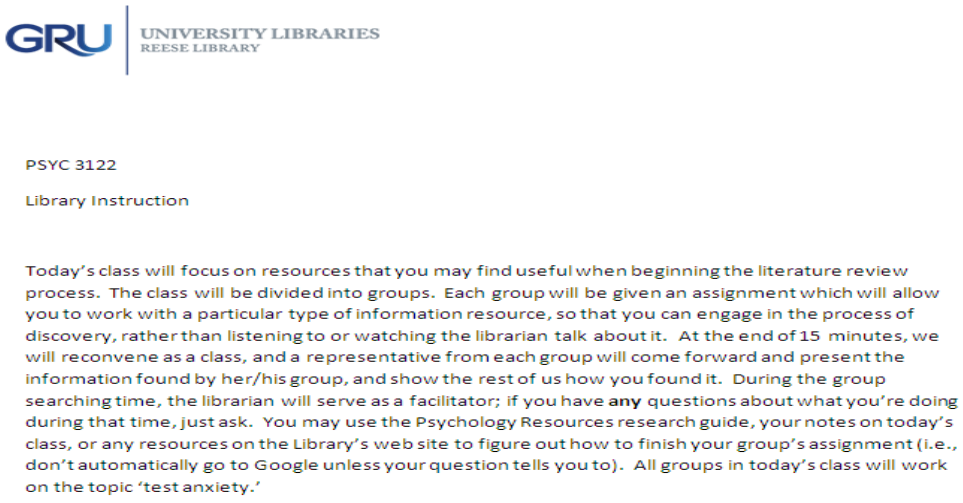
Abstract

Typical survey instruments used in library classrooms tend to place more emphasis on presenter performance than on student learning. The uses of teacher evaluation surveys are clear for personnel evaluative purposes. What is less clear is whether the effort expended on library instruction is worth the time invested in it, when framed in the context of student outcomes. In other words, is librarian performance in the classroom more important than student learning? The use of active learning techniques in library classrooms focuses attention on the materials at hand, often in ways that lectures and demonstrations cannot. This paper will define the attributes of authentic assessment, and explain how this type of assessment can be used in a library classroom, even a single session, once a semester, in order to put more emphasis on student learning, using the exercise itself to shape the expected student outcomes. Examination of a sample of completed student questions after such a class showed that students need more emphasis in two outcome areas, documentation and moving successfully from identification of desired items to retrieval of those items. These are areas where students often need extra assistance, but it can be challenging to provide that assistance in a single class where other outcomes also compete for both the students' and teacher's attention. However, a stronger focus on student learning creates a better measure of the value of the class than does a survey more suited to a performance evaluation.

How does a librarian assess what, or whether, students have learned anything in class? Typical survey instruments used in library classrooms tend to focus more on presenter performance than on student learning. The uses of these surveys are clear for personnel evaluative purposes. What is less clear is whether the effort expended on library instruction is worth the time invested in it, when framed in the context of student outcomes. In other words, who are we doing this for, ourselves or our students?



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PSYC 3122

Library Instruction

Today's class will focus on resources that you may find useful when beginning the literature review process. The class will be divided into groups. Each group will be given an assignment which will allow you to work with a particular type of information resource, so that you can engage in the process of discovery, rather than listening to or watching the librarian talk about it. At the end of 15 minutes, we will reconvene as a class, and a representative from each group will come forward and present the information found by her/his group, and show the rest of us how you found it. During the group searching time, the librarian will serve as a facilitator; if you have **any** questions about what you're doing during that time, just ask. You may use the Psychology Resources research guide, your notes on today's class, or any resources on the Library's web site to figure out how to finish your group's assignment (i.e., don't automatically go to Google unless your question tells you to). All groups in today's class will work on the topic 'test anxiety.'

Figure 1. Instructions to class in an exercise-driven class based on constructivist principles.

Librarians who have used constructivist principles (Fig. 1) in designing active learning techniques to be used in the library classroom have seen how this approach focuses attention on the materials at hand, often in ways that lectures and demonstrations cannot. This paper will focus on the attributes of authentic assessment, and how this type of assessment can be used in a library classroom, even a single session, once a semester, in order to get a better sense of what students may be learning.

An active learning exercise may be fairly easily transformed into an instrument which can be used to gauge whether and how effectively students retain instruction in library classes. Assessing the exercises after class is over provides a summary view of how well the lessons are retained, and which parts of the exercise or the instruction may need reworking. Using an exercise completed by students in class to assess the effectiveness of the instruction will be more time-consuming, but it is a sustainable approach that builds on the teaching process, rather than instructor performance.

Regarding assessment of library instruction, it is commonly accepted that a good program should include assessment, but the typical model of library instruction that so many instruction programs use makes assessment a real challenge. For many years, the most common model has been some form of survey, asking questions more suited to personnel evaluation that student learning, such as the following:

- Was your instructor prepared for class?
- Did she present interesting information?
- Did she give you useful information?

While common, these kinds of questions present their own kinds of problems, especially when the instructor's performance is being evaluated by lower division undergraduate college students, based on one observation. How do they know whether or not the instructor was prepared? Is everything that college students need to know really interesting to them? Do students understand the utility of a set of resources that most of them have never seen or used before, and can the case for that utility be made

to them realistically in 50 minutes, once per semester? In 2009, Walsh published a survey of different forms of information literacy assessment employed by libraries, and found the following types in use: Multiple choice – the most prevalent; citation analyses; quizzes and tests; and self-assessments. As he states, "The probable reason that most of these methods – with the exception of citation analysis – are used is that they are practical to administer and score."

For one very specific type of performance evaluation, these kinds of question are appropriate. The next things to ask, however, are, "Who should be asking, and who should be interpreting the results of the questions?" Should this be the purview of the instruction librarian/coordinator/etc., who is very often a lateral colleague of those being evaluated, if not a subordinate, and not a supervisor? If so, does this place an unfair perceived burden on the librarian? Does she have the authority to evaluate her colleagues (Bond, 2013, p. 3)? If so, is she then perceived as a better friend to management than to her colleagues? Most importantly, is this the most appropriate role for an instruction coordinator? Which is more important to the instruction program, the opportunity to teach students something they need to know, but don't, or the opportunity to make them feel good about a class that most of them think is remedial and unnecessary?

The personnel evaluation issues raised here may be provocative, but they are a realistic element in the library instruction setting at most colleges and universities. It is far easier to amass data that say that all the librarians are friendly and personable than

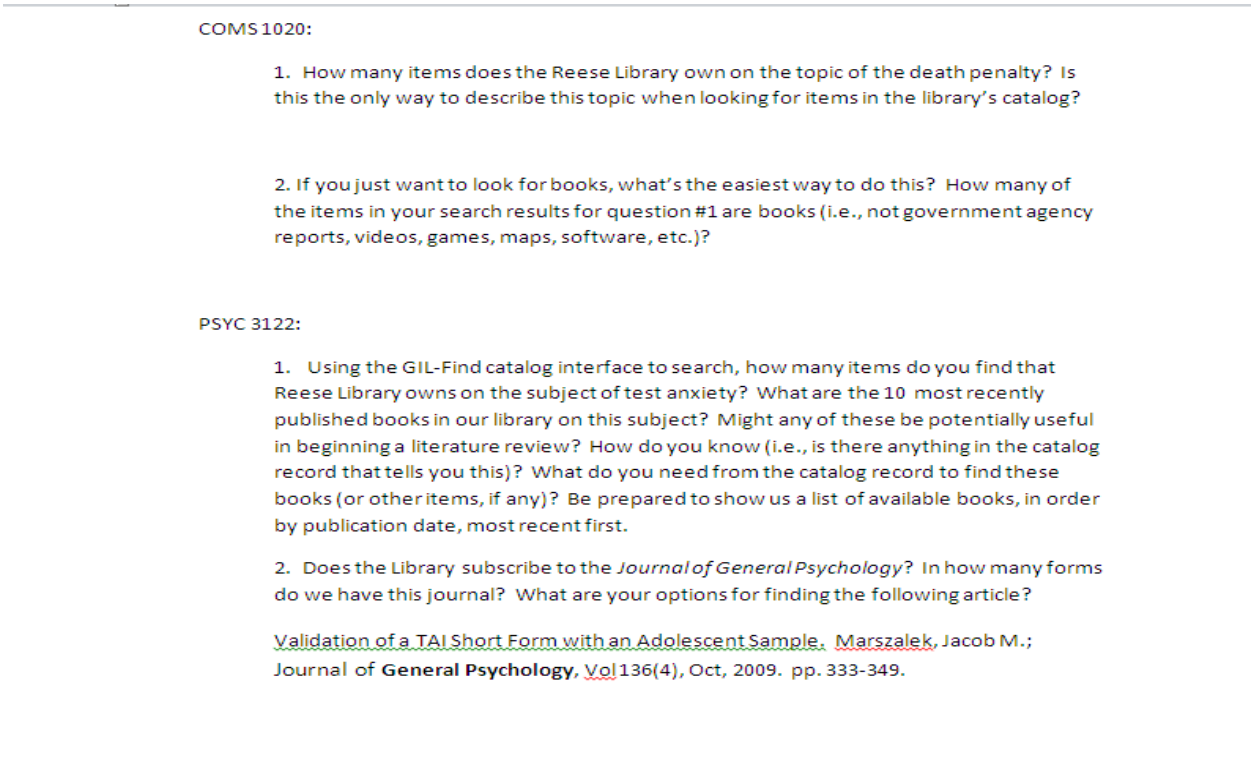
it is to gather data that say your students may not be learning much in class. However, assessment is supposed to be about improvement, not self-congratulation. Real improvement will only come from determining the shortfalls, and addressing them. What should be assessed, as far as is possible, is whether students have learned anything in the library classroom, and authentic means should be used to assess learning.

When teaching courses for credit, the assessment model is obvious: teach, grade homework and quizzes, assign a final project or exam or both, and develop a grading rubric for the course. What is obvious is often not easy. For those who do most of their instruction on a class request basis, usually one class per course, and once per semester, that model does not fit. It may seem logical to base library classroom evaluations on an institutional instrument used to evaluate the classroom performance of other faculty in other disciplines and departments at the parent institution. However, those are also heavily weighted on the performance side, as opposed to the learning side, with a focus on what students perceive rather than how they themselves have performed, which is determined by the course grade.

Authentic assessment is performance assessment, but it is the student's performance which is evaluated, rather than the teacher's. This requires creating a task that the students will complete in class, and then assessing their ability to perform the task.

> According to Silver's (2003) definition, when performance assessment is used for internal classroom assessment, both the form and content of the assessment can be closely aligned with the teacher's instructional goals. Therefore, the use of performance assessment in the classroom has been seen by some as a promising means of accomplishing a long-standing elusive goal – namely, the intersection of instruction and assessment (p. 135).

For the library class, these tasks usually involve use of some type of information resource, with refining characteristics supplied by the discipline faculty teaching the course.



COMS 1020:

1. How many items does the Reese Library own on the topic of the death penalty? Is this the only way to describe this topic when looking for items in the library's catalog?

2. If you just want to look for books, what's the easiest way to do this? How many of the items in your search results for question #1 are books (i.e., not government agency reports, videos, games, maps, software, etc.)?

PSYC 3122:

1. Using the GIL-Find catalog interface to search, how many items do you find that Reese Library owns on the subject of test anxiety? What are the 10 most recently published books in our library on this subject? Might any of these be potentially useful in beginning a literature review? How do you know (i.e., is there anything in the catalog record that tells you this)? What do you need from the catalog record to find these books (or other items, if any)? Be prepared to show us a list of available books, in order by publication date, most recent first.

2. Does the Library subscribe to the *Journal of General Psychology*? In how many forms do we have this journal? What are your options for finding the following article?

Validation of a TAI Short Form with an Adolescent Sample. Marszalek, Jacob M.; Journal of **General Psychology**, Vol 136(4), Oct, 2009. pp. 333-349.

Figure 2. Examples of questions from student exercises

In the examples in Fig. 3, both of the sets of questions deal with ACRL standards 1 & 2, identification and access, but they do so in different ways and using different

assignment constructs, as is appropriate. One course is a freshman level core elective. The typical assignment involves persuasive writing on a topic of some contemporary controversy, where 'sides' are clearly delineated, making it easy for the student to select a side and find information to support a position. The subject example used in class is from the list of topics that are usually forbidden from use by students because of their over-broad nature, over-wrought tones, and overuse by prior generations of students. The student gets to perform in class, but it's a demonstration only. They have to recapitulate the process on their own, with their own paper topic. The second example is from an exercise given to students in a research methods course in psychology. The terminology is appropriate to the assignment – a literature review – and the expectation is not only that the students will identify a result set, but that they will examine the surrogates on the spot for relevance and clues, and make a decision as to whether or not they wish to include them in their answer, and why.

Exercises such as this use the principles of constructivism and backward design. Constructivism is the underpinning of the idea of learning by doing.

> Stated most simply by Lamon (2003), the basic idea is that problem solving is at the heart of learning, thinking and development. As people solve problems and discover the consequences of their actions – through reflecting on past and immediate experiences – they construct their own understanding. Learning is thus an active process that requires a change in the learner. This is achieved through the activities the learner engages in…. People only deeply understand what they have constructed…. The teacher's role in a constructivist classroom isn't so much to lecture at students but to act as an expert learner who can guide students [and] to

> organize information around big ideas that engage the students' interest… (p. 1463).

Backward design, on the other hand, is assessment-focused. The teacher decides what will be tested or assessed before teaching it. Backward design is ideal for library instruction assessments, because the librarian preparing for the class usually already has a good idea of where the knowledge gaps are for our students. Those who have worked with undergraduates for any length of time already know where at least some of the potholes are on the road to information literacy. Some of the things students need to learn are environmental, some theoretical, some are timeless truths. Most of them are new, at least in the library context, to beginning college students. Wiggins and McTigue, in their book, *Understanding By Design* (1998), lay out six facets of understanding. When we truly understand, we can explain, we can interpret, we can apply, we have perspective, we can empathize, and we have self-knowledge (p. 44). Teaching librarians exhibit this kind of understanding of information literacy. Through a combination of knowledge of libraries' resources and environments and a professor's assignment to a group of students, a librarian can predict what needs to be emphasized to students in the classroom and then prepare exercises that exploit that knowledge and fill the gaps for students. While one cannot always insure that every student will achieve this deep a level of understanding after the first library class, groundwork for learning can be laid.

Assessment is not easy work, and it is sometimes disappointing, especially when the librarian doing the assessment does not grade student work on a routine basis, and has not developed those hard, intellectual callouses that protect the sensibilities from

students' lapses in judgment. It is not unreasonable, however, to care more that students begin to grasp a process well enough to find something approximately correct, than to care only that they follow well-defined steps that can be filled in on a bubble sheet. Students will often exert creativity that the instructor has not imagined in answering questions; that is not a bad thing, in every case, as long as the outcomes in the scoring rubric are broad enough to encompass alternative approaches while also being focused enough to enable scoring.

1. Using the *MLA Bibliography* link on your LibGuide, search for articles about Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*. Are all of your results journal articles? Can you limit to just journal articles? Are all the journal articles peer-reviewed? What else do you notice about your results?

   The Talented Ripley Hitchcock *By:* Parker, Hershel; *American Literary Realism*, 2011 Winter; 43 (2): 175-182.(journal article)

2. Using the citation tool in the database, look at the MLA version of this citation. Is it correct? Are all the required elements included? Is there extraneous information? Is the spacing correct? Using Advanced Search in *Academic Search*, look for scholarly articles about Tim O'Brien.What is the most recently published article in your list of results? How do you know it's the most recent one?

3. What are the different file types for full text articles in these databases? How are they different? How are they alike?

4. Does the Library have the journal, *War, Literature, and the Arts*? In what formats, and for what years? How do you get your hands on a copy of the article cited below:

   'Crimson Blotches on the Pages of the Past': Histories of Violence in Stephen Crane's The **Red Badge** of **Courage** Full Text *By:* Wood, Adam H.; *War, Literature, and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, 2009; 21: 38-57.

5. Using Stephen Crane as an example, how many books do you find in GIL-Find *by* him, and how many *about* him? Is it the same list of books in both cases?

6. Using the *MLA Bibliography* link on your LibGuide, search for Tim O'Brien in this database. Are all of your results journal articles? What is the most recently published item in your list of results? How do you know it's the most recent one? What percentage of your results are available in full text in this database?

7. Now, open the *Literature Online* database from either the list of literature databases in your ENGL 1102 LibGuide or the Databases A-Z tab in GALILEO. Search for critical articles about "The Things They Carried." How many articles do you find? Are all of them full text?

Figure 3. Questions from an in-class exercise for a freshman literature course

Sustainability is evidenced when the teacher uses an in-class exercise as the assessment tool. If this approach is used in the class anyway, there is no duplication of effort involved in creating a separate assessment. When starting with an existing exercise, the questions as stated in the exercise have to be reduced to their intended outcomes. Thus, questions which originate in the context of searching library catalogs and article databases (Fig. 3) may turn into a set of outcomes which look something like this:

- Students can differentiate between books and articles -- because the databases they use are no longer just about journals.
- Students can identify specific items in a list of results -- so that they can begin to see the value in reading results.

- Students grasp what is needed for accurate citation according to an academic style – because this is one of the few things that their discipline professors know from the outset that their students need help with.
- Students grasp the difference in basic article file types – where are the illustrations, not to mention the page numbers?
- Students can post-manipulate search results to refine a query – because they very often will follow the impulse to google-ize the query and not do this on their own.
- Students can move appropriately from identification to retrieval – because even their course professors need help with this process, from time to time.
- Students can differentiate between primary and secondary sources in a discipline – because the distinctions between 'by and about' are as important for the disciplines that use them as those between 'data and analysis' are for other disciplines.

Not every question in an exercise will be assessable; there should be some that are there primarily for exposure, so that students can see potentially remarkable differences in resources and strategies in a classroom setting where they can ask questions if moved to do so. There should, however, be a core list of outcomes that can be identified.

Outcomes nicely stated are only relevant if they illustrate useful learning. A sample of completed exercises which had used the ENGL 1102 questions displayed in

Fig. 3 yielded the following results, according to the outcomes mentioned previously, which were based on the questions in the class exercise:

- 75% successfully differentiated between books and articles
- 56% could select an individual item from an array of search results
- 44% had some grasp of what information in a database surrogate was necessary for a citation in MLA style
- 75% recognized the differences between .html and .pdf file types
- 94% could take a set of search results and do something else to it to refine the query
- 44% showed evidence of being able to move successfully from identification of an item to actual retrieval of an item
- 75% recognized the difference between primary and secondary sources.

It is not surprising that the two areas with the lowest scores fall under 1) documentation, an area that has high stakes in academia, and one for which professors in the disciplines recognize students have knowledge gaps, and #2) moving successfully from identification of a specific item to actual retrieval of that item. This second point has been an issue since bibliographic databases began including article content as well as citations. The advent of e-books has just increased the confusion for students.

However, even for the outcomes that did not have high scores, students are not without help. They can ask trained professionals, which they are encouraged to do all

the time, or they can ask each other, which they often do as an alternative of convenience. With a floor of forty-four percent correct answers – the optimistic almost-half – and a ceiling of ninety-four percent, the chance of a student getting the right answer from a classmate in this particular sample is actually rather high. At least some of the high-scoring results are due to the fact that the students worked on the questions as a group exercise. One of the virtues of collaborative learning is that students working in groups do learn from each other.

This type of assessment requires a great deal more hands-on from the teaching librarian than does administering a survey. Exercises must be created that are pertinent to the students' research topics; discursive answers must be scored by hand, not machine. The results of this effort, however, are a far more accurate indicator of whether any kind of learning is happening in the library classroom than are the results of a student survey of the librarian's performance as a teacher.

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